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Issue Brief

Russia's Embrace of China: An Alliance in the Making?

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Summary

The Russia-China partnership has acquired a qualitative strategic depth, marked by robust economic, energy, people-to-people, technology and military and diplomatic engagement. The growing convergence between Russia and China in their foreign policy outlook is underpinned by their shared objective of diluting what they perceive as American hegemony. However, it is unlikely that their ongoing entente will morph into a military alliance. Deft diplomacy, meanwhile, is needed to firewall the India-Russia bilateral relationship from their growing engagements with other powers.

The December 2020 Russia-China joint aerial patrol over the contested East China Sea, viewed through the prism of Moscow's support for Beijing's core strategic concerns, has ignited a debate of the possibility of a looming, formal alliance between the two countries. This joint patrol, the second within a year, came shortly after President Vladimir Putin's declaration at the Valdai Summit in October 2020 that the "idea" of a future alliance could not be ruled out.¹

Needless to say, the Russia-China partnership has acquired a qualitative strategic depth. From the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance to the glaring animosity of the last two decades of the Cold War, to a detente post-USSR's disintegration, and finally to the comprehensive partnership straddling practically every conceivable area of cooperation, the wheels of this relationship have come full circle.

The ongoing "golden age"² of partnership is marked by robust economic, energy, people-to-people, technology and military and diplomatic engagement. Notably, this cooperation extends even to areas hitherto perceived as Russia's red-lines, i.e., the Arctic, Far East, and Central Asia and includes sophisticated weapons exports.

What are the key drivers of this entente? Is Russia seeking a formal alliance with China? What are the potential implications of Russia's closer embrace of China for India?

Drivers of Russia's Rapprochement with China

Russia's ongoing confrontation with the West appears to be a key determinant in pushing the Kremlin closer to China. A robust partnership with Beijing is perceived as a strategic necessity for Moscow to tackle the Western pressure.³ Western sanctions targeting practically the entire Russian economy have contributed in undermining Russia's economic growth.⁴

This has led Russia to seek alternative sources of trade, investment and technology. With China being one of the few countries capable of meeting Russia's requirements and not be swayed by the West to contain Moscow, Russia appears to be increasingly leaning on China. This sentiment was aptly reflected in Putin's 2012 statement of Russia "catching the Chinese wind in our economic sail".⁵

¹ ["Meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club"](#), *President of Russia*, October 22, 2020.

² ["China-Russia Relations Embrace Golden Era"](#), *People's Daily China*, June 4, 2019.

³ Artyom Lukin, ["The Russia-China Entente and Its Future"](#), *International Politics*, June 13, 2020.

⁴ ["Monitoring of Russia's Economic Outlook: Trends and Challenges of Socio- Economic Development"](#), *Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy*, February 2021.

⁵ ["Vladimir Putin on Foreign Policy: Russia and the Changing World"](#), *Valdai Discussion Club*, February 27, 2012

Today, China occupies a central position in Russia's economy. China has emerged as Russia's largest trading partner with bilateral trade having crossed US\$ 100 billion. It is also one of Russia's key sources of investment, industrial equipment and technology, including 5G.⁶

It helps that there exists a growing convergence and mutual understanding between Russia and China in their foreign policy outlook. This is underpinned by their shared objective of diluting what they perceive as American hegemony. It has led Moscow and Beijing to increasingly coordinate their positions at the global level.

With Russia and China facing sustained American containment pressure, the two countries have sought to provide support to each other's core strategic concerns, particularly in their backyard. This includes Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, the Indo-Pacific, the COVID-19 pandemic origins, Huawei and Syria. They have also sought to co-opt countries like Iran, which have had a precarious relationship with the US. A Russia-China tandem at the global level, therefore, appears increasingly to be the new normal.

Russia's entente with China is also perhaps driven by its experience of having simultaneously fought two Cold Wars, i.e., with the US and China. It was marked by the US exploiting the fissures in Sino-Soviet ties to establish a new *modus operandi* with Beijing, anchored in their shared animosity towards the USSR.

Therefore, having stable relations with at least one of the other two countries in this strategic triangle today appears to be a compelling rationale for Russia. This is particularly relevant at a time when the outlook of a Russia-US detente under the new Biden administration seems grim.

Russia also appears to be the weakest of this trio in terms of comprehensive national strength. Against this backdrop, it seems that Russia is seeking to build a strong interdependence with China to minimise any potential disruption of their bilateral ties in the future, thereby securing one flank — a hallmark of realpolitik.

Defence partnership with Beijing has emerged as a key pillar of this Russian calculus. This is one of the few areas where Russia holds a qualitative edge over China, particularly on strategic systems and operational capabilities. Export of sophisticated equipment, including the S-400, early warning systems and aircraft engines, is now a recurring theme in their bilateral ties. Notably, it appears that Russia has overcome its apprehensions of China's intellectual property rights infringement of Russian technology.

However, weapons exports do not appear to be a one way street. Russia has sought to tap China's expertise in a few electronic components for which the Kremlin had

⁶ ["Russia-China Trade Turnover to Exceed \\$100 Billion Despite Pandemic"](#), RT, November 26, 2020.

earlier relied upon the West.⁷ Meanwhile, joint exercises in each other's periphery, including the East and South China Seas, the Western Pacific, and the Black and the Baltic Seas, have become vital tools to project mutual support. In strengthening China's defence capabilities, particularly air defence and early warning, the Russian calculus could even be based on diverting the US attention from Russia's western neighbourhood to the Asia-Pacific.

Meanwhile, as part of this growing entente, China not only gets to tap Russia's diplomatic heft and its military prowess but its abundant natural resources, which could help dilute China's Malacca dilemma. Moreover, given Russia's traditional influence in Central Asia, Russian acquiescence is likely key to China's Silk Road Economic Belt's (SREB) connectivity nodes to Europe which pass through the region. Also, a secure 4,500 km long China-Russia border frees Beijing in tackling headlong the US challenge without the distraction of a potential challenger next door.

The Russia-China relationship appears heavily driven by their two Presidents, marked by personal bonhomie between them. It also seems that Beijing has sought to reassure Moscow of its benign intent, given the prevailing economic asymmetry between the two countries. China has emphasised on bilateral ties being anchored in the principles of equality, peaceful co-existence and mutual benefit.⁸

Is Russia Seeking a Military Alliance with China?

With Russia being increasingly viewed as an adversary by the West, China has emerged as one of Russia's pillars to tackle the Western threat. However, it is unlikely that their ongoing entente will morph into a military alliance.

An alliance is underpinned by a common threat. Trust and consensus on a common course of action between allies are its usual hallmarks. However, while Russia and China both face a Western containment strategy, they have in parallel sought a new *modus vivendi* with the US.

In fact, it is unlikely that Russia would be counting on China's security guarantee to withstand any US onslaught. Russia's ongoing massive military modernisation programme, including relating to its nuclear arsenal, appears to be aimed at ensuring deterrence against a perceived threat from the West.

An alliance framework is also usually restrictive in nature, with negligible scope for flexibility. This is particularly relevant in the context of Russia and China's foreign policy outlook not always being in sync. This is evident in China being neutral on Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with Russia following suit on the South China

⁷ Samuel Bendett and Elsa Kania, "[The Resilience of Sino-Russian High-Tech Cooperation](#)", *War on the Rocks*, August 12, 2020.

⁸ "[China, Russia Commemorate 70th Anniversary of Diplomatic Ties](#)", *Xinhua*, June 6, 2019.

Sea dispute. The two countries also do not appear to be on the same page on Russia's weapons exports to India.

In fact, a deep dive into the Russia-China entente reveals several festering issues. Russia remains apprehensive of the disequilibrium in their bilateral ties which has led Moscow to accommodate China even in its core strategic space of Central Asia, the Arctic and the Far East. Arguably, it is not in Russia's DNA, given the country's history, to be the junior partner in any relationship.

Today, maintaining its own strategic autonomy is a key pillar of Russia's goal to be counted as a pole in global affairs. A compelling rationale of this calculus would likely rest on diversifying ties beyond China. This could help dilute Russia's growing dependence on China.

In fact, *Pax Sinica*, marked particularly by China's growing footprints in Eurasia, could even undermine Russia's comeback in this region.

It is also likely that Russia would have taken note of China's recent playbook of unilateralism, assertiveness and revanchism to get its way, notwithstanding the economic interdependence that Beijing shares with the opposing side. Notably, China's historical grouse against the Tsarist takeover of Chinese territory under the "unequal treaties" runs deep. Similarly, a bipolar world order vis-à-vis a polycentric one would appear more suited to China, even though the latter is a long-cherished Russian goal.

Against this backdrop, Russia's *Greater Eurasia* project as well as its attempts to strengthen its position in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) — organisations where China is not a member, appear to be a key Russian strategy to preserve its core strategic space.

Russia has also sought to expand its engagements, without ruffling China's feathers, with countries such as India, Japan, Philippines, Vietnam and Indonesia which has witnessed tensions in their bilateral ties with Beijing.

Arguably, latent competition appears to be embedded in Russia-China bilateral ties. This is evident even in the global weapons market with China increasingly seen as a competitor to Russia.

A military alliance under these conditions, therefore, appears unlikely. Perhaps, the statements emanating from Putin were intended as a message to both foes (like the US) and friends (like India) alike to alter the course of confrontation or arrest the perceived drift in bilateral ties, respectively.

What could perhaps seal a Russia-China alliance is a two-front attack by the US — a highly unlikely scenario in itself.

Implications of Russia's Closer Embrace of China for India

Over the years, Russia has been a key constant in India's strategic calculus. Moscow had played a vital role in not only strengthening India's comprehensive national power but also balancing external actors who had sought to undermine India's national security. The Soviet Pacific armada steaming into the Indian Ocean during the 1971 War was one of the hallmarks of their strategic partnership.

Since the end of the Cold war, both countries have followed a multi-vector foreign policy while maintaining vibrant bilateral ties. However, today, interlinked developments have somewhat complicated the India-Russia strategic partnership. These include Russia's confrontation with the West, a more robust India-US partnership, Russia's entente with China and tensions in the India-China relationship.

These have led Russia and India to recalibrate their ties with China and the US respectively to tackle the challenges posed by Washington and Beijing in this quadrangular equation, often putting Moscow and New Delhi in a difficult situation vis-à-vis each other. The Russia-China entente is a reflection of these emerging dynamics. Russia's defence technology partnership with China — an aspect which was earlier reserved exclusively for India, is likely to add a qualitative edge to Beijing's military capabilities.

Similarly, Russia appears to be increasingly batting for China at the global level, the most notable being the Indo-Pacific. On Afghanistan, a Russia-China-Pakistan troika too has gained traction. Crucially, a Russia-China tandem in Eurasia has the potential to alter the balance of power in this region. These dynamics could muddy India's strategic outlook.

As such, questions have been raised on Russia's traditional unconditional support to India. Needless to say, the recent India-China border standoff put Russia in a difficult position. This was reflected in its anodyne statement of calling upon the conflicting sides to amicably resolve the border issue.

However, reports of Russia agreeing to expedite weapons exports to India, despite perceived opposition from China, during Defence Minister Rajnath Singh's visit to Moscow in the middle of the Galwan crisis are a pointer to the Kremlin maintaining its strategic autonomy. It is, therefore, unlikely that Russia would allow China to have a veto over its foreign policy. However, to expect Russia to always explicitly support India would be far-fetched.

In this context, robust bilateral ties are in India's and Russia's mutual interest, given the scope of their partnership. A break, on the other hand, has implications for New Delhi and Moscow's strategic autonomy and balance of power calculations, both in their neighbourhood and in relations with others.

Notably, India and Russia share similar views on the rise of a hegemon in their respective neighbourhoods. They remain rooted to the idea of a multipolar world. Deft diplomacy would perhaps be needed to firewall the bilateral relationship from their engagements with other powers. The new normal could even rest on tacit silence and agreement on each other's vital concerns, if they impinge on their equations with their other indispensable partners.

As such, the February 2021 visit of Foreign Secretary Harsh Vardhan Shringla to Moscow highlights the ongoing initiatives to update bilateral ties in sync with shifting sands of time. While the exclusivity of the past has dissipated, the trust and comfort of working with each other remains strong. This should hold India and Russia in good stead in recalibrating their ties.

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