

## Russia-China: Ever Closer Relationship, But Not an Alliance Yet

Kaczmarek, Marcin

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Kaczmarek, M. (2021). Russia-China: Ever Closer Relationship, But Not an Alliance Yet. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 265, 2-4. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000476768>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-NC-ND Lizenz (Namensnennung-Nicht-kommerziell-Keine Bearbeitung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-NC-ND Licence (Attribution-Non Commercial-NoDerivatives). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>

## Russia–China: Ever Closer Relationship, But Not an Alliance Yet

By Marcin Kaczmarski, University of Glasgow

DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000476768

### Abstract

Since the US defined Russia and China as its strategic rivals, the question of whether Moscow and Beijing will form an alliance has gained new relevance. Although Sino–Russian cooperation has continued to flourish in a number of areas, the obstacles to the creation of a fully-fledged alliance remain evident.

### Introduction

For many observers, the Sino–Russian relationship is predominantly shaped by the pressures exerted on those two states by the US. According to this logic, since early 2018 we should have expected to see another round of rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. At that time, the US identified Russia and China as its strategic competitors. The American policy of engagement with China has been gradually replaced by one of neo-containment, whereas the number of sanctions imposed by the US Congress on Russia has overshadowed any initiatives by former president Donald Trump to establish cordial ties with Vladimir Putin. Despite such a ‘conducive’ environment, however, the balance sheet of Moscow–Beijing cooperation since 2018 has been nuanced.

On the one hand, Sino–Russian cooperation has continued to flourish in a number of areas, including common political and normative opposition *vis-à-vis* the West, energy, and security and defence (see below). On the other hand, the obstacles that have previously prevented both sides from entering into a fully-fledged alliance have remained in place. The asymmetry in material capabilities between Russia and China has only increased. While China seems cautious enough not to cross Russia’s ‘red lines’ in the post-Soviet space, Beijing’s influence in the region has been continuously rising. Russia has limited means to offer support to China in key areas of its rivalry with the US, such as trade, technology or investment. Moreover, Moscow has struggled to maintain neutrality with regard to Beijing’s increasingly assertive foreign policy towards its neighbours, including its pursuit of territorial claims in the South China Sea and tensions with India. On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has deprived both leaders of the opportunity to display their bonhomie to the external world.

The presidency of Joe Biden has the potential to influence the course of the Sino–Russian relationship. Unlike Trump, Biden can be expected to seek consensus with Europe in order to reduce the global influence of both Russia and China. This coincides with shifting perceptions of China in Europe, where a growing

number of actors identify China as a long-term challenge and a systemic rival. The emergence of a trans-Atlantic ‘united front’ might make Beijing more willing to join forces with Moscow. It would not, however, diminish the power asymmetry between Russia and China, which in a long-term perspective threatens to subordinate Russian interests to those of China.

### The Pillars of Cooperation

Three areas of Sino–Russian cooperation have stood out for the last couple of years: (a) political and normative opposition *vis-à-vis* the West, (b) energy, (c) security and defence. In each case, Moscow and Beijing have been incrementally strengthening their ties and coordinating their policies. The US pressure has not, however, led to a qualitative breakthrough in any of these realms.

The normative dimension of Russian–Chinese joint opposition towards the West, and the US in particular, has become increasingly relevant in light of the ruling elites in both states placing greater emphasis on corresponding national identity narratives. While in the case of Russia, this discourse can be traced back to 2012 and Putin’s return to presidency, in the case of China it has been a more recent phenomenon. On the one hand, Xi Jinping and CCP propaganda has continued to portray China as a harbinger of (economic) globalization, a proponent of an open economy decrying protectionism, and as a provider of global public goods. On the other hand, Chinese narratives directed towards the external world have begun to harshly criticise US unilateralism, adopting a tone similar to that set by Vladimir Putin’s 2007 Munich speech. Such anti-American views have converged in the public domain. Moscow and Beijing have also consistently strived to improve their positions within the UN system, with both seeing their election to the Human Rights Council in 2020 as crowning these efforts.

In the energy realm, Russia has retained its status as China’s main oil supplier. The opening of a second branch of the East Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline in early 2018 allowed Russia to double its direct oil exports to China. On top of this, China has been

purchasing an increasing volume of oil from the ESPO Pacific coast terminal in Kozmino. The Covid-induced slump in oil prices encouraged Chinese companies to increase their imports from Russia. The scope of Sino–Russian cooperation in the LNG sector has also broadened. In 2019, Novatek sold 20% of its Arctic LNG-2 project to the Chinese companies, CNPC and CNOOC, solidifying its ties with China. Finally, towards the end of 2019, Gazprom’s Power of Siberia pipeline came online, beginning natural gas exports to China. While it is going to take several years before the pipeline reaches its full capacity, the Russian side has already begun advertising another pipeline, one that would transit Mongolia en route to China. However, in light of the long history of failed negotiations between Gazprom and China, it is impossible to predict whether Beijing will decide to invest in this proposed pipeline route.

Both states have sought to demonstrate their camaraderie via highlighting security and defence cooperation. For three consecutive years, Chinese troops have taken part in Russia’s annual strategic-level military exercise: Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019 and Kavkaz-2020. While in each case, other external states also participated and the scope of practical cooperation was limited, this nonetheless represents an unambiguous political signal. Russia and China have also engaged in naval cooperation, in 2019 both states took part in bilateral (Joint Sea-2019) and trilateral naval exercises. In the same year, China and Russia conducted their first ever joint bomber patrol over the waters of the East Asia, a joint exercise repeated a year later in December 2020. On top of this, Vladimir Putin has stated that Russia has helped China to develop its ballistic missile early warning system (China has not commented on this or revealed any other details). Cooperation in the arms trade, on the other hand, seems to be waning. The most notable recent contracts were for the sale of S-400 missile defence systems and Su-35 jets, but these were signed back in 2014 and 2015, respectively. There were unconfirmed rumours suggesting that Moscow had suspended the delivery of the S-400s in 2020. Although these rumours were likely false, there has been a marked absence of new arms sales contracts, despite both states’ growing concerns about tensions with the US. China continues to purchase selected equipment from Russia (for instance, civilian and military helicopters) and Russia has begun to buy some equipment from China (e.g. naval engines), but the two states have shown no sign of upgrading such cooperation to jointly manufacturing weapon systems. Moreover, the competition between the Russian and Chinese military-industrial complexes looms large. In 2020, China overtook Russia as second largest exporting state on the global arms market.

## The Pandemic-Induced Slowdown

The Covid-19 pandemic has injected some degree of uncertainty into the relationship. As one Chinese scholar has *observed*, since the beginning of the global pandemic Putin and Xi have had little contact with one another, which stands in sharp contrast to the previous period in which they held regular meetings, usually several times a year. The pandemic has also generated a wave of speculation about estrangement between Russia and China, with both accusing the other of following a misleading policy on Covid-19.

Ultimately, however, both sides seem to have decided to brush potential problems under the carpet, notably with respect to their respective state narratives on the pandemic. Russia supported the Chinese narratives about its proper reaction to the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, whereas Russian state media helped to spread fake news about the alleged role of the US in manufacturing the pandemic. Beijing reciprocated by keeping silent about the treatment of Chinese nationals living in Russia during the pandemic, which at the height of the first lockdown often bordered on racism.

The pandemic has certainly slowed down military cooperation. No regular bilateral exercises took place in 2020. The rules on ‘social distancing’ and the switch to online diplomacy have prevented the usual displays of bonhomie between Russia and China’s leaders. 2020 was supposed to illustrate the closeness of Sino–Russian ties, including at the celebrations for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2 in Europe and Asia. Xi Jinping would have been an honorary guest for Victory Day in Moscow in May, while Putin would have attended China’s celebrations in Beijing in September.

## The Persistent Obstacles to an Alliance

The Russian political elite might be aware that external observers have generally indicated that potential problems between Moscow and Beijing may lie ahead. Using his annual speech at an (online) meeting with Russian and international experts in the framework of the Valdai Club, Putin hinted at the possibility of a Russian–Chinese military alliance. Responding to a question posed by a Chinese expert, Putin emphasised that neither states had the need to enter into a military alliance, but that he would not exclude the possibility.

One might argue that a military alliance would represent the logical implication of to-date developments between Russia and China and the pressures that Washington has been exercising on both states. The Sino–American rivalry, which has been embracing new areas, could modify China’s long-term position of avoiding alliance commitments. The evolution of the American policy towards China, away from engagement and towards neo-containment, put Beijing on par with Mos-

cow as a designated threat to US interests, and increased the value of Russian support. Russia, in turn, has tried to enlist political and economic support from China since the first wave of sanctions imposed by the West after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nonetheless, a number of obstacles persist that would prevent a fully-fledged alliance emerging. The most important is mutual unwillingness to underwrite the other side's most aggressive policies, and Russia's limited capability to support China in the latter's rivalry with the US.

China's tense relations with India illustrate how costly a military alliance could become for Russia. Responding to Sino-Indian border clashes, Moscow did its best to mitigate the tensions between its partners and stay neutral. While Russia's relations with China are much more substantial, India's geopolitical weight matters for Moscow. Russia does not like India's tilt towards the US and should not be expected to support the concept of the Indo-Pacific, but neither is it willing to forego cordial relations with New Delhi. Thinking aimed at forming a strategic triangle with China and India, which can be traced back to Gorbachev's policy towards Asia, prevails among the Russian elite. Any genuine alliance with China would force Moscow to loosen its ties with India as well as with its other Asian partners, such as Vietnam. China, in turn, has done its best not to offer full support to Russia's aggressive moves in the post-Soviet space. Beijing has not recognized the annexation of Crimea and sees Russian brinkmanship in the region as an unnecessary obstacle to implementing its economic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Sino-American rivalry poses a different kind of challenge. For many years, Russian observers portrayed a Sino-American conflict as the worst-case scenario, with Moscow either having to choose between the two or threatened with marginalization by the G-2 superpowers. These fears turned out to be exaggerated. Russian-American tensions, the lack of ties and the anti-Russian mood among the US establishment have meant that Russia has supported China by default. While not throwing its weight behind Beijing, Moscow's actions made it clear that the US should not expect a 'reverse Nixon', whereby its relations with Russia, or Russia in general, would take on an anti-Chinese turn. Russia has not banned Huawei from its market, has not pushed China to join arms control agreements (in spite of open US pressure), and accepted Beijing's claims on Covid-19.

#### *About the Author*

Dr Marcin Kaczmarski is a Lecturer in the School of Social & Political Sciences, University of Glasgow. In his research, he focuses on Russia-China relations and Russia's foreign policy. He is the author of *Russia-China relations in the post-crisis international order* (Routledge 2015).

At the same time, even if it wanted to support China more, Russia has limited opportunities to do so. The US has put pressure on Beijing via trade and technology policy, and has also begun limiting Chinese investments. Washington aims to foreclose Chinese scholars' access to the US research and development sector. In all those arenas of activity, Russia is not a top rank player. Regardless of the amount of goodwill, Russia cannot offset Chinese losses, suffered as a result of the US blocking Chinese companies from accessing key technologies, such as semi-conductors. If the US introduces further bans on purchasing its goods and technologies, Russian companies will not be able to offer substitutes to their Chinese counterparts. The Russian market cannot replace that of the US, if Washington decides to delist Chinese companies from US stock exchanges.

#### **The Biden Presidency**

The US's identification of China and Russia as strategic rivals goes beyond either Donald Trump and his acolytes or the Republican Party. The voting records on sanctions against Russia and widespread critiques of China attest to this view being prevalent across the US establishment and functioning as one of only a few bipartisan issues. It is highly likely that Biden, emboldened by receiving consensus support in the Congress, will not only uphold to-date policy, but also take further steps directed against China and Russia. Even more importantly, a new president can renew trans-Atlantic dialogue on both states and the challenge that they pose to the fracturing West. NATO has already signalled its readiness to pay more attention to China and Sino-Russian ties alike. Biden can be expected to reach out to the European Union, so as to tame China's influence regionally and globally.

If followed by concrete actions, the trans-Atlantic dialogue on Russia and China may provide additional glue for the Sino-Russian relationship. Faced with more coherent US-European positions, Beijing may be tempted to close ranks with Moscow. The latter's response is, however, far from certain. The Western pressure is not the only challenge Russia faces. A rising China has gained the upper hand over Russia in many areas and an alliance would only weaken Moscow's position vis-à-vis Beijing.