



Thirty years of China–Russia strategic relations: achievements, characteristics and prospects

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Received: 25 February 2022 / Accepted: 22 March 2022 / Published online: 13 May 2022
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Abstract

With 3 decades of steady development, China–Russia relations have entered their best period in history and increasingly become a model of major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics in the new era. They were smoothly transformed after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and went through in-depth development from being a constructive partnership to a strategic partnership of coordination and then a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era. In terms of the strategic, multi-dimensional, and pragmatic nature of bilateral cooperation, the relations have become more fruitful since 2012, with increased collaboration in such areas as international mechanisms, military technologies and energy. While there have always been factors that could have a negative impact on bilateral relations, they have been defused or managed well on the basis of high-level political mutual trust and through good communication between leaders of the two countries. The author believes that no matter what changes take place in the international situation and regional environment, the purpose of good-neighborly and friendly cooperation and the principle of mutual support, mutual benefit, and win–win will not change.

Keywords Russia · Strategic coordination · The big triangle

1 Introduction

In his statement at the opening ceremony of the Russian Tourism Year in China, President Xi Jinping said that China and Russia are good neighbors, good partners, and good friends connected by mountains and rivers. Benevolence and good neighborliness are the treasure of any nation (People’s Daily 2013a). China and Russia are each other’s main and most important partners of strategic coordination, and their bilateral relations are given priority in both countries’ overall foreign affairs

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and policies (People's Daily 2013b). As China's largest neighbor, Russia was once the main component of the world's first and largest socialist country. It is one of the countries with the biggest influence on China's security and development environment, an important external reference for China's reform and opening up, and also a country with profound impact on global strategic security and stability. Therefore, from a historical, strategic, and overall perspective, it is of great significance to develop well the China–Russia comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for the new era.

2 Historical context of contemporary China–Russia relations

On 1 October 1949, the People's Republic of China was founded. The Soviet Union immediately granted diplomatic recognition and established formal diplomatic ties with China. Over the following 40 years, Sino-Soviet relations went through alliance, disagreements, open debates, formal split, border conflicts, and full confrontation until the normalization of party-to-party and state-to-state relations in 1989. Former State Councilor Dai Bingguo summed up the experience into 4 decades: the honeymoon decade (1949–1959), the polemic decade (1959–1969), the confrontation decade (1969–1979), and the negotiation decade (1979–1989) (Dai 2016, 30).

2.1 A smooth transition from Sino-Soviet to China–Russia relations

In December 1991, the Soviet regime founded after the October Revolution and the socialist union founded in 1922 exited the historical stage. The Russian Federation, committed to joining the club of Western civilization, took its place. Whether the relations between China and the Soviet Union, the two major socialist countries, can be smoothly transitioned to a new type of China–Russia relations, was under a major test.

The Chinese side naturally had its own judgment on the role played by the then Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the USSR disintegration process. The loss of the ruling position by the Soviet Communist Party and the disintegration of the Soviet Union put considerable pressure on China's reform and opening up. These, plus Yeltsin's one-sided pro-western policy, fueled concerns for the direction of China–Russia relations.

Fortunately, determined to seek an external environment conducive to the country's reform and opening up, pursue peaceful coexistence with neighbors, and avoid alignment based on ideology and social system in state-to-state relations, the Chinese leadership did not openly criticize the foreign and domestic policies of Yeltsin in his early years in office and responded fairly constructively to Russia's primary concern with regard to becoming the successor to the Soviet Union in international law. In December 1991, the two countries signed an inter-governmental meeting minutes and smoothly transitioned from Sino-Soviet to China–Russia relations. The minutes confirmed China's support for the succession of the Russian Federation to the status of the Soviet Union under international law, and stressed the continued

validity of principles governing bilateral relations established in the two joint communiqués signed by the heads of states in 1989 and 1991 respectively, including the one-China position. There were rumors in the spring and summer of 1992 that the Moscow–Taipei Economic and Cultural Coordination Committee might be regarded as a diplomatic mission and that its employees might be granted diplomatic immunity. However, in September 1992, President Yeltsin signed the *Regulations on Relations between the Russian Federation and Taiwan* and the matter was clarified.

In December 1992, President Yeltsin visited China, albeit with certain hesitancy in comparison to his visits to the capitals of all G7 countries except Japan in the first half of the year. It is also very clear from the state of mind described in the autobiography by the then Russian Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev (1995, 5–6) that both he and President Yeltsin went to Beijing with much ambivalence.¹

In a departure from the uneasy mood of Russian leaders, the Chinese received President Yeltsin, who was visiting China for the first time, with great courtesy. The president had a background in architecture and was brought to the Forbidden City and the Great Wall. A dinner was hosted in his honor at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse. And he had cordial conversations with several Chinese leaders who had studied in the Soviet Union (see Dai 2016, 183–184).

During Yeltsin’s visit, the two heads of states signed the *Joint Statement on the Basis of Mutual Relations between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation*, declaring that the two countries “regard each other as a friendly country”. Although Yeltsin cut short his visit for some reason, his confidence in China was growing and his doubts were disappearing (see Dai 2016, 183–184).

2.2 Upgrading of bilateral relations

In a letter to President Jiang Zemin delivered by Foreign Minister Kozyrev during his visit to Beijing in January 1994, President Yeltsin proposed to upgrade the bilateral relationship to a constructive partnership. The announcement was then made in the joint statement signed during Jiang’s official visit to Russia in 1994: “The two countries enjoy a new type of constructive partnership, which features good-neighborly, friendly and mutually beneficial cooperation as full equals on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence, and is neither aligned nor directed against third countries” (Joint Statement between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation 1994).

The bilateral relationship was upgraded to a strategic partnership of coordination, as agreed during Yeltsin’s visit to China in April 1996, to reflect its nature of being strategic, collaborative, and institutionalized. As known to all, in the 40 years from 1949 to 1989, there were only five state visits, which were

¹ At the outset of Kozyrev’s book, he introduced his statement at the CSCE meeting of foreign ministers, which was held 3 days before he visited China on President Yeltsin’s delegation. In the statement, he warned that the Russian approach to the West would have its limitations and that Russia may well turn to Asia if stronger support to Russian reforms was not forthcoming. I find it a vivid example of a Russian attempt to exert pressure on the West through a presidential visit to China.

quite unusual for two neighboring major powers. With the strategic partnership of coordination, the two sides gradually developed regular (at the least once a year) dialogue mechanisms in all areas of cooperation at all levels, from the head of state to the prime minister, deputy prime ministers, ministers, and expert working group. These were reliable institutions for deeper political mutual trust, greater strategic coordination, and further practical cooperation.

In July 2001, China and Russia signed the *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation*, designed to pass on the friendship between the two peoples from generation to generation and based on mutual respect for each other's political, economic, social, and cultural development paths chosen in accordance with their respective national conditions and mutual support for each other's policies on national unity and territorial integrity. The two further undertake not to participate in any alliance or group which undermines the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other contracting party, take any such actions, including the conclusion of such treaties with any third country, or allow any third country, organization, or group to use their respective territory for activities undermining the national sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other contracting party. The treaty also reaffirms Russia's position on national unity and sovereignty, including on the Taiwan question (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People Republic of China 2001).

In keeping with the spirit of the 2001 treaty, while strengthening regular consultations between their functional departments and the legislative and judicial bodies, the two sides also dedicated efforts to consolidate the public will and social foundation for long-term good neighborliness and friendship. For example, in accordance with the *Outline for the Implementation of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation (2005–2008)* signed in 2004, the two countries started the China/Russia year programs in 2006. For example, China hosted the Russia year in 2006 and Russia hosted the China year in 2007 with rich events and opening ceremonies attended and addressed by the president. There were also the Year of Russian Language in China (2009), the Year of Chinese Language in Russia (2010), and the Year of Russian Tourism in China (2012).

China–Russia cooperation in the military, economic, and energy fields yielded fruitful results. The Peace Mission joint military exercise was first held in 2005 and has continued to this day, with growing number of participants and equipment, arms of the services, and drill items. The exercises have taken place at the sea, in the air and across vast land. From the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea, the two countries and other Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states have demonstrated higher levels of military cooperation.

As a contrast to the high-level political and security cooperation, the growth of bilateral trade was not stable and the size of bilateral investment was not large enough. In this connection, the two sides approved in 2009 the *Outline of Cooperation between the Northeast of China and the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia (2009–2018)* to support the development of the adjacent areas with favorable policies and institutions. Moreover, in February 2009, after long and arduous negotiations, China and Russia finally signed the long-term crude oil supply contract and

pipeline construction agreement. Russia began to supply oil to China on 1 January 2011. Cooperation in areas such as nuclear power was advanced steadily.

In September 2010, leaders of the two countries jointly signed a joint statement to comprehensively deepen the strategic partnership of coordination, promising to elevate cooperation in investment, infrastructure, and between regions in a pragmatic manner to a level consistent with the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination.

When the Wenchuan earthquake hit China, the Russian side sent medical teams and rescue teams with heavy helicopters to the stricken area. Russian President Medvedev invited nearly 1000 young quake survivors from affected areas in Sichuan, Gansu, and Shaanxi provinces to convalesce in Russian sanatoriums. The Ocean All-Russia Children's Care Center in Vladivostok received the largest number of children and received the best feedbacks. The story of Xi Junfei and his drift bottle moved many people. Xi first visited the center in 2010, giving encouragement to the children and expressing gratitude to local teachers.

Of course, the friendship and sincerity moved not only the children in China's disaster areas but also the bereaved families of Soviet soldiers falling in battle in China. Unlike some other countries that use historical topics to vilify the image of the Soviet Army on the European battlefield, the Chinese side has properly maintained the cemeteries, memorials, and tombs of the Soviet Union Red Army at Qiqihar, Dalian, Harbin, Shenyang, Changchun, Ulan Hot, Manzhouli, Tumen, and Wuhan. Together with Russian archaeologists in places like Mudanjiang, remains of Soviet martyrs were searched for, and collected and properly buried with tombstones erected at local martyrs' cemeteries (cnr.cn 2015).

2.3 Cooperation on multilateral platforms

Changes in international and regional situation at the turn of the century brought new contents to the strategic coordination between the two countries. In the face of new circumstances such as the unipolar American hegemony, the accelerated NATO's eastward expansion, the strengthening of US security relations with Japan and ROK and the rise of terrorist, splittist, and extremist forces in the hinterland of Eurasia, out of their own security interests and for the purpose of maintaining regional peace and stability and advocating a new security concept, China and Russia initiated a series of multilateral cooperation mechanisms, such as the "Shanghai Five", the China–Russia–India trilateral dialogue, the SCO and the BRICS, expanding the scope of their strategic coordination to a new level.

In June 2001, China and Russia joined forces with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to set up the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and put forward the "Shanghai Spirit", namely, mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations, and pursuit of common development. The organization enjoys growing influence and increasing members, observers, and dialogue partners.

Under the active promotion and coordination of China and Russia, the BRICS mechanism involving emerging economies such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China was launched in June 2009. It made a unique contribution to shaking off the negative effects of the financial crisis (2007–2008) that began in the US and moving global governance in a more just and equitable direction. South Africa joined in 2011. The G20 mechanism launched at the Pittsburgh Summit is an important platform for the BRICS cooperation mechanism to expand its international influence.

In addition, China and Russia have conducted intensive consultations and collaboration within the framework of the reform of the United Nations, the World Health Organization-led fight against the COVID-19 pandemic, and the six-party talks mechanism on peace-related issues on the Korean peninsula.

3 New era

The year 2012 witnessed leadership change in both Russia and China. Putin took over as Russia's president for the third time. Xi Jinping was elected as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) at the 18th CPC National Congress and as the President of the People's Republic of China at the first session of the 12th National People's Congress in March 2013.

Xi soon paid his first visit to Russia as the Chinese President, fully demonstrating the great importance he attached to relations with Russia. He said, "A high-level and strong China–Russia relationship not only serves the interests of our two sides but also is an important security for maintaining international strategic balance and world peace and stability. After more than 20 years of unremitting efforts, China and Russia have developed a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination that fully accommodates each other's interests and concerns. It has brought tangible benefits to the two peoples" (Xi 2013).

In his speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, Xi first proposed the idea of a "community of shared future": "In today's world, countries are more interconnected and interdependent than ever before. Mankind lives in the same global village and in the same time and space where history and reality meet. We are becoming more and more a community of shared future where our destinies are intertwined" (People's Daily 2013c, 2).

Xi's first visit to Russia as China's head of state marked the start of an effort to substantiate the two countries' unprecedentedly sound political relations with practical cooperation (People's Daily 2013c). In a joint statement signed by the two heads of state, they approved the *Outline of Implementation of the Treaty of Good-Neighborhood and Friendly Cooperation (2013–2016)* with specific targets for bilateral cooperation in trade, investment, high-tech, infrastructure construction, and finance. During the visit, the two governments signed 32 agreements covering the upstream and downstream oil and gas, nuclear energy, power, coal, new energy, and other industries, dubbed "contracts of the century" for their large values and long durations. In June of the same year, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Rosneft signed a long-term agreement to supply China 30 million tons of crude oil every year. In September, at the side of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg, Xi and

Putin witnessed the signing of CNPC's purchase of a 20% stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG project (Wang 2014, 10–11).

In February 2014, at the invitation of his Russian counterpart, Xi attended the opening ceremony of the Sochi Winter Olympics and held talks with Putin. It was the first time for a Chinese President to appear at an overseas sports event. In his meeting with Putin, Xi said, "The Sochi Winter Olympics symbolizes President Putin leading the Russian people to prosperity and strength. China and Russia are good neighbors, good partners and good friends. It is a Chinese custom to congratulate neighbors on a happy occasion. And so, I am here to congratulate and share the happiness of the Russian people" (People's Daily 2014).

In May of the same year, when Putin visited China and attended the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) summit in Shanghai, the two heads of state again signed a joint statement, which included Russian support for President Xi's proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The two leaders witnessed the signing by CNPC and Gazprom of a contract on gas supplies through the eastern pipeline route. The deal included a duration 30 years and a total value of about USD 400 billion. In November, a framework agreement was signed for CNPC to acquire from Rosneft a 10% stake in the Vankor Oilfield project, a breakthrough in upstream cooperation.

Other Chinese energy companies also made significant progress in cooperating with Russia. For example, in August 2013, Sinopec's Hong Kong subsidiary signed an agreement with Russian petrochemical company Sibur to buy 25% stake plus 1 share and join the management in a synthetic rubber plant of the latter. In October, Sinopec and Rosneft signed a memorandum of understanding on advance payments for Russian crude oil supplies to China of up to 100 million tons over 10 years. In July 2014, CNOOC signed a contract worth USD 1.64 billion with the Yamal project for the manufacturing of 36 modules, which was the first time for a Chinese company to win a contract to build core LNG process modules.²

In 2015, the two countries decided to celebrate the 70th anniversary of both the world's anti-fascism war and the victory of China's Resistance War against Japanese Aggression. President Xi went to Moscow in May for the military parade on Red Square. On 8 May, the Chinese and Russian heads of state issued in Moscow the *Joint Statement on Cooperation on Joint Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Economic Union Projects*. Since then, President Putin has participated in the first (2017) and second (2019) summits of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. These exchanges demonstrated the level of mutual strategic support between the two leaders.

In June 2016, President Putin visited China. Against the backdrop of the intensified disputes over the legal status of islands and reefs in the South China Sea, a joint statement on strengthening global strategic stability and a declaration on the promotion of international law were signed and a decision was made to hold joint military exercises in the South China Sea region.

² See Spivak and Gaboev (2021).

In July 2017, President Xi visited Russia. His meeting with President Putin was extended from a planned hour and a half to four hours, which was a testament to the importance the two heads of state attached to each other. Following the talks, the two sides signed joint statements on further deepening the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination and on the current world situation and major international issues, and approved the *Outline of Implementation for the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation (2017–2020)*.

In September 2018, President Xi attended the 4th Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok and signed with President Putin the *Sino-Russian Cooperation and Development Plan in Russia's Far East Region (2018–2024)* which identified seven priority areas for economic and trade cooperation in the Russian Far East, including natural gas and petrochemical industries, solid minerals, transportation and logistics, agriculture, forestry, aquaculture, and tourism.

In June 2019, Xi attended the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and signed with Putin in Moscow the *Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination in the New Era between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation*. It sets clear goals and directions for China–Russia relations: to watch over each other, give each other stronger strategic support, support each other in pursuing their own development path and safeguarding core national interests, and defend their respective security, sovereignty and territorial integrity. To this end, the two sides will further develop mutual trust and cooperation in relevant areas. The two countries vowed to closely coordinate and collaborate with each other with regard to their national development strategies, expand mutually beneficial cooperation in trade and investment, and strengthen coordinated action to align the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). They promised to blaze new trails in a pioneering spirit to tap more comprehensively the potential and growth momentum of bilateral relations. The two countries will work together for universal benefits and win–win results by maintaining the international order and international system centering on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, promoting the development of a new type of state-to-state relations featuring mutual respect, fairness, justice, and win–win cooperation, and promoting the building of a community of shared future for mankind.

In particular, the joint statement stated that the heads of state of the two countries will play a strategic leading role to prioritize political cooperation, security cooperation, practical cooperation, people-to-people exchanges, and international collaboration in their comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination and further substantiate the partnership.

This strategic decision of the two heads of state is being implemented in an orderly manner. For example, China and Russia are jointly developing the CR929 aircraft; China purchased SU-35 aircrafts and C-400 missile defense systems; Chinese companies are investing in the Irkutsk data center project; and China and Russia are jointly patrolling the Sea of Japan; on March 9, the space agencies of the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding on the establishment of a joint space station on the moon; the dialogue and communication mechanism has been operating smoothly. The list goes on and on.

In addition to the above-mentioned hard-core practical cooperation, cultural ties have also been strengthened. Interactions and mutual understanding between ordinary people, especially the young, are increased, leading to tighter people-to-people bond. As President Xi pointed out, both China and Russia have a long history and splendid culture and cultural exchanges play an irreplaceable role in enhancing friendship. The foundation for cultural exchanges between the two peoples is profound (Xi 2013).

The two countries have continued the tradition of holding each other's national years, such as those themed Chinese tourism (2013), youth friendship and exchange (2014–2015), media exchanges (2016–2017), local cooperation and exchange (2018–2019), and science, technology, and innovation (2020–2021).

With the unremitting efforts of the competent departments, good progress has been made in educational exchanges and cooperation. According to statistics, more than 35,000 Chinese students studied in Russia each year from 2017 to 2019, while more than 20,000 Russian students studied in China. Higher education in Russia has been more and more popular and recognized by Chinese students and parents. There are various types of mutually complementary educational exchange and cooperation mechanisms, such as out-of-pocket courses, exchange programs, and multilateral projects such as the SCO University and BRICS Network University.

In his congratulatory message to Shenzhen MSU-BIT University for its inauguration, President Xi said, “China and Russia jointly developing Shenzhen MSU-BIT University is an important agreement with President Putin and an important outcome of the furthering cultural cooperation between the two countries. It is of great demonstration value.” He also expressed the hope that the education authorities and educators of China and Russia will give full play to their respective advantages, tap their cooperation potential, accelerate the construction and development of the university, and strive to build a high-level university and train high-quality talents, thus making contributions to deepened China–Russia educational cooperation and enhanced friendship between the two peoples (People's Daily 2017, 1).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has been raging across the world, once again confirmed the solidness of the high-level strategic relationship and the sincerity in mutual help. Since the very beginning, leaders and competent departments have maintained very close communications and supported each other with urgently needed medical and protective supplies as well as teams of medical experts, gaining favorable public opinion in both countries.

When western countries tried to dump the blame on China, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov said, in response to a question about the role of the World Health Organization, that anyone with knowledge of the WHO's actions, statements, and specific decisions will be convinced of the organization's efficiency. He stressed the indisputable fact that the WHO has played and continues to play an important coordinating role to support pandemic response. He reminded the reporters that the US, as WHO's largest funder, enjoys much priority in the staffing of the secretariat and holds the most critical positions. As professionals, they make sober and professional decisions (Tass.ru 2020). Andrey Kortunov, Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, questioned those who accused China of taking quarantine measures to stop transmission. “Freedom is indeed the highest human value,” he

wrote, “but what will be your answer in front of this question: do you want to live in authoritarian Wuhan or die in free New York?”(Kortunov 2020a).

In addition, Russia has repeatedly called at all levels for international cooperation in pandemic response. It proposed to convene an emergency G20 summit as soon as possible rather than waiting until the planned November meeting in Riyadh and urged all parties to refrain from blaming each other, shifting blames, or erecting artificial obstacles (Kortunov 2020b). The Russian side sees Western countries scapegoating China as an attempt to evade the responsibility as the government of a sovereign state to prevent and respond to any pandemic. In this regard, Lavrov found it intolerable that some senior Western colleagues would openly talk about holding China accountable and claiming compensation from China, while the latter was doing its utmost to help other countries in various ways and sharing its experience in fighting COVID-19 (Tass.ru 2020).

4 Important characteristics and strategic value of China–Russia relations

China and Russia have made these great achievements in their relations thanks to the strategic value of the relationship and their unique mode of interaction.

Firstly, the two countries hold identical or similar ideas. For example, both strongly advocate non-interference in internal affairs, respect for the diversity of civilizations and the choice of domestic governance models and development paths by any country, and the rejection of discourses and models imposed by external forces. They support each other’s policies to safeguard national unity and sovereign status, with explicit and firm position statements on questions related to Chechnya, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Xinjiang. Both advocate the observance of international law and the maintenance of the post-war international order with the United Nations at its center. Both oppose the politicization of exchanges and cooperation in public health, sports, science and technology, and the humanities. They oppose any move to stigmatize the pandemic and described western mistakes in this regard as political viruses. Both advocate fair trade and common development, oppose the monopoly by Western countries of technology, markets, finance and their rules of operation, and oppose all forms of trade protectionism based on any pretext.

Secondly, there is deep political mutual trust and the two heads of state are personally involved. For example, President Putin attended two meetings of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation and took the lead to respond very positively to the Chinese initiative in front of the international community. President Xi’s attendance at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum and the Eastern Economic Forum also contributed to boosting Russia’s international economic appeal and influence in both Europe and Asia and highlighting its major-power status. Russia’s pivot to the east was part of Putin’s vision to “use the wind from China to drive the Russian economic sail”, laid out in an article published on the eve of his return to the Kremlin in 2011. Through high-level communications, the Russian side indeed was able to secure agricultural produce exports beyond the original Chinese

standards based on international trade rules and the principle of reciprocity. The two heads of state enjoy a sincere friendship and shared interests. Xi accompanied Putin from Beijing to Tianjin on a high-speed train and even showed the latter how to make a local-styled pancake. They awarded each other the highest Medal of Honor. Putin presented Xi with the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle, one of Russia's highest honors, while Xi conferred on Putin the first-ever Friendship Medal, the highest honor China grants to foreigners.

Thirdly, China–Russia Cooperation contributes to global strategic security and stability. As permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, China and Russia are both in favor of maintaining the leading role of the UN in matters of world security and peace and opposes any attempt to bypass the UN and act alone. Close consultations have been conducted between the two on Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Iran, and the reform of the UN itself, which have effectively upheld the authority of the UN.

There is a mechanism of direct high-level communication established when Sergei Ivanov and Li Zhanshu were chiefs of staff for respective top leaders, a practice without any precedent between even the two allied states of China and the Soviet Union or between China and other friendly countries.

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While seeking to achieve their own development goals and people's well-being through reform, China and Russia firmly oppose the gross interference of external forces in the internal affairs of sovereign states, believing that the promotion of the Western-style democracy is an important source of turbulence and chaos in the world. The two sides therefore share the same position and give each other firm political support on issues such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and color revolution.

Both China and Russia are proud of the splendid achievements and unique charm of their own civilizations and vehemently insist that the right of all civilizations to live together on an equal footing should not be trampled upon. They oppose the forcible export of any one civilization or system of ideas and the forcible “transformation” of other civilizations. While some countries are trying to reform others with abstract universal values such as human rights, democracy, and freedom and the western way of life, China and Russia strive to promote their traditional culture and engage in dialogue and exchanges among civilizations at the same time in pursuit of mutual support based on mutual understanding and a harmonious environment of coexistence and development for the world.

Both China and Russia suffered the ravages and severe trauma of massive wars. Therefore, they advocate the settlement of international disputes through peaceful and political dialogue and the establishment of common and reciprocal security mechanisms; and they oppose the use or threat of force at will, the Cold War mentality

of confrontation between military blocs, and the unilateral pursuit of international mechanisms for absolute security, including NATO in Europe, the so-called security mechanism in the Asia Pacific and the various missile defense systems deployed in the vicinity of the two countries. In contrast, as an emerging regional international mechanism, the SCO is the best example of China and Russia practicing the new security concept of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation.

Fourthly, economic cooperation between China and Russia is conducive to a sound and healthy development of the world economy. As the world's largest neighbors enjoying vast territory, abundant resources, innovative technologies, huge capital reserves, vast markets, hard-working people, and peaceful borders, China and Russia have fruitful coordination and collaboration in seeking market access in Europe and North America, increasing their voting shares in the International Monetary Fund, realizing domestic currency settlement to resist the hegemony of the US dollar, promoting the healthy development of the BRICS cooperation mechanism, and fully reflecting the constructive leading role of emerging economies in the BRICS cooperation mechanism and the G20 summit.

Lastly, China is the only major country in the world that explicitly supports Russia's major-power status and international influence. In particular, no matter what crises and difficulties Russia encounters, China has always clearly stressed that Russia is one of the power centers in the multipolar world. For a long time to come, Russia will rely on China's supportive attitude to demand that the US change its unilateral logic and its strategic thinking, actual policy, and specific moves to dwarf, vilify, and contain Russia. Therefore, on major international issues related to the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the World Health Organization and the maintenance of global strategic stability and the arms control regime, Russia will continue its close strategic communication and collaboration with China and strive to play the role of a responsible world power.

Russia has returned the favor. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Lavrov noted that the Chinese side had put forward an initiative to build a community of shared future for mankind and that some people were questioning the strategic intentions behind it. It does not matter, he argued, as the initiative is designed to foster synergy, unlike the dark philosophy behind the clamors for containing China and Russia, which focuses on confrontational factors and maliciously hypes up contradictions. He predicted that people armed with such a philosophy will lose more ground when the pandemic is over (Tass.ru 2020).

In a word, the strategic cooperative relationship between China and Russia is not a matter of expediency, but aimed at a friendship over generations and a lasting world peace and development (Guan 2016).

5 Facing the future: a need to balance the overall situation of China–Russia relations

While fully acknowledging the significant achievements in China–Russia relations, we cannot deny that there are still some issues to be urgently resolved and balances to be sought.

Firstly, the scale, structure, and mode of economic and trade cooperation between the two countries need to be improved. For example, although the two countries share a long common border, the infrastructure and its operation efficiency in those areas are seriously inadequate. The construction of cross-border railway and road bridges, even after more than 20 years of discussions and studies, were repeatedly delayed. Even after the completion of construction works, it is difficult to put in place ancillary facilities smoothly. The two countries' energy cooperation model and the implementation of long-term oil and gas supply contracts might be affected by the pandemic and encounter differences in price adjustments and supply scales in the future. In addition, as both countries manage to maintain the balance between domestic financial stability and economic stimulus in response to the pandemic, they may inevitably face the issue of trade settlement. Should their trade, including that in oil and gas, be settled with the Chinese or Russian currency? Concerns over the pandemic may lead to increased psychological defense on the part of Russia in terms of ecological security protection, agricultural, forestry, and fisheries cooperation with China and probably more stringent import testing standards. Quota controls on exports to China of agricultural products such as soybeans might be more complicated. Reflections over outbreaks related to major wholesale markets in Moscow may in some way result in tighter controls over cross-border movement of Chinese nationals.

Secondly, the scale and quality of cultural cooperation still lag behind those between either sides and other countries and regions. According to Russian experts, Russia accounts for 1–3% of the USD 100 billion per year global revenues from paid education resources (Kortunov 2021).

Educational cooperation does not match the level of strategic relationship between the two countries mainly because of differences between their educational systems, especially in terms of objectives and performance assessment, two-way language barriers, and rising real costs, including accommodation and daily life.

Cooperation mechanisms in science, technology, and innovation remain inadequate and inefficient. Government departments are still the main driving force in this field, while enterprises are not enthusiastic participants. As the cooperation is not market-oriented, a few research results have been transferred into products and services. As access to information about the projects, innovation policies, and institutional norms needed on the market as well as the required talents and available literature is limited, there is a need to improve information services supporting innovation cooperation. Cooperation in basic research also needs to be strengthened, since there are not many substantive collaborative projects now.

Thirdly, third-party factors often plague the relationship. Instead of taking side between China and the US, Russia seems to prefer “sitting back and watching the tiger fight.” It does not want China to make too many concessions to the US to the extent that Russia may lose a rare opportunity in its economic and trade relations with China. Gossips that Henry Kissinger persuaded Donald Trump to join hands with Russia against China and that Russia chose to support India instead of China over the latter two's border dispute have to some extent poisoned Russia's image in domestic Chinese public opinion.

Out of its own strategic interests, the West has never stopped using various insidious tactics to alienate China and Russia. American scholars like to exaggerate the threat of Sino-Russian alliance to the US and constantly call on their own government to adjust its containment policy towards Russia. For example, Professor Graham T. Allison, an advocate of the so-called Thucydides trap, wrote, “The Nixon-Kissinger gambit is now known as ‘playing the China Card.’ Today we should be asking: is Xin Jinping’s China ‘playing the Russia card?’” (Allison 2019, 7). Dimitri K. Simes, President and CEO of the Center for National Interests, stressed that “there is no path to responsible policymaking that does not begin with understanding and accounting for the unintended consequences of confronting two great powers simultaneously.” (Simes 2019, 15) Against this background, the rather rare joint statement on 25 April 2020 by leaders of Russia and the US on the so-called “spirit of the Elbe” to mark the 75th anniversary of the meeting between Soviet and US soldiers at the Elbe River naturally caused various speculations.³

Some Russians lost no time to hype up the prospect of a bipolar China–US confrontation and Russia’s balancing role in it. For example, according to Dmitri Trenin, Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, as pandemic response leads to greater visibility of the advantages of the Chinese and East Asian models, polarized confrontation between China and the US may exacerbate. Under such circumstances, Russia, which sees the balancing role critical to its own destiny, must reduce its dependence on China, let alone be a vassal of China. Russia must never accept being included in a camp dominated by China. On the contrary, Russia should strengthen its relations with Europe (Germany, France, and Italy), Japan, India, and other important economies and strike a balance from the west, east, and south so as to offset the impact of China’s rise and increased nationalism (Trenin 2020).

Fourthly, there are occasional unconstructive voices in both countries. For example, some forces in Russia, notably those once regarded as pro-China, have recently made a series of unconstructive remarks and moves in relation to pandemic response and intensified strategic game between China and the US. Among them, Alexander Lukin, a professor at Higher School of Economics, wrote the most eye-catching piece on the hardening of Chinese diplomacy (Lukin 2020). He and Andrey Dikarev of Moscow State Institute of International Relations published an article on Russia’s position on the South China Sea dispute, bluntly denouncing China’s position as another type of “double standard” and even placing it in the same category as the Monroe Doctrine. According to the authors, Russia does not support China’s position, has deep cooperation with other relevant disputants and intends to remain neutral, but in fact has taken a series of measures to support China secretly in exchange for greater Chinese support on the Crimea and Western sanctions on Russia (Dikarev and Lukin 2021, 5–15).

³ I took special note of this sentence in the statement: The “spirit of the Elbe” is an example of how our countries can put aside differences, build trust, and cooperate in pursuit of a greater cause. As we work today to confront the most important challenges of the twenty-first century. See White House (2020). I talked privately to a Russian colleague and asked whether the challenge here hinted at China. The answer I got was: in his life time, it is impossible for Russia to join hands with the US against China.

There are also sometimes extreme expressions in China, with fairly negative influences. For example, it is argued that Kissinger has for sure secretly implemented his “strategic triangle” scheme and encouraged a Trump–Putin deal to contain China. Russia is therefore unreliable. Moreover, when there were conflicts and contradictions between China and other countries, Russia always used the opportunity to get the most benefits in the name of mediation and helping China (Feng 2020). Some people believe that Russia is backing India’s hardline stance towards China by providing it with advanced weapons and equipment and that Russia is playing a two-faced game. There are also people hyping up the Russia topic from the opposite direction. In their view, since there is China–US confrontation, any Chinese speaking ill of Russia is an accomplice of the US and must be investigated into and held accountable for collaboration with the US.

Lastly, in light of the developments on the international arena and the attitude of some key actors in the pandemic, the Russian side may make some strategic or tactical adjustments, thus affecting the rhythm and effect of future strategic coordination with China. For example, Russia may more clearly and firmly regard Eurasian regional integration led by Russia as the center of strategic gravity in place of the economic globalization philosophy and policy orientation. The overall attitude will then be different from China’s openness in implementing the BRI. Professor Timofei Bordachev of the Higher School of Economics argues that the various mechanisms of globalization are powerless in the face of the pandemic, including the European Union, which acted rather indifferently to the Italian plea for assistance. In contrast, members of the EAEU, which is less globalized than the European Union and led by Russia, have demonstrated much stronger solidarity and a greater desire for mutual assistance (Bordachev 2020). In this connection, there might be changes to the design and arrangements for the future of international mechanisms such as the EAEU and the SCO. Russia may seize the opportunity to accelerate the integration of Central Asian countries such as Uzbekistan into the EAEU, even with observer status at the beginning. Fyodor Lukyanov, Research Director of Valdai International Discussion Club, pointed out that for China’s Eurasian neighbors, self-confidence (gained in being among the first to defeat the pandemic) is both an opportunity and a risk, for which Russia should get prepared (Lukyanov 2020).

Fortunately, the Chinese leadership, with a strategic vision and overall situation in mind, does not shy away from existing problems in bilateral relations and have been actively addressing them by setting eyes on the future. As President Xi pointed out, “There are still some specific problems in economic and trade cooperation between China and Russia. I would like to stress that these have arisen along with continuous advancement of cooperation and deepening of mutual integration. To effectively solve the problems, we need to have creative thinking and take multiple measures to continuously expand areas of cooperation, tap the potential of cooperation, increase mutual investment, provide market access, enhance trade and investment facilitation, and vigorously promote cooperation in agricultural trade, e-commerce and trade in services. These will grow the pie of mutual interests and increase the quality and

quantity of China–Russia economic and trade cooperation to a higher level” (People’s Daily 2019, 2).

6 Conclusion

The China–Russia relationship, which is under the severe test of the COVID-19 pandemic and has gone through 70 years of ups and downs from alliance to confrontation and then on track of comprehensive strategic coordination, is more and more mature. Involving neither alignment nor confrontation, it remains calm and fully interactive no matter how the world changes. China should have full confidence in this.

No matter how China–US relations will evolve after the pandemic, the intrinsic and unique value of the China–Russia relationship will not change. Countries cannot choose their neighbors, but their lasting development, prosperity, and stability depend on each other. Accordingly, the third-party factors only on occasions positively or negatively affect the depth and breadth of China–Russia strategic coordination, but are unlikely to change the general direction in which both strive to avoid antagonizing each other. It is no empty words to be good neighbors, good friends, and good partners, and to strive for friendship from generation to generation and never be enemies.

No matter how poor the China–US relationship gets or how good the China–Russia relationship gets, we must not expect Russia to stand unconditionally on China’s side or fight our wars. These willful thoughts should not have appeared from the very beginning.

In the fields of education, science, and technology, China and Russia should give full play to their respective comparative advantages and carry out complementary cooperation. The overall goal should be to contribute to continue deepening of the strategic partnership of coordination and further growth of political mutual trust. With reciprocal support and guidance of the two governments, relevant departments should actively consult each other on the existing cooperation platforms and avoid inequitable distribution of work load. Excessive reliance on the government should be reduced and more emphasis be placed on market-oriented cooperation, so that enterprises and the market will truly become champions of China–Russia scientific and technological cooperation at an early date.

In a world of great changes, China’s 14th 5 year plan and the vision for 2035 depict a new landscape and new models for innovation-driven development. With a true sense of responsibility as a major country, China and Russia also need to innovate and make breakthroughs in reforming the global governance system and striving for common prosperity and development of the international community.

Funding The authors have not disclosed any funding.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author sits on the editorial board of China International Strategy Review and he declares that there is no competing interest regarding the publication of this article.

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