

A NEW SINO-RUSSIAN ENTENTE?

The limits of cooperation on Ukraine and beyond

As the military standoff over Ukraine continues, both sides have attempted to mobilize international support for their respective positions. While Kiev has received increasingly robust NATO backing, Russia has turned to its “strategic partner” China. A recently published joint Sino-Russian statement has fueled speculation that Beijing could weigh in on Moscow’s side and perhaps even lead to the resurgence of competition between ideological blocs in world politics. However, diverging interests on Ukraine limit such cooperation in the short term. A long-term alignment between both sides is a more serious possibility, but can still be influenced by Western policy choices.



New strategic team? Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. (© Presidential Executive Office of Russia, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/67712>, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en>).

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In the wake of Vladimir Putin’s highly publicized visit to the Olympic Games in Beijing, and a joint Sino-Russian statement on “international relations in a new era” published on the occasion,¹ accompanied by a historic gas deal, speculation about future Sino-Russian cooperation has run rampant.² Much of this is connected to the current crisis over Ukraine, with commentaries

warning that Chinese backing could embolden Russia into military action, by shielding it from the consequences of Western sanctions and thus removing a powerful deterrent.³ Others have warned against further spillover, arguing that a US-Russian confrontation over Ukraine might even embolden China to pursue military reunification with Taiwan.⁴ Such extreme scenarios are unlikely to materialize, but the fact that they are being raised at all makes it necessary to analyze the interests, shared visions, but also limitations behind the emerging Sino-Russian partnership – in the short term related to Ukraine, as well as its potential to formulate a global agenda in the long term.

From a Russian perspective, it is easy to see the value of closer alignment with China over both timeframes: it offers rhetorical support for its stance on Ukraine and broader concerns over NATO expansion; it changes the perception that it has resulted in international isolation; and it may amount to an alternative economic lifeline. Accordingly, Russian experts have responded enthusiastically to the joint statement. In the words of Dmitrij Trenin, a leading thinker on Russian foreign policy, it “takes Sino-Russian entente to the level of a common front to push back against US pressure on Russia and China in Europe, Asia, and globally”⁵. Sergey Karaganov, another expert close to the Kremlin, argues that Russia should use the relationship with China as an ace in ongoing strategic talks with the West: “Military rapprochement with China is one of the strongest arguments in our conversations with the West. Our military-political rapprochement with Beijing powerfully multiplies both our forces”⁶.

Others have been more cautious, warning against an overestimation of Chinese willingness to get engaged in Russia's conflicts and limit its own options at the same time; Andrei Kolesnikov urged Putin to "take the needs of ideological partners into account and behave as carefully as possible".⁷

There certainly are fundamental reasons driving closer Sino-Russian cooperation: both sides share a broad outlook on the norms that should govern the international system, a mutual threat perception as targets of US containment, complementary economic ties, and are partnering on joint initiatives especially in Central Asia. However, when related to the current crisis, this does not equate to a coordinated stance on Ukraine – at least not at the level that has developed between the US and European NATO members – let alone backing in a potential military confrontation. As we will show, Chinese interests in Ukraine are far more complex than seeing it as a mere bargaining chip in its relations with Moscow, and support for military adventurism would contradict both its long-standing diplomatic principles and the recently laid-out joint agenda.

Chinese-Russian coordination on Ukraine: partial alignment, substantive differences

Speculation over possible Chinese backing for Russia's actions has recently been rekindled by an announcement that both sides had "coordinated" their positions on Ukraine. Following this, China joined Russia in opposing a US-requested debate on Ukraine in the UN Security Council, arguing that it believed Russian denials of a planned invasion to be credible and concerns over a war unfounded.⁸ This may be seen as a shift from China's stance in 2014, when it abstained from UNSC votes over Russia's occupation of Crimea. However, the obvious difference is that no military action has yet taken place in the current crisis, and views on the likelihood of such a development differ significantly even among NATO members. It is far less likely still that Sino-Russian "coordination" would amount to a parallel attack on both Ukraine and Taiwan in order to overstretch US defense commitments, as argued by some of the most speculative commentary. While some Chinese strategists may welcome a US reorientation towards Europe to relieve the pressure it is facing itself, this is a much longer-term view than treating Ukraine as an immediate opportunity for an invasion of its own, to say nothing of the enormous obstacles such a campaign would face.⁹ Apart from outright support for Russian action against Ukraine, there also seems to be little appetite for shielding Moscow from its consequences, e.g. by undermining a threatened Western sanctions regime. Here, too, both sides may share a long-term interest in reducing their dependence on a US-centric financial system, but at

present, China's vastly greater trade links with the US and EU make it acutely vulnerable to secondary sanctions.¹⁰ Even within Russia, commentators have been skeptical if Chinese companies would be willing to incur such risks, citing their past compliance with US regimes.¹¹

Chinese support for an actual Russian incursion into Ukraine would also jeopardize its own substantial interests in the country. China is one of Ukraine's main trading partners,¹² accounting for about a sixth of its imports and exports, while Ukraine has been one of the biggest destinations for Chinese investments in Eastern Europe especially in its agribusiness sector (albeit with most of them predating the 2014 crisis).¹³ Moreover, Ukraine sits astride some of the trans-Eurasian transport links which China is seeking to build under its Belt and Road Initiative. Additionally, Ukraine has actively courted related infrastructure investments, and secured a few small-scale projects in ports and energy.¹⁴ A more controversial aspect of its economic ties with China is the highly sensitive defense industry, which has triggered significant resistance within the country and from its Western partners. The Ukrainian provenance of China's first aircraft carrier is a well-known example, while a more recent one can be found in the attempted acquisition of aircraft engine manufacturer MotorSich by China's Skyrizon. This deal was put on hold due to US lobbying and eventually canceled on grounds of national security, with an international arbitration case now pending.¹⁵

What all of this amounts to is a Chinese position on Ukraine that has essentially remained unchanged since 2014: remaining on the sidelines of the conflict, urging a diplomatic resolution, and neither endorsing nor condemning Russia's past and present actions. This is born of a mixture of contradictory impulses and interests: on the one hand, sympathy for Russia and a shared belief that Western "meddling" in Ukraine's politics is to blame for the crisis; on the other, an awareness that Russia's own aggressive stance is challenging Chinese core norms like sovereignty and territorial inviolability.¹⁶

A Sino-Russian blueprint for a new world order?

If closer Sino-Russian alignment is unlikely to result in joint action over the specific issue of Ukraine, it may still be significant in drawing a new battle line over contending global orders and the underlying normative convictions. From this perspective, the recent Sino-Russian joint statement offers a few clues regarding jointly advanced alternatives to prevailing Western notions. However, a close reading also reveals the limits to which such a partnership can amount, and the degree to which Western policies can influence this trend.



China is one of the most important trading partners of Ukraine, and a military escalation would harm its economic interests. Containers in the cargo port and container terminal in Odessa, Ukraine. (© picture alliance / Zoonar | Multipedia.)

Firstly, the document cannot be read as a blueprint for a formal alliance, let alone justification for impending military adventurism. It affirms mutual support for each others' "core interests", but rarely spells them out: neither Ukraine nor Crimea, whose annexation remains unrecognized by China, are mentioned at all. Its brief mention of Taiwan occurs in the generic context of the "One China" principle – the basic precondition for any country to have relations with Beijing – while the inclusion of preferred Chinese language on "opposing Taiwan independence" has several precedents in earlier bilateral statements. The biggest Russian "get" in the text is probably a paragraph voicing opposition to further NATO expansion and urging it to "abandon its ideologized Cold War approaches", paired with similar Chinese concerns over US-led alliance schemes in the Indo-Pacific like AUKUS; however, neither side commits to any actions in response. Instead, the bulk of the text is devoted to a largely defensive statement of principles and rebuttal of selected elements of the Western agenda. Notably, its first section is devoted to de-Westernizing the concept of "democracy", claiming this status for both China and Russia, and seeking to deny the US its usage as a moral high ground and dividing line in world politics. This critique is clearly triggered by the recent US-sponsored "Summit for Democracy", and expanding on an earlier joint response by Russia's and China's ambassadors to the US.¹⁷ Its advancement of principles like a

strict interpretation of national sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic politics of other states restates long-standing opposition to Western interventionism and democracy promotion, made explicit in a long list of grievances with specific US actions. In this, it reflects Chinese more than Russian rhetoric, as the latter has sought to justify its own interventions by appropriating Western language on R2P (Responsibility to Protect) and national self-determination.¹⁸ When it comes to security orders, the statement raises previous Russian and Chinese propositions for „indivisible“ and „inclusive“ approaches as a replacement for US-centric alliance systems, which however have seen little uptake in an era marked by power shifts and resulting threat perceptions.¹⁹ In all of this, the text is marked by a fundamentally reactive attitude and a desire to turn the clocks back before the "end of history", not an aggressive agenda for revising the current world order. Its most proactive, forward-looking and arguably internationally popular part is a call for focusing on „development“ as a universal good that can transcend ideological divides, which however mainly reflects growing Chinese capabilities and international clout in this field.²⁰ A general prevalence of Chinese concepts and preferred language is notable throughout, hinting at the growing asymmetry between both sides that would further complicate any attempts to forge a long-term alliance. This is also evident in the much more muted media reaction in Chi-

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na, where a high-profile commentary focused squarely on the simultaneous gas deal and Russia's value as a resource supplier rather than ideological ally.²¹

Conclusion

Closer Sino-Russian alignment is mainly driven by a shared feeling of facing Western military and normative pressure, resulting in a growing identification of each other as desirable, comparatively trustworthy partners. However, the devil is as always in the details, and both sides' interests tend to diverge when looking at specific cases like Ukraine. Coordination in such cases is a problem even in heavily institutionalized formats like NATO; for the much looser Sino-Russian relationship, which seems so far mainly based on the personal rapport of both leaders, joint action is far less likely still. Whatever Chinese support Russia can expect in the current crisis is likely to be rhetorical, and further limited to blaming Western actions rather than endorsing its own.

In the longer term, shared interests and normative convictions are likely to deepen Sino-Russian cooperation across the many fields mentioned in the recent statement, from the UN and global governance to narrower issues like cybersecurity and connectivity. The relationship also contains a robust security element in defense cooperation and joint military drills, furthering perceptions of a nascent alliance.²² This should not be underestimated, but it is equally important to note the known irritants in Sino-Russian relations, from the growing power gap between both sides to China's increasing economic penetration of post-So-

viet Central Asia. The recently laid-out joint agenda is the most specific wherever it positions itself against US actions, showing both its fundamentally reactive nature and the degree to which relations with the US are still at the forefront of strategic thinking in both Moscow and Beijing. This also creates opportunities for Western assurances to influence the external and internal security perceptions of both powers. The emergence of a Sino-Russian counterweight to the West, or in a broader sense the return to fixed ideological blocks and battle lines in world politics, is not an unavoidable trend. In fact, it is likely to be highly responsive to Western policy choices, and should justify more attention to Chinese and Russian perceptions in their making.

References and further reading:
hsfk.de/spotlight0222-fn



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