

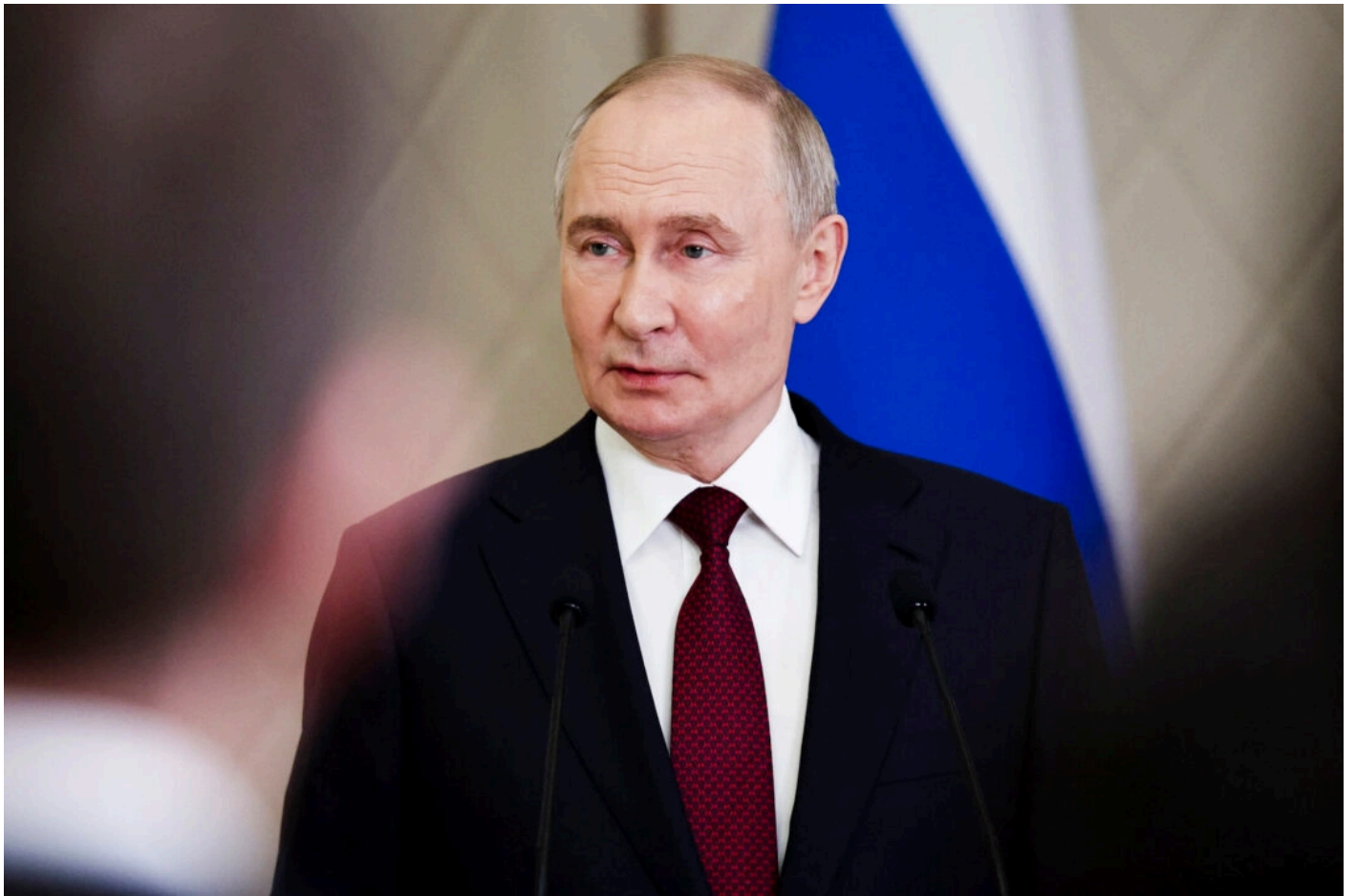
Russia Unlikely to Help China in Event of Protracted War in Indo-Pacific: Expert

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Russian President Vladimir Putin talks to the media after attending a meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Nov. 28, 2024. Mikhail Tereshchenko/AFP/Getty Images



By Frank Fang

1/12/2025 Updated: 1/12/2025

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Moscow is unlikely to provide assistance to Beijing in the event of a protracted war between China and a U.S.-led coalition in the Indo-Pacific, according to Russian military history expert David Stone.

“I think in the near term, it’s extraordinarily unlikely that Russia would participate, and part of that simply has to do with the commitments that Russia has with the war in Ukraine, there’s just not a lot of resources left to give,” Stone, who is currently the William E. Odom Professor of Russian Studies in the Strategy and Policy Department at the U.S. Naval War College, said during a Jan. 6 podcast hosted by the school’s China Landpower Studies Center.

Stone pointed to the recent downfall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria, where Russia [has](#) an airbase in the country’s eastern Latakia province and a naval base near the coastal city of Tartus. Even though Russia “has a lot of very concrete interests at stake” in Syria, Stone said, Moscow “appeared to have no resources available to try to prop up the Assad regime.”

“If the Russians aren’t in a position to provide kinetic support to a direct ally in direct support of their own interests, at least in the near term, it’s impossible to think that they’d have much to offer to the Chinese in the event of a protracted war in the Pacific now,” Stone said.

Moscow has granted asylum to Assad and his family, [according to](#) Russian state media.

Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leader Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin elevated their ties to a “no limit” partnership in February 2021, just weeks before Russia invaded Ukraine. In 2023, bilateral trade between the two countries reached a new record of [\\$240.1 billion](#), up 25 percent from a year earlier, according to China’s official customs data.

China has provided indirect support for Russia's war. Speaking in Paris on Jan. 8, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said China is supporting Russia's industrial bases with items such as machine tools and microelectronics, allowing Moscow to keep making weapons and munitions for its ongoing aggression in Ukraine.

Russia's stance on assisting China might change once the Ukraine war is over, Stone added, yet the likelihood of Russia helping a China war would still be low.

"I don't see it as particularly likely even in the long term, but that's a different set of constraints and a different set of reasons," Stone said.

Constraints

Once the Ukraine war ends, Stone said that Russia would want to rebuild its weapon stockpiles but it might have trouble doing so.

"The Russian economy is under a great deal of strain. The Russian interest rates are high. Inflation is high. The Russians are very short on labor. They are straining a lot to maintain their current level of production of military equipment," Stone explained.

"And it's not clear that once the war is over, that's going to be sustainable. So you cannot just take what Russia is producing right now and assume that will be the case five years from now, or 10 years from now."

According to the Central for Strategic and International Studies, Russia launched a total of 11,466 missiles at targets in Ukraine from Sept. 28, 2022, to Sept. 1, 2024.

Stone added that Moscow's decision to support China would also be influenced by the war's location. A war in the Korean peninsula would be more important for Russia than one in the South China Sea, he said.

The wars there would be fought differently, Stone explained, with the one in the Korean peninsula requiring more land military systems. On the contrary, a war over the Senkakus Islands in the East China Sea or Taiwan would require “put a premium on air and sea systems,” he said.

“There’s a limit to how much they can pass off to the Chinese, given their constraints on how fast they can build things,” Stone said, adding that Moscow produces advanced air and naval systems “very slowly” but it has built up its capacity for making guided missiles and cruise missiles due to the Ukraine war.

Stone pointed out that Russia currently needs Chinese goods to support its industrial base. It would seem unlikely that China could continue to send these types of goods to Russia if its war against the U.S.-led coalition goes bad, thus constraining Russia’s ability to produce weapons and send them to China, Stone added.

Another factor is how far off into the future is the China war once the Ukraine war is over, Stone added.

“So those are the kinds of variables that I think we need to be thinking about,” Stone said. “And those are all still, I think, kind of up in the air.”

China claims Taiwan as a part of its territory and is threatening to seize the island using military force. In October 2023, Putin’s statement calling Taiwan a part of China drew rebuke from Taiwan’s foreign ministry.

“China and Russia are colluding to advance authoritarian expansionism and posing a threat to the fundamental values of democracy, freedom, the rule of law, and human rights,” the Taiwanese ministry said in a statement at that time.

Relationship

Xi and Putin have met several times in recent years, mostly recently in Russia's Kazan on the sidelines of the [16th BRICS summit](#), which consists of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

According to a Chinese press release of the meeting, Putin told Xi that Russia "hopes to further deepen cooperation with China."

In December, Russia's state-run RIA news reported that Xi will visit Russia this year, quoting the Russian ambassador to China.

Stone said he didn't see anything shaking the Sino-Russia relationship in the short term since the two neighbors "see so much of a shared interest in trying to undermine a kind of a Western world order."

"In the long term, I do think there are a number of trends that are going to push them apart," Stone said.

He pointed to Russia's Vostok military exercises in 2010 and 2014, saying those drills were designed to consider China as a potential enemy. "2014 is not that long ago. So I think there's some Russian concern about the long-term prospects of the Russia-China relationship," Stone said.

China and Russia's Far East, Central Asia, and the Arctic are three potential areas that could drive the two neighbors apart, according to Stone.

Central Asia is often referred to as Russia's backyard due to their political, economic, and security ties to Moscow. In recent years, China has built up its [influence in the region](#), particularly through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which is also known as One Belt One Road (OBOR).

In terms of the Arctic, Stone thought that the two nations could eventually have divergent views on how the region is governed and how its sources are utilized.

In July last year, the Pentagon [issued](#) a new Arctic plan for countering Russia and China's cooperation in the region.

“A large part of [the bilateral ties] will be how long Vladimir Putin is in power and how long Xi Jinping is in power. And there’s no way to know the answer to those questions,” Stone said.

Reuters contributed to this report.

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