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By Michael R. Krätke
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China/Russia relations: Shoulder to shoulder, but no signs of affection

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The two great powers are strategic partners, without a formal alliance and taking care of the distances. But one of the two needs the other urgently.

Since the end of the Soviet Union, both Moscow and Beijing have always known how to think with foresight of the future and be aware that both states are connected by a land border of 4,200 kilometers. A neighbourhood treaty has existed since 2001, the last border conflicts were resolved by an agreement in 2006, and since 2013 the Russian Federation has been pursuing an "eastward turn". There is a meeting between Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin at the Winter Olympics in Beijing. This meeting is based on the following message: we feel compelled to strengthen our cooperation because of our common strategic adversary, the United States.

In the drift of confrontation that the United States seeks with President Joe Biden, as with Donald Trump, Russia is rather a minor partner for the Chinese, neither more nor less. This also has to do with the fact that Moscow leads rather weak allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), while China, as a matter of principle, does not belong to any military alliance and strictly guards its strategic sovereignty. For both, the rule is: we don't interfere in each other's internal affairs. In the Ukraine conflict, Beijing

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prefers to act with discretion rather than take risks, possibly ahead of the Winter Olympics. Support for Russian diplomacy in the UN Security Council should be enough.

Russia needs China much more than the other way around. After all, the People's Republic is superior in almost every respect or, at least, has long been even. Years ago, there was a notable exception in the military sector. The Beijing government was interested in benefiting from the modernization of the Russian military initiated in 2008, especially trends in weapons technology. High-tech weaponry was acquired for the People's Liberation Army, joint weapons technology projects were developed, and military exercises were conducted. The most recent took place in the summer of 2021 in Inner Mongolia, which belongs to China, when nearly 10,000 soldiers participated and Defense Ministers Sergei Shoigu and Wei Fenghe met. Meanwhile, the Chinese armed forces have partly caught up with the Russian ones, are superior in some respects or are in a position to reach them in nuclear weapons. Here, too, the mantra of being independent of any foreign power in armament matters applies equally to Russia.

The Chinese are well aware of the asymmetry and growing inequality in bilateral relations. Russia continues to rely on fossil fuels for its foreign trade; the Chinese now produce undoubtedly better and more effective weapons, software and high-tech pharmaceuticals. Despite the pandemic, they are the symbol of a rapidly growing global economic power that needs raw materials and can offer much in return: consumer and luxury goods, machines and equipment, more than ever computer products. The absorption capacity of the Russian market is seriously limited. The regions of the Far East are too sparsely populated, the infrastructures leave much to be desired compared to China, the population is shrinking and aging. With Moscow and St. Petersburg there are two prosperous cities with millions of inhabitants, China has a dozen of them.

However, the volume of trade between the two countries continues to grow, going from about eleven billion dollars in 2001 to 140 billion last year. And the trend is increasing, also thanks to the gigantic gas pipeline projects for the export of gas to China, such as the gas pipeline called "The Siberian Force". A first section, of 2,200 kilometers, has been in operation since December 2019; the second segment, of more than 800 kilometers, will follow shortly. The energy company Gazprom supplies an amount of 36 billion cubic meters of gas per year. This amount is likely to more than double as soon as another

stretch, "The Siberian Force 2", becomes operational. This is called diversification, and it gives Gazprom the advantage of being less dependent on Western customers and benefiting from China's climate policy. China's withdrawal from coal and oil will preferably be offset by the switch to natural gas. However, this does not change the fact that Russia is only a moderately relevant trading partner for China, while China is increasingly important to Russia. The People's Republic now accounts for a fifth of Russian foreign trade, while China only conducts just over two percent of its trade with Russia. Regardless of this, the Chinese need their neighbor for their Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the "New Silk Road," which they have been carrying out since 2013. The most important rail routes to Europe pass through Russian territory. The sea route, for example, through Arctic waters, where Russia would also be commissioned, would be more expensive. The fact that most of the partners China needs for its exports, international supply and value chains, foreign investments and business cooperation are located far west increases the value of transit routes through Russia.

At the same time, Chinese investors and banks shy away from broad participation in the Russian economy, especially in the Far East. Both sides have been excessively cautious about the respective sanctions imposed on them by the United States and the EU. China's central bank has done nothing to support the ruble. In any case, the Chinese financial market has always shown little interest in the Russian currency, much to the chagrin of Moscow bankers, who would like things to be different. And if Beijing wants, it can dictate prices to Russia's oil and gas monopolies, Gazprom and Rosneft. Despite supply contracts with a duration of 30 years.

Discrepancy over Crimea

China would be the ideal partner for the economic development of Russia's sparsely populated but resource-rich Far East. But China's geostrategic interests are not guided by such expectations. It's fine that the Chinese have built some bridges over the Amur border river, but that doesn't change the fact that China and Russia can be geostrategic competitors. For example, in Central Asian States such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where the People's Republic is very present thanks to direct military aid. Or in the Arctic, where China has so far cooperated with Russia on several major projects. Within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which in addition to Russia

and China includes archrivals India and Pakistan, the diplomatic terrain is available to regulate bilateral conflicts of interest in Central Asia or elsewhere. Certainly, good neighborliness prevails for the time being, but China does not unconditionally support Russian foreign policy.

Above all, Beijing does not support autonomous movements in Georgia, Moldova or eastern Ukraine. It is precisely the separatist aspirations that are feared and fought in their own country: in Xinjiang, in Tibet or in Hong Kong. Therefore, the Chinese authorities have so far not recognized the annexation of Crimea.

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