

The True Nature of Sino-Russian Relations

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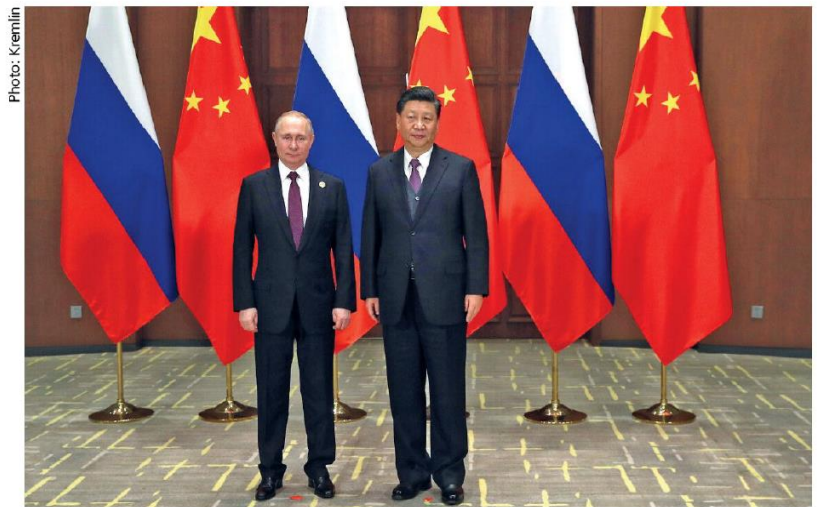
The oft-repeated mantra praising a special and comprehensive strategic partnership in Sino-Russia relations is more often heard from the Russian side than the Chinese.

While Russia is certainly viewed by Beijing as a reliable economic and trade partner with its oil, gas and arms exports to China, the Chinese do certainly not over-emphasise this relationship. Instead, China sees Russia as a waning power with its vast territories, supported by armed forces and nuclear weapons, while at the same time prone to endemic corruption and unable to pursue meaningful economic, political and social reforms.

No less important in this relationship is the fact that Russia's illegal annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in March 2014 was not supported by China and this remains a thorny issue in the relations between the two states today. Interestingly, this issue is usually omitted when experts discuss this strategic partnership. Whether the potential - and illegal - annexation of Taiwan by China would be supported by Russia or not cannot be taken for granted. Alexey Maslov, Director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences believes that "China would need a great-power partner like Russia to help it achieve its global ambitions in the post-coronavirus era" against the US-led democratic world. This assertion is rather far-fetched since China undoubtedly sees itself as the preeminent partner here, something that is obviously rejected by the Russian side, who prefer to believe that they hold equal status in the bilateral relationship. But is Moscow really on an equal footing in this partnership?

A US-China Cold War

Some voices in Moscow, however, are worried that Russia could end up a loser in the event of a new US-China cold war as Mos-



In view of China's growing strength, doubts are growing that Moscow is really on an equal footing in this partnership.

cow would be unable to maintain its strict neutral position in the long run. As Dmitry Suslov, from the Moscow-based National Research University Higher School of Economics, argues, "a continued intensification of the US-Chinese confrontation presents Russia with serious challenges because the more serious this showdown becomes, the more pressure there will be on Russia to pick a side, something that it does want to do." Russia has no desire to become embroiled in the middle of a serious disagreement between Washington and Beijing, since that could ultimately expose the true nature of the Sino-Russian relationship. Suslov added that "China's increasingly assertive foreign policy was another source of concern for Moscow. In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Beijing has adopted a new brand of 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy, an approach that has led to numerous Chinese ambassadors becoming involved in high-profile spats with their host nations" in order to intimidate and subsequently expose the impotence of those nations vis-à-vis China. Even though Russian and Chinese aversion to US efforts to promote global democracy has served as a key rallying point for the two

countries, Suslov warns that "an emboldened China could eventually demand that Russia follow its lead." The question also remains as to whether an overly gung-ho approach from Beijing might result in humiliation for Russia, not least as Moscow firmly believes in its equal status in the relationship. Whether Russia's leadership will come to their senses and realise that they are being duped and manipulated by Beijing is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, and for the time being, the answer to this question remains 'no'.

China's Military Build-Up

An additional factor that needs to be highlighted relates to China's military build-up. Yuri Tavorovsky from the Moscow-based Russian People's Friendship University, has claimed that there is a certain degree of apprehension in Moscow regarding this issue. Tavorovsky asserts that "in the long run, we watch China's success and do not rule out any possible scenario because we remember how Beijing's foreign policy changed from the 1950s to the reform period under Deng Xiaoping." It should be

noted that in March 1969, the Sino-Soviet border conflict in the vicinity of Damansky Island on the Ussuri River near Manchuria took place, damaging bilateral relations for some time. In addition, US President Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, his National Security Advisor, opened US doors to China, which itself eagerly undertook its own overtures towards Washington. Therefore, US President Ronald Reagan's famous adage "trust, but verify" should be borne in mind by the Russians.

Although Alexander Lukin from the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics, has expressed a similar sentiment, namely, "My sense is that there is understanding [in the Kremlin] that someday China could pose a problem," this problem, however, appears to be non-existent for the time being. Despite the fact that Russia and China jointly participate in naval and land exercises both in Russia and in China, it does not necessarily make them strategic partners, but rather partners who watch each other carefully, at the same time remaining distrustful of the other's intentions.

As for the co-development and manufacture of innovative and well-advanced military technology, both sides are not as cosy or close as some researchers or experts suggest. Even though Viktor Murakhovsky, Editor-in-Chief of the *Arsenal of the Fatherland* magazine published in Moscow, asserts that "China will not surpass Russia in the development of key military systems" the reality is already different. China is already ahead of Russia in developing a military application for artificial intelligence (AI), shipbuilding, UAV-manufacturing, introducing anti-carrier ballistic missiles, defence electronics, and civil and military space performance. And China is not interested in any joint production of its military products with Russia, since it prefers to keep its know-how and technology for itself. Perhaps least important in this regard is that China has financial resources to maintain its investments in R&D and preserve the technological edge over Russia. It may, however, sell some of those systems, such as UAVs and ships to Russia, while the Russian leadership is keenly aware of their technological weaknesses and vulnerabilities. It is true that Russia is maintaining its technological edge over China in terms of military aviation and air-defence systems, however, it is not interested in any type of transfer of technology (ToT) to China, its so-called strategic partner.

Russian-Chinese Alignment

While Russia has reservations about the implications of China's newly found military strength, including China's defence industry



Photo: via author

A freight train crossing the Russian-Chinese border near Manzhouli. Moscow remains reluctant to open all of its business sectors to Chinese companies.

strength, it feels that it has no other option than to align itself with China in order to counterbalance the US-led West. The question remains as to whether this alignment can continue to exist for an extended period of time. Most likely not, since this alignment is neither equal, nor strategic, but is rather a more simple cooperation between the two countries against the democratic West.

The Russian-Chinese alignment serves China well since it has capital to invest, and it seeks to co-opt Russian companies into Chinese businesses operating in Russia. Mobile TeleSystems (MTS), Russia's largest mobile operator, signed an agreement in June 2019 with China's Huawei Technologies, the world largest manufacturer of 5G equipment, to help develop network infrastructure in Russia. Likewise, Russia's growing embrace of mass surveillance of its population through facial recognition technology led it to enter into increased cooperation with China's Hikvision, a partially state-owned leader of this technology. And indeed Elsa Kania, Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Washington-based Centre for a New American Security's Technology and National Security Programme, is right when she says that "as pressure grows from US policies and other concerns [on China], Russia is an attractive alternative as a market for cooperation and recruitment of talent for Chinese companies." Russia's increasing reliance on China is set to continue since Russia has no alternative or viable options and the Chinese leadership is aware of this fact and uses Russia as a market for cooperation and recruitment of highly-skilled labour from Russia. In addition, the increased reliance on China exposes the weaknesses

of Russia in terms of technology, economy and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). In other words, the Russian alignment with China does not serve Russia well.

Despite China's technological inroads into Russia, Moscow remains reluctant to completely open all of its sectors to Chinese companies, in part due to a history of Chinese cyber theft of Russian designs or reverse-engineering of Russian military aviation technology. There are also increasing concerns about Russia's smaller and medium companies being dominated by China's global tech firms, thus leaving Russia easy prey to China. Interestingly enough, India recently introduced new restrictions on foreign investment to prevent 'opportunistic takeovers' of its companies by Chinese buyers. Whether Russia will follow India's example remains to be seen.

In conclusion, mutual feelings of resentment are certainly directed towards the US, since Washington is often seen as adopting a belittling attitude towards both countries, but at the same time, China itself tends to look down on Russia and this exposes Russian dependency on China, its so-called benevolent benefactor. In short, let's not to be fooled by the terms "strategic partnership" or "strategic interests". And we might also recall that Russian Emperor Alexander III, once said that "Russia has just two allies, the armed forces and the navy." In modern Russia, in addition to its armed forces and navy, the country relies on its ballistic missiles, nuclear weapons, and permanent seat at the UN Security Council and not simply as a co-operator or unequal partner with China. And that is the true nature of Sino-Russian relations today. ■