

China-Russia relations: alignment without alliance by Yun Sun

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Western assessments of the China-Russia relationship generally reach one of two conclusions: hyperventilation about a Beijing-Moscow alliance that aims to upend the existing international order or a blithe dismissal of a temporary meeting of minds and interests. Neither position accurately characterizes the current relationship, which is best understood as a genuine convergence of national interests despite powerful centrifugal forces. From a Chinese perspective, at least, a third option – alignment without alliance – can endure, especially if both sides agree to align themselves while maintaining a safe distance from each other, so that the competitive elements of their relationship can play themselves out without derailing their partnership.

China-Russia relations have been on a very positive trajectory since Xi Jinping assumed the supreme leadership in Beijing in 2013. He and Russian President Vladimir Putin meet frequently – 12 times in two and half years – in bilateral settings and in the expanding number of multilateral venues in which the two countries have membership, such as the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

When they meet, the two men see the world through similar prisms and reach similar conclusions about their country's strategic position. They both believe themselves to be in a strategic disadvantage relative to the United States and the West. Putin believes Russia's great power ambitions are thwarted by the West and he is seizing every opportunity to reassert Moscow's interests. China sees the US rebalance to Asia at best as a denial of strategic space and access to the western Pacific and at worst an attempt to contain China.

The Ukraine crisis and Russia's annexation of Crimea provided additional momentum for close ties. For China, the crisis forced the US to refocus on Europe. Beijing enjoyed more leverage within their relationship as Russia's vulnerability and isolation increased. In addition to strengthening China's hand in energy negotiations, Moscow now seems ready to cooperate in sectors previously seen as off limits or restricted, such as arms sales, cyber security, aerospace industries and hydro sectors. Finally, Beijing anticipates the new bilateral dynamic will encourage Moscow to be more accepting of China's Silk Road Economic Belt across the Central Asia, rather than hostile to an initiative in what is traditionally regarded as Russia's sphere of influence.

Of course, some Chinese fear that the Ukraine situation could set a precedent for similar 'splittist' movements, while others worry that Russia cannot be a sufficient distraction to

"shield" China from US pressure. "Faced with the Western hegemon, China always wishes for Russia to share burden, yet the reality is cruel and a wolf cannot take the bullet for the lion."

Moreover, there are powerful mutual suspicions between the two countries. Chinese remember that "however much we hate the US, it is Russia who took the most of our lost territory." Putin's nationalism targets not just the West, but China, too. That is why Putin has been reluctant to boost arms sales (especially military technologies) to China, to pursue trade/investment liberalization in economic cooperation with China, to follow through on oil/gas pipeline deals signed with China, to allow more Chinese participation in the Russian Far East, and why Moscow has introduced Japanese and Korean competition in its trade with China. Within South and Southeast Asia, China is suspicious of and antagonized by Russia's strategic-military ties with India and Vietnam. As an energy importer, China also believes its interests fundamentally differ from that of Russia, an energy exporter.

Nevertheless, China will continue to seek good relations with Russia. As Chinese have conceded, "we have worked closer with Russia for less." China sees strategic alignment with Russia having many concrete benefits while the negative factors can be managed. This is particularly true when China deals from a position of strength and Russia is at a strategic disadvantage. From Beijing's perspective:

- With a 3000-mile border, Russia has the most impact over China's immediate security environment, and vice versa. Sino-Russia hostility is unthinkable and unlikely;
- Of all countries, Russia shares China's strategic interest most. Both have domestic political issues and foreign policy aspirations that make them targets of the US. Therefore, China and Russia share a common interest in establishing a new international order and fending off Western attacks/isolation;
- Among all powers, Russia and China have the most similar authoritarian ideology. Both insist on their own political systems and economic development paths. Both reject Western color revolutions and military interventions. There is ample common ground for cooperation;
- Russia and China are strategically complementary. Russia is good at boxing (hard war) while China is good at tai-chi (maneuvering). One is an exporter, the other is importer. One has resources, the other has capital;
- The border has been settled for decades so no one should realistically expect China to reclaim what was given to Russia years ago. That case is closed.

Alignment without alliance:

As China and Russia survey the geopolitical landscape, there is much to unite them. History has taught them the perils of alliance, however. Their former alliance damaged both sides' confidence in the wisdom and feasibility of a similar relationship today. That does not mean China and Russia will not align positions on issues of common interest. Such an alignment will enhance the security and economics of both countries and it helps maintain balance in the world order.

A China and Russia that align positions against the West while maintaining a safe distance from each other would be more effective than an alliance. This third option, between alliance and enemies, is potentially the most worrisome for the West.

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