

Major Trends and Current Status of China-Russia Relations

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Officially, the Sino-Russian bilateral relations were raised to “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership in a new era” in 2015, indicating strong interests, on both sides at the state level, to further enhance Sino-Russian cooperation in a constantly evolving global context. As we enter in 2021, the foundational document defining Sino-Russia relations, *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation* signed in 2001, is also set to be extended for another five years. More broadly, in the official discourse, Russian-Chinese relations have also been set as the model for post-Cold War great power relations, a model of strategic mutual trust, a guarantor of international stability, and an important force in deterring U.S. unilateralist actions.

However, the Russian-Chinese relations actually have progressed in the midst of repeated internal and external doubts ever since the early 1990s. Popular narratives in the Anglophone world since the early 2000s, such as the “axis of convenience” thesis, always portray the bilateral relations as tactic, short-termed and predominantly derived from each other’s relation with the west, and the US in particular. In contrast, living experiences have already defied the most vocal warnings about the fragility of such bilateral relations, and the claims of Sino-Russian Rapprochement being a “strange case” in international relations.

The recent pandemic and the on-going public health crisis across the globe casts further doubt on the universality of liberal values and the American hegemonic imposition of its own value and institutions onto others, further accelerating the diffusing of power once concentrated in the transatlantic space. The loss of moral high ground of post-Cold War monism engenders an urgent call for peaceful coexistence of plural voices in the international society. As a result, we have recently witnessed both China and Russia’s enhanced willingness and intention to expand bilateral cooperation, as supporters of state sovereignty, multilateralism, and democratization of the international system, which takes on even more universal appeal in the current international context.

On top of solid person-to-person trust on the top leader level, another opportunity for further China-Russia rapprochement is the rising frankness, cool-headedness and pragmatic vision on both sides. The Chinese expert community in particular in recent years have strongly advocated for searching for the “the endogenous drives” of Sino-Russian relations. The underlying tone of such policy narrative is to go beyond the US as an omnipresent factor in the Sino-Russian engagement and not to see the bilateral

relations only from the prism of China-US and Russia-US relations, but rather to highlight the genuinely bilateral agenda between China and Russia. Such policy narrative implies a pragmatic and rational perception about the bilateral relations, as an attempt to bring the overly reliance on external factors in bilateral relations back to a supposedly more pragmatic and natural route. It also candidly acknowledges that in this bilateral relations one shall not expect each other to be on perfect alignment on every policy issue and shall not strive for perfect asymmetry between the two countries. Neither should one side expect unconditional support or perfect policy coordination on all key issues from the other side. Lastly, it implies a more solid realization that both countries need and are developing multiple sets of relations in an increasingly “multiplex” world, and so neither side shall take offense by other types of inter-state relations if they occur. Similarly, neither side wants to put the other or any third party in a situation of either-or choice.

Alongside with such more candid and pragmatic visions, another big plus for Sino-Russian rapprochement is the recent converging assessment between the two states of the overall international situation, potentially helping policy coordination between the two states. As sometimes called a “model of conservative (or sovereign) internationalism”, both states increasingly display features of “conservative” powers looking for independent development without sovereignty being impaired. Since 2014, for Beijing, Russia’s anti-sanction measures, partial success in import substitution in certain economic sectors, and more audacious decoupling from dollar-dominated financial markets provides both a chance to strike bilateral deals on Chinese terms and relevant experiences of operating the national economy in an increasingly dismal external environment. The emphasis on “internal circulation” in the so-called “dual circulation” new strategy advocated by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in July 2020 has been up for intense debate within China. Among the multiple interpretations, at least one major camp sees Chinese top leader’s call for beefing up “internal circulation” as a sign of using self-reliance to respond to the hostile external market, by emphasizing the advantages of a large domestic market and huge untapped consumption potential. For the same reason, as Chinese authorities and wider policy circles take the costs of overreliance on the dollar system with increasing urgency, Russia’s experiences and possible policy coordination and even joint counter-reaction on this front becomes a new possibility and even a necessity for China.

Oftentimes, on the flip side of opportunities lie challenges and even threats. The demand for more democratization and multipolarity in the international system comes with an increasing polarized and fractured world, the absence of effective leadership, where smaller players are also being pushed for picking a side in geopolitical confrontation of big powers. To make things even worse, lack of consensus on basic principles of code of conduct on international scene often regress into “no-adults-in-the-room”, where “responsible powers” are busy hurling insults at and conspiring against each other. All these structural changes make it even harder to affect peaceful co-existence of diverse ideas and different national systems, at the perils of Sino-

Russian cooperation too. The on-going Covid-19 pandemic is very likely to further exacerbate inter-state inequality and some of the worst consequences of previous round of neo-liberal globalization and global environmental crisis similarly poses mounting challenges to humanity at large, when the diminished global leadership and crippling multilateral institutions amidst such daunting challenges become only more acute. Sino-Russian rapprochement, no matter how one defines it, cannot escape from such a challenging environment.

Relatedly, both China and Russia are now being framed as the biggest threats against a supposedly liberal, democratic, capitalistic western world, as the major challenger to, the key violator of the supposedly universal and malign liberal international order, and even as the ultimate “bad guys” against common humanity, because of the fundamental difference and incompatibility between their domestic models and the western liberal democratic models. Such naming and framing practices recently add new layers of challenges: not only regime type, but also moral, even civilizational judgment plays a similar exacerbating role in demonizing the two countries by the West. Such a trend is destined to push for a further fragmented and fractured world, where cooperation and communication, particularly across the major fault lines, become even more difficult.

Beyond ideational framing and ideological competition, in the economic sphere, despite the fact that bilateral trade between China and Russia surpassed US\$100 billion in 2019, both countries are having a hard time to reach the targeted US\$200 billion by 2024. As there have been breakthroughs in several major economic spheres (energy, agricultural, weaponry, the Arctic), the hope to rely on the other as THE game changer in structuring a post-American economic order seems elusive. Among others, while the goal of dedollarization is tempting and both countries are actively seeking ways to implement it, the specific approach to reach that goal is still highly limited. Both sides need to realize that and actively seek economic opportunities beyond each other.

Last but not least, the defense of national sovereignty and criticism of hegemonic behaviors, the celebration of partial success in containing the Covid-19 pandemic or developing multiple vaccines shall not translate into hubris and declination for self-reflection and self-criticism in the guise of whataboutism. Both countries indeed face serious challenges in properly handling diversity within the sovereign boundaries, thus impeding the provision of a genuine alternative world of universal appeal to the world.

On March 23, 2021, the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers issued a joint statement on “some issues of global governance”, advocating for “a more just, democratic, rational and multipolar world order” and rejecting the West’s claim to a standard model of democracy and its moral high ground to define what constitutes “human rights” and “democracy”. This statement essentially reiterates the key

messages in the Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order signed by Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin in 1997. Such continuity reflects Moscow and Beijing's shared, stable stance in opposition to the hegemonic foundation of international system, signifying the Sino-Russian rapprochement over the past three decades is not the result of any particular national leadership, but more derived from structural realism in the international system. In the official narratives, the recent phrasing and framing of bilateral relations shows joint efforts to go beyond the US common denominator, beyond the "axis of convenience" thesis or the "liberal international order" framework, to continue to push for endogenous drives and new type of big power relations beyond traditional military ally as the ultimate and highest form of inter-state relation.

As the two countries are moving from the more constrained, "conservative" mutual role expectation of "do-no-harm-to-each-other", contained in the Three No Principles (No Allies, No Confrontation, No targeting third party) to more proactive "do-something-together" model, "practice what you preach" shall also the guiding principle in the future to further substantiate the fundamental bilateral agenda between China and Russia, on both the international and domestic levels. While the advocacy for democracy, coexistence of multiple civilizations and no-hegemony on the international level receives consistent support over the past three decades from the two states, one would expect to see further exploration and practice of how the internal and external circulations, to borrow the concepts from recent "dual circulation" policy guideline advocated by the Chinese top leader, can be logically and coherently integrated, as the foundation for further Sino-Russian rapprochement.

The on-going Russian military operation in Ukraine caused new challenges for China-Russia relations. The Chinese state, while trying to maintain neutrality, has been walking a fine line between open criticism and sanctions against Russia's and open support for Russia. The official voices from Chinese state have been somewhat vague and open for different interpretations since early March in 2022. As of mid-June 2022, it seems clear that the Chinese state will not criticize Russia openly, will not join or initiate any sanctions against Russia; will continue to blame NATO expansion as the root cause of the crisis and in different ways acknowledge the legitimate security concerns of all parties (Russia and Ukraine both included). Meanwhile, the Chinese state also increases its reference to the devastating consequences of the ongoing crisis and shows increased incentives to push for political solutions of the crisis. For the foreseeable future, Chinese side will also maintain the commercial ties it has already established with Russia and expand when commercially profitably, but shy away full scale support of Russia, both in economic and military/security spheres, as one would expect from a full-ally.