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Russia-China proximity augurs bad for US

March 24, 2013



Chinese President Xi Jinping started his first foreign tour with a three-day state visit to Russia on March 23, just nine days after he took office.

On Friday, the two countries signed a set of agreements on a further promotion and development of cooperation in the energy and banking sectors.

The documents, signed with the presence of Russian President Vladimir Putin and Xi, are aimed at broadening cooperation in the energy sector and in the construction process of a petroleum treatment facility and a petrochemical plant in China's Tianjin metropolitan area.

Chinese and Russian companies have also agreed to invest \$2 billion in eastern Siberia to develop coal mines.

For the third year in a row in 2012, China remained Russia's top trade partner. In 2012 alone, the volume of trade exchanges between the two countries reached \$88.16 billion, up 11 percent from the year before. Besides oil and gas, China imports sophisticated arms from Russia.

China was the world's fifth largest arms exporter in 2012, but it has shown willingness to buy Russia's most modern weapons.

The Russian and Chinese leaders hope they would diversify their trade. They plan to raise their trade exchanges to \$100 billion by 2015 and to \$200 billion by 2020.

The relations between Russia and China are currently at their best. The new Chinese leader's visit to Russia in his first foreign trip indicates the strategic significance of Beijing-Moscow relations.

This trip also carries a clear message for the United States and the European Union (EU) that China and Russia are determined to boost their influence on international developments.

Since the US foreign policy's strategy for the coming decade is focused on further clout with Asia, China is expanding its ties with Russia and other members of the BRICS group of emerging economies -- Brazil, India, and South Africa.

Energy is the most important sector Russia and China would cooperate in. Russia sits atop huge energy reserves which can serve energy-starving China. Through energy cooperation, the two countries can counter US financial and geopolitical influence.

Putin and Xi are not expected to finalize the deal for a pipeline to carry natural gas from Russia to China so soon. However, Putin is set to take advantage of China to keep Russia's economy running.

Xi has estimated that his country's economy would overtake US's during his ten-year term in office.

Over recent years, Russia and China have largely expanded their cooperation particularly within the framework of international organizations. They are now two leading members of the influential Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a counterweight to US expansionist policies in Central Asia and Eurasia.

Russia and China also share similar views on Syria, particularly in opposing Western interference in the affairs of this Arab state. Since the start of crisis in Syria in 2011, Russia and China have vetoed three resolutions drafted by other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.

In Putin's view, strategic relations between Beijing and Moscow are of great significance due to their influence on the world's stability and security.

In their Friday meeting, Xi told Putin that his first foreign visit to Moscow showed to what extent his country lent credence to its ties with Russia.

China's ties with US have become complicated. It has practically cut its ties with Japan while its relations with India are fraught with tensions. Amid such tumult, good and strong bonds with Russia would mean too much.

Economy is China's top priority, but cooperation about Iran, Syria, and North Korea are also of high significance in its foreign policy. Furthermore, China expects Russia to make up for their reduced oil imports from Iran.

The head of Russia's biggest oil consumer Rosneft, Igor Sechin, said on Friday that the company plans to increase its oil supplies to China to 45-50 million tons a year, from a current 15 million tons a year via the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline.

Following his talks with Xi, Putin said the two countries have agreed to cooperate further in space technology, telecommunications and aircraft manufacturing.

The US, EU and Japan are anxiously following up on Xi's ongoing visit to Russia. A possible proximity between China, Russia, and India would present the world powers with new puzzles.