



Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?

Alexander Lukin

To cite this article: Alexander Lukin (2021) Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:3, 155-173, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970904](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970904)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970904>



Published online: 22 Sep 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Have We Passed the Peak of Sino-Russian Rapprochement?

Russian-Chinese rapprochement is one of the most important modern geopolitical shifts. Recently, it seems that those who argue that closer relations between Moscow and Beijing stem from their converging interests, values, and worldviews have won out over those who claimed theirs is essentially a marriage of convenience—a tactical arrangement for countering attacks by the United States and its allies. According to some forecasts, the mutual understanding between the two countries will deepen in the foreseeable future and they will form, if not a formal then at least a de facto, alliance. Events indicate that, in fact, Russia and China have strengthened their interaction.

But will this trend continue? Recent developments, such as Beijing's assertive new foreign policy, its "wolf warrior" diplomacy (which is beginning to annoy Russia's political elite), and several political repercussions from the coronavirus pandemic suggest that the peak of Russian-Chinese rapprochement has probably passed.

A New Era in Rapprochement

On June 5, 2019, Russian and Chinese leaders signed a joint statement announcing the start of a "new era" in their comprehensive partnership and strategic

Alexander Lukin is Professor and Head of the International Laboratory on World Order Studies and the New Regionalism at HSE University in Moscow, Russia. He served in the Soviet Foreign Ministry and the Soviet Embassy in China, and he was Vice President of the Russian Diplomatic Academy. Among his most recent books is *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement* (Cambridge: Polity, 2018). He can be reached at avlukin@hse.ru. This work was supported by a grant of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of the National Research University Higher School of Economics in 2021.

© 2021 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 44:3 pp. 155–173
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970904>

interaction.¹ The term was drafted by China and shows that Beijing took the initiative to formulate the bilateral agenda. In 2017, Xi Jinping introduced the concept of “socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era,” which became enshrined into both the state’s and the party’s constitutions. Understandably, Chinese ideologists began to look for “new eras” in every sphere of life, including Sino-Russian relations. That prompted politicians and experts in both Russia and China to immediately begin searching for what, if anything, had changed in their relations and what exactly this new era entailed.

Seeking to define this new era, Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui listed the era’s five main characteristics: a high level of trust between the heads of state; the new status given to mutual relations; the opening of new areas of cooperation; a new level of friendship between their peoples; and mutual efforts to create a new type of international relations.² Neither the joint statement itself nor most of the official commentaries to it speak to any significant qualitative shift. Instead, they sum up achievements and state that work will continue in all areas of cooperation.

None of this is new. The two leaders have long enjoyed a high level of mutual trust and have been working since the 1990s to create a new type of international relations. They are constantly opening new areas of cooperation, and although there is no easy way to measure the level of friendship between their peoples, public opinion polls in both countries indicate that for more than the last 10 years, over 50 percent of both populations have considered the other country a friend.³

**A new high period
of cooperation
actually did begin
between 2014 and
2016**

However, one can still see that, if not an “era,” then at least a new high period of cooperation actually did begin between 2014 and 2016. But it may be coming to an end.

This new period in those relations began not because past trends have intensified, but because of entirely new factors that emerged after Russia entered into serious conflict with the West in 2014 and the United States

launched a trade war against China in 2016. These events mark the final realization by the leaders of Russia and China that the international system dominated by the United States and its Western allies would never admit them as equals.

The 2014 Ukrainian crisis was the turning point for Russia. Of course, Moscow had serious differences with the West even before that—for example, every time NATO announced it was expanding eastward, the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, and the conflict in Georgia in 2008. Prior to 2014, however, Moscow had always been willing to make concessions in hopes of maintaining constructive relations with the West. But the West viewed those concessions as weakness

and continued moving its military infrastructure closer to Russia's borders. And when the West supported the revolt in Ukraine that brought radical anti-Russian nationalists to power in Kiev, Moscow decided that the time had come to deliver a decisive counterpunch, regardless of how harshly the West was certain to respond.

China's watershed moment came slightly later—with Donald Trump's rise to power. He saw Beijing as Washington's main opponent in the international arena and unleashed a trade war intended to force China to abandon the very economic model that had proven so incredibly successful. Even though that clash was long in coming and had essentially begun under the Obama administration, it caught Chinese leaders and experts by surprise.⁴ Their entire economic development strategy until then had been based on the Western theory that globalization was inevitable and that called for a global liberal economic system whose spread benefitted the United States—and, incidentally, China. Beijing could not, or did not want to, believe that Washington would take measures harmful to its own economy for the sake of containing China geopolitically. The Trump administration saw things differently, however. It concluded that the United States must contain China by any means, regardless of economic losses. Otherwise, the argument went, it could be too late: China would use US technology to beat America at its own game, first economically, and then in terms of political influence in the world.

Trump's unexpected offensive left China perplexed and unsure of how to respond. Some in China advocated for a tough response, while others said Beijing should make significant concessions. In the end, Chinese leaders concluded it would be a protracted conflict and that they should prepare for the worst. In 2019, Xi Jinping even compared China's current situation with a new Long March, a Communist forces retreat in the end of the 1930s when the party managed to save its army but suffered heavy losses.⁵ Beijing has not rejected the need for talks and hoped in the January 2020 "first phase" trade agreement and talks with the new Biden administration to strike a deal with Washington that would, at least, give China enough breathing space to reconfigure its economy to be less dependent on exports to the United States and its allies and on their technologies.

However, the hopes to restore better relations were seriously undermined at the talks in Anchorage in March 2021. China no longer holds any illusions that Washington will treat it as an equal partner and maintain their stable and mutually beneficial cooperation into the future. The concept that reflected those former illusions—the new type of great power relationship between China and the United States—has fallen out of favor among Chinese experts.

There are very specific indications that Russian-Chinese relations have entered a new period

This loss of hope of restoring constructive cooperation with the US stimulated Beijing to reevaluate Russia's Western strategy and its future role for China. In a 2016 *Foreign Affairs* article that caused a major reaction in Russia, former Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Fu Ying gave a very positive assessment of Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation, even while reproaching Moscow for being too hot-tem-

pered and failing to build a judicious relationship with Washington.⁶ China increasingly refers to Russia as a "warrior nation" capable of mounting stiff resistance against its enemies and fiercely defending its interests.⁷ At times, Chinese commentators even hold up Russia as an example to leaders in Beijing. For this reason, the tough-looking President Putin enjoys wide popularity in China.⁸

In addition to these broad shifts, there are very specific indications that Russian-Chinese relations have entered a new period.

They include Chinese investment in Russian technology, integration across Eurasia, cooperation in space, weapons dealing, joint military exercises, and the creation of a missile attack warning system.

Chinese Investment in Russian Technology

Moscow has granted Chinese state companies permission to invest in the Russian energy sector and high technologies. Until 2015, the Russian government had essentially specifically blocked Chinese state companies from investing in the energy sector, but in February of that year, Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich announced that the Russian government was prepared to consider proposals from Chinese companies wanting to purchase controlling shares in strategic oil and gas deposits.⁹ By the end of 2015, Russian and Chinese companies had already signed several major contracts for Chinese investment. This agreement served to advance Russian-Chinese cooperation in the energy sector significantly, with Chinese investment helping to offset losses Russia had suffered from Western sanctions since 2014.

Moscow made a similar policy change regarding investment in high technology. During a September 2015 visit by Vladimir Putin to Beijing, the Russian company En+ Group—controlled by close Kremlin associate Oleg Deripaska and holding assets in energy, non-ferrous metallurgy, mining, and sectors linked logistically and strategically to those fields—signed an agreement with Chinese companies Centrin Data Systems and Huawei for the joint construction of a data center in Irkutsk.¹⁰ This marked a notable change in Russia's attitude.

Previously, when Putin had visited Novosibirsk in January 2005, Russian Academy of Sciences Siberian Branch President Nikolai Dobretsov proposed working with Chinese scientists to create an information technology center in Siberia. According to media reports, Putin asked, “Why with China?” And then, clearly alluding to the issue of security, he said, “We wouldn’t want the Chinese to gain access to these zones so that ... Well, it’s clear ...” He called at the time for being “cautious” in dealings with Russia’s strategic partner.¹¹

Integration across Eurasia

The process of linking the construction of the Chinese Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—which unites Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Russia—has started, and Beijing has approved of the idea to create a Greater Eurasian Partnership. China made a formal decision in 2015 to develop relations with the EAEU as an organization, thereby contributing to its international standing. Previously, Beijing had preferred establishing only bilateral relations with the republics of the former Soviet Union. In practice, this meant that China was supporting a broader system of integration across Eurasia, an idea that had first appeared within Russian expert circles and been promoted both by Moscow and Nur-Sultan.

Cooperation in Space

The Ukrainian crisis has led Russia and China to increase their space-based cooperation to some extent after those efforts had slackened considerably in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This was the result of Russia cutting some space projects with the United States because of economic sanctions.

Weapons Dealing

Russia is selling China its latest-generation weapons, including 24 Su-35 fighter jets and its S-400 air defense system. “Though the sale is relatively small,” said Russian expert Vasily Kashin, “it may have a considerable impact on regional security: even a single regiment of Su-35s may be enough to affect the balance of power in Taiwan. Irbis radar systems can detect airborne targets at a range of up to 400 kilometers, which will allow Beijing to monitor Taiwanese airspace from Mainland China.”¹² The S-400 air defense system will strengthen China’s security considerably. That China was the first country to which Russia has delivered that weapons system also reveals the depth of their mutual trust on matters of security. Russia refrained from selling the most advanced weapons systems to China before 2014.

Joint Military Exercises

The two countries have intensified their joint military exercises to the point of holding joint naval maneuvers in areas that NATO and other US allies consider sensitive, such as the South China and Baltic Seas, and joint Air Force patrols over the Japanese and East China Seas.

Creation of Missile Attack Warning System

Russia is helping China create a missile attack warning system, with Putin announcing in 2019 that several had been installed. According to some Russian military experts, cooperation in this area was announced by Putin in 2019, despite a strict adherence to the term “strategic alliance” over a military one. Analyst Vassily Kashin wrote “since 2018, military cooperation between the two countries has reached a new level” of a “tacit alliance.”¹³ Others express a more cautious viewpoint, saying only that the two countries will continue to synchronize individual elements of their military policies such as missile defenses.¹⁴

Russia’s Strategic Interests

The overall strategic interests that motivate Russian leaders to pursue closer relations with China consist of two parts. First, there is geopolitically an ongoing need to support stable relations with the economically and politically powerful neighboring state. Under any circumstances, having normal and friendly relations with such a neighbor would contribute to political stability and economic development in Russia itself. Russia needs China as a major trade partner and a source of investment, primarily in its eastern regions. Past complications in relations with Beijing have led to the need to increase military outlays and fanned unnecessary alarmist sentiment that was not conducive to the political stability needed for the country’s development.

The second part is a subjective factor: the Western policy of pressuring Russia, a country it perceives as undermining the Western-dominated world order. Targeted by Western sanctions, Russia has turned to China for political support as an alternative trade partner and as source of investment and credit. The fact that the West, and particularly the United States, is pursuing a similar pressure campaign against China is spurring Beijing to gradually deepen its relations with Russia.

At the same time, Russia understands that there are limits to its strategic cooperation with China. Moscow is unwilling to assume the obligation of fully supporting all Chinese initiatives and positions because, in some cases, that could complicate Russia’s relations with other partners. For example, Moscow

would not want to take a specific stand regarding China's territorial disputes, such as with India in Kashmir and Tibet, with Japan about the Senkaku (Diaoyu) Islands, or in the South China Sea, much less become involved in conflicts over those disputes, should any arise. Moscow is unlikely to express explicit support for Chinese territorial claims, just as China, adhering strictly to its principle of territorial sovereignty, is unlikely to give formal recognition to Russia's actions in Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and so on. Nonetheless, Moscow has made several gestures toward China such as expressing understanding for Beijing's position on Xinjiang as well as Hong Kong and supporting its refusal to recognize the decision of international arbitration concerning the dispute in the South China Sea.

Russia understands that there are limits to its strategic cooperation with China

The Russian public also has mixed feelings about an increasingly powerful China. Currently, most public opinion polls show that Russians consider China the friendliest of all countries. According to the special survey by the state-run Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), "China: Russians' Understanding of China and Chinese Culture," that was conducted in July 2018, 62 percent of respondents considered China a friendly state, while only 16 percent considered it unfriendly.¹⁵ A survey conducted in March 2021 by the independent Levada Center found that 75 percent of Russians have a positive attitude toward China, while only 14 percent express a negative attitude. It also states that this positive attitude has grown significantly since 2014 against the backdrop of Russia's conflict with the West.¹⁶

Overall, Russians are learning more about China and relating to the country better all the time. At the same time, a certain wariness toward China remains. Although the positive attitudes are indeed growing, the above surveys point to the stable presence of a minority whose attitudes toward China are negative, and this number is not decreasing. In political circles, this attitude is most common among pro-Western liberals and extreme nationalists. However, the worsening of relations with the West after 2014 led to the Russian political center growing support for the government and its policies, while the right- and left-wing fringes have become very small in number. Still, if the situation in the country worsens considerably, those fringe groups could theoretically regain influence.

Thus, the same political, economic, and cultural factors that are facilitating Russian-Chinese rapprochement are simultaneously limiting how close the two countries can grow. The rejection of US dominance in both countries is based on the feeling that Russian and China were historically great and independent centers of power and should not tolerate hegemonic dictate of a foreign power.

This same feeling may make it difficult for them to be excessively dependent on any big power—including each other.

China's Assertiveness and the Wolf Warrior Effect

The growing “assertiveness” that experts noted in Chinese foreign policy starting from the late 2010s could prove a significant obstacle to further rapprochement.¹⁷

Since then, a number of publications by Chinese journalists and experts—particularly those in the military—have called for Beijing to follow the US example and pursue a foreign policy that would rely on shows of force to increase geopolitical influence and support foreign trade relations.¹⁸ At that time, the Chinese authorities said those were only private opinions and did not reflect official policy. However, the *Huanqiu shibao* newspaper (*Global Times*) published by the Communist Party Central Committee soon became more popular, and its editor, former military correspondent Hu Xijin, was an open supporter of a more “assertive” approach. He encountered opposition from the advocates of more traditional diplomacy based on the ideas of Deng Xiaoping, who favored modesty as expressed in the maxim “taoguang yanghui” (meaning “bide your

time and keep a low profile”). Now, however, the policy of “assertiveness” has clearly gained the upper hand.

This assertiveness creates a serious contradiction between the officially stated goals of Chinese diplomacy and their practical implementation. Official documents in Xi Jinping's China since the beginning of the Chinese reforms in the late 1970s speak of “mutually beneficial” arrangements, five principles of peaceful coexistence, non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries,

respect for the principle of international law, and the fundamental difference between the foreign policy of Beijing and that of hegemonic policies pursued by other major powers, especially the United States.

In reality, though, a growing chorus of voices have charged China with, among other things, subjugating other states with debt and Chinese companies with violating other countries' labor laws, bribing local officials, polluting the environment, making ineffective investments, and failing to hire local workers. Beijing also stands accused of using its citizens, overseas students, and people of Chinese ethnicity living abroad (“*huaqiao*”) to interfere in the affairs of other countries. Already, China is establishing military bases abroad (it opened its

China's assertiveness creates a contradiction between Beijing's stated goals and practical implementation

first foreign naval base in Djibouti in 2017), applying economic sanctions against its neighbors (Mongolia and South Korea in 2016), and even attempting to dictate policy to the government agencies of other countries. For example, photographs of documents recently circulated on the internet show that the Chinese Embassy in Ukraine had demanded that the city government of Kiev close an exhibition devoted to events in Hong Kong while China's Embassy in Estonia urged the government of that country to revise the text of an official document that Beijing felt portrayed China's role in the world incorrectly.¹⁹ Even if the exhibition and document in question had been offensive, by diplomatic standards, such requests are seen as interference in the internal affairs of other states.

Of course, from Moscow's point of view, even those moves by China fall far short of the past or current deeds of such classic superpowers as the United States, the Soviet Union, and even colonial-era European states. Moreover, some of the accusations leveled by the United States and its allies such as calling Beijing's policy in Xinjiang "genocide" or blaming it for deliberately spreading the COVID-19 virus are unfounded and represent an obvious attempt to apply ideological pressure in the competitive struggle between great powers.

In any case, the trend is clear: Beijing is beginning to use the same instruments of influence as other powers do, but it does not admit to doing so in its official foreign policy rhetoric. Unofficial documents paint a different picture. Chinese expert literature and journalistic commentaries often point to the need to open numerous military bases in various parts of the world, to use the army to protect China's economic interests, and to apply sanctions as a means of pressuring the governments of other countries.²⁰

Even the style of Chinese diplomacy has changed. Senior Chinese diplomats—who actively use modern methods of communication, including many foreign social networks and messenger services that are banned inside China—speak in a very pushy manner with foreign journalists, experts, and politicians, telling them how to behave and what they can and cannot write, threatening to blacklist them for the "wrong views," and sometimes behaving downright rudely. Because senior leaders never criticize them for it, we can assume they consider such behavior—reminiscent of the style last seen during China's "Cultural Revolution"—to not only be acceptable, but perhaps even desirable. Beijing also uses Chinese citizens, teachers, and college students working or studying in foreign institutions to push the government's official line on various historical and international issues. They are often overly insistent on pushing their point of view, disrupting the classroom environment and damaging otherwise friendly relations among colleagues at work. This foreign policy is extremely counterproductive for China itself. The Beijing regime invests enormous energy and considerable sums on propaganda that promotes its achievements and international image, holding hundreds of

conferences and other PR-related events, publishing literature, and funding and staffing almost 500 Confucius Institutes around the world.

Of course, China does have something to tell the world: it is an ancient country with a unique culture whose leaders have managed to achieve an unprecedented three-decade-long economic boom, raising living standards for the population. Many people around the world find this extremely attractive, and China should be proud of these accomplishments. However, with that understandable pride growing into haughtiness and Beijing dismissing other countries' experience and trying, however unsuccessfully at times, to tell them how to organize their lives, and which values to embrace, could indicate a return to the xenophobia that characterized the Chinese Empire and ultimately led to its collapse.

Despite counter efforts by the Chinese authorities, all these factors have made China less popular in many countries, particularly among its neighbors. According to recent surveys conducted by Pew Report, in 2021, 77 percent of the people in South Korea held a negative opinion of China; that figure stood at 88 percent in Japan; 78 percent in Australia; 67 percent in New Zealand; and more than 50 percent in every European country except Greece.²¹ In India's August 2020 Mood of the Nation opinion poll conducted in the wake of the border clashes in Ladakh, 84 percent of the respondents answered that India could not trust China, while 59 percent of Indians believed that their country should declare a war on China (in January 2021 when the situation cooled down, this number went down to 20 percent)²².

Many of these countries once had extremely friendly feelings toward China. Even in regions such as Africa, South America, and Eastern Europe, where opinions toward China are somewhat more favorable, this indicator is sliding

China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic provides another example of its new "assertiveness."

downward. It seems certain that Xi Jinping's decision to embrace a policy of "assertiveness" is leading China toward serious problems. Given this situation, it is unclear how China can implement its extraordinarily ambitious and geographically expansive "Belt and Road" initiative that is predicated on Beijing winning the cooperation of numerous states.

China's handling of the coronavirus pandemic provides another example of its new "assertiveness." Beijing has joined the propaganda free-for-all in which the United States,

EU, and Russia all invent imaginary scapegoats whom they accuse of creating and spreading the virus. Participating in this tussle and pointing at other countries such as the United States, Italy, Australia, or India will only make

China even less popular beyond its borders.²³ China truly has mounted an effective response to its epidemic and provided substantial assistance to other states. Beijing, however, is trying to turn the fight against the pandemic into a point of pride. Other states are unlikely to appreciate this. After all, before it finally gained the upper hand against the virus, Beijing failed for many weeks to take any active measures to staunch its spread. Most importantly, the virus originated in China and spread from there to the rest of the world. Therefore, Beijing's clumsy attempt to present its victory over the virus as a major accomplishment is unlikely to convince others. And the frequent comments by Chinese public figures disparaging the healthcare systems of other states for supposedly failing to cope as well as China are unlikely to improve the country's image—despite the significant financial assistance Beijing provides to other countries.²⁴

Russian Attitudes toward China

China's popularity has been growing in Russia. Moscow is officially developing a "strategic partnership" with Beijing, making China not only a friend, but practically an ally. However, the reality of those relations is different: Beijing's attitude toward Moscow is evolving along the same lines as with other countries, albeit with some delay. For example, a furor erupted in March 2019 when Press Attaché to the Chinese Embassy in Moscow, Gou Yonghai, demanded that the *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (Independent Newspaper) remove an article he found unfavorable from its site or else he would block the author's further entry into China.²⁵ This event shows that Beijing acts "assertively" not just toward its adversaries, but toward everyone: such behavior has become a sort of craze that Chinese leaders are either unwilling or unable to stop.

And despite official statements to the contrary, there is a growing imbalance in Russian-Chinese relations. For example, Chinese television companies freely broadcast their programs on Russian airwaves, primarily as part of the package of channels offered by satellite TV services. Chinese media outlets also operate in Russia, and sometimes in the Russian language. The converse is not true, however: China legally prohibits the broadcast of foreign media, with the result that only a handful of the country's largest hotels air any Russian television programs. Many Chinese books on history, social, and international subjects are published in Russia. However, China will publish Russian books on the same subjects only if they do not contradict the official position, and those rules are growing increasingly restrictive. As a result, China now has a significant backlog of books written by Russian authors that have been translated into Chinese but not yet approved for publication.

In 2016, Moscow was home to the gala opening of the Museum of the Sixth National Congress of the Communist Party of China. The museum is controlled entirely by the Chinese side and is formally a branch of the Chinese Cultural Center of Moscow. Of course, the museum promotes the official Chinese version of party history and Soviet-Chinese relations—an interpretation that does not correspond to the results of unbiased research. It is Russia's only museum run by foreigners. At the same time, many museums in China—including those devoted to Russian-Chinese relations—prohibit entry to foreigners, including Russians (so as not to harm those relations, according to the unofficial explanations of Chinese authorities). Moreover, Chinese authorities have relocated monuments to the Russian troops who freed Northeast China from the Japanese in 1945 from their locations in city centers to the outskirts or more deserted locales—and they do so far more frequently than is done in Eastern Europe, to whose actions Moscow responds with much greater annoyance. Beijing's official rationale is a desire to free up space for the movement of transportation flows, but it is probably at least partly motivated by a desire to hide from the Chinese people the role that foreign forces played in halting Japanese aggression. And this is done despite the senior leadership in Beijing openly acknowledging the assistance the Soviet Union rendered in that struggle.

As a result, many Russian citizens and business directors are increasingly wary of the new assertiveness displayed by their Chinese partners. With a growing number of Russian scientists arrested and convicted of spying for China, bilateral scientific cooperation has become a dangerous line of work. China's increasing focus on ideology and censorship interferes with deeper cooperation in the social sciences as well.

The behavior of Chinese students and instructors is proving to be an obstacle to expanding cooperation between the two countries' institutions of higher education. The policy of using Chinese citizens, teachers, and college students working or studying in foreign institutions to push the government's official line on various historical and international issues has reached Russia. This often results in disrupting the classroom environment and damaging otherwise friendly relations among colleagues at work. Some Russian universities are already refusing to offer Chinese professors permanent teaching positions and are cutting back on the number of Chinese students they admit. Russia is also trying to limit the number of Confucius Institutes in the country and has reached an agreement whereby they are not to exceed the number of Russian Centers in China. The Russian authorities have already tried to close several Confucius Institutes for what they claim are illegal activities, but they have not yet succeeded.²⁶

In July 2020, Russian media and society reacted nervously to a surge of Chinese nationalism caused by the Russian embassy in China's video post in

its official *Weibo* (Chinese social network) account on the 160th anniversary of the city of Vladivostok. Many Chinese netizens, including *Global Times* editor Hu Xijin himself, criticized Russia.²⁷ According to the official Chinese version of history, Russians did not found the city, but renamed the Chinese settlement of *Haishenwai* after the Russian empire annexed this territory from China in 1860 via an unequal treaty. The fact that this Chinese version of events was not mentioned by the Russian Embassy announcement offended Chinese readers. For Russians, Vladivostok (which literally means “The Ruler of the East”) is a symbol of its vast but underpopulated Far Eastern region which borders the densely populated China.²⁸

All this shows that Russian-Chinese relations are changing. Of course, Russia continues to view China as an extremely important trade, economic, and geopolitical partner, especially given Russia’s current confrontation with the West that makes Moscow more amenable to making certain concessions to Beijing. In addition, Russia’s political system is increasingly coming to resemble the highly centralized Chinese system that Moscow understands far better than it does the more pluralistic Western system. At the same time, Moscow is increasingly concerned about the deepening disparity between Russia’s and China’s economic might, as well as Beijing’s massive military buildup and its growing assertiveness. Although Russia rarely makes these concerns public, they do exist and exert an influence on Moscow’s actions.

**Russian-Chinese
relations are
changing**

In a possible sign of Moscow’s discontent, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on June 18, 2020, for the first time did not participate in an international video conference of foreign ministers that Beijing called to discuss its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). President Putin himself had previously participated in two BRI summits, but this time Russia sent only an Ambassador-at-Large.²⁹

This lack of participation perhaps signals that Russia has grown weary of China touting the BRI but doing very little of substance. What’s more, Moscow has refrained from joining the project directly, limiting its involvement to the role played in the BRI by the EAEU, which Russia dominates. And although China ostensibly accepts the BRI-EAEU linkage, it continues to rely on bilateral arrangements with the EAEU smaller member states—which, in Moscow’s view, effectively undermines Russia’s position as a natural EAEU leader.

What Now? The COVID-19 Effect

What does all this mean for the future of Russian-Chinese relations? Of course, the pressure that the United States and the West as a whole are exerting on

Russia is much stronger and poses a much greater threat to its interests than does China's growing assertiveness. This threat makes it necessary for Russia to strengthen its relationship with China. It also makes sense from the geopolitical point of view for Russia to pursue closer relations with a less formidable center of power (China) to balance pressure from a more powerful US center. This does not mean, however, that the Moscow leadership will long close its eyes to reality, lulling itself into a false sense of security with its own slogans about the growth of mutual trust, the fundamentally new character of their mutual relations, and so on. Russia's geopolitical and security imperatives are driving the bilateral relations with China, and the no-nonsense geopoliticians in the Kremlin understand this perfectly well.

For this reason, and because Russia and China share a wide range of common interests, they will continue to maintain close relations at least as long as the United States preserves its strategic superiority and pursues a hostile course toward both countries. If China becomes more powerful overall than the United States, it could lead to a serious change in the global balance of power and this, of course, would influence Russian foreign policy.

Enter the coronavirus pandemic and the global changes it has generated. On one hand, states are turning inward, causing a trend toward greater insularity. On the other hand, they now better understand the need to work together to overcome natural disasters. Initially, at least, this strengthens the trend toward greater international cooperation and weakens confrontation, as does the need to collectively overcome the global economic crisis caused by the pandemic. The new situation might relieve Russia of the need to make a tough choice between Western or Eastern partners, bringing them all together against a common pandemic enemy, and having to develop relations only with those that can counterbalance the United States.

**The peak of
Russian-Chinese
rapprochement
very likely has
already passed**

In China, economic problems could temporarily ameliorate the trend toward assertiveness because Beijing could feel more compelled to cooperate with the world's leading economic powers. Unless its political system undergoes fundamental changes, however, such a trend would probably be short-lived. It seems inevitable that China, or any other country experiencing newfound strength, would become more "assertive." It

is therefore unlikely that Moscow would strive to achieve even closer relations with Beijing by attempting, for example, to establish a formal alliance with China. China has no need for Russia as an ally anyway: the trend toward assertiveness runs contrary to the idea of becoming tied down with formal obligations

that could limit the country's sovereignty and freedom to maneuver. It is, therefore, very likely that the peak of Russian-Chinese rapprochement has already passed. In the future, both parties will exercise greater pragmatism, although this might not find expression in slogans or official statements.

After Biden's coming to power, more and more experts close to the Democratic leadership claim that a policy of simultaneously pressuring Beijing and Moscow only succeeds in driving them closer. Some of them recommend that Washington soften its tone with Beijing but become tougher on Russia. They suggest combining containment with engagement in order to pursue a less offensive line.³⁰ Others suggest that Washington becomes softer toward Russia instead and use it against China, since the latter is a bigger threat.³¹ One thing is certain: Biden's administration will continue working on containing Beijing as long as the consensus to do so among Democrats and Republicans remains: rising China poses an existential threat to the United States and its influence in the world.

However, the policy that the Biden administration seems to have adopted is unlikely to seriously shatter the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. The current policy seems based on two main ideas: consolidation of US allies to increase the pressure on both Moscow and Beijing and applying the principle of "walk and chew gum at the same time" for "places where it's in our mutual interest to work together."³² This strategy would hardly bring any fundamental changes. However, in both cases, no substantial concessions or compromises on the pressure tactics used by the United States have been proposed, just vague promises to work together in areas of mutual interest. Few people in Russia or China are impressed by empty words combined with new sanctions or an attempt to form a united "democratic" front against "dictators," which is obviously directed against Moscow and Beijing.

The new US administration has ramped up its criticisms of China over human rights, citing Beijing's actions in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong. In fact, such ideological considerations are potentially not just a tool in the geopolitical struggle, but an end in themselves because a significant segment of the Democratic Party maintains close ties to human rights organizations. In its effort to combat growing Chinese influence, the new US administration might also have greater success enlisting allies to its cause such as India, Vietnam, and the Philippines, which are unhappy with Beijing. What's more, Republicans are already using China as a "whipping country"—as Russia was during the Trump administration—by accusing Biden of betrayal or collusion for any attempt to reach an agreement with Beijing. Any efforts to improve relations with China to pressure Russia are unlikely to go anywhere given these political considerations.

Biden is also unlikely to make any fundamental changes to US policy on Russia, although he might find common ground with Russia on security issues

such as extending the New START Treaty. But because Moscow was deeply disappointed by the failure of such attempts to fundamentally alter the relationship in both the early 1990s and early 2000s, when first Yeltsin and later Putin even offered to join NATO, it is unlikely to go down this road again. The Kremlin will continue to view China as a more reliable and amenable partner, one whose leaders do not demand that Russia alter its foreign or domestic policies in any way. These tendencies can be seen clearly in the virtual lack of results of Sino-US talks in Anchorage in March and the Biden-Putin Summit in Geneva in June of 2021.³³

This does not mean Russia trusts China, nor that it does not have concerns about Beijing's more assertive behavior or will come anywhere close to a more formal alliance. But it does mean Russia is more likely to pragmatically work together with China as a strong and important neighbor and a partner in balancing against the US hegemony. Any possible changes in US policy will probably prove less of a deterrent to further Russian-Chinese rapprochement than will Russian concerns over China's growing assertiveness.

Notes

1. "Joint Statement of the People's Republic Of China and the Russian Federation on the Development of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership for Collaboration in the New Era," *Bilaterals.org*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.bilaterals.org/?joint-statement-of-the-people-s&lang=en>.
2. "Posol Zhang Hanhui: 2019 – novaya tochka otscheta kitaysko-rossiyskikh otnosheniy" [Ambassador Zhang Hanhui: 2019 – a New Starting Point of Sin-Russian Relations], *China.org*, March 12, 2019, http://russian.china.org.cn/txt/2019-12/03/content_75473665.htm.
3. "Rossiysko-kitayskie onnosheniya" [Russian-Chinese Relations], Levada-Tsentr, March 30, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/03/30/rossijsko-kitajskie-otnosheniya/>.
4. Alexander Lukin, "The US–China Trade War and China's Strategic Future," *Survival* 61, no. 1, (2019), 23–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1568045>.
5. Yang Sheng, "Xi: Another Long March Begins: Trade War with US Just 'Another Obstacle' on Lengthy Road," *Global Times*, May 23, 2019, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1151300.shtml>.
6. Fu Ying, "How China Sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow Are Close, but Not Allies," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1 (January/February 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-12-14/how-china-sees-russia>.
7. "Guanyu Eluosi sange 'chuanshuo': Eluosi daodi shibushi zhandominzu?" [Three 'Sayings' about Russia: Is Russia a Warrior Nation After All?], *Xinhuanet*, May 10, 2016, http://www.xinhuanet.com/mil/2016-05/10/c_128973381_4.htm.
8. "China's Putin Fever," *Global Times*, February 7, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/868575.shtml>.
9. Vladislav Gordeev, "Dvorkovich dopustil uchastie Kitaya v osvoenii strategicheskikh mestorozhdeniy" [Dvorkovich Allowed for China's Participation in the Development

- of Strategic Oilfields], RBC, February 27, 2015, <http://www.rbc.ru/economics/27/02/2015/54f002189a7947255e32ef80>.
10. Pavel Kantyshev, "Kompaniya Olega Deripaski , Huawei i 'Lanit' postroyat data-tsentr" [Oleg Deripaska's Company, Huawei and 'Lanit' to Build a Data Center], *Vedomosti*, April 9, 2015, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/technology/articles/2015/09/04/607475-dannie-soshlyut-sibir>.
11. Andrey Kolesnikov, "Vladimir Putin porabotal na nauku" [Vladimir Putin Worked for Science], *Kommersant*, January 12, 2005, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/537896>.
12. Vassily Kashin, "Why Is China Buying Russian Fighter Jets?" Moscow Carnegie Center, February 9, 2016, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/62701>.
13. Vassily Kashin, "Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level," *Moscow Carnegie Center*, October 22, 2019, <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/80136>.
14. Dmitry Stefanovich, "Can Russia Help China Counter Missile Threats?" RIAC, October 8, 2019, <https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytics-and-comments/interview/can-russia-help-china-counter-missile-threats/>.
15. "Kitay. Predstavleniya Rossiyan o kitayskikh i kitayskoy kul'ture" [China: Russian Perceptions of Chinese People and Culture], FOM, June 20, 2018, <https://fom.ru/Mir/14071>.
16. "Rossiysko-kitayskie otnosheniya" [Russian-Chinese Relations], Levada-Tsentr, March 30, 2021, <https://www.levada.ru/2021/03/30/rossijsko-kitajskie-otnosheniya/>.
17. Alexander Lukin, "China's New Foreign Policy Strategy and Russia's Concerns," *Medjunarodni problemi* 63, no. 4 (2011): 483–504, <https://doi.org/10.2298/MEDJP1104483L>.
18. Song Xiaojun, Wang Xiaodong, Huang Jisu, Song Qiang, and Liu Yang, *Zhongguo bu gaoxing: da shidai, da mubiao ji womende neiyu waihuan* [Unhappy China: The Great Epoch, Great Goals, and Our Domestic and External Difficulties] (Nanjing: Jiangsu renmin chubanshe, 2009), 80–81, 98–99, 106–108; Liu Mingfu, *Hou Meiguó shidai de daguo siwei: Zhongguo meng* [The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and Strategic Posture in the Post-American Era] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2010). a
19. "Chinese Embassy Demanding that Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service Redo Security Report," *Baltic Course*, February 18, 2020, http://www.baltic-course.com/eng2/baltic_states/?doc=154153; "Germany Stands with Hong Kong," Facebook post, February 22, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/germanyswhk/photos/p.202335084474450/202335084474450/?type=1&theater>.
20. Dai Xu, *C-xing baowei – neiyouwaihuanxiade Zhongguo tuwei* [The C-Shape Encirclement: China's Breakthrough under Domestic Problems and Foreign Aggression] (Shanghai: Wenhui chubanshe, 2010); Liu Mingfu, *Zhongguo meng – hou Meiguó shidaide daguo siwei yu zhanlue dingwei* [The China Dream: Great Power Thinking and the Strategic Position of China in the Post-US World] (Beijing: Zhongguo youyi chubanshe, 2010); Luo Yuan, "Meiyou shangwujingshende minzu meiyou xiwang" [A Nation with No Military Spirit Has No Hope], *Fenghuang wang*, October 21, 2012, http://news.ifeng.com/mainland/special/diaoyudaozhengduan/content-3/detail_2012_10/21/18411333_0.shtml; Yan Liang, "Zhongguo duiwai jingji zhicai; mubiao yu zhengce yiti," [Discussing the Goals and Policy of China's Economic Sanctions against Foreign Countries] *Waijiao pinglun: Waijiao xueyuan xuebao* 29, no. 6 (2012): 16–29, <https://www.1xuezhexuezhexue.com/Qk/art/483564?dbcode=1&flag=2>.
21. Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "People around the Globe Are Divided in Their Opinions of China," *Pew Research Center*, December 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/12/05/people-around-the-globe-are-divided-in-their-opinions-of-china/>.

- pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/05/people-around-the-globe-are-divided-in-their-opinions-of-china/; Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Large Majorities Say China Does Not Respect the Personal Freedoms of Its People," *Pew Research Center*, June 30, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/30/large-majorities-say-china-does-not-respect-the-personal-freedoms-of-its-people/>.
22. "Mood of the Nation," *India Today*, August 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mood-of-the-nation-survey-2020>; "Mood of the Nation," *India Today*, January 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/mood-of-the-nation-survey-2021>
 23. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian's Regular Press Conference on July 30, 2021, Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Peoples Republic of China, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/t1896459.shtml; Zhang Hui, Zhao Yusha, and Zhao Juecheng, "Italy Potentially Had COVID-19 Outbreak 'Earlier Than Wuhan', Study Shows," *Global Times*, December 12, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1209646.shtml>; Gursharan Bhalla, "After US, India, Europe and Australia, China Now Blames Imported Frozen Food for COVID Outbreak," *India Times*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.indiatimes.com/news/world/after-us-india-europe-and-australia-china-now-blames-imported-frozen-food-for-covid-outbreak-529970.html>.
 24. Hu Xijin, "US Should Be Ashamed to Criticize China on Human Rights Considering Its Own COVID-19 Death Toll," May 4, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202105/1222646.shtml>; Peerzada Arshad Hamid, "Xinhua Headlines: COVID-19 Deterioration in India Shows Weakness in Healthcare System, Int'l Cooperation Needed," *Xinhuanet*, April 26, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-04/26/c_139908008.htm.
 25. "Kitayskiy diplomat ugrozhaet zhurnalistu 'NG' popadaniem v chyornye spiski" [Chinese Diplomat Threatens a 'NG' Journalist to Blacklist Him], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 4, 2019, http://www.ng.ru/world/2019-03-04/2_7523_china.html?print=Y.
 26. Ye. Vasil'eva, A. Chernych, G. Tumanov, S. Strokan, and Kh. Kasumova, "Institut Konfutsiya perevodyat v inostrannye agenty," *Kommersant*, July 28, 2015, <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2777293>.
 27. Hu Xijin: "Jiu Eluosi shiguande Weibo shuo jiju" [Some Comments on the Russian Embassy Weibo Entry], July 3, 2020, <https://baijiahao.baidu.com/s?id=1671172712464428365&wfr=spider&for=pc>.
 28. Eduardo Baptista, "Why Russia's Vladivostok Celebration Prompted a Nationalist Backlash in China," *South China Morning Post*, July 2, 2020, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3091611/why-russias-vladivostok-celebration-prompted-nationalist>; Ivan Zuenko, "Kitaytsy o yubilee Vladivostoka: 'Posol'stvo Rossii unizilo Kitay'" [The Chinese on Vladivostok's Anniversary: 'Russian Embassy Humiliated China], *Argumenty i fakty*, July 15, 2020, https://vl.aif.ru/society/a_byl_li_hayshenvay.
 29. Ankur Shah, "Russia Loosens Its Belt," *Foreign Policy*, July 16, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/07/16/russia-china-belt-and-road-initiative/>.
 30. James B. Steinberg, "What Went Wrong? U.S.-China Relations from Tiananmen to Trump," *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 1, (Winter 2019/2020), 119–33, <https://tnsr.org/2020/01/what-went-wrong-u-s-china-relations-from-tiananmen-to-trump/>; Michael McFaul, "Cold War Lessons and Fallacies for US-China Relations Today," *Washington Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (2020): 7–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2020.1850406>.
 31. Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shulman, "China and Russia's Dangerous Convergence: How to Counter an Emerging Partnership," *Foreign Affairs*, May 3, 2021, <https://www>.

foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-03/china-and-russias-dangerous-convergence;
Charles A. Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split China and Russia: Washington Should Help
Moscow Leave a Bad Marriage," *Foreign Affairs*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-04/right-way-split-china-and-russia?fbclid=IwAR0uK PnliI9V6n1qQc95yySD7hzz0nYFqFRutVPrAP4tlBAGSNMQxhprjCI>.

32. "TRANSCRIPT: ABC News' George Stephanopoulos Interviews President Joe Biden," *ABC News*, March 16, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/transcript-abc-news-george-stephanopoulos-interviews-president-joe/story?id=76509669>.
33. Sergey Lavrov, "The Law, the Rights and the Rules," Russian Foreign Ministry, June 28, 2021, https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/us/-/asset_publisher/unVXBbj4Z6e8/content/id/4801890?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_unVXBbj4Z6e8&_101_INSTANCE_unVXBbj4Z6e8_languageId=en_GB.