

The Outcome of President Putin's Visit to China has Global Significance

Introduction

On 16 May, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in China on a two-day state visit to meet his 'Dear Friend' President Xi Jinping as the two countries look to further deepen a relationship that has grown closer since Russia invaded Ukraine more than two years ago.

The two Presidents had declared a "No limits" partnership days before the Russian invasion in February 2022. In March 2023, when President Xi visited Moscow, he described a "New era" in the countries' relationship, while in October, when Putin last visited Beijing, Xi spoke of the "Deep friendship" between the two.^[i]

It is President Putin's first trip abroad since his March re-election and his second in just over six months to China. The visit also comes days after Russia launched a new offensive in the North-Eastern Kharkiv region which has met with some success. Incidentally, President Xi, returned last week from a three-nation tour of Europe, where he countered Western criticism of Beijing's ties with Moscow.

Sino-Russia Relations

As per Konstantin Kalachev, an independent Russian political analyst, the visit is intended to show that Sino-Russian relations are moving up another level, including the personal relationship between the two leaders.^[ii]

President Putin, in an interview published in China's Xinhua state news agency before his visit, hailed China's "Genuine desire" to help resolve the Ukraine crisis. By this, he appeared to give his backing to a 12-point Ukraine peace plan that Beijing released in February 2023.^[iii] The two countries have also deepened military ties, holding joint war games over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, and organising training for ground forces in each other's territory.

During his speech, President Xi praised "75 years of persistent accumulation of ever-lasting friendship and all-round cooperation" between the two countries.^[iv] President Xi also stated that China earlier talked about a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine and repeated that by saying it was the only option for lasting regional peace.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who met President Xi in Beijing last month, warned that China's support for Russia's "Brutal war of aggression" in Ukraine had helped Russia ramp up production of rockets, drones and tanks while stopping short of direct arms exports.^[v]

The Military Dimension

China and Russia have worked together more closely in recent years. Their Air Force and Navy have held joint military exercises, including near Alaska and Taiwan. While China has not provided Russia with lethal weapons, it has been the top supplier of components like semiconductors and machine tools that have both civilian and military uses. As the dependencies on each other increase, China will be able to demand access to key areas of military technology that the Russians have developed benefiting from access to mainly European technology. This is particularly true of Russian development in hypersonic and nuclear propulsion technology, areas where it has worked steadily to close the gap with the West and where China continues to lag.

Military Cooperation is evident between the two countries even though they are not at a stage of operating seamlessly. But military ties have increased from joint training over the last twenty years to participating in each other's strategic drills and conducting regular naval exercises which have been also conducted near Taiwan as well as air activity near Japan. Russia has also confirmed the transfer for missile defence technology in 2019 though little detail of its progress is available as per the Financial Times

Shadow of the Ukrainian Conflict

Trade between China and Russia has boomed since the Ukraine invasion and hit \$240 bn in 2023, according to Chinese customs figures. But after Washington vowed to go after financial institutions that facilitate Moscow, Chinese exports to Russia dipped during March and April, down from a surge early in the year. Last month, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said; "Russian natural gas is fuelling numerous Chinese households, and Chinese-made automobiles are running on Russian roads". [\[vi\]](#)

Despite efforts to isolate Russia and reduce its war-waging capacity, Russia's economy grew past expectations to grow at 3.6 per cent in 2023, according to data from the International Monetary Fund. The sanctions have caused a shift in Russia's trade with China which emerged as its key economic lifeline. The two countries reached \$240 bn in bilateral trade, hitting a target to exceed \$200 bn in two-way trade by 2024 ahead of schedule which has made China Russia's top trade partner.

But as the economic partnership comes under close scrutiny in the West, Chinese banks fear US sanctions that might cut them off from the global financial system. That, coupled with recent efforts to rebuild fractured ties with the United States, may make Beijing reluctant to openly push for more cooperation with Russia.

White House officials in recent weeks have confronted Beijing on what they believe is substantial support from China for Russia's defence industrial base. Beijing has slammed the US as making 'Groundless Accusations' over 'Normal Trade and Economic Exchanges' between China and Russia.

The Joint Statement

In a lengthy joint statement, Russia and China pledged to tighten ties between their militaries and expand the scale of their joint exercises. The statement focussed on deepening their strategic partnership and condemned "US nuclear missile deployments that threatened Russia and China as well as Washington's AUKUS alliance with the UK and Australia". The statement also said "Intend to increase interaction and tighten co-ordination in order to counter Washington's destructive and hostile course towards the so-called 'dual containment' of our countries".[\[vii\]](#)

Russia welcomed China's efforts to broker peace with Ukraine and also vowed to deepen their economic partnership, which has emerged as a vital lifeline. The statement condemned attempts to seize sovereign assets — a clear reference to discussions over giving some of Russia's frozen sovereign funds to Ukraine and said the countries reserved the right to respond against them.

It seems that in spite of Antony Blinken's visit aimed at persuading China to scale back its relationship with Moscow, both countries see eye to eye on a range of important issues, including Ukraine, and resist Western pressure to downgrade their ties.

Conclusion

Sari Avrho Havren of the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) says; “We should not underestimate Russia’s ‘usefulness’ as a friend without limits to China and Xi Jinping. Russia also sees Taiwan as an integral part of China, and we have already seen speculation about the war scenario in the Indo-Pacific and whether Russia would step up to help and join China in possible war efforts.”^[viii]

While Dr Jonathan Ward, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute says, “There may be much more dangerous activity to come in the years ahead as these two authoritarian states continue to deepen their relationship”.^[ix]

Alexander Gabuev with the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Centre has said that “every relationship is assessed through three elements, what a country can bring to advance Putin’s war effort in Ukraine; what a country can do for Russia’s revenue streams to counter the impact of Western sanctions; and whether a country can help Moscow push back against the West. China currently meets all these”. ^[x]

There is no doubt that the current China-Russia ties are based on a 'Confluence of Interests'. In what is being portrayed as a battle between 'Autocracy' and 'Democracy', the exchange between the two autocratic allies reveals that they are not hesitant in flaunting their relationship, and believe their systems are better at confronting the challenges in the increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world.

What remains to be seen is how the US will deal with China both as far as its aggressive expansionism is concerned and regarding trade which has expanded, and it is now the largest trading partner of the US. Despite disagreements and disputes, neither side can afford to sever relations.

The war in Ukraine has brought out a core strategic realignment in the global power distribution that is fast redefining the world order: the Sino-Russian partnership that many had not given due importance to earlier. The outcome of this visit undoubtedly has global ramifications as both China and Russia remain committed on supporting each other’s core interests while the two countries remain crucial to global order. This is the new global reality.

Endnotes

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