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China and Russia strengthen ties to counter US threats

Chinese President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin met in Vladivostok on Tuesday and pledged greater strategic and economic cooperation aimed at countering the US.

The Trump administration is accelerating its trade war measures against China, with preparations to impose another \$200 billion of tariffs on Chinese goods, while imposing further sanctions on Russia.

Moreover, the Pentagon's National Defence Strategy, unveiled at the beginning of this year, declared that great power competition, not terrorism, is the primary focus of US military strategy. It branded China and Russia as "revisionist powers"—that is, countries that pose a threat to the existing "international rules-based order" dominated by the US imperialism.

Neither Xi nor Putin named the United States or Trump but they left no doubt that stronger ties between China and Russia were a reaction to punitive US measures. In an obvious reference to Washington, Xi declared that the two countries would cooperate "to oppose the policy of unilateral actions and trade protectionism."

The Chinese president noted that he had met Putin three times this year and the two countries held "similar or identical positions on international matters." China-Russia cooperation, he declared, is "gaining ever more importance against a backdrop of growing instability and unpredictability on a global scale."

Putin declared that his talks with Xi had paved the way to enhance “the comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation between Russia and China.” He noted that the two leaders had discussed “military-technical co-operation.” Putin referred, in particular, to their identical views on the need for a “political and diplomatic settlement of the situation on the Korean peninsula” and urged Washington to normalise relations with North Korea. Significantly, Xi and Putin met as more than 3,000 Chinese troops, along with 30 fixed-wing aircraft, joined huge Russian military exercises known as Vostok in Siberia. China and Russia have held joint war games regularly, but foreign participation in these annual drills have been limited previously to Russia’s closest allies from the former Soviet Union. In the past, these specific drills were used to prepare for war against China.

The Russian military billed this year’s week-long Vostok exercises as the biggest since 1981, with around 300,000 Russian personnel and more than 1,000 aircraft, 36,000 tanks and scores of ships.

Vasily Kashin, an analyst from the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics, told the *Wall Street Journal* that China’s exercises with Russia provided “much-needed foreign experience that is crucial if Beijing wants to establish an internationally-capable fighting force.”

Xi was in Vladivostok to participate in the Eastern Asian Forum, established by Putin in 2015 to attract foreign investment to the Russian Far East. The fact that Xi attended for the first time, along with a delegation of nearly 1,000 Chinese businesspeople and officials, was aimed at underscoring the growing ties between the two countries.

Facing pressure and threats from Washington, Beijing and Moscow have enhanced their cooperation despite conflicting interests. In 2014, the two countries signed a landmark agreement on oil and gas sales to China that had been long delayed due to haggling over prices.

Russia also has been reluctant to sell hi-tech weaponry to China, fearing there was still the potential for it to become an adversary. However, in recent years, Moscow has begun selling some of its most advanced weapons to Beijing, including the S-400 surface-to-air missile system and Su-35 fourth-generation fighter jet.

Putin was clearly seeking to expand economic ties with China as a means of circumventing sanctions imposed by the US and its allies. The Russian president told the media that he and Xi had paid “special attention to trade and economic cooperation.”

“We noted with satisfaction that bilateral trade increased by almost one third in the first six months of the year, reaching \$50 billion,” Putin said. “We have every reason to believe that by the end of the year, trade will reach a record high of \$100 billion.”

On the sidelines of the Eastern Asian Forum, Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba signed a deal with the state-owned Russian Direct Investment Fund, Russian internet group Mail.ru and telecom company MegaFon to establish a Russian online shopping portal.

China and Russia signed agreements aimed at “consolidating Russian-Chinese regional, production and investment cooperation in the Far East.” They outlined a program for developing bilateral “trade, economic, and investment cooperation” in Russia’s Far East for the next six years. The two countries also “reaffirmed their interest in broadening the use of national currencies in mutual payments,” thus avoiding the use of US dollars as the means of trade.

Xi told the media: “Our trade is making progress. Both sides are actively working on the rapprochement of the projects One Belt, One Road and the EAEU [Eurasian Economic Union], promoting large strategic projects in the energy sector, aviation, space and transport links, and also developing our cooperation in new spheres, such as finance, agriculture, and e-commerce.”

The reference to China’s massive One Belt, One Road infrastructure plan for linking Eurasia, and the EAEU, proposed by Russia for economic and political cooperation between former Soviet republics, is significant. Potentially these are rival plans to bring the vast Eurasian landmass under the domination of Moscow or Beijing. That Xi is offering a “rapprochement” on this key issue signals that the two countries are putting aside their differences, for the time being at least.

Russia and China are not formal military allies and both sides are well aware that significant strategy and economic differences remain. While looking to consolidate ties to counter the threat posed by the United States, Moscow and Beijing are each willing to cut a deal with Washington at the expense of the other, should the opportunity arise.

The intransigence of the Trump administration, however, is driving the two countries into each other’s arms, just as it is destabilising long-established alliances of the US with European powers and Japan.

This instability is not simply a product of the erratic and reckless policies of the Trump administration. The volatility reflects the drive by US imperialism to arrest its historic decline through economic and military means. Once again, as in the 20th century, rival economic and political blocs are forming, as the precursor to world war.

