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Contemporary China-Russia-North Korea Alignment:

NOT ALWAYS TOGETHER, BUT NEVER THAT FAR APART

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Ever since Xi's rise to power in Beijing and Putin's return to the Kremlin, Russia and China's military, political and economic realignment has grown tighter. Indeed, estimates are that Xi and Putin have met with one another more than they have with any other leaders in the world: an estimated 43 times at the time of writing. All of this is in rather stark contrast with Sino-Soviet relations that progressively worsened under Stalin and Mao, culminating in a break in the 1970s. The new alignment is all the more striking since there is no shared ideological component in modern Chinese-Russian relations.

Instead, the blossoming relationship between Putin's Russia and contemporary China is pragmatic: the Russian regime needs Chinese markets and foreign investment to keep its economy afloat as it fights its now four-year war with Ukraine, while China needs Russia's energy and weaponry. Although their two leaders have described the partnership as one without limits, there are clearly some boundaries that they will not cross. Fundamentally, China's economy makes it more invested in the post-World War II international order—the very order that Putin appears intent on disrupting.

Pragmatism, Not Ideology

Russia's drive for global influence in the 21st century is very different from the Soviet period. Back then, the USSR's grand strategy was based on ideology and the spread of communism served as a strong, motivating ideological force. As Arne Westad has written, because of the capitalist versus communist component, "the Cold War was … an unprecedented struggle for the soul of mankind."

Communist China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s and 1960s were united in this battle against global capitalism. Their leaderships ardently believed in the superiority of the communist system for human development, and this belief bonded their countries in the global war against capitalism.

By contrast, Moscow's ambitions today bear little resemblance to the ideology that determined Soviet foreign policy. Under Putin's leadership, Russia has attempted to present itself as the leader of a group of socially conservative regimes opposed to the excesses of liberal democracy and to American global aggression. In this way, under Putin's leadership, Russia is not far out of step with Xi's vision for China. Still, this vision is almost purely pragmatic—not ideological, and the bond between the countries may be more flexible should global conditions change.

Putin's Russia has also engaged in risky behavior as it tries to establish a renewed presence abroad—again, in sharp contrast to the Soviet Union, which pursued risk-averse policies, especially after Khrushchev's adventurism in Cuba. By extending its web of political, economic, and strategic contacts in new and distinct ways worldwide, Russia is frequently in direct opposition to American interests and injects unpredictability into the global order. This element too might further strain Russia's coalition with China since China has benefitted from membership in the postwar economic system. Where Putin sees the post-Cold War settlement as having been bad for Russia, and good only for the West, China sees benefit in maintaining the stability of at least the economic components of the very international system that Putin is intent on disrupting.

Realignment Along Three Dimensions: Political, Economic and Defense

Still, Russia and China's cooperation, which goes back to at least 2012, has moved far beyond their shared 4,200 km border and their mutual poor relations with the United States. Under Putin and Xi, the two countries also increased military and technology cooperation as well as energy and non-energy trade.

China has purchased S-400 anti-missile defense systems from Russia, as well as Su-35 jets. According to SIPRI, about 12% of Russia's weapons sales went to China between 2013 and 2017. Since 2022, China has shared drone technology and proved to be a friend when Russia needed artillery in the first two years of the war in Ukraine.

But Russia-China defense cooperation goes beyond just weapons sales. Their militaries have conducted joint military trainings since the mid-2000s, ranging from smaller anti-terrorism exercises to the larger Vostok 2018 exercise (although it featured far greater representation from Russia than from China). The larger Tsentr exercise in 2019 included not only Russia and China, but also India, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Tsentr involved 128,000 personnel and included a mock invasion of a hypothetical terrorist state and a series of exercises involving special forces troops tasked with defending Russia's Arctic bases. Most of the participants were in fact Russian, however, with only 1,600 soldiers from China.

Officially, China and Russia have no military alliance, "but the two militaries are becoming more familiar with each other. They are taking part in joint training; making their weapons systems more compatible, and syncing their communications, logistics, tactics and military doctrines." Clearly the strategic relationship between Russia and China is deepening. One could argue that there is even an "authoritarian peace" dynamic—where the two autocrats have an implicit agreement to avoid conflict with one another—that did not exist prior to 2012.

Cooperation on strategic matters is more extensive than Sino-Russian economic cooperation, although by 2016, Russia had become China's largest supplier of crude oil, and bilateral trade rose from $69.6 billion in 2016 to $107.1 billion in 2018. This has increased markedly since Russia's full invasion of Ukraine and the ensuing sanctions regime imposed on Russian energy exports by Western Europe.

Economic ties were becoming stronger well before this, however, partly underpinned by the construction in 2011 of the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, which provided a new pathway to supplying crude oil to China and other Asian markets. It enabled Russia to increase oil exports to China by 146 percent in just five years between 2012 to 2017. In 2016, Russia reportedly became the biggest oil supplier to China, displacing Saudi Arabia from that position.

In 2019, the "Power of Siberia" natural gas pipeline was completed with the capacity to export 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China, diversifying China's LNG sources while providing Russia with an ongoing revenue source. Power of Siberia II, a second gas pipeline linking Russia and China, is stalled, however, and notably Russia has been on the losing end of tough negotiations over pricing with China as its legal markets for sale of its energy resources have become ever more limited since 2022. As one analysis notes, "if and when the project [PoS2] is built, it will likely be on China's terms."

From Russia's perspective, warmer relations with China—the world's largest economy (at purchasing power parity)—was crucial. Even before Russian forces appeared in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine in 2014 and the ensuing sanctions imposed on parts of the economy, Putin's Russia had begun closer economic and strategic collaboration with China. This was an axis of mutual convenience, to be sure, and came at a time when relations with the United States were in sharp decline for both Russia and China.

But closer relations with China also had the effect of amplifying the opportunities for Putin's Russia to project its global influence more broadly. In other words, for Russia, it was not simply a matter of the enemy of my enemy being my friend, but also that the trading partners of my friend can become my friends too. Russia and China have cooperated, or at least complemented, one another in terms of the opportunities and resources that they offer in much of the Global South.

A Relationship of Unequals?

It is often argued that Russia is the weaker partner and therefore expendable for China. The asymmetry in the traditional measures of global power (population size, total military spending, and GDP) is obviously true. But a few statistics are often overlooked in this telling: Russia's population is smaller, but richer per capita than China's; its nuclear arsenal is larger; its military technology is superior in many areas; and it has weighty influence in energy markets, including control and

ownership of vast energy resources and energy transportation networks. All of this helps to bring some balance to the relationship. Further, in facing a common rival in the United States, and in having complementary as opposed to conflicting interests in much of the global south and east, there is more comity than conflict in the Sino-Russian relationship.

Of course, there are clear areas where Putin's Russia must compete with China—for example, with respect to the latter's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the possibility of pulling Russia's Central Asian partners out of its economic orbit. Perhaps in an effort to try to mitigate Russian concern in 2015, Xi agreed to coordinate with Russia on Central Asian investments with the Eurasian Economic Union. Russia and China also jointly founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and despite predictions of conflict rather than coexistence, there is growing evidence that says, "their common focus does not mean they are necessarily competing against each other. Rather, China and Russia share similar concerns about Eurasia's political stability and security, and similar overall objectives regarding what a future regional order should look like."

So far, they have been able to cooperate more than compete even in Central Asia— where more people speak and read Russian than Mandarin and consume Russian media daily—because of their shared security interests in the region. They have also collaborated on the Northern Sea Route (NSR) through Russia's Arctic coastline, where they have shared interests in exploring for new energy sources as well as in forging new, more direct trade routes.

The countries also occupy two of the five permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council, and they vote almost in unison. Both have identified the need to defend against American encroachment in what each state views as its rightful sphere of influence, and they need allies who might support their respective territorial claims, in the South China Sea in China's case and in Ukraine in Russia's case.

The Xi-Putin Connection: Does Leadership Matter?

As autocrats who have bestowed lifetime appointments upon themselves, are close in age, and have not dissimilar life experiences, Xi and Putin have a shared vision of the postwar global order. Most importantly, they agree that the world must be multipolar, not dominated by the United States. They share a vision of a new global order that recognizes the "exceptional" roles of their two countries in the emerging international system.

To the extent that personal relationships between leaders matter in international politics, Xi and Putin have publicly declared their close friendship: in 2017 Putin bestowed upon Xi the Russian "Order of St. Andrew the Apostle," Russia's highest award for prominent statesmen and citizens. A year later, Xi

awarded Putin China's first ever "Friendship Medal," declaring on live Chinese state television that "President Putin is a good and old friend of the Chinese people. He is my best, most intimate friend."[1]

While Russia's rapprochement with China ultimately serves Russia well in enabling the continued invasion of Ukraine, it is important to see the relationship as on an ever-closer trajectory of relations along military, economic and diplomatic dimensions. China and India have helped sustain the Russian economy through energy purchases, blunting the force of Western sanctions. But they are also arguably part of a global eastern and southern alignment that increasingly sees the West, led by the United States, as a shared problem in international relations.

[1] See "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multi-Polar World and the Establishment of a New International Order," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 1997; Lora Saalman, editor, China-Russia Relations and Regional Dynamics: From Pivots to Peripheral Diplomacy, SIPRI, March 2017.