



Russia Policy Monitor No. 2627

April 22, 2024 **Ilan I. Berman, Chloe E. Smith, Walker Robinson**

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CRACKS IN THE MOSCOW-BEIJING ALLIANCE?

According to a leading Chinese expert, Russian adventurism in Ukraine is fundamentally harming the country, and is a net negative for neighboring China, which has emerged as a key strategic ally of the Kremlin. In a recent column for *The Economist*, Peking University's Feng Yujun made the case that Russian President Vladimir Putin's "special military operation" against Ukraine is doomed to failure, for multiple reasons. Just as significantly, however, Feng argued that Russia's war of choice has adversely impacted the People's Republic of China (PRC). "China's relations with Russia are not fixed, and they have been affected by the events of the past two years," Feng contends. "Shrewd observers note that China's stance towards Russia has reverted from the 'no limits' stance of early 2022, before the war, to the traditional principles of 'non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-targeting of third parties.'"

What might this mean? Although China's ongoing efforts to find a diplomatic conclusion to the conflict have so far been unsuccessful, "no one should doubt China's desire to end this cruel war through negotiations." That desire, says Feng, "shows that China and Russia are very different countries. Russia is seeking to subvert the existing international and regional order by means of war, whereas China wants to resolve disputes peacefully." (*The Economist*, April 11, 2024)

[EDITORS' NOTE: Feng's article is strategically significant, because it signals a notable shift in official attitudes in Beijing. Simply put, such a piece in such a high-profile publication would not have appeared without official sanction from the Chinese government. That, in turn, suggests that China's leaders are increasingly dissatisfied with the dislocating political and economic effects of Russia's war, despite the current strategic alignment between the two countries.]

QUIET TALKS ABOUT A PRISONER SWAP

The U.S. and Russia are engaged in discussions regarding a potential prisoner exchange that could lead to the release of Evan Gershkovich, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter detained for over a year in Russia on espionage charges, and Paul Whelan, a former Marine now serving a 16-year sentence there. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov confirmed the existence of a "specialized closed channel" for these negotiations, but declined to provide further details. The U.S. office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs also refrained from commenting on Ryabkov's remarks.

Nevertheless, recent developments suggest that both sides are seriously considering the idea. In early April, Roger Carstens, the Biden administration's point person for hostage diplomacy, announced that the White House was preparing a new proposal to Moscow to secure the release of Gershkovich and Whelan. Russian President Vladimir Putin has also indicated his willingness to engage in a prisoner exchange, hinting at the possibility of getting back Russian operative Vadim Krasikov, who is now serving a life sentence in Germany for assassinating a Chechen opposition leader, in return. Additionally, the White House is calling for the release of *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty* journalist Alsu Kurmasheva, a dual U.S.-Russian citizen detained there for months on charges of failing to register as a foreign agent and spreading "false information" about Russia's military. (*Wall Street Journal*, April 11, 2024)

PUTIN CALLS FOR SPACE NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT

Russian President Vladimir Putin has instructed the country's space agency, ROSCOSMOS, and its state nuclear bureau, ROSATOM, to allocate funds for the joint development of a space nuclear energy program by mid-June of this year. The announcement follows a February warning from Congress about Russia's capability for an anti-satellite space-based weapon, with U.S. intelligence suggesting that Moscow has been experimenting with nuclear weapons and other methods to target satellites. While Putin's recent orders did not mention nuclear weapons or anti-satellite devices, the deployment of such weapons in space would violate a 1967 treaty signed by the U.S. and the former Soviet Union.

Putin's instructions emphasize the importance of developing Russia's existing scientific and technical basis in the field of space nuclear energy, following up on his previous statements that placing a nuclear power unit in space is a priority for the country. Additionally, ROSCOSMOS head Yuri Borisov has mentioned that Russia and China are "seriously considering" a joint project to install a nuclear reactor on the moon in the 2033-2035 timeframe. (*Newsweek*, April 11, 2024)

