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# Choosing your partners

## How strong is the partnership between China and Russia?

by *Christian Becker*

**The relationship between China and Russia is currently ambivalent. Temporary symbolic unity in the public eye stands in contrast to increasingly difficult negotiations surrounding issues of security and energy policy. At the end of the day, however, the current connection to Beijing serves to free up Russian resources for action in Eastern Europe and Syria. Should China be convinced to loosen its ties to Russia? The chances of such an endeavour succeeding are unclear. Playing the “Chinese card”, as the United States once did during the Cold War seems impossible because perceptions in Beijing have changed. It is also clear that any efforts in that direction would require coherent European-US cooperation.**

### **Current situation and international effects of the Chinese-Russian partnership**

There are plenty of thorough analyses of Chinese-Russian cooperation in the political, economic, and military spheres. Their results are, however, far from unanimous. They could be interpreted as showing either an increasingly close partnership or a problematic relationship of convenience that has no future. Demonstrative and symbolically charged joint appearances of the heads of state on the one hand contrast increasingly difficult negotiations about armaments cooperation on the other. Considerable entanglement in the oil and gas sector is becoming apparent while Beijing thoroughly exploits the precarious situation of the Russian energy sector to extort better conditions. Joint exercises of the armed forces of both states in the Pacific and even in the Mediterranean contrast with differences of opinion regarding intensity and organisation of military cooperation for example in Central Asia.

Against this backdrop it is rightly pointed out how insubstantial Chinese-Russian cooperation often is. Existing conflicts of interest between Beijing and Moscow are also highlighted frequently. It would, however, be ill-advised to relativise Chinese-Russian cooperation too much. That would disregard the clear tendency towards intensifying and expanding the bilateral relations. Regardless of all differences, Chinese-Russian relations have been making considerable progress in the last 20 years. Both sides continue to agree that their partnership should be fostered and intensified.

Problematic from a Western point of view is the fact that the Chinese-Russian partnership indirectly encourages Russia's tough attitude on the international stage. This is because, while the Chinese-Russian relationship is not without its problems, cooperation with Beijing does provide Moscow with benefits in the political, economic and military spheres. Russia would thus lose an important supporting factor for its revisionist attitude if the Chinese-Russian partnership were to become more distant. China should thus be con-

vinced to loosen its ties to Russia. But how? Could there be a repeat of the Western-Chinese rapprochement of the 1960s and 1970s?

### **The importance of cooperation for Russia**

Russia has taken on a role on the international stage that does not reflect its real economic and military power. Russia is “punching above its weight” for various reasons, and they are mostly owed to the skilled Russian policy of exploiting opportunities to revise the post-Cold War shift of. But Russia can afford this approach, not least because of its good relations with China.

The amicable arrangement with the People’s Republic provides the Russian government with domestic support. The message sent to the Russian public through the impressive media staging of bilateral friendship is that, on its sometimes difficult way back to global power, Russia has a strong partner by its side and is by no means as isolated as Western “propaganda” suggests. But it would be short-sighted to write off the Chinese-Russian partnership as entirely staged. Beijing and Moscow work in close coordination on real issues of foreign policy – something that seemed unthinkable as late as the 1990s, when the two states had to slowly agree on confidence-building measures along the shared border. Over the last years, this close coordination has been evident in similar stances regarding the crises in Libya and Syria, for example.

An increasing economic entanglement between the energy sectors of the two national economies is apparent. This branch of the economy that is so important for Russia may indicate that Moscow, as an exporter of fossil resources, has limited leverage against China. Russia is increasingly forced to accept Chinese conditions when it comes to selling natural gas and crude oil as well as joint projects to exploit these resources. But even though these developments may seem problematic from a Russian standpoint, the Chinese option does provide Moscow with more leeway in its foreign energy policy.

When it comes to the military, the partnership with China is important to Russia for two main reasons. Firstly, despite sometimes considerable differences with regard to specific contractual terms, China is an important market for Russian defence goods. Secondly, the relaxed military situation towards the east allows Russia to focus its military efforts elsewhere. Moscow nevertheless does not entirely neglect its national defence capabilities in the Far East but is aiming for modernisation. At the same time, thanks to friendly relations with Beijing, Russian military leaders can focus on those aspects of developing military capabilities and troop deployment that are important to the rivalry with the West.

### **China’s role within the partnership**

While China is the senior partner in this bilateral cooperation, Beijing certainly benefits from it, too. Russia’s approval, albeit somewhat unenthusiastic, of tapping the markets of Central Asia in the context of the “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR) initiative, the cheap supply of Russian raw material, and the transfer of military expertise are positive effects of the partnership as far as Beijing is concerned. The good relations allow China, much like Russia, to focus its political and military efforts on its rivalry with the United States. Especially with regard to the urgently pursued modernisation of the maritime and air forces, Beijing benefits from the fact that its land forces are not needed for reassurance against Russia, allowing it to focus on modernising the other services.

From a Chinese perspective, the People’s Republic suffers from numerous strategic dilemmas. Washington, Tokyo and Canberra are consolidating an alliance system in East and Southeast Asia that is aimed at containing China. India is starting to act as a major regional power, albeit later and less strikingly than China.

The regime in Pyongyang is considered an ally that is increasingly becoming a burden. For Beijing this is a challenging strategic environment in which the partnership with Russia plays an important role. The advantages of this partnership are supplemented by the authoritarian nature of the political systems of both states. In its interactions with Russia, unlike those with the United States or Europe, Chinese political leaders do not have to face the sometimes open, sometimes latent challenge to their legitimacy.

At the same time, the partnership with Russia is just one way of bringing about a stable and smooth development that will, or so Chinese leaders hope, lend China more importance on the global stage. Therein lies the fundamental difference to the Russian perception, which is not based on the feeling of a rising superpower that only needs the right management. Thus, China relies less on Russia than vice versa.

### **Containing Russian revisionism via Beijing?**

Throughout the East-West conflict, rapprochement with Beijing was the “Chinese card” that the United States could play because China was more concerned about Moscow than about Washington. This is no longer the case. Anybody wanting to play the Chinese card cannot rely on Beijing being worried about a strong Russia. What is more, during the Cold War, the United States did not have to worry about jeopardising its role in East Asia if it strengthened its ties to China. That, too, is different today. The United States is thus very hesitant to make concessions in order to “buy” China out of its cooperation with Russia.

There are nevertheless ways to unsettle the Russian narrative of a consolidated Chinese-Russian friendship. As long as NATO and EU pursue a policy of appeasement and weak ultimatums in their interactions with Russia, Beijing has little incentive to distance itself from Russia’s actions because that way Russia absorbs US efforts that would otherwise be spent on containing China. The People’s Republic benefits from Putin’s political and military forays. This will change once Beijing is forced to take a stance. China would be faced with the problem of supporting Moscow’s scheme to recover former greatness and hazarding worsening relations to the West.

In a first step, NATO and EU would have to get China to take a stance by publicly withdrawing support for Russian positions. Chinese diplomats have shown some restraint regarding conflicts that are highly important to Russia. This shows that, as outlined earlier, the Chinese-Russian partnership is not necessarily sound. What is more, this Chinese restraint is one way of publicly confronting Russia with the fact that it cannot automatically rely on Chinese support. The Ukraine conflict would be one such opportunity. A potential resurgence of the Georgia conflict would be another. In both cases, Beijing is faced with the dilemma of wanting to support the Russian partner on the one hand, but anticipating strong reactions from NATO and EU to conflicts along their periphery on the other. What is more, the Chinese government, which is anxious to maintain domestic stability, struggles with the Russian tactic of stoking ethnic conflicts in order to challenge the territorial integrity of other states. Against this backdrop, China’s abstention from putting in a veto in the UN Security Council on an issue that is important to Russia could be symbolic and might motivate Moscow to consider Chinese sensibilities, maybe even to curb its own revisionist efforts.

This will not, however, work out in the long term as long as Beijing thinks that containing Russia is just a prelude to even more efficient containment of China. Beijing is convinced that it will have to fight for power against US stalling or even sabotage tactics. Considering such a perception of the strategic environment, it makes sense for Beijing to choose Russia as an anti-Western partner. If the West wants to counteract closer Chinese-Russian ties, Beijing would have to be convinced that cooperation with the West offers greater benefits than a closer partnership with Russia does. The West could send the appropriate signals in Central and Southeast Asia but also in its approach to discussing values with Beijing.

The OBOR initiative is very important to Chinese foreign and foreign-trade policy. It is intended as a tool to focus Chinese political and economic efforts in a direction that is not blocked by a China-sceptic coalition. At the same time, Beijing and its OBOR initiative are advancing deep into Russian spheres of interest. If Germany and Europe were to more clearly indicate their intention to treat the initiative with favour and see it as an opportunity for their own national economies, this signature project of the Chinese government would also grow in international esteem. The states of Central Asia could also be encouraged to closer align already planned infrastructural projects with the Chinese initiative.

Washington is about to consolidate an alliance system in the Asia-Pacific region against Chinese expansion. While this approach certainly has its valid reasons, it is also a main reason for Chinese-Russian rapprochement. It is therefore important to establish countervailing power in the Asia-Pacific region in a flexible manner. Possible ways of acknowledging China's distancing itself from Russian positions would be concessions in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. For example, the US administration could suspend its freedom of navigation operations, which are doubtless justified but represent a grave loss of face for Beijing.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese political system is stable and Chinese society is less and less open to outside influence. Nevertheless, from the perspective of the Chinese government, Western universalism is still a cause for concern and suggests rapprochement with authoritarian Russia. This begs the question whether a discussion of values with Beijing is possible without the Chinese government feeling like a destabilisation of the People's Republic's political system would be considered mere collateral damage.

## Conclusions

This paper is intended as food for thought for German, European and – hopefully – joint European-US policy facing increasingly close Chinese-Russian solidarity on international issues. It is clear that only an approach that is coordinated between the United States and Europe can be successful. It does not help, of course, that the major Western powers have different perceptions of both Russia and China.

Any suggestion of counteracting Russian revisionist efforts through compromise with China is bound to be met with scepticism. Given China's increasing political and economic power, however, the West will have to qualify many positions that are critical of the People's Republic. One could also argue that this step is best taken as long as it still creates some leeway in terms of foreign policy.

The approaches outlined in this paper for disrupting the Chinese-Russian partnership are not easy, nor are they guaranteed to succeed. The current way of treating Russian provocations and Chinese challenges separately, however, involves the danger of fostering Russian revisionism and, sooner or later, having to face the painful fact of a truly substantial Chinese-Russian cooperation.

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<sup>1</sup> These operations mostly involve military air operations over disputed maritime areas and island regions that China has laid claim to.