

# Russia's Relations with China

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## Russia–China: Ever Closer Relationship, But Not an Alliance Yet

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### Abstract

Since the US defined Russia and China as its strategic rivals, the question of whether Moscow and Beijing will form an alliance has gained new relevance. Although Sino–Russian cooperation has continued to flourish in a number of areas, the obstacles to the creation of a fully-fledged alliance remain evident.

### Introduction

For many observers, the Sino–Russian relationship is predominantly shaped by the pressures exerted on those two states by the US. According to this logic, since early 2018 we should have expected to see another round of rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. At that time, the US identified Russia and China as its strategic competitors. The American policy of engagement with China has been gradually replaced by one of neo-containment, whereas the number of sanctions imposed by the US Congress on Russia has overshadowed any initiatives by former president Donald Trump to establish cordial ties with Vladimir Putin. Despite such a ‘conducive’ environment, however, the balance sheet of Moscow–Beijing cooperation since 2018 has been nuanced.

On the one hand, Sino–Russian cooperation has continued to flourish in a number of areas, including common political and normative opposition *vis-à-vis* the West, energy, and security and defence (see below). On the other hand, the obstacles that have previously prevented both sides from entering into a fully-fledged alliance have remained in place. The asymmetry in material capabilities between Russia and China has only increased. While China seems cautious enough not to cross Russia’s ‘red lines’ in the post-Soviet space, Beijing’s influence in the region has been continuously rising. Russia has limited means to offer support to China in key areas of its rivalry with the US, such as trade, technology or investment. Moreover, Moscow has struggled to maintain neutrality with regard to Beijing’s increasingly assertive foreign policy towards its neighbours, including its pursuit of territorial claims in the South China Sea and tensions with India. On top of this, the Covid-19 pandemic has deprived both leaders of the opportunity to display their bonhomie to the external world.

The presidency of Joe Biden has the potential to influence the course of the Sino–Russian relationship. Unlike Trump, Biden can be expected to seek consensus with Europe in order to reduce the global influence of both Russia and China. This coincides with shifting perceptions of China in Europe, where a growing

number of actors identify China as a long-term challenge and a systemic rival. The emergence of a trans-Atlantic ‘united front’ might make Beijing more willing to join forces with Moscow. It would not, however, diminish the power asymmetry between Russia and China, which in a long-term perspective threatens to subordinate Russian interests to those of China.

### The Pillars of Cooperation

Three areas of Sino–Russian cooperation have stood out for the last couple of years: (a) political and normative opposition *vis-à-vis* the West, (b) energy, (c) security and defence. In each case, Moscow and Beijing have been incrementally strengthening their ties and coordinating their policies. The US pressure has not, however, led to a qualitative breakthrough in any of these realms.

The normative dimension of Russian–Chinese joint opposition towards the West, and the US in particular, has become increasingly relevant in light of the ruling elites in both states placing greater emphasis on corresponding national identity narratives. While in the case of Russia, this discourse can be traced back to 2012 and Putin’s return to presidency, in the case of China it has been a more recent phenomenon. On the one hand, Xi Jinping and CCP propaganda has continued to portray China as a harbinger of (economic) globalization, a proponent of an open economy decrying protectionism, and as a provider of global public goods. On the other hand, Chinese narratives directed towards the external world have begun to harshly criticise US unilateralism, adopting a tone similar to that set by Vladimir Putin’s 2007 Munich speech. Such anti-American views have converged in the public domain. Moscow and Beijing have also consistently strived to improve their positions within the UN system, with both seeing their election to the Human Rights Council in 2020 as crowning these efforts.

In the energy realm, Russia has retained its status as China’s main oil supplier. The opening of a second branch of the East Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline in early 2018 allowed Russia to double its direct oil exports to China. On top of this, China has been

purchasing an increasing volume of oil from the ESPO Pacific coast terminal in Kozmino. The Covid-induced slump in oil prices encouraged Chinese companies to increase their imports from Russia. The scope of Sino–Russian cooperation in the LNG sector has also broadened. In 2019, Novatek sold 20% of its Arctic LNG-2 project to the Chinese companies, CNPC and CNOOC, solidifying its ties with China. Finally, towards the end of 2019, Gazprom’s Power of Siberia pipeline came online, beginning natural gas exports to China. While it is going to take several years before the pipeline reaches its full capacity, the Russian side has already begun advertising another pipeline, one that would transit Mongolia en route to China. However, in light of the long history of failed negotiations between Gazprom and China, it is impossible to predict whether Beijing will decide to invest in this proposed pipeline route.

Both states have sought to demonstrate their camaraderie via highlighting security and defence cooperation. For three consecutive years, Chinese troops have taken part in Russia’s annual strategic-level military exercise: Vostok-2018, Tsentr-2019 and Kavkaz-2020. While in each case, other external states also participated and the scope of practical cooperation was limited, this nonetheless represents an unambiguous political signal. Russia and China have also engaged in naval cooperation, in 2019 both states took part in bilateral (Joint Sea-2019) and trilateral naval exercises. In the same year, China and Russia conducted their first ever joint bomber patrol over the waters of the East Asia, a joint exercise repeated a year later in December 2020. On top of this, Vladimir Putin has stated that Russia has helped China to develop its ballistic missile early warning system (China has not commented on this or revealed any other details). Cooperation in the arms trade, on the other hand, seems to be waning. The most notable recent contracts were for the sale of S-400 missile defence systems and Su-35 jets, but these were signed back in 2014 and 2015, respectively. There were unconfirmed rumours suggesting that Moscow had suspended the delivery of the S-400s in 2020. Although these rumours were likely false, there has been a marked absence of new arms sales contracts, despite both states’ growing concerns about tensions with the US. China continues to purchase selected equipment from Russia (for instance, civilian and military helicopters) and Russia has begun to buy some equipment from China (e.g. naval engines), but the two states have shown no sign of upgrading such cooperation to jointly manufacturing weapon systems. Moreover, the competition between the Russian and Chinese military-industrial complexes looms large. In 2020, China overtook Russia as second largest exporting state on the global arms market.

## The Pandemic-Induced Slowdown

The Covid-19 pandemic has injected some degree of uncertainty into the relationship. As one Chinese scholar has *observed*, since the beginning of the global pandemic Putin and Xi have had little contact with one another, which stands in sharp contrast to the previous period in which they held regular meetings, usually several times a year. The pandemic has also generated a wave of speculation about estrangement between Russia and China, with both accusing the other of following a misleading policy on Covid-19.

Ultimately, however, both sides seem to have decided to brush potential problems under the carpet, notably with respect to their respective state narratives on the pandemic. Russia supported the Chinese narratives about its proper reaction to the Covid-19 outbreak in Wuhan, whereas Russian state media helped to spread fake news about the alleged role of the US in manufacturing the pandemic. Beijing reciprocated by keeping silent about the treatment of Chinese nationals living in Russia during the pandemic, which at the height of the first lockdown often bordered on racism.

The pandemic has certainly slowed down military cooperation. No regular bilateral exercises took place in 2020. The rules on ‘social distancing’ and the switch to online diplomacy have prevented the usual displays of bonhomie between Russia and China’s leaders. 2020 was supposed to illustrate the closeness of Sino–Russian ties, including at the celebrations for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW2 in Europe and Asia. Xi Jinping would have been an honorary guest for Victory Day in Moscow in May, while Putin would have attended China’s celebrations in Beijing in September.

## The Persistent Obstacles to an Alliance

The Russian political elite might be aware that external observers have generally indicated that potential problems between Moscow and Beijing may lie ahead. Using his annual speech at an (online) meeting with Russian and international experts in the framework of the Valdai Club, Putin hinted at the possibility of a Russian–Chinese military alliance. Responding to a question posed by a Chinese expert, Putin emphasised that neither states had the need to enter into a military alliance, but that he would not exclude the possibility.

One might argue that a military alliance would represent the logical implication of to-date developments between Russia and China and the pressures that Washington has been exercising on both states. The Sino–American rivalry, which has been embracing new areas, could modify China’s long-term position of avoiding alliance commitments. The evolution of the American policy towards China, away from engagement and towards neo-containment, put Beijing on par with Mos-

cow as a designated threat to US interests, and increased the value of Russian support. Russia, in turn, has tried to enlist political and economic support from China since the first wave of sanctions imposed by the West after the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Nonetheless, a number of obstacles persist that would prevent a fully-fledged alliance emerging. The most important is mutual unwillingness to underwrite the other side's most aggressive policies, and Russia's limited capability to support China in the latter's rivalry with the US.

China's tense relations with India illustrate how costly a military alliance could become for Russia. Responding to Sino-Indian border clashes, Moscow did its best to mitigate the tensions between its partners and stay neutral. While Russia's relations with China are much more substantial, India's geopolitical weight matters for Moscow. Russia does not like India's tilt towards the US and should not be expected to support the concept of the Indo-Pacific, but neither is it willing to forego cordial relations with New Delhi. Thinking aimed at forming a strategic triangle with China and India, which can be traced back to Gorbachev's policy towards Asia, prevails among the Russian elite. Any genuine alliance with China would force Moscow to loosen its ties with India as well as with its other Asian partners, such as Vietnam. China, in turn, has done its best not to offer full support to Russia's aggressive moves in the post-Soviet space. Beijing has not recognized the annexation of Crimea and sees Russian brinkmanship in the region as an unnecessary obstacle to implementing its economic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The Sino-American rivalry poses a different kind of challenge. For many years, Russian observers portrayed a Sino-American conflict as the worst-case scenario, with Moscow either having to choose between the two or threatened with marginalization by the G-2 superpowers. These fears turned out to be exaggerated. Russian-American tensions, the lack of ties and the anti-Russian mood among the US establishment have meant that Russia has supported China by default. While not throwing its weight behind Beijing, Moscow's actions made it clear that the US should not expect a 'reverse Nixon', whereby its relations with Russia, or Russia in general, would take on an anti-Chinese turn. Russia has not banned Huawei from its market, has not pushed China to join arms control agreements (in spite of open US pressure), and accepted Beijing's claims on Covid-19.

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At the same time, even if it wanted to support China more, Russia has limited opportunities to do so. The US has put pressure on Beijing via trade and technology policy, and has also begun limiting Chinese investments. Washington aims to foreclose Chinese scholars' access to the US research and development sector. In all those arenas of activity, Russia is not a top rank player. Regardless of the amount of goodwill, Russia cannot offset Chinese losses, suffered as a result of the US blocking Chinese companies from accessing key technologies, such as semi-conductors. If the US introduces further bans on purchasing its goods and technologies, Russian companies will not be able to offer substitutes to their Chinese counterparts. The Russian market cannot replace that of the US, if Washington decides to delist Chinese companies from US stock exchanges.

#### **The Biden Presidency**

The US's identification of China and Russia as strategic rivals goes beyond either Donald Trump and his acolytes or the Republican Party. The voting records on sanctions against Russia and widespread critiques of China attest to this view being prevalent across the US establishment and functioning as one of only a few bipartisan issues. It is highly likely that Biden, emboldened by receiving consensus support in the Congress, will not only uphold to-date policy, but also take further steps directed against China and Russia. Even more importantly, a new president can renew trans-Atlantic dialogue on both states and the challenge that they pose to the fracturing West. NATO has already signalled its readiness to pay more attention to China and Sino-Russian ties alike. Biden can be expected to reach out to the European Union, so as to tame China's influence regionally and globally.

If followed by concrete actions, the trans-Atlantic dialogue on Russia and China may provide additional glue for the Sino-Russian relationship. Faced with more coherent US-European positions, Beijing may be tempted to close ranks with Moscow. The latter's response is, however, far from certain. The Western pressure is not the only challenge Russia faces. A rising China has gained the upper hand over Russia in many areas and an alliance would only weaken Moscow's position vis-à-vis Beijing.

## “Endogenous Drives” with “No-Limits”: Contrasting Chinese Policy Narratives on Sino–Russian Relations since 2014

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### Abstract

This article compares the two policy narratives that have recently become prominent among Chinese political and expert circles regarding the Sino–Russian relationship: “no limits” and “endogenous drives”. While the two policy discourses convey a certain degree of internal tension, they converge on portraying Sino–Russian relations as operating on a level distinct, and higher than that of the “axis of convenience” or the “revisionist challenger to liberal order” conceptualizations of the relationship that are prevalent in Western discourse.

### Sino–Russian Relations through Western Eyes

Sino–Russian relations during the early 2000s were popularly characterized as an “axis of convenience” or “marriage of convenience” within western expert discourses (Lo 2008). Such perceptions portray Sino–Russian bilateral relations as predominantly tactical and short-term in nature, and driven by reactive responses to common threats from the outside world, in particular, geopolitical pressure from the U.S. and its major allies. More recently, Russia and China have been defined as the greatest threat to the liberal democratic capitalist world and liberal international order, because of the proclaimed fundamental differences and incompatibility between the Russian and Chinese domestic models and the western liberal democratic models.

Against this background, this article maps out Chinese policy discourses regarding Sino–Russian relations, which since 2014 have operated under the aegis of two seemingly contradictory key concepts: “no limits” and “endogenous drives”. This article aims to unpack the hidden nuances and internal vagueness of Chinese policy narratives regarding Sino–Russian relations, by scrutinizing the hidden assumptions, and associated geopolitical imaginations contained within them.

### Post-Crimea World and the Big Triangle

The years since the 2013/4 Ukrainian crisis would seem to have vindicated the “axis of convenience” thesis: closer ties between the Chinese and Russian states are driven predominantly by mounting pressures from the international system that are common to both countries.

The successive rounds of sanctions applied on Russia by western states since 2014 have led many within the Russian elite converge on the view, rather unwillingly, that Russia has no other choice than to be more

accommodating to China, lending further support to the Russian “Pivot to Asia” strategy, formally announced by Putin in late 2013. In the immediate years following the Ukrainian crisis, top level Russian and Chinese officials frequently visited one another and these exchanges resulted in a series of key agreements, some of which went beyond earlier constraints that the elites of both states had placed on such collaborations. In particular, the President of China Xi Jinping’s symbolic appearance as the only guest of honor among the great powers that attended the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in 2015 showcased the special status and value that relations with the other had reached for both Russia and China. During the 2015 Xi-Putin summit, Putin also openly outlined that China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union represented complementary, rather than competing projects, leading to the signing of a “conjugation deal” between the two countries’ most ambitious regional development projects. Subsequently, Russia has shown increasing signs of accommodating Chinese interests in areas in which Russia has traditionally enjoyed the status of the “incumbent” influence. For example, Russia has been willing to grant Chinese firms more shareholding stakes in its key energy projects. Russia also appears to be more willing to support China’s efforts to brand itself as a legitimate “near Arctic state”. Although much of this post-2014 agenda for bilateral collaboration was assembled in a rush (Gabuev 2015), these developments unquestionably led to intensified collaboration between the two countries.

About four years later, when the US–China trade war broke out and the US sanctioned Chinese agencies, it was an *aha* moment for many Russian specialists working on Sino–Russian relations, who sent messages to their Chinese counterparts saying “see, we have warned you long

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ago! What happened to us will happen to you.” Since then, for Beijing, Russia’s anti-sanction measures, partial success in developing import substitution in certain economic sectors, and partial decoupling from dollar-dominated financial markets have provided further opportunities for China to strike bilateral deals more on its terms, as well as to learn from Russia’s relevant experience of operating its national economy in an increasingly hostile external economic environment. The emphasis on “internal circulation” in the so-called “dual circulation” strategy advocated by Xi Jinping in July 2020 has generated intense debate within China. Among the multiple interpretations of this policy concept, at least one major camp sees China’s top leader as calling for beefing up “internal circulation” as a sign to move towards greater self-reliance in response to a hostile external market, by emphasizing the advantages of its large domestic market and huge untapped consumption potential. For the same reason, the Chinese authorities and wider policy circles have become increasingly concerned about overreliance on the dollar as the international currency system, with one senior Chinese diplomat calling de-dollarization “the most significant issue in current global political economy”. Russia’s recent experiences in responding to barriers to international markets by promoting domestic alternatives, and the possibility of Russia–China policy coordination and even joint counter-reactions in this regard, has meant that greater engagement with Russia has come to be seen by Chinese elites as an attractive option or even a necessity.

All these recent domestic and bilateral dynamics can be interpreted, at least partially, as being based on the common responses of Chinese and Russian state elites to what they consider as a hostile external environment maintained by pressure from the US. Thus, the Russian–Chinese relationship may now be described as following an inverse “axis of convenience” thesis. While it may be that both the Russian and Chinese authorities ultimately continue to care more about their relationship with the US than each other and that their bilateral relationship is derived on this basis, their respective relationships to the US no longer represents the ultimate benchmark and reference point for measuring progress in the bilateral relationship, but rather serves as the source of common threat that drives Sino–Russian relations.

### From “No Alliance” to “No Limits” and “Endogenous Drives”

The wording of the 2001 *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation*, intended to be the foundational document for the Russian–Chinese bilateral relationship, was rather cautious. It was even interpreted by some Russian experts as “a careful attempt to refrain from ideological declarations or knowingly unrealiz-

able obligations” that “indicated that the leaders of the two countries were thinking long-term and tried to avoid mistakes made fifty years earlier” (Gabuev 2015). Informally, the “three-no” principles also became the de facto guiding principles for Sino–Russian relations: “no alliance, no conflict, and no targeting of any third country” (Fu 2016). This loosely parallels the informal “three-no” principles of China’s Deng Xiaoping-era foreign policy: non-alliance, non-intervention, and non-leadership. This approach was later summarized in an even more succinct fashion as “partners, but not allies”, further indicating the lack of interest on both sides in establishing a formal military alliance.

However, since 2013, bolder statements began to be heard, such as there are (or should be) “no limits” to the development of Sino–Russian relations. That expression has taken on several different forms. For example, former State Councilor, and at one time a key figure in relations with Russia, Dai Bingguo (2016) commented that there should be no “upper-ceiling” for Sino–Russian relations. In a similar vein, China’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng told Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov in 2019: there is no cap (or no ceiling) and no limits to the development of bilateral relations (Le 2016). Gradually, such narratives were further developed informally into various forms for the new “three-no” principles. Among others, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (2021), recently suggested that for Sino–Russian strategic cooperation there is “no end limit, no forbidden zone, no upper bound”. Most recently, in early 2021, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying (2021) reiterated that “in developing China–Russia strategic cooperation, we see no limit to how far this cooperation can go, and no forbidden zone”. However, up till now, neither Russia’s, nor China’s primary political leader has openly used or endorsed such “no-cap” or “no-limits” narratives. Nor have such phrases been used in formal official documents.

It is in this context that the search for “endogenous drives” or the “endogeneity” of Sino–Russian relations began to appear in Chinese academic and policy circles. The first openly available publication making direct reference to “endogenous drives” in Sino–Russian relations can be traced back to 2013 (Yujun 2013), with this soon followed by similar comments from top Russia experts in China (Feng 2013). Unlike the “no-limit” narrative, “endogeneity”, and related concepts, has been taken up and used by China’s paramount leader. President Xi Jinping (2015) used it for the first time when meeting with the then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in 2015, stating that “there is both solid political consensus, solid public opinion support, and strong endogenous drives for developing the Sino–Russian comprehensive strategic partnership”. Xi (2020) again referred to such

phrases in his latest telephone conversation with President Putin, stressing that China–Russia relations have strong “endogenous dynamics” and independent values, which are not affected by changes in the international arena and are not disturbed by any other factors. Since 2014, there has been a dramatic rise in references to either the “endogenous drives” or the “endogeneity” of Sino–Russian relations among senior officials, scholars and think tankers.

### Interpretations and Implications

Although there are clear limits on what can be gleaned from an analysis based on policy narratives alone, the two discourses on “no-limits” and “endogeneity” can be said to demonstrate two distinct trends within China’s Russia-watching community, as Chinese political elites seek to adjust and redefine the China–Russia relationship in the light of the evolving global context and changing domestic conditions in both countries. These relational complications are clearly manifested in the seemingly contradictory nature of the two narratives.

The references to “no-limits” narratives, mostly, by representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been echoed among a relatively small scholarly and expert community. These actors have shown strong interests in providing a vague, but flexible and large enough space for imagination in conceptualizing the bilateral relationship, beyond that which is offered by the 2001 *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation*, soon to be automatically extended for another five years.

Within the “no limits” narratives, the previously popular phrase “partners, but not allies” is now presented not as a way of “constraining” the relationship. The implied connotation is that traditional military alliances, which the US is said to have masterfully used as the foundation of its global hegemony, does not represent the “highest” level of relations between sovereign states. Indeed, the “no-limits” narratives imply that the Sino–Russian relationship has already moved to a higher stage than that of a traditional military alliance. Thus, the “no-limits” discourse aims to drum up excitement about the possibility of the relationship further expanding and extending beyond its current level, in a way distinct to prevailing ideas about military alliances. Such interpretations lend support to another claim: that the idea promoted by Chinese state actors about a “new type of major-country relations” that was originally intended to be “sold” to an American audience in 2013, has, somewhat unexpectedly, partly materialized between China and Russia. In other words, Sino–Russian relations have already become the archetype for the model of a “new type of major-country relations” (Xing 2016). Such phrasing

has been used in many open comments and speeches made by Chinese senior officials.

In contrast, the “endogenous drives” narrative, emanating initially from the scholarly and think tank community, before later being taken up by China’s political leadership, reveals another set of more recent calculations, based on a more pragmatic and rational perception about the bilateral relations. The rise of the “endogenous drives” narrative serves as a self-corrective mechanism, taking one step back from the “no-limits” trend and foregrounding the previous overreliance on external factors in bilateral relations. It also reflects the more candid and coolheaded attitudes among China’s expert community toward both the status quo and possible future trajectory of Sino–Russian relations.

In this regard, one can further note a few related, more specific observations. First, the “endogeneity” discourse essentially advocates a better understanding of the differences between two countries, including their different takes on key international issues, divergent interests, and even competitive relations in certain key policy areas and differing concerns about third party’s reaction. Second, it candidly acknowledges that one should not expect the other to be in perfect alignment with them on every policy issue, and that to strive for perfect asymmetry between the two countries would be a mistake. Consequently, it also implies greater alertness to the need for conflict management in the relationship. This reflects the recent experience of the overly idealist and optimistic imaginations of the bilateral relationship, which quickly translates into disappointment when one side finds that they do not have resolute support from the other (Yang 2020). Lastly, it acknowledges that both countries are developing diverse sets of relationship with other actors in an increasingly “multiplex” world, and that neither side wants to put the other in a situation of having to make an either-or choice in maintaining the bilateral relationship. In sum, the “endogeneity” approach, particularly as seen from the expert community, has been derived from the “three-no” principles, acknowledging that the bilateral relationship has been primarily delineated by “what shall not be done” as a supposedly healthier and more sustainable foundation.

Xi Jinping’s recent reference to “endogeneity” adds a slightly new tone to the narrative. According to Xi (2020), the bilateral relationship holds value independent from one other’s interaction with other parties; and thus that it will not be affected by any changes in the wider international arena or by any other exogenous factors. As Xi (2020) put it, it is this endogeneity that resulted in “strengthened strategic cooperation between China and Russia that can effectively resist any attempts to suppress and divide the two countries, and build a solid barrier to safeguard international justice and equity”.

## Conclusion

The “no-limits” and “endogenous drives” narratives outlined by China’s Russia expert community and officials since 2013–14 convey a certain degree of internal inconsistency, tension, and even contradictions reflecting their different understandings of and expectations for Sino–Russian relations. The rise and expansion of two such seemingly contradictory policy narratives indicate the contradictory tendency among Chinese policy makers, who are concerned about the uncertainty and vagueness underlying the relationship with Russia, but who are also simultaneously seeking to utilize such uncertainty to their advantage.

What the two policy narratives have in common, however, is that they portray Sino–Russian relations as operating on a level distinct, and higher than the “axis of convenience” or the “revisionist challenger to

liberal order” conceptualizations prevalent in Western expert discourse. The “no-limits” and “endogenous drives” narratives, at the very least, imply an intention to, and interest in, proactively constructing the relationship in a way that is not constrained by existing vocabularies and ideas in the mainstream policy space about Sino–Russian relations. It leaves room for “striving for more achievement” in the field of China–Russia relations, while still emphasizing the value of sticking to the “three-no” principles. No matter which policy narratives comes to be dominant in the official and expert policy communities in China, the Chinese–Russian bilateral relationship will be phrased and framed in a way that goes beyond their respective relationships to the US and the “liberal international order” debate that remains popular in the Anglophone world.

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## ANALYSIS

## Russia and the China–India Rivalry

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### Abstract

The deadly Himalayan border clash between China and India in June 2020 and the ensuing breakdown of China–India relations posed a challenge for Russia’s foreign policy. Russia has consistently sought to balance its relations with China and India, while also encouraging cooperation among the members of the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle in seeking to increase their role in global governance. The deterioration of relations with the West has led Russia to strengthen relations with China, but Russia has also sought to avoid excessive reliance on China through diplomatic outreach to other countries, especially India. Tensions between China and India have long served to hinder Russia’s strategy, a problem that the events of 2020 compounded. In the face of growing concerns about China, India in recent years turned to the United States for support, becoming an active participant in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. This trend is accelerating following the border clash. Both Russia and India seek to maintain strong relations with one another, but the intensification of great-power rivalry in Asia is placing an increasing strain on this relationship, hindering Russia’s objectives related to the Russia–India–China triangle.

Russia’s recent “pivot to the East” has led primarily to close ties with China, even as the balance of power in the bilateral relationship continues to tilt rapidly in

China’s favor. In search of diversity in its foreign policy, Russia has sought to strengthen its relations with other Asian countries, especially India. Ideally, from Rus-

sia's standpoint, all three countries in the Russia–India–China triangle would enjoy friendly mutual relations while cooperating to raise their profile in global governance. At the same time, Russia's close relations with India would subtly balance China. The practical results of such triangular diplomacy, however, have consistently fallen short of Russia's expectations. Russia maintains strong relations with both countries, but China–India tensions have limited the triangle's effectiveness. The dramatic downturn in China–India relations during 2020, punctuated by a deadly clash along the two countries' Himalayan border, laid bare the limits of Russia's approach.

### **Russia and the Russia–India–China Triangle**

Russia's conception of triangular diplomacy with China and India dates back to the late 1990s, when Yevgeny Primakov proposed a Russia–India–China strategic triangle. The proposal failed to gain traction, as China, India, and Russian President Boris Yeltsin all rejected it, but the idea lived on in Russian diplomatic thinking. The Russia–India–China (RIC) grouping obtained institutional form in 2002 with a meeting of the three countries' foreign ministers, an event held annually since then. In the years that followed, Russian President Vladimir Putin's growing disillusionment with the West led him to turn toward China and India.

In his infamous speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007, during which he sharply criticized U.S. unilateralism, Putin argued that the world was becoming multipolar, as demonstrated by the growing economic potential of Brazil, Russia, India, and China. These "BRIC" countries held their first summit in 2009, then added South Africa the following year to become BRICS. Around this same time, Russia began promoting India's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional organization that China and Russia founded in 2001 to address Central Asian security, and in which India had gained observer status in 2005. The concrete achievements of Russia–India–China diplomacy in these institutional formats remained limited, but Putin saw them as a source of leverage in Russia's deteriorating relations with the West. In his view, these organizations offered a counterweight to a Western-centric international order. Although Russian officials refrained from saying so publicly, India's participation in these institutions also served to balance the relationship with China.

As U.S.–Russia relations soured following Putin's return to the presidency in 2012, Russia announced its "pivot to the East," an effort that grew increasingly urgent following the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis and the imposition of Western sanctions. China soon became

the focus of the pivot, as demonstrated by a major natural gas deal and by the sale of advanced Russian weapons to China, most notably the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 fighter jets. In an effort to avoid excessive reliance on China, Russia also sought closer ties with other Asian countries, including India.

The friendship between Moscow and New Delhi dated back to the early days of the Cold War, and Russia continued to benefit from this relationship. India maintained a neutral position during the Ukraine crisis, refusing to join the international condemnation of Russia or follow the West in imposing sanctions. Similarly, India refrained from criticizing Russia's intervention in the Syrian civil war. Russia continued to promote RIC and BRICS, and it secured China's agreement for India to become a full SCO member, provided that China's 'all-weather' ally Pakistan would become a member state simultaneously. The two South Asian rivals joined in 2017. At this point, Russia's ambitions for triangular diplomacy with China and India were far from fulfilled, but Russia had achieved some success in forming institutional arrangements that were conducive to its vision.

### **U.S.–China–India Triangle Poses Challenge for Russia**

Standing as major obstacles to Russia's vision, however, were the China–India rivalry and the potential for increased strategic cooperation between India and the United States. China and India were both rising powers in Asia, setting the stage for rivalry. China enjoyed an advantage in power over India, which has contributed to Indian leaders' perceptions of China as representing a threat to its aims, but China also perceived a threat emanating from India's rise. Potential flashpoints existed both on land and at sea. Last summer's border clash served as a grim reminder that the border dispute, over which the two countries fought a war in 1962, remained unresolved. India was also concerned about China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean and its alleged "string of pearls" strategy to build a regional network of ports that could eventually serve military purposes. China's support for India's main rival, Pakistan, was an ongoing source of tension and a major reason for India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), of which the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor was an important component.

The intensifying China–India rivalry had the potential to draw India and the United States into close cooperation. India's preference was to maintain strategic independence and to avoid being drawn into the U.S.–China superpower rivalry, but signs of growing U.S.–India cooperation were clearly visible as early as 2005, when the two countries signed a civilian nuclear agreement. The issue came into sharp focus in 2017, when the Trump

administration adopted its Indo-Pacific Strategy aimed at ensuring a “free and open Indo-Pacific” and revived cooperation with India, Japan, and Australia in the Quadrilateral Strategic Dialogue, or the Quad, with the clear purpose of establishing a counterweight to China.

For Russia, these were adverse developments. India’s participation in this process threatened to aggravate its relations with China, undermining the Russia–India–China triangle. U.S.–India strategic cooperation could also lead India to drift away from Russia. In the worst case, from Russia’s standpoint, the Indo-Pacific Strategy could become an effort to contain not only China, but also Russia. After all, the Trump administration’s national security and defense strategies identified both China and Russia as threats, and the 2019 U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy Report called Russia a “revitalized malign actor.” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized the Indo-Pacific Strategy during an appearance in Vietnam in February 2019 and on other occasions.

Despite its concerns about the new U.S. strategy, Russia subsequently achieved notable successes in relations with both China and India. Russia–China cooperation continued to intensify, as illustrated by China’s participation in Russia’s ‘Vostok-2018’ military exercise, diplomatic coordination on the North Korean nuclear crisis, and joint bomber patrols in Northeast Asia in 2019. At the same time, Russia made important advances in its relations with India. Russia, traditionally a major supplier of arms to India, agreed in 2018 to supply India with the S-400 air defense system. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in September 2019, where he offered a \$1 billion line of credit for development of the Russian Far East and discussed plans for a Vladivostok–Chennai sea link. The two countries are partners in the North-South Transport Corridor.

Russia also stood to benefit from an apparent improvement in China–India relations following the border standoff at Doklam during the summer of 2017. Following the Doklam crisis, during which Russia maintained neutrality, the Chinese and Indian leaders held informal summits during Modi’s visit to Wuhan in April 2018 and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s trip to Chennai in October 2019. In June 2019, Putin, Xi, and Modi held a trilateral meeting of RIC heads of state during the G20 summit in Osaka. During India–Pakistan crises over Kashmir in February and August 2019, Russia maintained neutrality while China supported its ally, Pakistan, in both cases.

### **China–India Tensions Threaten Russia’s Strategy**

After this period of relative success in Russia’s relations with both China and India, events in 2020 cast Russia’s

approach into doubt. A standoff between Chinese and Indian armed forces along the two countries’ Himalayan border, which began in May, turned deadly on June 15 when a skirmish broke out in the Galwan Valley in Ladakh, resulting in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and an unknown number of Chinese troops. China, which enjoyed a military advantage in the region, appeared to be responding to India’s attempts to strengthen its position. Amid the deterioration in U.S.–China relations following the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, China may also have intended to send India a warning signal, aiming to deter it from making moves to strengthen its relations with the United States. The clash appeared to have the opposite effect, however, as Indian leaders concluded that their only viable response to the growing threat posed by China was to increase coordination with the United States, Japan, and other democracies.

The border clash put Russia in an awkward position. Russia adopted a neutral position on the dispute and sought to maintain friendly relations with both countries. Russian leaders also made it clear that they had no desire to act as a mediator. On June 23, Russia hosted a videoconference of RIC foreign ministers, which had already been rescheduled because of the pandemic. The three foreign ministers agreed in advance that they would not discuss the border dispute. Both the Chinese and Indian defense ministers attended the following day’s delayed ‘Victory Day’ parade in Moscow commemorating the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II. Despite its neutrality, Russia appeared to offer reassurance to India by promising to accelerate deliveries of the S-400, as well as 33 fighter jets. Almost simultaneously, Russia announced that further deliveries of the S-400 to China would be suspended. The official explanation cited the pandemic, but observers speculated that the border clash had been the true reason.

### **Conclusion**

Under the circumstances described above, Russia will face increased difficulty in achieving its objectives in the Russia–India–China triangle. If the China–India rivalry continues to intensify, then Russia will be hard-pressed to act in concert with these two countries, whether in RIC, BRICS, the SCO, or any other format. In its relations with China, Russia argues that its own ties with India serve a useful purpose for China by discouraging India from aligning with the United States. If India–U.S. ties continue to grow, then this argument will lose force. India would prefer to maintain its longstanding friendship with Russia, ideally by driving a wedge between Russia and China. India recently floated the possibility of Russia’s participation in a Russia–India–Japan diplomatic grouping. Such overtures are unlikely to interest

Russia anytime soon, however. The Russian leadership has concluded that its main foreign policy problem at present is its confrontation with the West, which necessitates cooperation with China for the foreseeable future. Even if Russia could repair its relations with the West, it would be reluctant to risk a downturn in relations with China, its increasingly powerful neighbor. China, which faces growing international hostility, is likely to work assiduously to maintain Russia's support.

In the near term, Russia and India will seek to shore up their relationship. Putin planned to visit India in late 2020, but the pandemic delayed his visit until sometime in 2021. India withdrew from Russia's 'Kavkaz-2020' military exercise in September, reportedly because of China's participation, but Russia and India later held joint naval exercises near the Strait of Malacca. Russia's traditional role as an arms supplier to India could provide continuity in the relationship. India agreed to purchase the S-400 even at the risk of incurring U.S. sanctions for doing so, though U.S. policymakers could grant India a waiver on this issue in the interest of maintaining cooperation against China. Ultimately, Indian officials

recognize that their security requires heightened cooperation with the United States and other democracies. In the event of an armed conflict with China, they know that they cannot count on military support from Russia.

Despite the mutual desire of Russia and India to preserve their long-established friendship, signs of tension are apparent. Retired Indian diplomats have expressed dissatisfaction with Russia's repeated criticism of India's participation in the Indo-Pacific Strategy, including Lavrov's December 2020 accusation that Western countries were attempting to draw India into "anti-Chinese games." In recent years, Russia's diplomatic outreach to Pakistan has also raised concerns in India. In an extreme case, which remains unlikely, a breakdown of Russia-India relations could lead Russia towards forming a bloc with China and Pakistan. Neither Russia nor India would welcome such an outcome, but the intensification of great-power rivalry in Asia could cause regional alignments to grow rigid, reducing diplomatic flexibility. Russia's aspirations for the Russia-India-China triangle could become a casualty.

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**ABOUT THE RUSSIAN ANALYTICAL DIGEST**

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