



30 June 2024

PORTENDS OF THE XI-PUTIN SUMMIT IN MAY 2024

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Summits between Russian President Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping are invariably closely monitored in world capitals, especially since the onset of Russia's war with Ukraine in 2022 and the two having declared a "no limits friendship"! China is the largest country to sustain Russia's effort to withstand Western pressure. The Summits also incrementally advance their common agenda of changing the existing world order to make it "more fair" and "equitable". Xi Jinping has already articulated the principal features of the world order envisioned by him, namely a community of common destiny, and the Global Civilisational Initiative (GCI), Global Development Initiative (GDI) and Global Security Initiative (GSI). By initiating the war with Ukraine, Putin has fired the first salvo in the bid to replace the existing world order and US dominance.

2. The rapidly strengthening China-Russia ties have aroused concern in the US and Europe as it comes in the backdrop of growing and persistent reports that China is supplying weapons, ammunition and other military hardware to Russia for its war with Ukraine. China's long, porous border with Russia's Far East, over which huge quantities of grain and consumer goods have been transported for decades, will facilitate the subterranean shipment of military and dual-use goods. In the past few months US and European official interlocutors have made it clear to Beijing that there will be consequences if they are able to confirm that China is supplying weapons and ammunition to Russia. The US and Europe are also distracted by the war in Ukraine and this coincides with China's visibly escalated military actions around Taiwan and consequent increase in tension in the Taiwan Strait.

3. Despite the obviously close ties between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping and their two countries, there are thinly concealed suggestions that mutual suspicions continue to linger. This was evident in China's recent interactions with the US and Europe where Russia appears to have contrived to display its close ties with China. Most recent was the announcement (May 14) that Russian President Putin would visit China. The visit came within a week of Xi Jinping's visit to France and Hungary. This was Putin's second visit to China in six months. Earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov too, interestingly, arrived in Beijing on the final day of US Treasury Secretary Yellen's visit to China and, barely a week prior to Xi's departure for his 3-nation European tour.

4. In a briefing to reporters on Putin's visit to China, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin said "President Xi Jinping will exchange views with President Putin on bilateral ties, cooperation in various fields, and international and regional issues of common interest." The Kremlin said the two leaders would discuss their "comprehensive partnership and

strategic cooperation" as well as "define key areas of development of Russian-Chinese cooperation and exchange views in detail on international and regional issues". The Kremlin said the two leaders would sign a joint statement after the meeting and that during the visit the two leaders will take part in a gala evening celebrating 75 years since the Soviet Union recognised the People's Republic of China. This was Russian President Putin's fourth in person meeting with Chinese President Xi Jinping since the start of the war in Ukraine. Setting the tone, on May 15, the People's Daily published the full text of Xinhua's interview with Russian President Putin.

5. On arrival at Beijing airport on May 16, Putin was received by Mme. Shen Yijin, State Councilor in charge of Women's Affairs. Xi Jinping held a grand welcome ceremony and guard of honour for Putin at the east gate square of the Great Hall of the People. Signalling that economic issues would dominate the agenda, included in Putin's entourage were at least 5 Deputy Prime Ministers and almost all the important members of his cabinet.

6. On May 16 morning itself, Chinese President Xi Jinping held a "restrictive" meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Great Hall of the People. Xi noted that this year marks the 75th anniversary of the China-Russia diplomatic ties and that during this period the China-Russia relationship has withstood the test of international changes and "set an example of mutual respect, sincerity, peaceful coexistence, and mutual benefit between major countries and neighbouring countries". He said the "stable development of China-Russia relations serves the fundamental interests of both nations and their peoples and contributes to peace, stability, and prosperity in the region and the world. China is ready to work with Russia to stay each other's good neighbour, good friend and good partner that trust each other ... and uphold fairness and justice in the world". Xi emphasized that China and Russia must "always promote the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, respect each other, trust each other equally, care for each other's concerns, and truly support each other's development and revitalization". Putin replied that he was pleased to visit China again after his inauguration as the new President of Russia. He said "the development of Russia-China relations is not a temporary expedient and is not targeted at any third party. It benefits international strategic stability. Russia is willing to continuously expand bilateral cooperation, closely communicate and cooperate within the frameworks of the United Nations, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and promote the establishment of a more just and reasonable international order".

7. The two later presided over extensive talks between both full delegations. They listened to reports from the chairs of various intergovernmental cooperation committees of the two countries on cooperation in investment, energy, trade, "Northeast-Far East", humanities, and international fields. They expressed satisfaction with the progress made and affirmed suggestions for future cooperation. Xi said "They should enhance communication and coordination in international multilateral platforms such as the UN, BRICS, the SCO, and regional affairs, demonstrate international responsibilities, and promote the establishment of a fair and equitable global governance system." Putin said "the two sides have signed a series of cooperation documents, indicating their determination to further deepen and expand mutually beneficial cooperation. Russia is willing to work with China to implement Pre-2030 Development Plan on Priorities in China-Russia Economic Cooperation."

8. An unprecedentedly lengthy 12,000-character joint statement titled 'Deepening China-Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era' was subsequently issued. There was implicit criticism of the U.S. throughout the document, which mentioned the U.S. 13 times, and expressed "serious concern over the United States attempts to undermine strategic stability to maintain its absolute military superiority". Japan was mentioned once. Xi and Putin witnessed the signing of many bilateral cooperation documents spanning various sectors including economy and trade, environmental conservation, inspection and quarantine, media, etc. Interestingly, however, it made no mention of the 3,500 kms-long Siberia 2 gas pipeline despite Russia pushing hard for it. A Russian spokesman later said it would be announced soon, but there has been no comment yet by the Chinese.

9. At noon that day, Xi hosted a welcoming banquet for Putin in the Golden Hall of the Great Hall of the People. Chinese Politburo Standing Committee members Cai Qi and Ding Xuexiang, Politburo members Wang Yi, He Lifeng and Zhang Guoqing and State Councilor Shen Yiqin, among others, attended these activities. Chinese Premier Li Qiang also held talks with Putin.

10. Among the highlights of the Joint Statement are:

- (i) "that China-Russia relations have withstood the test of international vicissitudes, highlighting their stable and resilient qualities, and are at their best historical level". It affirmed that the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era is not an expedient measure and has strong intrinsic motivation and independent value. The two declared they would "resolutely defend their legitimate rights and interests" and oppose any attempts to obstruct their development or interfere in their internal affairs";
- (ii) Russia reaffirmed "its adherence to the One-China principle, recognizing Taiwan as an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China. Russia opposes any form of "Taiwan independence" and said it "firmly supports China's efforts to safeguard national sovereignty and territorial integrity and achieve national reunification". In turn, China supported "Russia in maintaining its national security and stability, development and prosperity, sovereignty, and territorial integrity, and opposes external forces interfering in Russia's internal affairs;
- (iii) It endorsed "China's concept of building a community with a shared future for mankind" and its "series of global initiatives";
- (iv) It mentioned the very close cooperation at the political level between the offices at the highest level i.e. the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (CC) General Office and the Presidential Executive Office of the Russian Federation, the armed forces and security services;
- (v) Strengthening bilateral economic and social development, including in the banking and insurance sector, over the long term;
- (vi) It established a Sino-Russian Arctic Route Cooperation Subcommittee under the framework of the Sino-Russian Prime Ministers' Regular Meeting Committee, to conduct mutually beneficial cooperation in the development and utilization of the Arctic as an important international transportation corridor, and deepen cooperation in polar ship technology and construction.
- (vii) It promised to align the "Belt and Road" Initiative with building of the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Greater Eurasian Partnership";

- (viii) It mentioned the SCO, BRICS and AUKUS; and
- (ix) Expressed "serious concern over the United States attempts to undermine strategic stability to maintain its absolute military superiority."

11. Putin concluded his trip to China with a visit to Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang province, where he attended the opening ceremony of the 8th China-Russia Expo in Harbin. Interestingly, on arrival at Harbin he was not received by the Heilongjiang Party Secretary, but the lower ranked Mme. Liang Huiling, Governor of Heilongjiang province. It is curious that Putin was received by women CCP cadres at Beijing and Harbin and, though senior, they were not Vice Premiers. At the gala event in Harbin, where Xi and Putin both spoke, Putin spoke in Russian and apparently forgot that he had to pause for the interpreter to translate. When this was pointed out at the end, Putin said he was so at home that he forgot he was speaking in a foreign language! While seeing-off Putin at Harbin, in a very unusual gesture Xi Jinping hugged Putin.

12. After Putin's departure, the People's Daily (May 21) published lengthy article titled 'China, Russia set prime example of new form of international, good-neighborly relations between two major countries'. It stressed that this meeting highlighted the importance of the two countries "always promoting the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, respect each other on an equal footing, trust each other, accommodate each other's concerns, and truly provide mutual assistance for the development and revitalization of both sides". It observed the two presidents have held over 40 meetings, and this time had a candid and fruitful discussion. It attributed the "notable progress in China-Russia relations" to the commitment of both countries to five principles: a) China and Russia are committed to mutual respect as the fundamental principle of relations, and always render support for each other's core interests; b) China and Russia are committed to win-win cooperation as the driving force of relations, and work to foster a new paradigm of mutual benefit; c) China and Russia are committed to lasting friendship as the foundation of relations, and carry forward the torch of Sino-Russian friendship; d) China and Russia are committed to strategic coordination as an underpinning of relations, and steer global governance in the right direction; and e) China and Russia are committed to fairness and justice as the purpose of relations, and dedicated to the political settlement of hotspots.

13. The article said the two countries need to make further structural improvements to their cooperation, and consolidate the good momentum in trade and other traditional areas of cooperation. It added that they need to look for areas where their interests converge, tap into their comparative strengths, deepen the integration of interests, and enable each other's success.

14. Though short, Putin's visit to China was important. It came amid Russia's growing dependence on China for consumer goods, military-related supplies and support in the international arena. It is in Xi Jinping's interest, at this time when he is under considerable pressure from the U.S., to ensure that Russia remains undefeated and China is not left as the sole major communist power facing the West. The lengthy, expansive Joint Statement revealed the commonality in their concerns and wide range of cooperative endeavours the

two envisage. Both have also clearly endorsed their respective positions on security, sovereignty and opposition to interference by foreign powers in their internal affairs.

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