

# Russia -China Relations: “Exchange of Criticisms” Regarding COVID-19 Crisis

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Global Research, April 17, 2020

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

Theme: [Intelligence, Science and Medicine](#)

*The recent so-called “exchange of criticisms” between Russia and China over their respective border policies in response to World War C is more of a rare wrinkle in their relations caused by media reports than a growing rift that could endanger their comprehensive strategic partnership, though it should still be monitored in the worst-case scenario that it turns out to be a turning point in their relations in hindsight.*

## “Trouble In Paradise?”

The Mainstream and especially [Alternative Media](#) have become accustomed to reporting about the increasing closeness between Russia and China ever since the onset of the [New Cold War](#) in 2014, each for their own reasons (the former mostly to ominously fearmonger and the latter to wishfully cheerlead) which rarely portray this comprehensive strategic partnership for the pragmatic marriage of convenience that it really is, which is why it was so surprising to them that these two Great Powers recently exchanged criticisms of one another over their respective border policies during [World War C](#). Global Times, a popular Chinese media outlet run by the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) People’s Daily, published an editorial on 13 April titled “[Russian alarm on imported infection risk: Global Times editorial](#)” which painted a bleak picture about Russia’s COVID-19 containment efforts. The author of the present analysis is sharing the piece in full below and underlining specific passages in order to draw the reader’s attention to them, followed by an analysis of the article itself before discussing Russia’s official reaction to it that was soon thereafter reported upon by TASS and RT:

## China’s “Message”

“The number of imported cases from Russia has surged. At least 409 imported cases from Russia have been confirmed as of press time, China’s largest source of imported cases. The China-Russia border city of Suifenhe has been hit hard by returnees from Russia by land. Since the start of April, every flight from Russia to China has seen a high rate of infection, suggesting the worsening situation in Russia.

Russia is the latest example of a failure to control imported cases and can serve as a warning to others. When the virus wreaked havoc in Europe, Russia appeared to have successfully blocked the epidemic outside its border. It was only on March 2 that the country reported its first case, much later than Western Europe and the US. Russia has also imposed strict restrictions on the entry of Chinese travelers. But it eventually failed to curb the epidemic.

Russian experts said hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens returned from Italy, France, Spain and other Western European countries in late March. Most

of them ended up in Moscow or transited through the capital, making the city the worst-hit area within Russia. Europe is one of the global hubs. It would be much tougher for Russia to guard against cases from there than from China.

The virus knows no borders or races. The Chinese people have watched Russia become a severely affected country from one that did a great job. This should sound the alarm: China must strictly prevent the inflow of cases and avoid a second outbreak. For China, understanding this is perhaps more important than coping with the large number of imported cases from Russia. The anti-pandemic fight is a protracted one, and we cannot lose any battle.

Northeast China's Heilongjiang Province and others are facing a major test from the sudden influx of infected people from Russia. But it is believed that they are able to handle it. And the central government is also mobilizing and ready to provide support. Another problem is how to avoid panic of Chinese people returning home. That will increase the risk of those compatriots and also increase the difficulty of China's response.

Some say there are 1.5 million Chinese people in Russia. But according to Da Zhigang, a Chinese expert based in Heilongjiang, the number should be around 100,000. Some of them are worried that Russia's prevention and control system is weak and the medical system may break down. They know that China has done a good job in domestic prevention and medical care is guaranteed. Thus, the willingness to return to China is strong among them.

For Chinese people in Russia, we encourage them to stay where they are to avoid being infected. The most effective way to prevent infection is to implement strict self-quarantine. The risk of long-distance travel is very high. The flight from Moscow to Shanghai on Friday carried 204 people and 60 people have been diagnosed with COVID-19 so far. This was the flight with the most confirmed cases since the global outbreak. We cannot confirm how many of them were infected during their trip, but the ratio is not low.

Among those who returned to China from Russia through the Suifenhe land port, the infection rate was also very high. This has sounded the alarm for the Chinese people in Russia. The actual infection rate in Russia is likely to be high, and every flight to China imposes a great risk to healthy passengers. If it were not the last resort, Chinese people in Russia should not take the risk.

China and Russia are comprehensive strategic partners of coordination for a new era. They should have enough political will and resources to coordinate supporting Russia's anti-epidemic fight and helping the Chinese people in Russia. China and Russia should help and understand each other, and jointly defeating a vicious enemy such as the COVID-19 as they build a high-level strategic relationship."

### **Explaining The Global Times' Op-Ed**

The first thing to be said is that it's not exactly accurate to interpret this piece as being an official "message" from China despite Global Times being managed by a CCP-run outlet, the same as can be said about RT in respect to being publicly financed as well. Both media platforms clearly have an editorial stance that favors that respective governments, but they are not official reflections of state policy even though it can sometimes be speculated that their editorial decisions to publish certain content might hint at a certain unspoken stance that can't be publicly expressed for "politically correct" reasons. For example, if one applies the standard that the Global Times' piece reflects China's official policy, then they should hold the same view that RT's rare China-bashing is also a reflection of Russia's official

policy, which clearly isn't the case.

After all, RT published two of its own op-eds in late March which included extremely provocative passages about China. The narrative propagated in the article titled "[From villain to hero? After its badly botched response to the Covid-19 outbreak, China now seeks to be the world's savior](#)" is self-explanatory and includes the quip that "A cynic might suggest that there is something intrinsically wrong with China arguably being entirely responsible for spreading a disease then selling its cure back to those nations who have not managed to avoid its killer path" while the piece titled "[I am an American constitutional lawyer - and I see our government using Covid-19 to take away our fundamental rights](#)" which came out a few days later is less direct but nevertheless strongly implies that China is abusing its citizens when the outlet's contributor wrote that "The very premise of popular films like V for Vendetta reveal this: a group uses a virus to seize power and create a totalitarian society. Anyone could witness this from far-off lands, watching the news about China locking people up in their own homes and then removing them screaming from those homes whenever the state wanted." Furthermore, [RT hosted notorious China-basher Gordon Chang on a show](#) discussing the US' response to this global pandemic earlier that month, which can be interpreted as an attempt by their producers to "gently" introduce him to their audience, build his credibility, then possibly interview him about China in the event that Russia's relations with the People's Republic sour one day and the decision is made to "unleash" him as the ultimate "perception manager" on this topic.

Still, it would be amiss to assume that RT is acting at the direct order of shadowy state figures in this respect, the same as it would be equally amiss to assume the same about the Global Times vis-a-vis the CCP regarding its recent editorial about the worsening COVID-19 situation in Russia that's comparatively milder in its criticisms of Moscow's comprehensive strategic partner than RT's two cited ones were of China. Having gotten that "disclaimer" out of the way, it should be objectively acknowledged that the Global Times article is somewhat critical of Russia, but purely in an objective sense and not the fearmongering and/or fake news-driven subjective one that characterizes most Mainstream Media reporting on the country. President Putin himself recently acknowledged that [the situation is worsening](#) in his country, so there's no longer any "taboo" about discussing this, let alone by one of the leading international media outlets of Russia's trusted comprehensive strategic partner.

All that the Global Times did was draw attention to the objectively existing and easily verifiable fact officially shared by the Chinese authorities that the largest number of imported cases into their country are attributable to their compatriots who are returning home from Russia. Extrapolating on this, the editorial included passages remarking on the observable failure of the Russian authorities to fully contain this outbreak and the possibility of its medial system breaking down, the latter of which has since been vindicated by the Moscow health department's warning that the city [might soon experience a shortage of hospital beds](#) in the coming weeks. No attribution of blame was even remotely implied in the piece, simply a listing of facts and interpretations thereof that are relevant for Chinese citizens and the outlet's international readership alike.

### **Russia's Official Reaction To The Global Times**

Even so, Russia reacted real negatively to the Global Times' editorial. TASS published a short report on 15 April headlined "[Kremlin says countries should drop accusations and join](#)

[efforts to fight COVID-19](#)” which cited presidential spokesman Peskov’s response to a question about that particular piece, with the relevant portions of that article being republished below for the reader’s convenience:

“The Kremlin disapproves of ‘playing table tennis’ through mutual accusations and wants to see countries join their efforts to tackle the coronavirus crisis, Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in a comment on China’s Global Times daily’s article claiming that China is facing the threat of a second wave of infection as people are returning from Russia.

“We hear that various countries exchange such criticism about coronavirus, which is reminiscent of a table tennis game. We think that there’s little use in it. On the contrary, Moscow is a supporter of uniting globally to counter the coronavirus,” Peskov noted. The spokesman added that Moscow does not agree with such accusations. “In any case, we cannot agree with this criticism, if there was criticism voiced in that newspaper,” he said, clarifying that he is not aware of the article in question.”

What’s interesting is that he implied that the Global Times’ editorial stance is the same as its government’s despite the outlet not being an official representative of the state like its Ministry of Foreign Affairs is. In addition, describing their reporting and the analysis the facts thereof as “reminiscent of a table tennis game” after talking about how “various countries exchange such criticism about coronavirus” implies that Russia participated in this “game” as well.

It hasn’t, at least to the best knowledge of the present article’s author, unless one speculates that Peskov was referring to RT’s rare instance of China-bashing that was described earlier. That of course can’t be known for sure, but moving along, it should also be pointed out how he clarified that he actually wasn’t even aware of the article in question anyhow and was thus only responding to the claims made in the unnamed journalist’s question about that piece.

### **Is RT Stirring The Pot?**

This is extremely important because it suggests that the Russian media’s reporting about this exchange isn’t as accurate as it should be. This is even more so the case when reading how RT — which to remind the reader once again, isn’t “state-run” despite being publicly financed and therefore isn’t an official representative of the Russian government the same as the Global Times isn’t China’s official representative either — dramatically headlined their article “[Kremlin rejects criticism as China calls Russia its ‘largest source of imported coronavirus cases’](#)”.

There’s a lot wrong with how they covered this, presuming of course that they intended to abide by the journalistic standards of simply reporting the facts like they regularly present themselves as doing since they should have otherwise indicated that they were analyzing/interpreting them if that’s what they indeed meant to do (recognizing that journalism and analysis, despite being closely related, are actually two separate information products that readers can tell the difference between upon becoming “media literate”). To begin with, it’s mistaken at best and misleading at worst to equate the Global Times’ editorial with the official position of the Chinese government, and secondly, RT didn’t mention in their article that Peskov clarified that he wasn’t even aware of the editorial in question before being asked about it.

For the reader's convenience, here's the entirety of their report on his remarks:

"The Kremlin has rejected criticism of Russia's handling of the coronavirus outbreak after China said its largest source of imported cases had come from transmissions in the far northeast, bordering Russia. "We hear that there is now an exchange of criticism over coronavirus between different countries, which is played like ping pong. We consider this to be a thankless exercise," spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters on Wednesday.

Beijing's Global Times newspaper said in an editorial on April 13: "The Chinese people have watched Russia become a severely affected country from one that did a great job. This should sound the alarm: China must strictly prevent the inflow of cases and avoid a second outbreak." The newspaper is run by the Chinese Communist Party's People's Daily.

China reported 46 new confirmed cases on Tuesday compared with 89 cases a day earlier, according to the National Health Commission. Of the new cases, 36 involved travelers arriving in the country from overseas, compared with 86 a day earlier.

"China is on guard against imported cases," the state-owned Global Times wrote in its editorial on Tuesday, saying that the US and Europe are "not ready to restart [their] economy." It warned that "once the epidemic is repeated in Europe and the US, or spreads around the epicenters worldwide, it will disastrously continue."

Only RT itself can account for why the editorial decision was made to omit that crucial detail, but leaving it out left the reader with the false impression that Peskov planned to make a statement about the Global Times' piece and wasn't just generically responding to a journalist's question about something that he wasn't even aware of before being asked. This raises very uncomfortable questions about whether RT is either simply incompetent in how it reports on Russian-Chinese relations (which are strategically sensitive) or if something more insidious might be brewing per its earlier publishing of two China-bashing pieces and its efforts to "gently" introduce notorious China-basher Gordon Chang to its largely China-friendly audience.

### **Earlier Wrinkles In Russian-Chinese Relations**

Whatever the case may be, there's no ignoring the fact that some wrinkles were earlier observed in Russian-Chinese relations as a result of World War C. Russia's leading business daily [Kommersant](#) reported that "Chinese diplomats were at a loss after Russia barred entry to Chinese citizens as a coronavirus prevention measure" in mid-February, a move that the author analyzed in his piece titled "[Russia Bans Most Chinese From Entry: 'Pure Racism' Or 'Preventive Reaction'?](#)" The Global Times published an article around the same time titled "[Russian ban on Chinese visitors regrettable but understandable: experts](#)", which cites Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Geng Shuang as saying that "Russia informed China through diplomatic channels in advance before issuing the ban".

That could have been the end of their differing views over border security at the start of World War C had it not been for the subsequent reports that the Russian authorities were discriminating against Chinese citizens in Moscow. Whatever may or may not have happened was apparently serious enough to warrant the Chinese Embassy in Russia [officially complaining about this](#) through a letter that they published in the Novaya Gazeta

newspaper, after which the Global Times published a detailed report sourced from some of the alleged victims titled "[Dozens of Chinese citizens forcibly quarantined and deported in Russia amid coronavirus](#)".

It's unclear how that scandalous situation was resolved, if ever, but the next wrinkle in Russian-Chinese relations came earlier this month after the latter closed down a border crossing along its neighbor's Far Eastern frontier over fears of imported cases arriving from Russia. The Global Times once again took the lead in reporting on this in their relevant article on 9 April titled "[China, Russia appear to be in discord over whether to re-open land port amid pandemic](#)". Instead of republishing it in full below like the one that forms the focus of this present analysis, here are some highlights that convey its main points, with key passages underlined like before:

"As epidemic wanes in China, North East China's Heilongjiang Province recently came under the spotlight as one of its border cities with Russia, Suifenhe, recorded 118 COVID-19 cases in just 5 days, all of whom were Chinese nationals returning home from Russia. The growing number not only shocked China but also overwhelmed the medical capacity of the small border city, which has a population of mere 70,000.

Fearing that the pouring infections might collapse its medical system and spark widespread outbreak, China temporarily suspended the Suifenhe land port on April 7 to give itself more time to prepare for the inbound patients. The only problem is that Russia, which is under increasing pressure to contain the virus as it just witnessed a record-high single day surge of confirmed cases, may not be able to accommodate Chinese nationals aggregating at the border for long.

Lu Yuguang, a journalist of Phoenix TV in Russia, said Wednesday on Twitter-like Weibo that Russia's Ussuriysk customs required the Chinese side to re-open its border port to receive citizens returning to China through the land port as the direct flight was limited to once a week. Customs said they have opened the Pogranichny port and moved stranded Chinese travelers to the port, waiting for Suifenhe to open up, according to Lu's post. Lu's post has not been verified by the embassy and consulates as of press time.

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Lu's post has sparked massive debates on the Chinese internet with some netizens expressing disappointment over Russia's arrangement, claiming it was irrational to let Chinese nationals to wait at the border for Suifenhe to open, as doing so might facilitate cross-infection. Global Times also learned that the hotels available for isolation in Suifenhe, which locked down on Wednesday, are fully occupied, including hotels for hundreds of medical workers. A makeshift hospital with over 600 beds is expected to be completed on April 11, which might ease the burden. "Our public health capacity is saturated, and we hope that the Russian side will understand and help take care of our compatriots for the time being," a Suifenhe resident told the Global Times on Thursday.

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The Chinese government attaches great importance to the health and safety of Chinese citizens in Russia, maintaining close communication with the Russian side, and urges the Russian government to provide convenience and guarantee for Chinese citizens in terms of residence and medical treatment.

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Wu Dahui, a professor of international relations at Tsinghua University, told the Global Times that it is not the case that China doesn't want to accept its citizens stranded on the border. China is moving to make preparations to receive them, such as hospitals and medical teams.

Wu said the rumors over the Ussuriysk customs' move to some extent shows the severe condition in Russia's far east region in terms of pandemic prevention and control, as they do not have the ability to temporarily take in stranded Chinese. Local Russian regulators also face pressure from the central government, which might lead to the stranding of Chinese at the border.

Yang Jin, an associate research fellow at the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, told the Global Times on Thursday that "it is normal for Russia to express its concern as the confirmed cases in the country is rising, but we also hope Russia could understand China's pressure."

## Cooperation Amid Controversy

While the above-mentioned wrinkles are understandably cause for concern, it should be noted that Russia and China still retained — and even strengthened — their cooperation in other dimensions during this time. Famous Chinese billionaire Jack Ma [gifted Russia over 1 million masks and 200,000 testing kits](#) in late March, which earned him heartfelt thanks from Russian Defense Minister Shoigu. China then [pledged to deliver over 80 million masks](#) to Russia in April or early May and later [dispatched medical experts to Moscow](#) to brief their counterparts on their country's successful COVID containment measures. In addition Chinese Foreign Ministry Zhao Lijian [recently thanked](#) Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov for his opposition to the West's calls for reparations from China over the fact that the virus originated within its borders.

The spokesman also answered some specific questions about Russia during a different press conference earlier this week, with the [relevant exchanges](#) being republished below and points of interest underlined by the author:

“RIA Novosti: I have two questions. First of all, yesterday Heilongjiang provincial authorities promised up to 5000 yuan for reports about illegal crossing of China-Russia border. I wonder if there were already any cases or incidents of illegal border crossing, or it's just precautions? And secondly, I wonder if the Foreign Ministry has any statistics or information on how many Chinese citizens are in Russia at the moment?”

Zhao Lijian: Regarding the first question, according to the agreement on the boundary management system between China and Russia, the competent authorities and local governments of the two sides should jointly take necessary measures to prevent and stop illegal border-crossing and other illegal activities in the border area. This is a responsibility that the two sides must fulfill in order to uphold order in the border area. As to the second question, based on the information we have, there are about 100,000 Chinese citizens in Russia but the exact figure is hard to come by for the time being.”

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Beijing Daily: We've noticed the increasingly severe epidemic situation in Russia. With regard to the Chinese medical group to Russia you mentioned the other day, could you talk about their work? Will China provide more assistance to Russia?

Zhao Lijian: The medical team sent by the Chinese government arrived on April 11. The experts visited designated hospitals for COVID-19 patients and had exchange with their Russian counterparts on such topics as epidemic prevention, containment, diagnosis and treatment. There will be more in-depth exchange, experience-sharing, guidance and training. The group also shared through video-link know-how in prevention and control with Chinese nationals including students and employees of Chinese enterprises in Russia and distributed medical supplies. At our most trying times fighting COVID-19, Russia offered us strong support and assistance. At present, with the fast spread of the virus, Russia is at a crucial stage. As its comprehensive strategic partner of coordination for a new era, China relates deeply to what Russia is going through and will not stand by and watch. We will further enhance cooperation with the Russian side to jointly tackle this challenges posed by the pandemic.”

Two main points stand out from his answers. The first is that he emphasized that it is the joint responsibility of the competent authorities “to prevent and stop illegal border-crossing and other illegal activities in the border area”. This strongly implies that the Russian side isn’t doing what it’s supposed to, thus feeding into the speculation that it’s passively facilitating illegal border crossings by Chinese citizens trying to get back home because the local and/or regional authorities there either don’t want them in the country any longer (i.e. the same attitude that the Moscow authorities reportedly expressed towards Chinese citizens in the capital) and/or simply aren’t able to safely accommodate them for whatever reason (e.g. state systems are overwhelmed due to World War C).

The other point, however, is much more positive and it’s that China isn’t letting these wrinkles get in the way of its comprehensive strategic partnership with Russia. Just like Russia helped China during its most trying time, so too is China reciprocating that act of friendship by helping Russia during its own present travails. Quite clearly then, the exchange of criticisms between Russia and China over their strategic partner’s response to World War C is more of a rare wrinkle in their relations than a growing rift, though there’s also no denying that the combination of Russia’s [recently renewed strategic relations](#) with [newly pro-American India](#) and the even more recent progress that it’s made towards clinching a “[New Detente](#)” with America [could complicate](#) this relationship [in the future](#).

## **Concluding Thoughts**

All told, it convincingly appears to be the case that the recent so-called “exchange of criticisms” between Russia and China stemming from the Global Times’ editorial is more an invention of the media (whether innocently created through RT’s journalistic incompetence or deliberately manufactured for purely speculative ends) than anything to be seriously concerned about, though several disagreements nevertheless objectively exist between these two Great Powers over their border security policies during World War C. Those issues, however, are mostly being kept under wraps and responsibly addressed by the relevant authorities at this moment owing to the sensitive nature of their bilateral strategic relations during these uncertain times so as to prevent any third state parties (such as the US and India) from exploiting their differing stances for divide-and-conquer infowar ends. Having said that, the recent wrinkles in their relations shouldn’t by any means be ignored by responsible observers since they might end up being seen as a turning point in the worst-case scenario that a growing rift eventually emerges from their increasing divergences on key issues.

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*This article was originally published on OneWorld.*

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