

Sino-Russian Relations: Implications For Vietnam

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Abstract

Sino-Russian relations have witnessed remarkable developments in recent years. China's big market, high demand for energy, and weapon systems have contributed to mitigating Russian economic difficulty to a certain extent. The two nations have resolved border disputes of more than 4,000 km. This article focuses on real situation, nature of ties and their implications for Vietnam.

Introduction

Consequent to annexation of Crimea, by use of military force, Russia has suffered from political isolation and economic stagnation,² and has turned eastwards. China's big market, high demand for energy, and weapon systems have contributed to mitigating Russian economic difficulty to a certain extent. The two nations have resolved border disputes of more than 4,000 km. Cooperation in the fields of defence and energy has achieved breakthrough; and in other fields cooperation has deepened. Sino-Russian strategic partnership has been established for a period of 20 years and is likely to attain new heights.³ China is Russia's biggest trading partner. The two nations intend to increase two-way trade to US \$ 200 billion in the next 10 years.⁴

The two nations have shared positions⁵ on defence. Russia has granted China a "special" status, and has been selling to China more items of weapon systems⁶ than any other country. Naval cooperation between the two has been on the rise in terms of scale, quality, content, and conduct of exercises.⁷ It reflects China's readiness to expand global reach and military cooperation with Russia. China also appears ready to assist Russia not only in the Pacific Ocean, but also in the Atlantic Ocean and the North Sea. China has adopted pro-Russia policy since the 18th Congress

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in 2012. To curb US influence near China's borders, Russian Navy has designated China as a "core partner" in its naval doctrine, signalling to exert greater influence in regional waters.⁸ Russia has supported China's position on the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) regarding the South China Sea case.

Both nations refrain from using the term "alliance" to describe their political and military relations. Their relations have been modelled to compete with US and its allies, leading towards emergence of a new Cold War. It has encouraged US and its allies in Europe and Asia-Pacific to strengthen ties. It has increased risk of a global arms race as well as potential conflict in the South and East China Seas.

Analysis of Strategies Adopted

The two nations jointly want an end to US dominance in the international financial system, and oppose US measures to change regimes in several countries.⁹ China wants to replace the US as the sole superpower. It competes with US in Latin America. Meanwhile, Russia is in competition with US for influence in the Middle East, North Africa and in Latin America. Russia wants to stop NATO's eastward expansion, and an arms race in outer space. While Russia is in direct confrontation with US, China has adopted a more flexible approach. Russia may resort to military measures if its national interests are threatened.¹⁰ China treats its relations with the West with caution since China benefits a lot from economic globalisation, especially from its ties¹¹ with US.

China favours policy of "soft expansion". She seeks to buy Russia's natural resources and technologies at cheap rates while gradually encroaching upon Russian territory. China challenges Russia's monopoly in export of oil and gas to the Central Asia by means of "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI). Putin has agreed to connect the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with BRI, but its feasibility is unclear. Russia is apprehensive of China's military power. That explains why Russia continues to deploy its military units in the Far East close to China border. Russia is worried about China's infiltration in the Far East and its growing influence in Central Asia, particularly in Ukraine. Russia is afraid of the possibility that China would become its major competitor for export of military hardware, and compete with Russia for influence in Central Asian nations.

Despite close cooperation, there remains distrust in Sino-Russian relations. China took advantage of Russia's difficulty during negotiations regarding construction of a gas pipeline from Siberia to China in 2014, and sales of Su-35 fighters and S-400 missile system. Russia is worried about losing its military technology edge to China. Chinese businesses are worried about Russia's incapability to pay debts, and risk is high due to sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. China did not follow Russia to recognise South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states.

Russia has periodically given priority to its relations with some of the Western countries which may harm Sino-Russian strategic partnership.¹² Both nations are neither allies nor adversaries. Russia's decision to sell weapons to India, challenges China's ambition to dominate the region. Admission of both India and Pakistan to Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) implies hidden motives of both, Russia and China. While Russia seeks to develop alliances resembling the BRICS Group¹³ to contain US, China pays more attention to establishment of bipolar international system with US. China exploits its trade surplus as a weapon to control Russia.

Implications for Vietnam

China will need to maintain stability and take help of neighbouring countries, at least for the next 5 to 10 years, to secure its southern borders. China would not like Vietnam to go against China's strategic interests. Russia also wants to improve current scenario to promote regional security.

China wants to cooperate with Vietnam, which is a big market and has extensive network of free trade agreements conducive to economic development in southern China. Russia is attempting to promote economic competition of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) countries, including Vietnam. It can be visualised as an opportunity to enhance cooperation in military technology, defence industry, science and so on. Vietnam-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership is an opportunity to share Russia's advantages of defence industry, military technology, cadre education and training.

Vietnam has developed trade relations with both China and Russia. These are favourable conditions for Vietnam to promote its diplomatic relations.

Negative impact

China fears that Vietnam would be induced by the US to contain China. China continues to follow its policy of “courting” and “coercion” to keep Vietnam within its sphere of influence or as a buffer zone. China sustains moderate development of “comprehensive strategic partnership” with Vietnam, exaggerates risk of “Westernisation” and “disintegration” of Vietnam, periodically. China increases or eases tension; and sets conditions for tackling the South China Sea issue through “joint exploitation” for the sake of smooth bilateral relations. On one hand, China takes advantage of Russia, and embroils Laos and Cambodia. On the other hand, it applies pressure on “stubborn” ASEAN state members such as Singapore, and creates hardship for Vietnam.

As per Russia’s National Security Strategy 2016; the US is perceived as a threat to its security. China seeks to prevent the US from increasing influence in Vietnam, and hinders Vietnam from developing comprehensive partnership with the US. Russia’s comprehensive strategic partnership with China and bilateral settlement of South China Sea issue; naval cooperation with China in the South China Sea, have led to disappointment and suspicion. It has also posed a serious challenge to Vietnam.

Russia is keen to muster international support to cope with US and European Union (EU). Both, China and Russia do not have proper understanding of the nature of Vietnam-US relations, and are keen that Vietnam should refrain from upgrading its relationship with US.

Russia gives priority to its relations with China.¹⁴ In March 1988, Russia did not respond to Vietnam’s request to send its ships in Cam Ranh Base to support Vietnam’s naval vessels damaged in the conflict in Johnson Reef, Spratly Islands. Russia continues to maintain an ambiguous position regarding South China Sea. It does not criticise China’s moves to dominate South China Sea, conduct build-up and militarisation of islands and reefs, and step up their activities. China may impede naval vessels of US, Japan, India, etc., but does not do so to Russian warships operating in the South China Sea or making port calls at Vietnam’s harbours.

Recommendations

Vietnam should strive to settle maritime issues with China, thus creating momentum for developing good relations between the two countries. During strategic dialogues with China, Russia, and other countries, it is necessary to put forth the Vietnamese position on the resolution of disputes in a straightforward manner.

There is a need to promote economic cooperation on the basis of equality and mutual benefit while preventing China from doing harm to Vietnamese national interests. Vietnam also needs to continue to deepen cooperation with Russia on the basis of mutual benefit.

Vietnam should enhance its defence and security ties; upgrade strategic dialogues; and coordinate resolution of multilateral issues like the South China Sea case at multilateral forums. Vietnam has to take initiative in developing mechanisms for strengthening maritime security, conflict prevention, and consolidation of forces for dealing with contingencies, catering for the worst case scenario. It is necessary for Vietnam to resolutely defend its sovereignty, territorial integrity, and legitimate interests at sea; preserve its islands, and economic-science-service complexes; and create environment conducive for national development.

There is a need to maintain free flow of information between advisory offices, be judicious for allowing Russian aircraft to transit and refuel in Vietnam, so as to avoid difficulty in Vietnam - US diplomatic relations. It is important to make public awareness about the Vietnamese strength and advantages.

Vietnam needs to deepen its relations with both China and Russia. Vietnam – China borders should be developed into borders of peace and friendship. Focus should be on defending Vietnam's island territory.

We also need to improve relations with countries seeking economic and cultural ties with Vietnam and garner international support for important issues.

Conclusion

China is improving relations with Russia. Russia has to pivot to Asia because she is facing difficulty with US and EU. China and

Russia jointly may try to keep the US out of the South China Sea and Asia. Despite recent developments in their bilateral relations, China and Russia might not become allies. Their relations are potentially complex, fragile and imbalanced. However, US administration's approach towards North Korea and South China Sea is likely to bring China and Russia closer.

Vietnam should continue to preserve its independence, give priority to developing relations with China, harmoniously maintain Vietnam-China-Russia relations, broaden its relations with other major powers in the world, and develop harmonious relations with the US for promoting Vietnam's national interests.

Endnotes

¹ Russian economic power became weak, accounting for 1.5 per cent of global GDP as compared to 2.5 per cent.

² These two nations have concluded an agreement to produce high-speed trains; agreements to produce long-range civilian aircraft and heavy helicopters; energy contracts; MOU on cooperation for electric production and construction of underground gas depots in China.

³ Despite its current rate of \$66 billion, Sino-Russian trade has dropped from its peak of \$88 billion in 2012, before decreasing oil prices and Russia's subsequent economic recession. China still imposes trade restrictions to several Russian exports, including wheat and cattle.

⁴ Both China and Russia consider "Rebalance" and NATO's eastward expansion as US-initiated policies; and object US deployment of missile systems in Europe and THAAD in South Korea. China did not oppose Russia's annexation of Crimea and support of opposition factions in Ukraine.

⁵ These items include Kilo-class submarines, Su-27 and Su-35 fighters, Sovremenny –class destroyers, S-400 air-defence missiles.

⁶ The 2012 exercise in the Yellow Sea (China) witnessed the participation of 25 warships and submarines, 13 aircrafts, 9 helicopters; the 2013 exercise was conducted in Primorie (Russia) and the Sea of Japan with the involvement of 18 warships; the 2014 exercise was carried out in the East China Sea, near the Senkaku Islands (the Diaoyu Islands in China).

⁷ See aspistrategic.org.au, TASS - 15, 16 September 2016.

⁸ The two nations opposed the 1990s Wars in the Former Yugoslavia, the 2003 Iraq War, the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine, and the 2011 Arab Spring.

⁹ Russia's strategic bombers often fly close to the airspace of NATO countries, including the U.S; opposes Kosovo's declaration of independence, Georgia and Ukraine's inclination towards NATO and EU, U.S. deployment of missile defence system in Europe, and so on.

¹⁰ In financial terms, Sino-U.S. trade is 10 times higher than Sino-Russian trade. China promotes exchange with U.S. in the realms of investment and technology, and training and education of young elites at U.S. universities.

¹¹ After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Russia allowed U.S. to set up its military bases in Central Asia without consulting China. When Russia revealed shortcomings between Russia and NATO regarding the theater missile defence, China was very annoyed since it would become vulnerable to U.S. missile systems.

¹² The combined economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

¹³ A new concept of Russia's foreign policy was unveiled on November 30th, 2016. Accordingly, Russia put China on the top of its priority list, followed by India, Mongolia, Japan, and so on. See more Sergey Luzyanin, "Russia pivots to the East in geopolitical terms," *International Studies Review*, No.2 (109), June 2017, page 119.