

The Geopolitics of China-Russia Relations, The Dragon and the Bear

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Global Research, November 10, 2021

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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Most serious students of Sino-Russian relations are well aware that the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation, a twenty-year strategic treaty that was signed by the leaders of the two countries in July 2001, was set to expire in February of 2022. However, the end of this formal agreement between China and Russia did not appear to be on the radar of most (supposed) regional experts – nor, seemingly, of Western mainstream media organizations – until it was announced on June 28th during a video call between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping that the treaty would be extended for another 5 years.

There is value in examining the growing partnership between China and Russia with a view towards identifying what the latter half of 2021 will bring for these two great powers. Whereas 2020 will invariably be written about in the history books as the darkest year of the devastating Covid-19 pandemic, the arrival of 2021, which held more promise than perhaps any other year since the end of the Second World War, will likely be seen as a huge disappointment, with the pandemic continuing to ravage the world’s citizens and economies. As we now (finally?) begin to emerge from lockdowns and learn to live again, and as the United States reasserts itself internationally, the Dragon and the Bear will likely be looking for opportunities to hunt together, as evidenced (at least in part) by the formal renewal of their strategic partnership.

To be clear, emerging from the societal and economic ruin wreaked upon a large swath of the globe by the coronavirus pandemic will prove an immense challenge for even the most resilient of the world’s societies and economies.

China and its people suffered immensely during the early days of the pandemic, but by the latter half of 2021, it has become evident that while China is still facing structural challenges and a number of trade disputes, the country will likely be among the first in the world to fully recover from the ill effects of the pandemic.

In contrast, the long-term effects on Russia's economy, and the prospects of an eventual recovery, are far less clear at this point, though most will agree that Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, will not allow his country to suffer unnecessarily, and will do whatever is needed to rescue his country's economy. What do these divergent paths to recovery mean for the relationship between these two countries as they seek to renew a strategic treaty between them signed twenty years ago, when nobody could have foreseen the events of the past twenty months?

To start, it had seemed unlikely that a treaty extension would be signed between China and Russia – primarily because one is not needed. While more than merely a symbolic entente, the treaty itself is largely inconsequential to the continuance or development of economic cooperation between the two countries, particularly within the context of China's insatiable demand for energy and raw materials and plans for economic modernization. Articles of the treaty centering on defense and military cooperation could have been maintained pragmatically so long as both sides agree that they remain beneficial, and Russia's stance in relation to Taiwan (i.e. that it remains a part of China) is unlikely to change. In addition, the economic and military co-dependencies that existed when the treaty was signed have shifted so dramatically in the past twenty years that the renewal of the treaty was unlikely to be viewed as necessary other than to serve some symbolic need in the face of growing Western aggression. As noted by Jonathan E. Hillman, Senior Fellow, Economics Program, and Director, Reconnecting Asia Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), in discussing four dimensions of China-Russia connectivity (1):

“Collectively, these factors reveal a partnership of unequals that will become even more lopsided in the future. China already towers over Russia in nearly every dimension, and if it can navigate its own domestic challenges, it will loom even larger in a decade. During that period, Beijing will need Moscow's help, or at least its acquiescence, to continue expanding westward. No country is positioned better than Russia to spoil China's overland ambitions. But isolated from the West, Russia has few alternatives to deepening economic ties with China.”

Hillman accurately notes that while the relationship between China and Russia will continue to skew in China's favour, the two strategic partners will not stop needing each other to accomplish their respective goals, both domestically and on the world stage. And while this reality is particularly evident from an economic standpoint, it is also clear that China and Russia have much to gain from their ongoing alliance in countering the influence of Western powers such as the United States, the EU and NATO. Going it alone against such formidable foes (however weakened the latter may have become in recent years) is far less appealing than having a reliable partner in one's corner.

How much China is willing to spend to support Russia with the latter's post-pandemic recovery – both in terms of actual dollars and cents (or, more accurately, yuan), as well as in political capital – will be a telling indicator of how much the two countries will be willing (and able) to continue marching arm-in-arm in the same direction as the world emerges from the pandemic. However, while Russia will invariably have the most to gain from the “partnership of unequals”, China, though a master in its own right at wielding “sharp” power abroad, is still engaged in a trade dispute with a U.S. President who is proving (at least in some respects) to be as skeptical and critical of China as his predecessor, and can potentially learn a trick or two from Russia about how to get what it wants without needing to break the bank. After all, if there's one thing that Russia has been able to prove over the past few

years, it's that there is more to leveraging influence than simply who has the most money or the biggest aircraft carriers.

There is little doubt that, in 2022 and beyond, the strategic partnership between China and Russia will continue to evolve beyond the stipulations set forth in the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. What remains to be seen is how each partner will seek to maximize its respective returns on investment in the relationship – and ultimately, which partner will be most successful in leveraging those gains to accomplish its goals. As most of the world is desperately waiting for the pandemic to take its final breaths, the Dragon and the Bear have perhaps the most to look forward to in the year ahead.

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Notes

1. Hillman, Jonathan E. "China and Russia: Economic Unequals". Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), July 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

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