

Sino-Russian challenge: Symbolic, strategic and synchronized

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The great shift in international politics where Russia and China challenge traditional western dominance received a formal stamp from President Xi Jinping and President Putin during the former's recent visit to Moscow. Xi's concluding comment that 'right now there are changes not seen for a hundred years' and that 'we are driving these changes' sums up the directions of Sino-Russian partnership. The symbolism of this meeting is a combined power projection.



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The contexts of this Sino-Russian meeting are (i) the proxy war in Ukraine, where Russia has made significant gains over the Russian speaking areas of the Donbas region but remains bogged down; North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is providing massive arms, monetary, intelligence assistance, so there is no end in sight to this war of attrition. (ii) United States (US) national security strategy marks China as the long-term dangerous threat and is arming Taiwan, encouraging its independence; isolating China economically by putting export controls that curb and target Chinese technologies, industries and manufacturing. (iii) The US has twinned the Sino-Russian threats. NATO strategy is to decimate and weaken Russia irreversibly and simultaneously isolate and contain China. The US is supporting major militarisation of the Indo Pacific in Japan, South Korea and the Philippines and extending military bases in many islands; the Australia, United Kingdom, US (Aukus) Agreement will bring nuclear submarines to isolate China. It is no wonder that China and Russia believe they need security and strategic coordination.

China published a 12 point very general peace plan for Russia-Ukraine that proposes that peace is possible if the 'legitimate security concerns of all' are respected; they have commonalities in framing this war, oppose unilateral sanctions, and reject the 'Cold War mindset'. This plan is rejected by the US that does not want to cede ground to the Russians till Ukraine is victorious on the battlefield. This appears an unlikely scenario.

Xi's trip to Moscow that comes straight after his election as president for an unprecedented third term, has been more than symbolic. A major thrust of the holistic partnership is their commitment to 'coordination -no matter whatever the changing events'. So, whether it was China's mediation between the Saudis and Iran, Chinese foray into the international politics of West Asia, it is clear that Russia provides unsung background support. The earlier "no limits" partnership, called 'rock solid' is now multidimensional with a material basis.

Russia as China's top gas and petroleum supplier will step this up, as it changes the direction of pipelines from Europe to China, with a second 'Power of Siberia' Pipeline constructed by Gazprom and Chinese State CNPC. Cooperation and trade from agriculture exports to machinery and manufacturing are to expand to reach a goal of \$ 200 billion of annual trade with Agreements on 80 bilateral projects signed. Further Russia will build civil nuclear power facilities in China. They will cooperate in the construction of civil aircraft, ship building, auto manufacturing. Russia like the Central Asian Republics is part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

The Sino-Russian partnership has taken the early steps to challenge the US Dollar, which is the root of American hegemony. The West pushed Russia out of the dollar zone with sanctions, but Russia, China and many countries- including India, are encouraging trade in national currencies and currency swap arrangements. Putin endorsed the use of the Chinese yuan in settlements between Russia and other countries. Already, two thirds of trade between Russia and China - worth about \$ 150 billion is in local currency. So, steps towards the internationalisation of renminbi will be furthered, enhancing US threat perceptions.

The China-Russia security and economic cooperation is not a security or military alliance like NATO. However, they do send signals of a close relationship that seeks to push the US out of the Eurasian land mass. They collectively root for a multipolar world and oppose any axis of great powers. As NATO escalates its militarism in the Indo-Pacific, the depth of Russia- Sino relationship can begin to acquire a military and security dimension. Especially since their joint statement says that this 'friendship that will not tolerate coercion from any third party.'

It is clear that the Chinese are not supplying weapons as the Russians do not need these and, in any case, China does not want to be sanctioned. Further the argument being made that Russia has ceded its sovereignty and become a client state of China is untrue. Russia has demonstrated its capacity and agency in equal terms. This partnership does not pose a military threat to the region and they underline this with their collective support to groupings like the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organizations.

The narrative of multipolarity, regionalism, inclusive security from Russia and China finds resonance from many countries in the Global South. All these countries want peace, economic development for their people but would also like to leverage their relations with both the West and with China and Russia for development projects and have strategic choices. Of course, several countries have their own contentious issues with China- whether it is India, Vietnam and several in South East Asia. They would like to resolve these through bilateral diplomatic channels in a fair way and set codes of conduct. If China wants to be an international peace broker, then its problems in the region must get priority for a peaceful region.

In the meantime, it appears clear that the lines are being drawn between the traditional Atlantic powers who want to maintain unipolarity versus the Eurasian ones who want a multipolar system. But in this division no one should forget the role that the Global South is playing by maintaining neutrality and opposing war.

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