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RUSSIA-CHINA: IMPLICATIONS OF THE RELATIONSHIP AMIDST GLOBAL UNCERTAINTIES

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Less than 24 hours after US President Trump left Beijing after a much sought after 3-day (May 13-16) state visit, the Russia-China relationship again occupied the international spotlight with Beijing's announcement that Russian President Putin would visit Beijing from May 19-20. The visit would be intended to demonstrate that China and Russia share close ties and continues the practice of the two leaders briefing each other soon after any major exchange.

2. The China-Russia relationship is especially important at this time when the world is in flux. The focal points of power are shifting to the East; new emerging powers especially in Asia are seeking a greater and meaningful voice in global decision-making; and China has overtly challenged the global primacy of the US. With its invasions successively of the Crimea and Ukraine, Russia too has overturned the global order established by the West and opposed the sole global superpower viz. the US. The convergence in their thinking was evident in the joint statement issued after Putin's visit to Beijing in 2022. The Russia-China relationship at this juncture particularly has the potential to shape the future equations of global power.

3. Offering an insight into the thinking of the Western powers and particularly those who had experience of Asia, are the remarks of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair at a Labour Party convention in October 2011. He said: "The starving, the wretched, the distressed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause. This is the moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us!" This process of re-ordering the world has been initiated. AUKUS is one attempt to pre-emptively position western, or more correctly, Anglo-Saxon power in Asia. US Secretary of State Rubio, in an apparent bid to assuage European sentiments, seemingly echoed this sentiment of unity of the West in his speech in Munich in February 2026. He said the United States and Europe belong together, are part of one Western civilization and "are bound to one another by the deepest bonds that nations could share, forged by centuries of shared history, Christian faith, culture, heritage, language, ancestry, and the sacrifices our forefathers made together for the common civilization to which we have fallen heir".

4. A response from Russia and China was not long in coming. Both had a deep partnership in terms of economy, energy, trade and military supplies which has got steadily consolidated since the 1990s — noticeably after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. While Beijing sponsored the BRICS economic grouping in 2006, it soon thereafter sought to give more muscle to its global ambitions by establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

in 2021. Chinese President Xi Jinping gave a fillip to his concept of a new world order by advancing the Global Development Initiative (2021), Global Security Initiative (2022) and the Global Civilisational Initiative (2023). Beijing has sought to consolidate these concepts by securing endorsements of other countries in joint statements or statements by visiting leaders. Russia has supported China's efforts.

5. The economic and trade ties are a solid factor. Bilateral trade had started rising from around 2020 but rose appreciably after 2022. Essentially the trade was for Russian natural resources in exchange for manufactured goods. In the face of Western and US sanctions, Russia's dependence on China increased. Bilateral trade surged to \$240 billion in 2023-24 but dropped in 2025 by nearly 7% because of reduced Russian demand for Chinese cars and drop in the volume of China's imports of Russian crude. Chinese banks also provided a lifeline to Russia with the trade in Yuan helping bypass SWIFT. Nearly 40% of Russian trade with China is in Yuan. Chinese consumer goods have also long supplied Russia especially its east. Since the crisis in the Hormuz Straits, China too is dependent on oil from Russia.

6. China-Russia military ties remain a strong factor. China assists Russia in its war with Ukraine and continues to be dependent on Russia for oil and military technologies, though in areas like missiles, drones, space and submarine tech, cyber etc. it has developed rapidly and is an independent manufacturer. But weaknesses remain, for example in jet engines. China is still struggling to develop a jet engine for its 5th generation fighters. Interestingly, among the first telegrams sent by Zhou Enlai to Stalin in October 1949 was a request for assistance and technology to make jet engines for aircraft!

7. The attitude and role of leaders is an important factor in bilateral ties. China and the Soviet Union, particularly the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), have shared close 'fraternal' ties since the CCP was founded in 1921. The substance of these ties have persisted over the decades despite the disintegration of the CPSU and China pursuing more capitalist economic policies. The CCP leadership has grown with Communist ideology and, while the younger leadership may not have that same familiarity with their Russian counterparts, numerous cooperative links still remain between the CCP and Russian state and between Party and state organisations at various levels. Though Russia officially discarded Communism as state philosophy in 1991, China informally views Russia as essentially a Communist state. Certain other linkages also remain. After 70 years of Communist rule, the leaders who emerged in Russia came from the erstwhile CPSU system. CCP leaders too had links to Russian counterparts and the "comfort" level that existed between them helped ensure that the relationship endured.

8. Furthermore both, Xi Jinping and Putin, have strong moorings to the communist ideology. Both emerged from their respective communist systems. While Xi Jinping opted to join the CCP despite he and his family having suffered at its hands during the Cultural Revolution and many children of senior CCP cadres going abroad to escape its excesses, Putin was nurtured in the KGB -- the Soviet security apparatus and very heart of the CPSU. That Xi Jinping holds Putin in high regard is no secret, but the growing tension with the US and Washington's effort to "contain" China have made this relationship more mutually beneficial.

9. That the relationship between Xi Jinping and Putin is very close became evident in February 2022, when Xi Jinping went out on a limb and announced a "no limits" partnership with Russia. Doubts still exist as to the extent to which Putin briefed Xi Jinping about his

plans for Ukraine, but it is almost certain that he did convey some idea of what was in the offing. China also has the highest type of relationship with Russia called “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Coordination Relations.” Its leaders have met more frequently than with leaders of other countries (well over 40 times since 2025) and their foreign ministers meet or speak to each other every month. Noticeably, officials of the two countries interact promptly after a meeting between Chinese and US officials. Additionally both Xi Jinping and Putin view the West with suspicion. Trump’s policies have not only alienated allies and friends of the US but simultaneously strengthened the relationship between China and Russia. It has also given a fillip to Xi Jinping’s ambition to surpass the US by the PRC’s 100th founding anniversary in 2049.

10. Nonetheless, there are fault-lines or weaknesses in the China-Russia relationship. Some of these are:

- (i) Russian dependence on China has grown, converting Russia from the role of a leading partner to a junior partner. This gives China more leverage to influence Moscow’s foreign policy and strategic relationships.
- (ii) China harbours ambitions of recovering its lost territories. In 2013 it published an article in the Beijing-owned and Hongkong-based Wen Weibo titled “Six wars that China must fight in the next 50 years”. The last is with Russia. Chinese nationalism is also occasionally glimpsed on the issue of Vladivostok. China’s claims on the port date back to the 1860s during the Qing Dynasty when it was called Haishenwai and ceded to Russia.
- (iii) Analysis of the interactions between Chinese and Russian leaders shows they interact promptly after either of them interacts with the US. While such interactions reassert their bonds, they could also suggest that not only do they need to reassure each other but that a degree of suspicion taints their relationship with regard to the US.
- (iv) Unless Moscow acquiesces to a subordinate client-patron relationship with China the potential of conflicting strategic interests remains real. Examples are the Central Asian Republics -- long viewed as Russia’s soft underbelly -- where China has made substantial inroads; and Russia’s arms sales and relations with other countries like India, and
- (v) Putin’s ambitions could in future collide with those of Xi Jinping.

11. Finally, China’s quest to “recover” its so-called “lost territories”, be the predominant power in Asia, and surpass the US puts it on a collision course with other countries. While conflict with the US is probably ultimately inevitable, Beijing will have to first confront and deal with Japan, India, Vietnam, and Australia. None of these countries will willingly accept Beijing’s overlordship. The next few years will be fraught and, only if Washington plays its cards right, could the China-Russia relationship weaken or possibly see a rupture.

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