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China, Russia lead non-West initiatives

By Dmitri Trenin

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President Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, talk on the sidelines of the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Dushanbe, Tajikistan on Thursday.

On May 9, when Russia celebrates the 70th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany, Moscow's Red Square will for the first time see a unit of China's People's Liberation Army marching past the reviewing stand. Among the foreign dignitaries reviewing the military parade, Chinese President Xi Jinping will be the most prominent.

Xi's presence at the Victory Parade will be in stark contrast to the decision of Western leaders to stay away from it in protest against Russia's involvement in Ukraine. In September, Russian President Vladimir Putin will return the compliment by traveling to Beijing to mark the 70th anniversary of Victory in the War of Chinese People's Resistance against Japanese Aggression and the end of World War II.

In mid-May, nine ships from the Russian and Chinese navies will hold joint drills in the Mediterranean Sea. Similar bilateral exercises have been held since 2012, but all of them have been in the western Pacific Ocean. Taking the naval drill to what used to be a NATO pond after the end of the Cold War is certainly designed as a not-too-subtle message to the United States.

Also, Russia has decided to allow the transfer of more sophisticated weapons, such as the S-400 air defense system, to China. Japan, which has had to bow to US pressure and join sanctions against Russia, will not be amused. Does all this suggest incremental moves toward a de facto military alliance between Moscow and Beijing?

The answer is no. China and Russia both basically rely on nuclear deterrence as ultimate national security guarantee, and an alliance brings little added value.

Besides, every country is adamant about its own strategic independence. Right now, there is no common military threat of a caliber warranting a Sino-Russian alliance. For all their mutual resentment toward US global dominance, strategies of Russia and China toward the US differ greatly. And even though Russia-China relations have progressed greatly since being normalized a quarter century ago, military security remains a highly sensitive area where neither side wants to open up too much, and too soon.

Yet the fact that there is no Sino-Russian alliance in the offing does not mean that the relationship has remained static. In the last 15 months or so, it has made a big leap forward from a "marriage of convenience" to something of an entente, that is, a close political alignment.

The Ukraine crisis, which has resulted in a confrontation between Russia and the US and a rupture between Russia and the European Union, produced a major geopolitical shift in Eurasia, pushing Moscow's geopolitical and strategic axis eastward. At the same time, Beijing's "Belt and Road Initiatives" laid a blueprint for a more active Chinese role in Eurasia. Facing US-led opposition along its eastern seaboard, China has embarked on a journey westward. China and Russia, which until recently were standing back to back on their long border, no longer fearful of each other but each looking away, will come face to face.

Given the present global environment, Moscow and Beijing are more likely to cooperate than to compete. The common agenda is both expanding and deepening. It includes energy and transportation, infrastructure and banking, agriculture and water resources, space and technology, regional security and continental order. In each area, qualitative steps are being taken or envisaged, taking cooperation to a higher level.

The process may not be smooth and interests do not always coincide, but the direction of the change is clear. From East Asia to Eastern Europe, and from the Arctic to the South China Sea, a new pattern of much closer interaction is emerging. China is becoming a clear priority for Russia. Beijing, for its part, is forming a Eurasian strategy, with Moscow being a key part of it.

Other countries, from the US to European nations to Japan, need to pay attention. They should not expect a new Sino-Russian bloc, complete with a military pact. However, the Russia-China rapprochement is a sign of the changing world order, in which the West is still very relevant, but no longer dominant. The non-West, a highly diverse group of countries, is beginning to flesh out international structures of its own, from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to BRICS to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The Sino-Russian entente is a major driver of the process.