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On Geopolitical Alignments and the Future of Sino-Russian Friendship

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On Geopolitical Alignments and the Future of Sino-Russian Friendship

On September 18, a three-day Sino-Russian heads of government meeting ended in Moscow. One of the most significant outcomes were the diplomatic messages of President Vladimir Putin and Chinese Premier of the State Council Li Keqiang on both countries' perception of the geopolitical chessboard.

Most notably, President Putin remarked that the comprehensive partnership with China remains Russia's "unconditional foreign policy priority". Arguably, this statement carries some significance beyond being just a friendly remark on occasion of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations which the meeting marked.

Before this significance is pointed out and taken as an opportunity to generally reflect on the overarching geopolitical trend of an Eurasiazation of geopolitics under Sino-Russian signs, it shall be mentioned that the partners also set an ambitious bilateral trade target of more than US\$200 billion by 2024 to boost economic relations amid the US-Chinese trade war [[Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty](#)] [[TASS](#)].

More interesting at this point are, however, the indicated mutual messages on the future of the Sino-Russian comprehensive strategic partnership that seems to increasingly stop short before emerging into an alliance.

What has been said?

It is worth to have a closer look at the statements of Putin and Li beyond their pledge to stand together against "unilateralism and protectionism" and the outlook of an announced Putin-Xi meeting on occasion of the BRICS summit in mid-November in Brazil and the directly ensuing Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meeting in Chile.

President Putin's central message reads:

"I would like to note that a very long distance has been covered in the history of bilateral cooperation over the past decades. Today, we really are strategic partners in the full sense of the word, and are implementing a comprehensive partnership that remains Russia's unconditional foreign policy priority. [...]"

I am confident that you can see our efforts, efforts on the part of Russia aimed at expanding Russian-Chinese ties across all areas. There is probably no need to go over this right now. The only thing I would like to say is that our interaction is, of course, the most important factor in international affairs [...].

In his response Li Keqiang remarked:

"Indeed, we have come a long way – we have been holding regular meetings without fail for 20 years, and the agenda is continuously being filled with new content. At the press meeting, we found it very difficult to briefly describe all of our areas of cooperation. Our cooperation promotes the development of not only our two countries but also the region and the world, especially considering the growing instability and uncertainty in the world, [...]."

It is very important for us to continue strengthening our friendship, cooperation and mutual ties so we can pool our efforts in the future to ensure world order under the aegis of the UN, and maintain the system of free trade based on WTO rules, which is very important for developing global stability and security.” [\[The Kremlin\]](#)

It is instructive to read this message of the Russian President not only as a remark to his Chinese counterpart but also to the West.

A hardening Sino-Russian partnership

Initially, the West has arguably underestimated both Russia’s relative recovery as a declining great power in the military realm, China’s stunning rise as a great power and the fast rapprochement between both countries after relations first between the West and Russia and then the US and China rapidly deteriorated.

Since 2017, it has become increasingly obvious that geopolitics and raw great power competition were back as the defining ordering principle on the global stage. With a resuming rhetoric of war on both sides, with trade-, currency- and tech ‘wars’ unfolding amid episodes of hostility in proxy theaters and hostage diplomacy, talk about a new Cold War is resounding a fast cooling political climate.

In this climate, the Sino-Russian partnership is thriving. In 2015, amid Western sanctions over the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, Putin and Xi laid the groundwork to expand mutual relations on geopolitical terms declaring to link the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union with the BRI. After the 2017 US National Security Strategy [\[The White House\]](#) and the 2018 National Defense Strategy [\[US Department of Defense\]](#) named great power rivalry with Russia and China as its top concerns, Beijing demonstratively stepped in when Russia became increasingly pressured over the Skripal poisoning affair that begun in March 2018. Furthermore, Russia and China cooperated on a number of global hotspots like Syria, Venezuela and Iran vis-à-vis the US position. Just very recently, Russia and China have submitted for the first time a joint draft plan in the UN Security Council for the pacification of Syria’s Idlib province. [\[Al Jazeera\]](#)

In comparison, joint Western policies on global issues seem to lack momentum and cohesion. Strong irritations in US-Turkish relations over the purchase of the Russian S-400 and differences over Kurdish affairs, a heating geopolitical competition between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus and forcefully advancing inroads of both Russia and China in the Balkans further alarm Western policy analysts. This comes at a time, when relations within NATO seem to be confused by Donald Trump’s almost open hostility towards any multilateral governance arrangement and by what many US allies perceive as an erratic foreign policy.

With an unabated rise of China, an increasing Chinese assertiveness in pursuing the own foreign policy goals, an undeniable impact of the Sino-Russian rapprochement and a European Union facing a hard time over Brexit, problems with internal unity and economic difficulties, the geopolitical imperatives and preferences seem increasingly less clear for many Western policy makers. What seems clear, however, is the geopolitical weight of a potential Sino-Russian de-facto alliance.

A US military expert has described the situation of a further growing together of the two Eurasian giants on terms of a more permanent arrangement as a dramatic

challenge to the United States: “The world system, and American influence in it, would be completely upended if Moscow and Beijing aligned more closely.” [[New York Times](#)]

Despite some potential areas of limited conflict also between Russia and China - concerning for instance the growing Chinese influence in Central Asia -, the overall trend seems to support clearly this: an unabated Sino-Russian rapprochement.

Notions of rapprochement with Russia and their rejection

While most Western analysts and policy makers are increasingly wary of a perceived need to engage and contain Russian assertiveness on rather adversarial terms as expressed for instance in a May 2019 Pentagon White Paper on “Russian Strategic Intentions. A Strategic Multilayer Assessment” [[Politico](#)], a competing opinion indicates that it would be in the West’s interest to thwart the momentum of an ever-closer Sino-Russian partnership by means of a rapprochement with Russia. After the election of Donald Trump as US President seemed to have opened up a window of opportunity for a US-Russian rapprochement for a brief moment, this was soon crushed by Russia-gate and its consequences. This notwithstanding, a NYT opinion piece some months ago also suggested to “peeling Russia away from China’s orbit” [[New York Times 2](#)], prompting RT to ask rhetorically “hell freezes over?”. [[RT](#)]

Similar ideas, got even stronger traction in Europe. Especially French President Macron, one of the weightiest foreign policy voices in Europe, has frequently expressed a genuine European interest in bringing Europe and Russia back together underlining that Russia would essentially be a European country in historical-cultural perspectives.

It might be that President Putin understood domestically beleaguered President Macron’s overtures as an expression of weakness, a notion that would resemble both Russia’s and China’s sobering discovery of Western economic weakness in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and the subsequent economic destabilization of the Eurozone. At least Putin remarked in his rather direct way: “I think everyone understands today, and President Macron has said recently in public that Western hegemony is over,” referring to the French president. [[South China Morning Post](#)]

Now, Putin has spoken again and I would suggest to read his remarks to China’s Premier of the State Council in light of this broader context. At core Vladimir Putin stresses that Russia and China are now “really [...] strategic partners in the full sense of the word”, that further implementing this “comprehensive partnership [...] remains Russia’s unconditional foreign policy priority”, and that both countries’ interactions in this sense form nothing less than “the most important factor in international affairs”. - ‘Unconditional’ is a strong word in the diplomatic lexicon and Putin could hardly express his commitment to Beijing any stronger in the given circumstances. At the same time, this commitment can hardly not be understood as a clear rebuttal to all careful and moderate Western expressions of interest to find ways towards a rapprochement with the West.

Meanwhile, over the last years, Russia’s international posture and position seems to constantly improve. After a number of foreign policy advancement in the Middle East, the Trump administration failed to secure its interests in Venezuela, and thus regarding its classical sphere of influence, while President Maduro enjoyed Chinese and especially Russian support to be now on his way to visit Moscow. [[Radio Free Europe. Radio Liberty 2](#)]

At the same time, Russia has just held its large-scale Tsentr-2019 military exercise alongside China, India and other Asian nations, with around 128,000 troops and maneuvers spanning from the Caspian Sea to Central Asia. [\[Moscow Times\]](#) Moreover, Iran just reports to plan joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman with China and Russia amid US pressure over the recent attack on Aramco. [\[The Times\]](#)

Nothing in the present, still very fluid geopolitical equilibrium is set in stone and reversing trends are always possible. For the time being, however, it looks as if Sino-Russian relations will continue to thrive on a sustaining and even accelerating momentum in a world in which both powers exert an increasing influence.

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