



# COMPARATIVE

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## CONNECTIONS

A TRIANNUAL E-JOURNAL OF BILATERAL  
RELATIONS IN THE INDO-ASIA-PACIFIC

CHINA- RUSSIA RELATIONS

## ABSORBING SHOCK AND AWE: TRUMP STYLE

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A year into Donald Trump's presidency, both China and Russia have found themselves in a more difficult relationship with the United States. For the first time in history, the two large powers were characterized as "revisionists," "strategic competitors," and "rivals" in a series of US strategy documents: the 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS), 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) and 2018 *Nuclear Posture Review* (NPR). In practical terms, the US threatened Beijing with a [trade-war](#) and tried to play the [Taiwan card](#), while punishing Russia with [Syria bombings](#) and [diplomat expulsions](#). Meanwhile, Russian President Putin secured his next six years, his fourth term in office, with 77 percent of the vote while President Xi Jinping succeeded in [ending a two-term limit](#) on the PRC presidency. At the onset of 2018, the three largest powers in the world were in the hands of strongmen and the world was in uncharted waters as the US appeared ready to simultaneously take on China and Russia as its main rivals for the first time since the early 1970s.

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This article is extracted from *Comparative Connections*: A Triannual E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations, Vol. 20, No. 1, May 2018. pp 121-128

## All the president's men...

The first four months of 2018 did not witness any top-level leadership exchanges between China and Russia. Other senior officials, however, frequented each other's capitals. By early April, both newly appointed Chinese foreign and defense ministers went to Moscow for their first trips abroad as Russia's relations with the West had plunged to a new low. In facing the increasingly hawkish and unpredictable Trump administration, these exchanges continued to define the shape and substance of the Sino-Russian "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination" (CSPC).

In his meeting with visiting Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on April 5, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stressed the strategic and comprehensive nature of bilateral relations. "Our relations are global and strategic. Moscow and Beijing set an example with their balanced and responsible approach to resolving current international issues and effectively work together in various multilateral formats, primarily in the UN, but also in the SCO, BRICS, G20, APEC, East Asia Summits and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia as well as at other venues," said [Lavrov](#). Indeed, given the inconsistencies of Trump's foreign policy, Russia and China found more assurance in each other's arms as the Russian foreign minister described "[the unprecedently high level](#) of Russian-Chinese comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation."

In his meeting with President Putin, Wang Yi also framed China's relations with Russia as based on "the highest level of political mutual trust" (最高水平的政治互信) with the CSPC as the only status that each country granted to the other (中俄互为彼此唯一的全面战略协作伙伴). Wang's Moscow trip was particularly weighted as he was defined as a special envoy of President Xi, who received his second term as Chinese president five days after Putin got his fourth-term presidency. Russia was also Wang's first foreign destination after his appointment as a counselor of the State Council (国务委员), which is equivalent to being a vice premier. This means Wang will supervise China's foreign affairs even after he retires from the foreign minister position.



1President Putin with Special Envoy of the Chinese President, Member of the Chinese State Council, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi

Other high-ranking Chinese officials were also in Moscow in early April. China's newly appointed Defense Minister Wei Fenghe (魏凤和) visited April 1-5 on his first overseas trip after his mid-March appointment. In addition to getting acquainted with his Russian counterparts, Wei attended the Seventh International Security Conference on April 4-5, which, according to Wei, was [a signal](#) to "let the Americans know about the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia." In his meeting with Wei, Russian Defense Minister Sergey [Shoigu](#) was quoted as saying that the high-level Russian-China relationship was becoming an important factor for world security.



2Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu and Defense Minister Wei Fenghe (Xinhua)

It was a coincidence that China's foreign and defense ministers were in Moscow in early April since Wang's original visit was originally set for March 27-28. However, immediately after a big fire in a department store in the Siberian city of Kemerovo, which killed 60 people, Russia requested that China [postpone Wang's Russia trip](#) to early April.

In their [talks](#) in Moscow, Russian and Chinese defense officials focused on the Korean nuclear

issue and its military implications for Russia and China. They also talked about the US security strategy that defines both China and Russia as its rivals. [Wei](#) was accompanied by the PLA's Army Chief of Staff Liu Zhenli (刘振立) and Air Force Chief of Staff Yu Qingjiang (俞庆江). The PLA delegation also visited the Military Academy of Russia's General Staff, the elite Tamanskaya Tank Division (Таманская дивизия) outside Moscow and some underground facilities at an unknown location. For Wang, the first order of business was to prepare for Putin's official visit scheduled for June as the Russian president will join the annual SCO summit in Qingdao. Beyond these time-sensitive issues, senior Chinese and Russian officials reportedly reassessed the scope, substance, and adaptability of the CSPC in light of changed US security and nuclear strategies.

### An anti-US non-alliance?

China and Russia would not form a military alliance, but would cooperate to confront US hegemony, remarked Dmitri [Trenin](#) of the Carnegie Moscow Center. Trenin's "anything-but-not-alliance" depiction of the CSPC offered the highest degree of freedom of action, while leaving options open for an alliance if necessary. Those who called for an alliance between Moscow and Beijing, such as Qinghua University political scientist Yan Xuetong, have never been the mainstream. Top leaders of both countries have said that the goal of CSPC is not alliance formation. For Beijing and Moscow, an ideal world order would be the democratization of interstate relations in which multiple centers of different political, economic, and civilizational entities would co-exist. This diverse world would accommodate current efforts to construct multilateral institutions and conceptualized frameworks such as the [SCO](#), [BRICS](#), [BRI](#), [AIIB](#), [EAEU](#), [Harmonious World](#), [Community of Common Destiny](#), while continuing to work with West-led multilateral institutions such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, G20, G7, etc. A Beijing-Moscow alliance would require some fundamental changes in the thinking and practice of their current foreign policy paradigms.

A China-Russia alliance could also be impractical given the nature and scope of the threats posed to each of them. Despite the deterioration of the security situation, external threats to China and Russia have not been

systemic and irreversible. Many, if not all, of these threats could be managed by diplomatic and nonmilitary means. A case in point is the North Korean nuclear issue. Until recently, it was perhaps the most imminent threat to regional and even global stability with the possibility of a real war involving major powers. A series of diplomatic maneuvers, notably by the two Koreas and almost all the major powers (except Japan), has defused, or at least delayed, the Korea "time bomb" by reorienting it into an ironic competition for a Nobel Peace Prize. In fact, the outcome of the Korean issue, at least for now, testifies to the validity of the long-time position of Beijing and Moscow that the Korean issue should be resolved through diplomatic and political means. This nonmilitary approach also applies to and is preferred regarding many current security issues for China and Russia such as Taiwan, the South China Sea, China's border disputes with India, Iran, and Syria.

The identification of China and Russia by the Trump administration as revisionists and top rivals, ahead of North Korea and ISIS, may lead to a situation in which Russia and China are simultaneously challenged, or even threatened, by the US to an extent that Moscow and Beijing are forced to form a formal alliance. That prospect, however, is far from certain given the inconsistencies of the Trump administration, the relative decline of US power and still credible nuclear deterrence. Nor are these strategies necessarily new. The Ukraine crisis happened during the Obama administration, whose Asia-Pacific "rebalance" and TPP were far more substantial than the strategy of the Trump administration. In the longer term, what is needed in the age of WMD is to manage disputes and crises. In this area, an alliance may not be the best option for Russia and China.

Nevertheless, the Sino-Russian partnership could be highly effective in synchronizing joint actions, particularly on military-security issues of mutual grave concern. One such issue was the joint naval [transportation of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013-14](#). Another case was their response to the United States' deployment of missile defense in South Korea in 2017. Chinese and Russian defense agencies conducted [two computerized missile defense simulations](#) in May 2016 and December 2017 and held four joint briefings on missile defense issues in multilateral forums in 12 months. The potential for Russia and China to move toward a real alliance, therefore, may depend on external

circumstances, particularly their respective relations with the West. Nor does it necessarily target any particular third country. In essence, the CSPC has been an adaptable, dynamic, and open-ended process through which both sides have learned to manage important bilateral, regional, and global affairs.

Perhaps the most important argument against an alliance between Moscow and Beijing is the current CSPC, which is a product of non-alliance, and which both sides find more equitable and comfortable. This “best ever” relationship has been achieved despite the huge change in the balance of power between the two: namely, the steady rise of China and historical decline of Russia, which is unprecedented in bilateral ties since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There must be a more powerful and mutually beneficial construct of bilateral relations to displace the CSPC, which is not in sight.

Putting China and Russia in the same category of the US’ “main rivals,” however, may have unintended consequences for the Trump administration, which has not abandoned its plan to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. Even at the lowest point in US-Russian relations, Trump does not seem to have given up on winning Russia over. After the March 2018 Russian presidential election, Trump initiated a phone call with Russian President Putin to congratulate him on his re-election. The US president never raised the issue of Russia’s meddling in the US election or the alleged nerve agent attack in London. Instead, the two focused on issues of “shared interests” including North Korea, Ukraine, etc. The US president went so far as to invite Putin for a summit “in the not-too-distant future” It was the ninth phone call between the two leaders despite all the accusations against Trump. They also expressed satisfaction with the relaxed Korean situation.

In contrast, Trump never officially congratulated Xi Jinping on his second term as China’s president. *Xinhua* released a strange piece with the title “Trump congratulated Xi’s reelection as Chinese president (特朗普祝贺习近平当选中国国家主席).” But after a lengthy list of greetings from 26 heads of states, the article ended by saying that, “US President Trump congratulated Xi with other means” (以其他方式). Apparently, Trump has not given up pulling Russia away from China, according to Beijing’s *Global Times* citing various Russian sources praising Trump’s initiatives. To drive home his

Russian-friendly-and-China-phobia strategy, Trump signed the Taiwan Travel Act that encourages the US to send senior officials to Taiwan and vice versa on March 16. Although the legislation is nonbinding, Beijing considers it a major departure from the one-China principle, which is seen as the foundation of the China-US relationship.

Trump was not the only person inside the Beltway to toy with the idea of dividing Russia from China, which is singled out as the main and long-term challenger to the US-led liberal international order (LIO). Research by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) also explored this possibility (see Asia Policy, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 2018).

Efforts to undermine the CSPC between Beijing and Moscow will continue regardless of what happens between the two Eurasian powers. They may not lead to the desired outcomes, however, since the CSPC has been driven largely by bilateral dynamics of the two countries and is therefore independent of, or immune to, their respective relations with the West, particularly with the US. One reason for this is the fact that the CSPC is ideology-free, meaning the two countries no longer assess and work with each other on the principle of ideological sameness. This state of mind evolved through a prolonged process in which the same communist ideology first minimized and then maximized socio-cultural differences between the two communist systems. Both sides paid a huge price for their overemphasis on ideology. After a short “honeymoon” (Sino-Soviet alliance, 1949–1960) and prolonged “divorce” (or confrontation in 1960–1989), the two countries found themselves in the “just-right” (Goldilocks) state of affairs as they deal with each other as they are, not what they want the other side to become. It is a cliché to depict Sino-Russian relations as a “marriage of convenience,” but living with one another without sentimentality, but with sensitivity to the lessons of history and each other’s vital interests, is a tacit ideational construct for many Russian and Chinese political elites.

The CSPC has gone well beyond current liberal interventionism in the West, which has caused many instabilities and miseries in the Middle East and much blowback against the West in the form of terrorism, refugees, and anti-establishment populism. For China and Russia, the current harsh posture of the US stems

largely from a strong sense of disappointment and dismay over the failed effort to “change” the two large powers with a [neoliberalist](#) agenda (democracy and free market economics) – hence the alleged “end” of the liberal international order. Unless the West significantly moderates its liberal interventionism, the CSPC between Moscow and Beijing, which is ideology free, will not be abandoned.

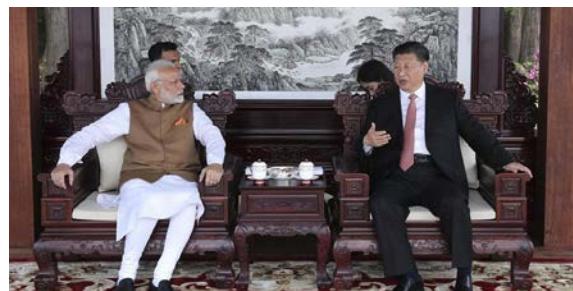
### FOIP vs. Primakov’s Dream?

One of the key components of the December 2017 US *National Security Strategy* is the “free and open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) strategy, which made a lot of sense given the sensitive and unstable relationship between China and India. In the post-Cold War decades, India became a favorite of the West as it was the most populous democracy in the world and has a thriving economy. As a result, the India factor in the FOIP strategy, which is seen as formulated around the quadrilateral security dialogue among the US, Japan, Australia, and India, seems natural for the Trump administration to contain a rising China.

China has not officially responded to the FOIP strategy, although Chinese experts have been actively [debating](#) its scope and substance with a wide spectrum of assessments. Some believe that strategy has yet to take definitive shape. Others consider it an extension of Obama’s Asia-Pacific “rebalancing.” Still others see it as a comprehensive strategy consisting of military, economics and political dimensions, although its players may have different dreams despite being in the same “bed” (FOIP), according to [Wu Minwen](#) (吴敏文) of the University of Science and Technology of National Defense. A major difference between FOIP and Obama’s rebalancing, however, seems to be the “infrastructure” dimension of the FOIP, according to [an assessment](#) in early April. This focus is evident in the infrastructure-centered Japan-US-Indian foreign ministerial meetings in New Delhi on April 4; the three countries committed to major infrastructural projects in several Southeastern countries with specific funding and coordination. The most alarmist Chinese analysts believe that FOIP transformed itself from a geographic concept to a geostrategic one on Oct. 18, 2017 when former US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson delivered a talk to CSIS. One of the goals of FOIP was to balance and constrain China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) strategy, said [Wei Hongxia](#) (魏红霞), a researcher in the American Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Science in Beijing.

The last thing that China would like to see is FOIP’s integration with Taiwan’s “[New South Policy](#)” (新南向政策).

The rationale for the FOIP was complicated when Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid a surprise “unofficial” visit to China on April 27–28. The two-day “informal” summit between President Xi and Prime Minister Modi was “nothing but [extraordinary](#),” remarked Xi as he greeted the visiting Modi. Despite its “informal” format, the summit in Wuhan reportedly achieved “[broad consensus](#)” through “in-depth exchanges of ideas regarding issues of global, long-term and strategic importance,” according to the *Global Times*. For the first time in 28 years, the non-performing “link” of the Russia-India-China (RIC) trio, which was conceptualized by the late Russian PM Yevgeny Primakov (Евгений Примаков) in 1995, is coming back to life.



3Prime Minister Modi and President Xi meet in Wuhan (Xinhua)

Much of their nine-hour discussion covered development strategies and governing methods of the two largest countries in the world. Xi explained China’s approaches to urbanization, urban-rural relations, and China’s focus on quality of life through “[supply-side](#)” economics, meaning structural changes for producers to meet the specific needs of China’s consumers. It remains to be seen how Xi’s “new era for building socialism of Chinese characteristics” and Modi’s “new India” will converge.

For [Xi](#), mutual trust is the key to the stability and development of bilateral relations. The China-India relationship was of [strategic importance](#), given that the two large Asian countries are not only the most rapidly developing markets but also the main forces for global multipolarity and economic globalization.

"The two agreed on the need to strengthen strategic communication through greater consultation on all matters of common interest," said Indian Foreign Secretary Vijay Gokhale after the summit. Beyond bilateral ties, the two sides agreed on building an open, multipolar and an open global economic order. Peaceful and stable India-China ties would be a positive development for global governance.

It would be naive to expect that the cumulative problems between the two largest Asian countries would evaporate with one summit. Modi's sudden pivot to Wuhan may well be driven more by his need for another five years in office than a genuine policy reorientation. This informal meeting took place, however, against a backdrop of heightened US pressure on China, particularly the Indo-Pacific strategy with a visible Indian role in containing China. The two-day summit apparently improved mutual trust so much that Modi's invitation to Xi for a second meeting in India was immediately accepted. Any improvement in relations with India would reduce the likelihood of a C-shaped encirclement of China by the US' Indo-Pacific strategy. Modi said India pursued an independent foreign policy, globalization, multilateralism and democratization of international relations. These concepts run counter to Trump's unilateralism and America-firstism and Beijing would like to see India live up to its declared independent posture in world affairs.

India and China have plenty of issues between themselves. The Tibet issue, though being managed, persists. India still lives in the shadow of its [1962 war](#) with China. The Kashmir issue and the \$62 billion China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) remain irritants for India. And, India has yet to join China's BRI. Finally, India's ruling elite remain suspicious and even hostile toward China. The informal summit, nonetheless, represents a first step toward a more pragmatic relationship after years of mutual suspicion.

One of the concrete results of the informal summit was a "[strategic guidance](#) to their ... militaries to strengthen communication in order to build trust and mutual understanding and enhance predictability and effectiveness in the management of border affairs," according to the Indian media. The commitment to confidence-building between the two militaries was both timely and vital given the 73-day standoff in

June-August 2017 in the Doklam border area (*dong lang* 洞朗 in Chinese). The two sides are working to ensure that their 3,488-km joint border would not see a repeat of the faceoff that sent ties plummeting.

For India, China's declared foreign economic policies provide India with specific benefits, while the US factor remains uncertain. Trade with China has increased steadily since 2014. In 2017, bilateral trade grew 20 percent to \$84.4 billion, and India's exports to China jumped 40 percent. Meanwhile, China's investment in India increased by 40 percent as major Chinese appliance and electronics companies continue to invest in India. All these developments require the two sides to synchronize in a world in which more than a third of the population (2.6 billion) are Chinese and Indian. The benefit from cooperation is certain while the cost for confrontation is also guaranteed. Xi and Modi seem to have chosen the former.

The elephant-dragon "dance" may lead to substantial outcomes in geopolitics as the Xi-Modi summit constitutes the first step toward a more equitable Eurasian league. It remains to be seen if the dream of Primakov will give rise to new dynamics not only in the China-Russia-India trio but in the US-India-China-Russia quadrilateral game in a fluid and unpredictable international environment.

# CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

## JANUARY – APRIL 2018

**Jan. 10, 2018:** Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Igor [Morgulov](#) meets China's Ambassador to Russia Li Hui to discuss the Korean Peninsula and agree to coordinate bilateral efforts with a view to reaching a political and diplomatic settlement.

**Jan. 13, 2018:** Deputy Foreign Minister Morgulov meets Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister [Kong Xuanyou](#) in Moscow. They exchange opinions on the Korean nuclear issue and Northeast Asia and emphasize “the need to further improve coordination of efforts between Russia and China in order to de-escalate tension and settle the entire range of problems in the region based on mutually promoted peace initiatives.”

**Jan. 26, 2018:** Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa Mikhail [Bogdanov](#) receives Chinese Ambassador Li to discuss the Middle East and Syria.

**Feb. 7, 2018:** [Opening ceremony](#) for the Years of Russian-Chinese Interregional Cooperation (2018 and 2019) is chaired in Harbin by Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang and Russian Deputy Prime Minister and Plenipotentiary Presidential Representative in the Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev.

**March 3, 2018:** Russian State Aerospace Group (ROSCOSMOS) and China National Space Administration sign an [agreement of cooperation](#) in the areas of moon exploration, deep space studies, and the creation of a joint data center for space exploration. The document is signed on the sidelines of the second International Forum of Space Exploration in Tokyo.

**March 12, 2018:** Deputy Foreign Minister Morgulov receives Ambassador Li to discuss bilateral relations and the current state of affairs on the Korean Peninsula.

**March 15, 2018:** Deputy Foreign Minister [Morgulov](#) travels to Beijing to co-chair the Russian-Chinese Dialogue on Security in Northeast Asia with China's Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou. Morgulov also meets Foreign Minister Wang Yi.

**March 15, 2018:** Deputy Foreign Minister and Special Presidential Representative for the Middle East and Africa [Bogdanov](#) meets China's Special Envoy on the Middle East Gong Xiaosheng on the sidelines of the Rome II Ministerial Meeting to support the Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces. They discuss the Middle East, including the current situation in Syria and Libya, and the prospects for a Palestinian-Israeli settlement.

**March 17, 2018:** President Vladimir Putin sends congratulatory [message](#) to Xi Jinping on his election as president of China. Putin notes that Russia-China relations have reached an unprecedented height thanks largely to Xi's personal push.

**March 19, 2018:** President Xi sends [a congratulatory message](#) to President-elect Putin. Xi and Putin also [talk](#) over the phone.

**March 26, 2018:** President Xi and Premier Li Keqiang send messages of condolence to Russian counterparts for the 64 victims of a fire in a department store in Kemerovo Siberia.

**March 26, 2018:** More than 20 Western countries expel more than 130 Russian diplomats in retaliation against the alleged nerve agent poisoning of former Russian spy Sergei V. [Skripal](#) and his daughter in the UK on March 4.

**April 1-5, 2018:** China's Defense Minister Gen. [Wei Fenghe](#) visits Russia and leads the Chinese group for the seventh Moscow International Security Conference.

**April 4-5, 2018:** China's Foreign Minister and State Counselor Wang Yi visits Moscow as President Xi's special envoy. He meets Russian counterpart Lavrov and President Putin.

**April 4-5, 2018:** Russian-Chinese Commission on the joint verification of two sections of the state border between Russia and China holds its [first sessions](#) in Moscow.

**April 23-24, 2018:** Russian FM Lavrov visits China and meets FM Wang. Lavrov also attends the SCO's annual foreign ministerial meeting, where President Xi meets SCO foreign ministers.

**April 25-26, 2018:** Fifth Russian-Chinese conference of the Valdai Discussion Club, titled "Russia and China: Contemporary Development Challenges" is held in Shanghai and more than 50 officials and leading experts from Russia and China attend.