

CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The friendship between China and Russia is a masterfully crafted facade.

In almost every field we have studied, the actual situation conveys distrust and competition.

As things stand, the two countries' interests can only converge up to a certain point.

The rapprochement of China and Russia that began in 2014 against the backdrop of the Ukraine crisis has continued and, in some areas, intensified somewhat during the COVID-19 pandemic. There is closer collaboration in security and influence activities as well as economic cooperation. During the COVID-19 crisis, China and Russia may have seemed ready to move beyond just being on good terms to a new level of an alliance. However, the increased number of high-level visits and joint political statements, the hints at a possible military alliance, and the avoidance of mutual criticism point not so much to the emergence of a China-Russia alliance as to an alignment of pragmatic objectives, highlighted by the crisis, which both are trying to exploit. On closer inspection, the image of friendship between China and Russia turns out to be a clever facade hiding the inequality and mutual distrust between the two superpowers.

China labels countries as those submitting to its hegemonic ambition or those opposing it. Russia is no exception.

Russia's "turn to the East" was driven by the need to reduce the impact of EU and US sanctions on its economy and the Kremlin's desire to give the impression of non-subservience to Western pressure, both domestically and internationally. This is essential to preserve the image of President Vladimir Putin, who intends to stay in power. China was, and continues to be, much less interested in warming the relationship with Russia. This stance is primarily due to the Chinese Communist Party cadre's ambition to expand its reach and rally like-minded countries around itself as a counterweight to the US-led international system of the West. However, the desired outcome of China's new world order – Xi Jinping's "community of common destiny" – rules out full partnerships. In this system, China treats any other country either as a subordinate or an opponent to its hegemony, applying a "stick and carrot" method equally to all of them, according to the circumstances and its objectives. Russia is no exception, and the Russian elite is well aware of this.

The official Russian media channels describe China and Russia as the two greatest global powers, but in reality, Russia lags far behind China in most areas, especially economically. Despite China's steadily growing share in Russian foreign trade and the EU's decreasing share, Russia's trade with the EU is still almost twice the size of its trade with China. Chinese investment in the Russian economy also remains far behind



The closer cooperation between China and Russia during the Covid-19 pandemic is based on pragmatic goals, resulting from the confrontation of the two countries with the West. In reality, the leaders of China and Russia perceive the threats emanating from one another, which is why the relations between the two countries are not as good as they wish to demonstrate.

Source: Alexander Zemlianichenko /AP

European investment. Russia's growing exports rely on natural gas and oil, which Russia was forced to sell to China at below-market prices because of falling oil prices during the pandemic. To maintain relations with China, Russia must make a lot of concessions and compromises, both on the prices of natural resources and on clauses in cooperation agreements, which China, aware of its advantageous position, often seeks to change to its benefit. The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened this asymmetry.

In technology, China has overtaken Russia in many spheres but still depends on Russian military technology to some extent, especially in the production of aircraft engines. There is very close cooperation on developing artificial intelligence (AI). Several Chinese tech companies are active in the field of AI in Russia, Huawei having the most significant presence. Both China and Russia would like to reduce dependence on Western technologies and work together to achieve that. At the same time, cases of espionage in favour of China that came to light in Russia during the pandemic show

that, despite the desire to give the impression of effective cooperation, there is a lack of trust between the two countries. Russia is aware of the threats posed by China, and by disclosing espionage cases, sends a signal to its alleged partner.

Cases of spying in favour of China that became public during the COVID-19 pandemic in Russia betray the distrust behind the facade of ever-growing cooperation.

In the field of military cooperation, China considers Russia's combat experience highly useful, especially because it has very little itself. This lack of experience is why China is interested in joint military exercises with Russia. The joint exercises between the two countries also serve other objectives – to act as a deterrent to NATO countries and for China to intimidate countries with which it has territorial disputes or considers an integral part of China (Taiwan).

Despite the shared desire to give joint exercises names suggesting broad military cooperation, such as the Zapad/Interaction-2021 exercise in China in August 2021, joint Chinese-Russian activities in the field of security still fall short of coordinated cooperation. In fact, Zapad/Interaction-2021 only shares a symbolic link with the major exercise Zapad-2021 conducted in Russia and Belarus. By presenting themselves as a partnership, China and Russia seek to manipulate the international community and strengthen their image and position. Still, they also realise that forming a real alliance would require actions and concessions that neither is prepared to make.

Much tension occurs in international relations between China and Russia whenever China gains significant influence at the expense of Russia. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is becoming a platform where China and Russia engage in a power struggle under the pretence of good relations between member states. China has begun to assert itself much more forcefully in the SCO, upsetting Russia, which sees the SCO countries of Central Asia as its sphere of influence. China's attempts to use vocabulary that imposes its foreign policy agenda on countries in the Russian sphere of influence worry Russia. This dynamic also confirms the imbalanced partnership between the two great powers as China ignores Russia's wishes in its policy-making.

At the same time, Russia is trying to resist Chinese attempts to force it to endorse China's policy statements and concepts on which the two have no common understanding or agreement. For example, joint statements are co-signed on the condition they also explicitly mention Russian strategic interests. China's previously neutral and restrained foreign policy has become much more aggressive in the last few years, and Russian diplomats have experienced this first-hand. Occasionally, China has broken agreements with Russia, and Chinese diplomats have behaved disrespectfully towards their Russian counterparts.

China's behaviour confirms that it is pursuing its objectives not only by pressuring Western countries that criticise it but also by forcefully, and sometimes cunningly, demanding explicit support for its policies from Russia – a country with which it has seemingly good and trusting relations. Russia, which wants to put pressure on the West by making the international community believe that its good relations with China could lead to a powerful economic and military alliance, hides all diplomatic differences from the public and tries to solve problems with patient negotiations behind the scenes. At the same time, the Russian leadership is concerned about the growing imbalance in relations with China and is doing all it can to defend its right to shape its foreign policy independently.

||| Baltnews.

Политическая жизнь В мире НАТО в Прибалтике Коронавирус Экономика Энергетика Свобода сло

Еще не конец. Литва поплатится за представительство Тайваня

24 ноября 2021 | 17:20



"It is not over yet. Lithuania will pay for the Taiwanese representative office" – in addition to Kremlin's propaganda, Russian propaganda outlets active in the Baltic states are also disseminating the narrative designed by Chinese authorities.

Source: Baltnews

Appearances are very important for Russia. The Kremlin's official media reports extensively on cooperation with China, spotlighting the positive aspects and skirting the differences. In the Russian media, China and Russia are often treated in the same context to give Russia more weight in the eyes of domestic audiences.

Russian propaganda channels also spread pro-China sentiment among Russian-speaking people living in the EU and across the territory of the former Soviet Union, spreading the Chinese official narrative as well as the Kremlin's talking points. The proliferation of Chinese propaganda in Russian propaganda channels over the past year is mainly due to the Kremlin's desire to use it to turn both the COVID-19 crisis and the US-China confrontation to its advantage. China's propaganda is aimed first and foremost at the local Russian-speaking population and exacerbates their already widespread Euroscepticism, anti-NATO sentiment and mistrust of democratic values. In the Baltic states, with a tiny Chinese community, the Russian-speaking population is probably a very receptive audience for Chinese propaganda..

Chinese propaganda amplifies euroscepticism, anti-NATO sentiment and mistrust of democratic values among the Russian-speaking population in the Baltic states.

The Chinese official media reports on the frequent meetings between Chinese and Russian leaders and avoids criticising Russia while not over-emphasising the partnership aspect or confirming speculations about an alliance between the two countries. Instead, it seeks to convey that China will cooperate with any country that agrees to its terms, irrespective of size, reputation or relations with other countries. The situation is somewhat different in Western social media, where Chinese diplomats refer to Russia as a partner and share their Russian counterparts' messages. This has occurred, for example,

when promoting vaccines produced in either country or cooperating to provide humanitarian assistance to other countries in the COVID-19 crisis, as well as in criticising countries perceived as a common enemy and their policies. The disinformation spread

by Chinese social media users is similar in content and rhetoric to Russia's, but this should not be seen as a sign of coordinated cooperation.

During the pandemic, Russia has exploited the topic of a rapprochement between China and Russia as a propaganda weapon, gladly using it for blackmail. However, the softening of Western policies towards Russia and the renewal of dialogue with Russia on its terms is highly unlikely to change Russia's aggressive policy. Russia's demands would probably grow, the policy towards its neighbouring countries would become even more aggressive, and the Kremlin would present all this as its great achievement, which would become very handy in upcoming election campaigns.

A rapprochement between China and Russia is only possible up to a certain point. Although speculation about a China-Russia alliance originated in Russia, Russians also realise that joining China in an alliance would make them a satellite state – something the Kremlin seeks to avoid under any circumstances.

China, in turn, is wary of Russia, perceiving it as an unstable and unpredictable nation with the power to undermine the stability necessary to pursue China's economic interests. China is also critical of Russia over its inability to take control of the COVID-19 epidemic. Although the Chinese media refrains from drawing attention to it, Russia's problematic situation with the virus is blamed on irresponsibility and lack of organisation.

Russia and China will continue pragmatic cooperation in the short term in our assessment. Russia's dependence on China, and proportionately China's influence over Russia, may increase in the longer term. Russia will then likely start looking for ways to minimise the risks. Unity and consistency in US and EU policy towards China and Russia would go a long way to reducing the risks arising from their rapprochement.