

Sino-Russian Consolidation at a Time of Geopolitical Rivalry

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There has been a notable consolidation of the Sino-Russian partnership during the past two years. Although this has coincided with the U.S.-China trade war and a period of increased tensions between the United States and Russia, the Sino-Russian partnership began deepening well before the changes in U.S. policy toward each country, as a discussion of Sino-Russian cooperation in agriculture, technology, military affairs, and the Arctic attests. Nonetheless, there are limits to cooperation in all of these areas and Chinese analysts are now debating the desirability and feasibility of such a partnership. Strong personal ties between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin enable them to steward the relationship, which is further strengthened by their parallel approaches to authoritarian governance. However, potential shifts in U.S. policy and especially developments in Central Asia and the Arctic may challenge the Sino-Russian partnership in the future.

Since the 1970s analysts have used the strategic triangle to illustrate patterns in the relations among Washington, Moscow, and Beijing. According to triangular logic, a consolidation of Sino-Russian relations would be a natural response to the current tensions in U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations. Indeed, signs of such a consolidation abound. On June 5, 2019 China and Russia upgraded their relationship to a “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era,” featuring greater mutual support.¹ The Power of Siberia gas pipeline opened in December 2019 and by 2024 it will pump 38 bcm annually to China. The first railway bridge spanning from Tongjiang in Heilongjiang province to Nizhneleninsk in Russia’s Jewish Autonomous Oblast opened in March 2019. The long-awaited automobile bridge connecting Heihe in northeastern China to Blagoveschensk in the Russian Far East was completed in November 2019 and will open to passenger traffic later this spring. Sino-Russian trade hit \$100 billion in 2018 and Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin committed to doubling this figure by 2024.²

The two leaders have established a strong personal bond and their own partnership has been an important factor in driving forward a number of projects, especially in the politically connected energy sectors in each country.³ Although military sales have not been as robust as they were in the 1990s, military cooperation between Russia and China has accelerated in recent years, including regular participation in land and naval exercises. During the past year we saw two notable instances—joint air patrols and cooperation in missile defense. Two Russian Tu-95 long-range bombers accompanied Chinese Xian H6-K bombers in a joint patrol over international waters between Japan and the Korean peninsula, prompting both countries to intercept.⁴ In October 2019, Putin revealed that Russia was helping China develop a missile-launch detection system.⁵

It is true that certain tensions in Sino-American and U.S.-Russian relations have impacted Sino-Russian relations since 2018. The U.S.-China trade war, U.S. efforts to restrict use of Huawei's 5G technology, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Agreement (INF), and its sanctions on Russia and views of great power competition in the Arctic all have served to promote closer Sino-Russian relations. As we will see below, however, Sino-Russian cooperation in agriculture, technology, missile defense, and the Arctic all preceded the Trump administration's policies on these issues and reflect a gradual rapprochement between Russia and China during the past decade rather than a reaction to the more recent shifts in U.S. relations with China and Russia.

Despite evidence of deepening cooperation, however, there are limits to cooperation in all of these issue areas. Chinese analysts of the Sino-Russian partnership are today debating how much cooperation with Russia is feasible and also how much is desirable. Looking ahead, the strong ties between Xi and Putin, both of whom have taken steps to remain in power for the foreseeable future, are likely to maintain stability in the partnership. Moreover, the two countries have parallel interests in a number of areas of authoritarian governance, including Internet sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of authoritarian states. Nonetheless, changes in their external environments, including their relations with the United States as well as developments in Central Asia and the Arctic, will test the consolidation of the Sino-Russian partnership. Moreover, on January 30, 2020, the coronavirus abruptly halted cross-border interactions, which have always been a weak point in the relationship. With the diagnosis of two Chinese citizens who traveled to eastern Russia with the disease, the land border was closed, and most air and rail links were curtailed.⁶

Soybeans and Agriculture

In response to \$2.4 billion in U.S. tariffs on Chinese steel and aluminum, China imposed tariffs on a similar amount of imports of U.S. agricultural and industrial products. Before China imposed 25 percent retaliatory tariffs on U.S. soybeans, one-third of U.S. soybeans went to China. Chinese soybean imports, which peaked in 2017–18 at 94.2 million metric tons, fell by more than 11 million metric tons in 2018–19, to 82 million metric tons.⁷ China, which imports more than 75 percent of its soybeans,⁸ has had to replace the United States as its primary supplier. With no exports of U.S. soybeans to China in November 2018, the peak of the growing season, China scrambled to find new suppliers as well as to produce more at home.

As of 2016, 90 percent of China's soybean imports came from only three countries, the United States, Brazil, and Argentina. This situation is regarded by the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture as a concentration risk.⁹ Although swine flu reduced China's pig herd by 40 percent,¹⁰ decreasing the demand for soybeans for pig feed, the Chinese government has nonetheless sought to diversify its suppliers. A February 2019 report by the Ministry of Agriculture urged Chinese companies to "go out" along the Belt and Road to take advantage of the growing connectivity and to develop new suppliers, such as Russia and Kazakhstan, which have the added advantage of producing non-GMO soy.¹¹

This has proven to be a boon for Sino-Russian agricultural relations as well as for the overall trade relationship, which has suffered from a lack of dynamism outside of the energy sector. Indeed, the June 2019 Joint Statement on Developing a Comprehensive Partnership of Strategic Coordination for a New Era highlights expanding Russian soybean exports. Soybean exports to China have increased dramatically during the past year—in 2018, 90 percent of the Russian harvest of 800,000 metric tons went to China.¹² In an effort to boost Russian exports, in July 2019 the PRC General Administration of Customs allowed exports of soybeans from all over Russia (previously only the five regions in the Russian Far East had the right to export soybeans).¹³ Although there is talk of increasing Russian soybean exports to China to 3.7 million metric tons by 2024, such a dramatic increase in supplies from Russia would still not take up the U.S. slack, as Russian exports of soybeans currently amount to only 1 percent of Chinese demand.¹⁴

Some Russian officials talk of boosting production from 1 million metric tons to 10 or even 20 million metric tons to meet Chinese demand, and of leasing 1 million hectares of land in the Russian Far East to Chinese companies to this end. However, Ivan Zuenko, a Vladivostok-based analyst of Russian regional affairs, sees this as a pipe dream. According to Zuenko, soybeans are already grown on 70 percent of the arable land in the Russian Far East; other land may not be suitable for soybean cultivation, and the leasing of land may be too costly.¹⁵ In a speech to the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2019, Putin admitted that Russia lacked the investment in agriculture and arable land to meet China's soybean demand.¹⁶ Moreover, Russians oppose the use of Chinese farm labor, even though it is preferred by Chinese enterprises,¹⁷ and Russian soy processing firms have complained to Putin that China's interest in purchasing unprocessed beans is undermining their livelihood.¹⁸

Huawei and “Splinternet”

As in the case of soybeans, Sino-Russian relations have deepened in response to U.S. policy, in this case the U.S. prohibition of the use of China's Huawei telecommunications technologies, which are seen by the Trump administration as potentially harmful to U.S. national security. Facing pressures from the United States since the December 2018 arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou on charges of violating U.S. sanctions on Iran, China has turned to Russia as a market and partner for research and development. Cooperation between Russia and China in the tech sector actually accelerated beginning in 2015, however, involving an agreement on cooperation in the digital economy (2015), an annual Sino-Russian high-tech forum (2016), an agreement to develop a medical robotics center in China (2016), the creation of a Sino-Russian innovation park in Xi'an (2016), an annual Sino-Russian innovation dialogue (2017), and the creation of the Skolkovo high-tech center in Moscow, with joint Russian and Chinese investment (2018).¹⁹

Furthermore, there have been a number of important initiatives since 2018. During Xi Jinping's visit to Russia for the June 2019 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Huawei signed an agreement with Russia's MTS to build a 5-G network in Russia, beginning with a test zone in Moscow. The company also partners with other Russian companies, including Megafon, Beeline, and Tele2, a part of Rostelekom. Huawei is investing \$7.8 billion to train 10,000 specialists in Russia and is collaborating with a number of Russian academic institutions on research and development.²⁰

With R&D centers in Moscow and St. Petersburg, and three others in Kazan, Novosibirsk, and Nizhny Novgorod, the country now hosts Huawei's third largest R&D operations outside of Europe and North America.²¹ In Moscow, the Beeline carrier is working with Huawei and the Skolkovo Institute of Science and Technology to integrate 5G in a variety of technological applications, including surgery.²² Huawei is seeking to purchase some Russian technology, such as the patents for the Vokord image recognition system.²³ It has also agreed to partner with Russia's National Technology Initiative and to work with leading Russian research centers to develop AI technologies.²⁴

Russia has many of the services that Huawei needs for its business and Huawei is a part of the Skolkovo Institute's incubator for the production of 5G technologies.²⁵ Huawei is reportedly testing a Rostelekom operating system, Aurora, as a possible substitute for Android operating systems, which will become more difficult to service with the addition of Huawei to the U.S. Entity List in May 2019, prohibiting contacts with U.S. companies. Aurora, which was initially created for corporate clients, includes additional features that enable the remote monitoring of phone activities.²⁶

Huawei's integration of Aurora has the potential of institutionalizing the emerging "splinternet"²⁷ between Chinese/Russian technologies and Western technologies and of deepening the divide between proponents of "sovereign" controllable access to digital content and an open Web. Although Russian policymakers do not share U.S. national security concerns about Huawei, the Russian Ministry of Defense reportedly has been wary of adopting the 5G frequency for fear of conflicts with military use of the frequency, an issue also raised by the U.S. Defense Innovation Board.²⁸ Moreover, while Huawei's expansion comes at a time of contraction of opportunities in Russia for U.S. firms, the scale of Huawei's demand for skilled staff in Russia is likely to result in competition with local firms for personnel,²⁹ and possibly will contribute to a brain drain if such staff choose to seek opportunities in China.

Arms Control

In response to U.S. actions such as withdrawal from the 1987 INF Treaty and the uncertain U.S. commitment to extend the New START Treaty, Russia and China portray themselves as supporters of a global arms-control regime and opponents of the Trump administration's efforts to disrupt global stability.³⁰ Although the Trump administration explained its decision to withdraw from the 1987 INF Agreement in August 2018 as a response to Russian violations of the treaty, the U.S. action will have important security consequences for China, and potentially for Sino-Russian relations. Arms control has not featured prominently in Sino-Russian relations because of the major differences in their capabilities.³¹ China has also rejected the Trump administration's appeals to join in trilateral arms-control negotiations with Russia.³² Unlike Russia, China has never sought parity with the United States, as Chinese capability is substantially smaller.

Nonetheless, during the past three decades Sino-Russian agreements include several arms-control provisions. In 1994 the two countries agreed to no-first-use of nuclear weapons against each other. Article 2 of the 2001 Treaty on Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation

between China and Russia reaffirms that the two countries “will not be the first to use nuclear weapons against each other nor target strategic nuclear missiles against each other.”³³ The two countries declared their commitment to strategic stability when they reaffirmed, in a June 5, 2019 statement, that sharply criticized the United States for undermining arms control.³⁴ In addition, during that same month, Xi and Putin jointly urged all countries to return their nuclear weapons to their own territory.³⁵ After the U.S. withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019, Russia then proposed a moratorium on intermediate nuclear missile deployment, providing an opportunity to engage China on the subject. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov held talks with his Chinese counterparts on arms control in Beijing on November 27, 2019.³⁶

Theater missile deployments have long been an issue in relations between Moscow and Beijing. During the period of Sino-Soviet tensions in the 1980s, China urged the United States and the Soviet Union to sign a treaty that would cover Asian missile deployments as a way to limit Soviet SS-20 missiles that were then directed against China. China also sought to exclude French and British missiles from the agreement to avoid setting a precedent that might increase pressure to include Chinese forces. Both goals were achieved in the “global zero” formula to which Gorbachev and Reagan agreed in 1987.³⁷ In the ensuing years, Beijing deployed some 1,000 intermediate range missiles.

Currently, China and Russia oppose the deployment of U.S. THAAD anti-missile systems in South Korea and Japan that are directed against North Korea. For China, this is especially urgent because, if configured in a particular way, THAAD could neutralize China’s own missile forces. Because Russian missiles are deployed farther west, the issue of opposing missile defense is a matter of principle. In 2016 and 2017 China and Russia participated in two simulated joint missile defense exercises, one in China and the other in Russia. The parallel development of hypersonic glide capabilities in both Russia and China may also be a response to regional missile defense deployments by the United States and its allies.³⁸

As noted earlier, in October 2019 Putin announced Russia’s plans to help China with missile-launch detection. According to Tong Zhao of Carnegie/Tsinghua, with the START scheduled to expire by February 2021, such a capability will be important if the U.S.-Russia strategic arms-control regime unravels. This could prompt Beijing to respond to a larger U.S. nuclear force, as urged by the 2018 U.S. Nuclear Posture Review, by increasing the alert level of Chinese nuclear forces or even shifting their posture to launch-under-attack.³⁹

There is some speculation in Washington that U.S. deployment of ground-based missiles in Asia to counter Chinese capabilities as well as North Korean capabilities would lead China and Russia to make countermoves, potentially restoring past distrust between the two countries.⁴⁰ Although this may be wishful thinking on the part of the Trump administration, Russian commentators note that China and Russia do not always have the same perspective on arms control.⁴¹ Putin has previously commented that although Russia supports the INF Treaty, it fails to cover the missile capabilities of neighboring states, a problem the United States does not face.⁴² In November 2019 Foreign Minister Lavrov said Russia was receptive to the idea of a multilateral approach to INF, but he pointed out that China was not prepared to take such a step.⁴³

The Arctic

Chinese companies struggled for some years to invest in major upstream energy projects in Russia, but by 2013 China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) succeeded in acquiring a 20 percent stake in the first Yamal LNG project. The Silk Road Fund followed in 2016, purchasing a 9.9 percent stake and providing a loan of \$813 million. China's Exim Bank and Development Bank provided another \$11 billion in loans. China has contracted to receive 3 million tons of LNG annually for twenty years from the project.⁴⁴ China's Poly Group also proposed investing \$5.5 billion to develop the port of Archangelsk and connecting the north-south Belkomur Railroad, which could provide an additional transportation corridor for Chinese goods bound for European markets. Although the project, with a total value of \$20.8 billion, is included on the list of Russian government-approved projects for the development of the Russian North, with a potential completion date of 2022, Russian officials disagree about its profitability and no construction has yet begun.⁴⁵

CNPC and China National Offshore Oil Corporation (CNOOC) each bought a 10 percent stake in the Yamal 2 LNG project in April 2019.⁴⁶ Chinese Arctic experts are especially proud that their country will be providing technology, not only capital, for Arctic development. The Chinese Offshore Oil Engineering Co., Ltd. (COOEC), for example, will manufacture modules for liquefying gas at a cost of \$1.6 billion. China National Chemical Engineering agreed in June 2019 to contribute crude oil-processing equipment, a shipping dock, pipeline, and storage tanks to the \$5 billion Payakh fields development project, which could turn out to be one of Russia's richest development projects, with up to 1.2 billion tons of oil.⁴⁷

U.S. sanctions on Russia for its takeover of Crimea and intervention in Ukraine had left Russia with a dearth of investment capital and a lack of technology suppliers for its Arctic energy projects, which made Chinese participation in Russian Arctic projects all the more welcome. For China, this was fortuitous as it helped overcome Russia's initial wariness about Chinese interests in the Arctic—Russia, like Canada, initially opposed China's observer status in the Arctic Council until China agreed to recognize the sovereignty of the Arctic states.⁴⁸ For China, cooperation with Russia serves many important goals. It helps justify China's self-declared "near-Arctic" status. By linking the "Polar Silk Road" to the Maritime Silk Road in July 2017, China found an opportunity to move forward with a Belt and Road project in Russia (as many others were stalled, such as the Kazan high-speed railway). Moreover, at a time of heightened tensions with the United States, Sino-Russian Arctic energy cooperation provides a new source of LNG that does not face the same maritime supply risks as other energy imports. Participation in energy and transportation projects in the Russian Arctic also gives China an opportunity to demonstrate its gas-drilling capabilities and to gain new experience in Arctic navigation and shipping.

China's growing interest in the Arctic has not gone unnoticed in the United States. In a May 2019 speech, Secretary of State Pompeo spoke of China's infrastructure investments paving the way to a security presence in the Arctic. Characterizing Russian behavior in the Arctic and Chinese actions outside of the region as "aggressive," the Secretary of State urged vigilance regarding the

activities of both countries in the High North.⁴⁹ While noting that Russia and China pose different challenges to U.S. interests in the Arctic, a June 2019 U.S. Defense Department report on the Arctic speaks of the region as a “potential corridor of strategic competition” from Russia and China.⁵⁰ For the first time, the U.S. Department of Defense’s annual report on the Chinese military addresses China’s role in the Arctic and raises the possibility of a strengthened Chinese military presence there. Even though the report saw the Arctic as a promising arena for commercial opportunities, the Defense Department noted that Russian opposition to the operation of foreign vessels in the Northern Sea Route, which Russia administers as an ice-covered waterway under UNCLOS 234, could lead to potential frictions with Chinese interests in its commercial use.⁵¹

Despite their joint perception of U.S. pressure in the Arctic, Russia and China continue to harbor some suspicions about the other’s intentions. Chinese experts chafe at the regulations Russia imposes on the Northern Sea Route, the waterway above its Arctic coastline, requirements LNG exporters use for Russian-flagged vessels, and other regulations involving fees that increase the cost of Arctic shipping and make it less attractive for shipping companies.⁵² Moreover, although Chinese analysts understand that a need for financing brought China and Russia together in the Arctic, they acknowledge that the security environment in the Arctic is complex and not necessarily favorable to China’s growing role. China Polar Research Institute researcher Deng Beixi notes the geographical advantages Russia and the United States have in terms of deterring China as well as in terms of posing challenges to China’s commercial use of the Arctic.⁵³ PLA Navy Captain Zuo Pengfei pointed out that once Chinese forces “normalize” their presence in the region, pressures on China from its strategic opponents would be reduced.⁵⁴

Chinese Assessments

Against the background of continuing tensions in Sino-American and U.S.-Russian relations, Chinese experts are seeking to define the parameters of the Sino-Russian relationship. One issue is how far it can go. The June 5, 2019 agreement upgraded the relationship to its highest level—a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination. On the same day, *Global Times* came out with an editorial rejecting as “biased” the view that tensions in Sino-American and U.S.-Russian relations have been the driving forces behind the Sino-Russian partnership. The editorial highlighted that “endogenous” forces are stronger than shifts in the strategic triangle in terms of shaping the Sino-Russian relationship, and it forecast that the partnership will be strengthened regardless of U.S. policy.⁵⁵

Similarly, former Chinese defense attaché to Russia, Major-General Wang Haiyun, argued that common threats from the United States are not the only factors serving to deepen Sino-Russian security cooperation. He sees military cooperation between the two countries playing a key role. As continental states with defensive postures, Wang believes the two countries share a similar perception of their strategic environment. He also has noted that Chinese military technology and strategic thinking developed in cooperation with Russia, thus establishing the foundation for their partnership in the military sphere.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, Chinese experts who focus on the regional aspects of the Sino-Russian partnership are more cautious in their assessments about its future. In part, this stems from a lack of economic support by the Chinese and Russian governments for their own border regions.⁵⁷ Yang

Cheng, a scholar at Shanghai International Studies University who helped negotiate the first ten-year cooperation program for the Chinese Northeast and the Russian Far East, notes that some officials from China's Northeast region have been overeager to show short-term results for domestic political reasons—to achieve promotions and to boost their careers—and their zeal has raised suspicions in Russia that China is pursuing a government-led strategy to take over Russian resources. As Yang explains, “The methods used by some local governments often result in a situation where the more active China is, the more negative Russia becomes.”⁵⁸ Despite the deepening of the Sino-Russian partnership, the coastal provinces in the Northeast (Jilin and Liaoning), which have more alternatives than landlocked Inner Mongolia and Heilongjiang, have closer ties with South Korea and Japan than with Russia.⁵⁹

Feng Shaolei, a prominent expert on Russia at East China Normal University, and Cui Heng note that although Russian officials have become more receptive to participating in China-led frameworks such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the business communities in both countries display inadequate mutual understanding. As the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has deepened, the number of registered Chinese companies in the Russian Far East has actually declined—from 162 in 2015 to 125 in 2017. The Program of Cooperation between Northeast China and the Russian Far East, 2008–2018 achieved only a 28 percent project-completion rate and was abandoned in favor of a less ambitious agenda for the next decade. Feng and Cui point out that many of the projects that have been completed to date reflect domestic investments by each country in their border regions rather than bilateral cooperation.⁶⁰

One highly anticipated Chinese investment by the AquaSib company in the Irkutsk region to bottle water on the shores of Lake Baikal, a World Heritage site, for export to China and other countries caused a storm of protest, including a petition to Putin as well as litigation over the project's environmental impact. Ultimately, the Irkutsk government declared that the six-year investment by the Chinese firm was invalid. According to Li Yonghui, a former diplomat and an expert on Russia at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, the AquaSib debacle shows that despite their deepening partnership, China needs a better understanding of Russian national psychology, particularly Russia's dissatisfaction about the growing economic gap between the two countries and the tendency for Russians to prioritize security and environmental interests over economic issues, even in a project that appeared to the Chinese side to be mutually beneficial.⁶¹ Yang points out that both Russia and China lack mutual understanding; in China, for example, knowledge of Russian and the field of Russian studies has declined since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶² A similar shortage of expertise on China exists in Russia.⁶³

Another key issue is the desirability of a close Sino-Russian partnership vis-à-vis China's other interests.⁶⁴ Wang Haiyun sees the United States as the primary obstacle to China's rise and believes that a “quasi alliance” with Russia provides important respite.⁶⁵ One distinction that Wang Haiyun makes is that an alliance relationship with Russia should not involve treaty obligations and should be more informal. Although he acknowledges China's priority for relations with the United States, he contends that relations with a strategic partner like Russia as well as with European countries that are at odds with the Trump administration are particularly important, especially at a time of great tensions with Washington. Wang admits, however, that although China and Russia are increasingly sharing strategic interests, within the two countries

there are detractors who speak of a “China threat” or “Russian unreliability,” and he urges efforts by both sides to refute them.⁶⁶

Other Chinese analysts are more skeptical. An alliance relationship with Russia might actually create new tensions regarding which country plays the leading role (“谁是老大？谁是老二？”). Moreover, China might be obligated to take positions that are not in its own interest.⁶⁷ This stems, in part, from different identities that lead Russia and China to take different positions on conflict resolution with other states.⁶⁸ Fu Ying, chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chinese National People’s Congress, also points to differences in foreign-policy focus and style as well as Russia’s suspicions about China’s intentions in Central Asia.⁶⁹ She notes that, historically, alliance relations between China, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet Union did not end well.⁷⁰ In her view, triangular politics are a relic of the past and an alliance relationship with Russia today would do little to solve the Sino-U.S. problems, which can only be resolved on their own.⁷¹

For Zhao Huasheng, professor at Fudan University, Russia’s concept of a Greater Eurasian Partnership provides an opportunity to avoid competition and to promote cooperation in a region that is strategically important for both countries.⁷² Frozen out of most cooperative projects with Europe, Putin introduced this concept at the St. Petersburg Economic Forum in June 2016 as a way of broadening his Eurasian economic integration project and extending Russia’s geopolitical influence over a wide swath of Asia, including South, Central and Southeast Asia.⁷³ Zhao notes that although Russia’s counterbalancing of China’s growing role in Eurasia may be a component of its concept for the region, a desire for cooperation with China and stability in Eurasia is dominant.⁷⁴ China’s involvement in Russia’s Greater Eurasian Partnership might also provide a framework for cooperating not only with Russia but also with Europe in China’s Belt and Road, Zhao further argues.⁷⁵

Fudan University Dean and Professor Feng Yujun argues that the partnership with Russia has thus far proved incapable of reducing U.S. pressure on either country and that upcoming challenges, such as non-traditional security issues, will fall outside the purview of triangular-power balancing logic. Feng instead advocates a trilateral dialogue, on both interstate and Track II levels, about several contentious issues, including missile defense in Asia, counterterrorism, and arms control in the nuclear, space, and cyber realms.⁷⁶

Continuity and Change

Even as Chinese experts debate the desirability and feasibility of a closer Sino-Russian partnership, forces both inside and outside of China continue to shape the contours of the partnership. Although domestic imperatives drive the consolidation of their relationship, changes in U.S. policy toward one or both countries, such as the removal of sanctions on Russia or an improved economic relationship with China, will have an impact, as is argued by the triangular logic. The greatest challenges will come from their peripheries, however, especially Central Asia and the Arctic. Climate change in the Arctic will open up new areas for shipping and fishing that may make it possible for China to act more independently of Russia, particularly as the upper Arctic becomes navigable and China is no longer restricted to the Russia-regulated

Northern Sea Route.⁷⁷ It remains to be seen how closely Russia will want to partner with China in the Arctic, especially in the security sphere and whether or not this will facilitate a greater role for China in Arctic affairs.⁷⁸

In Central Asia, China has already been expanding its security portfolio by setting up border security posts in Tajikistan and providing them with personnel.⁷⁹ This alters the unofficial division of labor between the two countries—Russia providing security and China driving economic cooperation. It remains unclear whether China will continue to expand its security footprint in Central Asia, and, if so, how Russia will react.

Nonetheless, with Xi Jinping facing no term limits and Putin's government reorganization ensuring his own paramount role after his final term ends, the strong personal bond between the two leaders will enable them to continue to manage the relationship from above. Although their efforts contrast with weak synergy for cross-border cooperation, parallel approaches to authoritarian governance serve to reinforce the partnership and may help to insulate it from external challenges.



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Notes

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