

The Prospects and Limits of the Russia-China Partnership

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Russia's relations with the West are at a lowpoint not seen since the Cold War due to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the ongoing conflict with Ukraine. In this situation, Russia emphasises stronger ties with its non-Western partners, notably China. Russia's message to the West is: "if you try to isolate us, we will further enhance a good relationship with China and you will regret it". The question is: what has really changed in the Russia-China relations due to the pressures Russia perceives?

In fact, Sino-Russian bilateral cooperation has improved, but not beyond its longstanding limits. Some cooperation issues are hard to make progress on. China is developing its economic and military capabilities and chooses its policy on the international arena without much regard to Russian preferences. They do not support each other on controversial issues, but agree not to interfere in each other's affairs.

Russia's "pivot to Asia" did not start in 2014. Since the Gorbachev era Russia has wanted to develop its Far East territory and integrate it into the regional economy. In the years 2012–2013 Russia intensified its efforts to strengthen its Armed Forces in the Eastern Military District. It also upgraded ties with both China and Japan. In 2012, Russia's fleet joined the Sino-Russian Maritime Coordination-2012 joint naval exercise, the first in a series, and also the RIMPAC (the Rim of the Pacific) exercise around Hawaii hosted by the US Pacific Fleet. Russia also sent Nikolai Patrushev, the secretary of Russian Security Council and one of President Vladimir Putin's closest associates, to start bilateral security talks with Japan. And in April 2013 the new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe visited Putin in Moscow to upgrade bilateral ties, resulting in a unique "2+2" foreign and defence ministers' meeting in Tokyo in November. The year 2013 also witnessed the Sino-Russian Maritime Coordination-2013 exercise, and, just after that, a much larger Russian military exercise in the form of a snap inspection of the Eastern Military District. Russia's approach to Asia is clear: nurture the partnership with China while enhancing Russia's own military presence

and its ties with other countries in the region to avoid dependence on China.

In 2014 Russia's actions concerning Ukraine did affect its position in East Asia. Japan expressed its disapproval of Russia's infringement on Ukraine's sovereign rights, and implemented some sanctions against Russia, prompting complaints from Russia. In April 2014 the frequency of flights of Russian military planes around Japan suddenly surged, which in turn annoyed Tokyo.

In 2015, Japan noticed Russia hardening its stance in the bilateral territorial dispute over the islands which Japan regards as its "Northern Territories" but Russia controls and perceives as the southern parts of the "Kuril Islands". Prime Minister Dmitrii Medvedev visited Etorofu (Itrup) Island to participate in an all-Russian youth forum and Russia renovated military infrastructure on the islands.

In spite of this, Russia and Japan have engaged in strategic talks and keep up a certain level of defence exchanges. In September 2015, Patrushev visited Seoul and Tokyo, where he participated in the fourth security talks since 2012. A few days later Putin and Abe met in New York to discuss global security issues and their bilateral territorial dispute.

There was a noticeable improvement in Sino-Russian relations in 2014–2015. The limited framework for the relations has not been updated, but one significant event was signing of the eastern route gas pipeline agreement in May 2014. This was a major breakthrough after years of failures to reach an agreement. However, construction has been slow due to insufficient investment from China. Russia would have preferred the western route through Altai to Xinjiang, exploiting the existing gas fields, but the concrete terms are still under negotiation. Complicating matters is the fact that issues involving big business interests cannot be solved solely by the willingness of political leaders.

Cases in Russian arms exports also show the not-so-smooth nature of Russia-China cooperation. For example, Vietnam continues to receive Kilo-class submarines and training support from Russia. At the same time, Russia



has been eager to sell weapons to China, but negotiations on concrete terms have always been tough. In April 2015 Russia announced that it had signed a contract for the sale of the S-400 air defence system. Meanwhile, negotiations for the sale of the Su-35 fighter aircraft trade have a long history of disagreement over the number, price, and technical details of the aircraft. Early in 2014 the top political leaders intensified collaboration in all areas, but it took a long time of further bargaining before the signing of the contract was announced in November 2015.

On a more symbolic level, Russia has been using the Moscow military parade in May to underline its political interpretation of history and to support its contemporary legitimacy, whereas China did the same in the Beijing parade in September 2015. By reciprocal visits they wanted to show their solidarity on historical issues. However, Putin did not endorse the way China blames contemporary Japan. Clearly, Russia does not want to be bound to China's position. Nor does it take sides concerning disputes in the East China Sea or the South China Sea, which involve China, Japan, the Philippines and Vietnam.

China and Russia held two sets of Maritime Coordination-2015 joint naval exercises. The first commenced on Russian Victory Day in Novorossiisk and continued in the Mediterranean. The second took place near Vladivostok and included joint fleet manoeuvres and landing drills, also involving the Chinese Air Force. Indeed, the exercises have been continuously upgraded since 2012, but there is still a limit on Russia's support to train China's anti-submarine warfare capabilities.

One important underlying factor of Russia's China approach is the memory of bitter confrontation in the Cold War era. In the 1990s, Russia made great efforts to resolve the border settlement with China and ease tensions by force reductions and confidence-building measures to avoid future troubles. So far Russia has been successful in establishing friendly relations with China, but continues to upgrade military capabilities in preparation for future risks. In the 2010s the Russian Armed Forces have activated more operational capabilities and improved the relatively outdated forces in the Eastern Military District. There are now more brigades than in other military districts, they exercise their fleets, submarines, and aircraft around the

Sea of Okhotsk more frequently, and they have dispatched long-distance units up to the Kamchatka Peninsula and the Arctic area. China is not a natural friend of Russia's, but rather a country that Russia wants to make a friend by engagement while hedging China's dominance with good partnerships elsewhere in the region.

China's influence and capabilities have increased tremendously over the last twenty years. This development is probably beyond even the expectations of the Chinese leadership. In the coming twenty years China will be more powerful and may cause even more friction in the regional security order. It will be hard to continue the peaceful rise of China while avoiding serious confrontations.

Russia, on its part, suffers from financial difficulties due to the lower oil price and chronic failure to achieve economic development based on much-needed reforms. Russia cannot rely solely on China in order to achieve economic growth. Moscow thus needs to recover business, investment and cooperation with the West through diplomatic bargaining. This is probably one of the aims of the "less Ukraine, more Syria" approach in the autumn of 2015.

The willingness of Russia and China to cooperate is genuine and they have made progress, but many factors that limit cooperation remain in place. Russia can neither change the course of China's behaviour nor its rapid development of capabilities. Therefore, Russia pursues a hedging strategy carefully balancing China's growing weight while improving cooperation with other East Asian countries. Although there are promising prospects, the limitations in Sino-Russian relations make it unlikely that relations will improve greatly. Rather, frictions will increase as China's rise continues.

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