



BACK TO THE PAST: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RUSSIA AND CHINA'S JOINT STATEMENT

BY YU BIN

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Of his [11 official visits](#) to China as Russian president, Vladimir Putin's nine-hour stop in Beijing on Feb. 4 was the shortest, perhaps barely adequate to refuel his huge Ilyushin Il-96-300PU Russian Air Force One.

From Russia, with love, and more...

This Blitzkrieg-style visit to Russia's largest neighbor and the most valuable "strategic partner," however, meant not only Russia's "love" (support for the Beijing Winter Olympics) but was also loaded with substance. Before attending the opening ceremony, Xi and Putin lunched together, held talks, and inked 16 agreements in energy ([\\$117.5 billion](#)), trade (up to \$250 billion in a few years), space, and digital sectors. The two sides also discussed "[military-technical cooperation](#)" to enhance their "special" relationship.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of Putin's visit was the signing of the "Russia-China [joint statement](#) on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development." In it, the two spelled out a similar worldview, bolstered by a non-alliance that will nonetheless allow for very close coordination.

The world according to Moscow and Beijing

The last time the two leaders met in person was 25 months earlier, in Brazil, for the annual [BRICS summit](#). Since then, the world has changed so much—post-Trump, post-Afghanistan, protracted pandemic—and yet so little: relations with Washington continued to worsen, particularly in areas of their "core national interests" (such as Ukraine and

Taiwan). Despite differences in these two interests, Moscow and Beijing now perceive Washington as unreliable and even dishonest in living up to its diplomatic commitments: "no NATO expansion to the east" as spelled out by [James Baker](#) in 1990 and the "one-China principle" that Beijing argues Washington has retreated from.

"No state can or should ensure its own security separately from the security of the rest of the world and at the expense of the security of other states," says the statement. The Russian side reaffirmed its support for Beijing's "One-China principle" and its opposition to AUKUS, which both Moscow and Beijing have argued is an anti-China alliance in the Indo-Pacific. China reciprocated with its opposition to NATO enlargement. There is no mention of Ukraine (a "strategic partner" of China), but Beijing "is sympathetic to and supports" Russia's proposal "to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe." For Moscow and Beijing, the UN-based world order, not the US-led NATO alliance, should be key to world peace and prosperity.

At the onset of the Biden administration, Moscow and Beijing expected something different, after a Trump administration that labeled them both "strategic competitors." Biden's hardball approach of alliance-building, democracy promotion, and enduring sanctions ended their limited expectations for a moderate "reset" of relations with Washington.

Even the chaotic Afghan exit last August produced some uncomfortable outcomes for Beijing and Moscow: an unsettling Taliban-run Afghanistan with ripple effects for Central Asia; more resources for Washington to counter its major-power rivals; and a United States more determined to avoid another loss similar to the fall of Kabul.

A league of their own

For those who believe that every interaction between Russia and China aims at undermining the West, the new 5,400-word statement offers a full plate. For those who try to regain a pivotal US posture within the "strategic triangle" pioneered by President Nixon exactly 50 years ago, however, there is little optimism: the document suggests much closer ties between the two. Both alarmists and realpolitik practitioners, however, miss some important dynamics between China and Russia—and within them.

From time to time, Moscow and Beijing declare that their strategic partnership is not an alliance. Nor do they intend to build one. “The new inter-state relations between Russia and China are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era,” says the statement. These public declarations to transcend traditional military alliances need to be taken more seriously for at least two reasons.

First, China and Russia are among the few genuinely independent large civilizational entities that value their independence and sovereignty above anything else. Traditional military alliances with interlocking mechanisms for security would deprive them of their freedom of action. The West now seems to forget the rigid and binding alliances that produced the fateful “[Guns of August](#)” of 1914. Within a week of Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, major powers in Europe declared war on each other largely because of their alliance commitment (see Scott Sagan’s “[1914 Revisited](#)”).

More important is the shadow of their past. The Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s, though brief, produced both friendship and friction. There is no question that massive Soviet assistance laid the foundation for China’s modernization, for which the Chinese are still grateful. It was nonetheless an asymmetrical relationship with considerable Soviet intrusion into China’s domestic affairs.

Over time, their shared political ideology of communism did not prevent them from pursuing different priorities at home and abroad, leading to both polemical and military confrontations in the 1960s and 1970s. Ideology exaggerated the friendship during their “honeymoon” (1949-59) and amplified disagreements during their 30-year “divorce” (1960-89). As such, the first step of their rapprochement in the 1980s was to de-ideologize their relationship. Since then, the two have transformed this asymmetrical, highly ideological, and dangerously militarized relationship into one of pragmatic coexistence. In a way, the current Russia-China “strategic partnership” is a normal relationship after the “best” and “worst” times.

The non-aligned nature of the current Sino-Russian relationship, however, does not preclude close coordination. If anything, it allows open-ended and flexible strategic interaction. “Friendship between the two states has no limits” and “there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation,” declares the joint statement. Ultimately, it is the vast and stable strategic depth between the two large land powers, or the so-called

“[back-to-back](#)” posture, that guarantees their national security. It is highly unlikely that either Moscow or Beijing would trade this anchor of stability for any tactical overture from Washington.

Back to the past?

A considerable portion of the joint statement is devoted to the democracy issue, as a response to the US-sponsored “Democracy Summit” in October 2021. For China and Russia, democracy should be chosen and administered by local peoples, just as the West has done, and not imposed from outside; the global system, too, should be democratized, rather than subject to hegemony.

This parallel democratic mechanism at both domestic and international levels, no matter how unrealistic in the eyes of the West, may reflect the national trajectories of Russia and China.

Three decades after the Cold War, China and Russia have returned, to different degrees, to their cultural/religious heritage of Confucianism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Despite their vastly different national experiences (China’s steady rise and Russia’s historical decline), they have managed to maintain stable relations thanks to their historical return to the Westphalianism of noninterference in each other’s domestic affairs, the foundation of the modern world system of sovereign states pioneered—and now largely discarded—by the West.

How Russia and China’s back-to-the-past approach will interface with Washington’s alliance/democracy-promotion strategy remains to be seen.

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