

Opportunities for Further China-Russia Rapprochement

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Some of the worst consequences of the previous round of neo-liberal globalization, as well as the global environmental crisis, pose challenges to humanity as a whole, where the effect of diminished global leadership and shrinking multilateral institutions becomes only more acute amidst daunting challenges. Sino-Russian rapprochement, no matter how one defines it, cannot escape such a hostile environment.

Officially, the bilateral Sino-Russian relationship was elevated to a “comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership in a new era” in 2015, indicating strong interests at the state level in further enhancing Sino-Russian cooperation in a constantly evolving global context. In 2021, the foundational document defining China-Russia relations, the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed in 2001, is set to be extended for another five years. More broadly, in the official discourse, Russian-Chinese relations have also been set as a model for post-Cold War great power relations, a model of strategic mutual trust, a guarantor of international stability, and an important force in deterring U.S. unilateral actions.

However, Russian-Chinese relations have progressed amid recurring internal and external doubts that have shrouded the partnership ever since the early 1990s. Popular narratives in the Anglophone world since the early 2000s, such as the “axis of convenience” thesis, always portrays bilateral relations as tactic, short-term in nature and predominantly derived from each of the parties’ relationship with the West, the U.S. in particular. In contrast, however, real life experiences have already defied some of the most vocal warnings about the fragility of such bilateral relations, and the claims of Sino-Russian rapprochement being a “strange case.”

The recent pandemic and the on-going public health crisis across the world has cast further doubt on the universality of liberal values and America’s hegemonic imposition of its own values and institutions onto other actors, further accelerating the diffusing of power once concentrated in the transatlantic space. The loss of moral high ground of post-Cold War monism engenders an urgent call for peaceful coexistence of plural voices in international society. As a result, we have recently witnessed an enhanced willingness by both China and Russia to expand bilateral cooperation in support of state sovereignty, multilateralism, and the democratization of the

international system, which has taken on even more universal appeal in the current international context.

On top of solid person-to-person trust at the level of the heads of state, another opportunity for further China-Russia rapprochement is the frank, cool-headed and pragmatic vision, which has emerged on both sides. The Chinese expert community, particularly in recent years, has strongly advocated a search for “the endogenous drivers” of Sino-Russian relations. The underlying tone of such a policy narrative is to go beyond the U.S. as an omnipresent factor in the Sino-Russian engagement and not to see the bilateral relations only through the lens of China-U.S. relations and Russia-U.S. relations, but rather to highlight the genuinely bilateral agenda between China and Russia. Such a policy narrative implies a pragmatic and rational perception of bilateral relations as an attempt to bring overreliance on external factors in bilateral relations back to a supposedly more pragmatic and natural route. It also candidly acknowledges the notion that we should not expect each of the two parties to be perfectly aligned on every policy issue and should not strive for perfect symmetry between the two countries. Nor should one side expect unconditional support or perfect policy coordination on all key issues from the other side. Lastly, it implies a more solid realization that both countries need and are developing multiple sets of relations in an increasingly “multiplex” world, and so neither side should take offense at other types of interstate relations if they occur. Neither side wants to present the other or any third party with an “either-or” choice.

Alongside these more candid and pragmatic visions, another big plus for Sino-Russian rapprochement is the recent converging assessment by the two states of the overall international situation, potentially aiding in policy coordination between the two countries. In what is sometimes called a “model of conservative (or sovereign) internationalism,” both states increasingly display

features of “conservative” powers seeking to pursue independent development without sovereignty being impaired. Since 2014, for Beijing, Russia’s anti-sanction measures, partial success in import substitution in certain economic sectors, and more audacious decoupling from dollar-dominated financial markets have provided both a chance to strike bilateral deals on Chinese terms and relevant experiences of how the national economy can be operated in an increasingly dismal external environment. The emphasis on “internal circulation” in the new so-called “dual circulation” strategy advocated by Chinese leader Xi Jinping in July 2020 has been up for intense debate within China. Among the multiple interpretations, at least one major camp sees the Chinese top leader’s call for beefing up “internal circulation” as a sign of using self-reliance to respond to a hostile external market by emphasizing the advantages of a large domestic market and the huge untapped consumption potential. For the same reason, as China’s overreliance on the dollar system seems to be realized with increasing urgency by the Chinese authorities and wider policy circles, Russia’s experiences and possible policy coordination and even joint counter-reaction on this front have become a new possibility and even a necessity for China.

Oftentimes, on the flipside of opportunities lie challenges and even threats. The demand for more democratization and multipolarity comes with an increasingly polarized and fractured world amid the absence of effective leadership, where smaller players are also being pushed to pick a side in the geopolitical confrontation between the big powers. To make things even worse, a lack of consensus on the basic principles of a code of conduct on the international scene has often regressed into “no-adults-in-the-room” shouting matches, where the “responsible powers” are busy hurling insults at, and conspiring against, each other. All these structural changes have made it even harder to effect peaceful co-existence amid a diverse range of ideas and different national

systems, taking a toll on Sino-Russian cooperation. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is very likely to further exacerbate interstate inequality. Some of the worst consequences of the previous round of neo-liberal globalization, as well as the global environmental crisis, pose challenges to humanity, where the effect of diminished global leadership and shrinking multilateral institutions becomes only more acute amidst daunting challenges. Sino-Russian rapprochement, no matter how one defines it, cannot escape such a hostile environment.

Relatedly, both China and Russia are now being framed as the biggest threats facing a supposedly liberal, democratic, capitalistic Western world, as the challenger, the violator of the supposedly universal and benign liberal international order, and even the ultimate “bad guys” confronting humanity as a whole, because of the fundamental difference and incompatibility between their domestic models and Western liberal democratic models. Such naming and framing have recently added new layers of challenges: not only does regime type, but also moral, even civilizational judgment play a similar exacerbating role in the West’s framing of the two countries. This trend is destined to drive a wider wedge in the world, where cooperation, particularly across the fault line, becomes even more difficult.

Beyond ideational framing and competition, in the economic sphere, despite the fact that bilateral trade between China and Russia surpassed \$100 billion in 2019, both countries are having a difficult time reaching the target of \$200 billion in the coming years. As there have been breakthroughs in several major economic spheres (energy, agriculture, military weaponry, the Arctic), the hope to rely on the other as the game changer in structuring a post-American world seems futile. Among others, while the goal of de-dollarization is tempting and both countries are actively seeking ways to implement it, the specific approach to reaching that goal is still highly limited, if not completely elusive. Both sides need

to realize that and actively seek economic opportunities beyond each other.

Last but not least, the defense of national sovereignty and criticism of hegemonic behavior, the celebration of partial success in containing the COVID-19 virus or developing multiple vaccines, shall not translate into hubris and lack of self-reflection and self-criticism in the guise of whataboutism. Both countries indeed face serious challenges in properly handling diversity within the sovereign body, thus impeding the provision of a genuinely attractive alternative system that would be of universal appeal to the world.

On March 23, the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers issued a joint statement on “some issues of global governance,” advocating for “a more just, democratic, rational and multipolar world order” and rejecting the West’s claim to a standard model of democracy and its moral high ground in defining what constitutes “human rights” and “democracy.” This statement essentially reiterates the key messages in the Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order signed by Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin in 1997. Such continuity reflects the stable stance shared by Moscow and Beijing in opposition to the hegemonic foundation of the international system, signifying that Sino-Russian rapprochement over the past three decades does not merely reflect the policies of any particular national leader, but structural realism.

In the official narratives, the recent phrasing and framing of bilateral relations shows joint efforts to go beyond the U.S. common denominator, beyond the “axis of convenience” thesis or the “liberal international order” framework, to continue to push for endogenous drivers and a new type of big power relations, beyond the tradition of military alliances constituting the ultimate and highest form of interstate relations. As the two countries move from the more constrained, “conservative” mutual role

expectation of “do-no-harm-to-each-other” principle, contained in the “Three Noes” (No Allies, No Confrontation, No targeting of third parties) to a more proactive “do-something-together” approach, “practice what you preach” shall become their guiding principle in the future to further substantiate the greater bilateral agenda between China and Russia, on both the international and domestic levels. While advocacy for democracy, the coexistence of multiple civilizations and opposition to hegemony on the international level has received consistent support over the past three decades from the two states, one would expect to see a further exploration and practice of how the internal and external circulations, to borrow the concepts from recent “dual circulation” policy guideline advocated by China’s president, can be logically and practically integrated as the foundation for further Sino-Russian rapprochement.