

Sino–Russian Relations: Critical Moment in Deepening and Developing Cooperation

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No matter in terms of domestic transition or the ever-changing international milieu, the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship is at an important turning point.

Since the end of the Cold War, both China and Russia has spontaneously undergone three similar stages in their respective domestic institutional transition. In the 1980s, both China and Russia began the first stage of reform, with market and democracy as the starting point. They mainly emulated Western institutions, promoting modernization and institution reforms. At this stage, both countries experienced severe challenges in transition and Sino-Russian strategic partnership was established as well. The first decade of the new century is the second phase of transition in both China and Russia. What is common is that both countries' economy has gone gangbusters within the favorable global economic surroundings. Especially the state-owned economy has been enhanced unprecedentedly, the country's autonomy and subjectivity has been strengthened, and their international influences have been greatly expanded. Objectively speaking, now both countries are facing the third stage of transition.

Against the backdrop of new-pattern international and domestic politics, economy and security, both countries are preparing to enter a completely new stage, which continues the past in essence. This stage is neither similar to that of the 1980s and the 1990s, nor is it to the first decade of the new century. That is, at this stage these two countries should both ensure the state's strong role in their respective socio-economic development while maintaining stability, and give full play to the role of market-based regulation, improving their democratic decision-making levels. In Russia, there appear calls for reform according to the "political economics of crisis" logic; while in China, the government, under both Xi and Li, advocated innovation and development through government decentralization and market's bigger role based on ensuring political stability, in addition to a clear direction of national development. Although the real start of any reforms is never easy, yet the internal logic and challenges of both countries' domestic process are bound to come to this stage eventually. As a matter of fact, both countries' similarities during the domestic transition have provided an important prerequisite for the development and promotion of their bilateral relationship.

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According to the external international environment, current international political development has entered a new era in the wake of the end of the Cold War. During this period, although the United States is still today's most powerful country, yet the U.S.-dominant West can no longer be the lord of all it surveyed as before. A diversified power structure and more diversified ideas, concepts will be difficult to deter. The challenges, which the emerging economies are facing, indicate that they still cannot substitute the West's potentials in a short term. Nevertheless, undoubtedly, they represent the future long-term direction of development; the G20 and emergence of a series of new international mechanisms during the international financial crisis is an important sign of this change actually; the globalization has been hindered while regional political and economic competition has become a new focus, which is a manifestation of current re-adjustment of international efforts. In short, greatly different from the relatively stable situation dominated by the West in the 25 years after the end of the Cold War, a new transitional form with continued unrest and uncertain prospects will last a long time.

For the Sino-Russian relationship, this external environment means both opportunities and challenges. Importantly, both countries should not drift with the current but instead adhere to the planned direction, by summarizing, deepening and developing the Sino-Russian strategic cooperative partnership. In the meantime, they should also advance with the times, to innovate and improve.

Politically speaking, there is profound background explaining why Sino-Russian relations are not "expediency". Both China and Russia have their own long history of civilizations and traditions. We have experienced similar hardships on the road to modernization, forming opinions towards political development different from that of the West. We also have to face an external environment full of disorderly competition, complex and diverse patterns of interests, which is excessively ideology-driven, even kind of "rent-seeking" or "demonized". It is quite natural that both countries come together, understanding and supporting each other.

However, regarding the future orientation of Sino-Russian cooperation, to what extent, do we have mature ideas about the future political positions of both countries within the international community? Should we attempt to achieve "revolutionary transition" or "reform" of the current international order? These questions should be answered clearly. Looking in-depth into this complex issue, we can find not only the Western powers still exert pressures on China and Russia, but also the power structure at global and regional levels is generally discrete, and even some places have been almost out of control, or even caught in anarchy. Therefore,

both countries' choices are bound to affect the overall situation.

From an economic perspective, China and Russia, as the largest developing countries and the largest transition countries, these two neighbors have natural and convenient geographical conditions to achieve economic complementarity. The decision, achieved by two politicians Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin regarding the “coordination” of “One Silk, One Road” Initiative and Eurasian Economic Union, has become a far-sighted political one, promoting their bilateral economic cooperation under new situation. Currently, this “coordination” is based on both the institutional framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and consultations between China and the Eurasian Economic Union, as well as tests through China-Mongolia-Russia trilateral cooperation. Moving forward, it is foreseeable that there will be a broader basis and space for Sino-Russian economic cooperation.

The principle of international political economics shows that international economic success primarily depends on political cooperation, particularly political cooperation among those great powers. Therefore, to promote the Sino-Russian bilateral economic cooperation, the key is not the necessity of cooperation but instead the way to promote. To this end, both sides need to rationally grasp some key issues in perceptions.

First, for China and Russia, two countries with enormous land and undergoing tough transition, it is far more difficult for them to form a cooperative mechanism, in the general sense, than those smaller market economies. For Sino-Russian economic cooperation, it is imperative to go beyond the conventional thinking. For example, at the beginning of the new century, FTA cooperation between China and Russia was proposed, but so far, it has just been put onto the agenda, indicating the difficulty of this issue. Whether it means that the FTA cooperation is not suitable for Russia and China, or whether we still need to think about more ideas, or whether we should promote economic cooperation by means of new methods combined with the FTA, these are the questions to be answered.

Secondly, I have once heard old experts, who have been working for years engaged in Sino-Russian economy and trade, proposed completely different views. Some hold that any effective cooperation between China and Russia is difficult to achieve without government initiatives or effectively promoting. While others argue just the opposite, they think only private sectors can truly survive and cooperate. On the issue of Sino-Russian cooperation, whether the cooperation could be pushed forward depends on the governments and enterprises, especially how to define the functional boundaries of each private enterprise and how to effectively match them.

Third, just when we advance triumphantly, welcome the advent of a new round of cooperation, we still cannot ignore the problem of implementation of Sino-Russian economic cooperation. Although there used to be a lot of cooperation programs, yet they were delayed for a long time and nothing was done finally. Is it on the earth the problem of the proposals themselves or is there lack of effective security system or norms?

From a security perspective, there are at least the following aspects, which are important foundations for Sino-Russian cooperation, which still need further clarification and to be dealt with safely.

Both China and Russia are located at the complex Eurasian geopolitical environment, which is different from that of the United States as a “safety island”. The objective situation, naturally, enables both China and Russia to resort to mechanisms and surroundings, which can buffer and counteract the effects of various external pressures against the domestic situation. In this regard, how can both countries care about the other’s comfort without inheriting the traditional “spheres of influence” approach? When some Western prominent scholars have played up this background, this is an issue both in theory and international law. In particular, we need to carefully recognize and distinguish it in practice.

Second, in addressing the issue of regional cooperation mechanisms, a series of regional crises in recent years prove that the Asia-Pacific region cannot simply copy the practices of other regional security systems. The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has set a model for regional and sub-regional cooperation. How can both China and Russia further deepen their cooperation in regional and sub-regional security systems? For instance, how can we further establish the regional role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization? How can we further coordinate the two functions of security and economy at the same time? How can the SCO both enlarge while improving its efficiency, including how to attract the younger generation, how to enhance their attention to and participation in the SCO? There is really a long way to go.

Finally, for China-Russia-U.S. trilateral relationship, there seemingly does not exist a platform for their mere coexistence and direct interaction, but they actually interact with each other incessantly. It can be said that this is the most important group of multilateral relationship in the world. The international history shows that the trilateral relationship is the basic framework, which is never inferior to any bilateral relationship. Sino-Russian relationship provides some important principles to handle trilateral relations, for example, no conflicts, no confrontations and no aiming at any third parties. How to ensure this set of trilateral relationship

not to repeat the tragedy of the Cold War? This may be the most critical issue in contemporary international political life.

In accordance with the above analysis, optimistically speaking, whether both countries are likely to enter the third phase of domestic transition, or whether the international configuration after the Cold War will enter the second period, in fact, both provide opportunities for the improvement of China-Russia-U.S. trilateral interaction. Even the prevailing terrorism also promotes the trilateral cooperation. However, on the other hand, we cannot deny there also exist possibilities of undesirable scenarios in the future.

The key lies in that there doesn't emerge a significant domestic transition in the United States like that in both China and Russia, nor has there occurred theoretical reflections like those in China and Russia. In other words, when it is unlikely for the American ideology to change in reality, it seems that both countries' politicians and elites should first shed light on the prospects of China-Russia-U.S. trilateral relationship.