



**China-Russia Relations:
Into the Syrian Storm: Between Alliance and Alignment**

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In the final months of 2015, China-Russia interaction started with President Putin's state visit to China and ended with the 20th annual prime ministerial meeting in Beijing. While Putin's visit was full of historical and geopolitical symbolism (China's victory parade for the 70th anniversary of its war of resistance against Japan's invasion), the prime ministers meeting was geared for substance, aiming to energize bilateral economic relations against the backdrop of Western sanctions against Russia and China's economic slowdown. In between, Chinese and Russian leaders met at multilateral forums to synchronize their policies and actions, and a \$2-billion sale of 24 Russian *Sukhoi-35* fighter-bombers to China after eight years of negotiations was finalized. Meanwhile, the world witnessed Russia's decisive intervention in the Syrian civil war, the European refugee crisis, the Paris massacre, and the rise of [anti-establishment forces](#) across the West. The apparent warming of Sino-Russian relations led to another round of questions: were they moving toward an anti-West alliance?

Putin in Beijing

Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to China on Sept. 2-3 was scheduled for two reasons: to participate in China's first-ever Victory Day parade to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of WWII, which served to reciprocate for President Xi Jinping's participation in Russia's V-D parade in May, and to make a state visit. 12,000 Chinese servicemen accompanied by the latest equipment in the PLA's arsenal took part in the parade, while 81 Russian guards of honor from the Preobrazhenskiy Regiment brought up the rear of the foreign delegations. Despite the rather "thin" Russian contingent for the largest military parade in the PRC's history, the appearance of Russian servicemen in the parade, which was the first time this occurred in the history of their relations, was significant in and of itself. For some in China, the Russians made an important "final touch (压轴戏)" for the spectacular display of China's military might. Putin's appearance in Beijing was full of political, historical, and perhaps geopolitical symbolism. Among the heads of the 20 foreign countries and governments joining the ceremonial events in Beijing, he was the only leader who represented a country that had been an ally of China in World War II.

After the military parade, the two heads of state held a formal meeting. They reiterated their resolve to safeguard the historical legacies regarding WWII, pointing out that the two countries were the main battlefields in Asia and in Europe during WWII and that both made the greatest

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sacrifices and the greatest contributions to the final victory of World War II. While Putin emphasized that the two countries should do everything possible to prevent large-scale military conflicts and keep all armed conflicts to a minimum, President Xi Jinping talked about promoting regional and world peace and injecting positive energy into mankind's peace and progress. The nuances that distinguished their remarks were perhaps less important than their respective presence at each other's ceremonies, while their former Western allies were largely absent. The reciprocal visits for each other's V-Days were not only for preserving the historical linkage, but also for mutual understanding, if not support, when the strategic spaces of Moscow and Beijing were being contested by the West, particularly the US.

Economic issues, however, topped the agenda in their meeting. In his opening statement, President Xi said that the two sides should expand cooperation in finance, investment, energy, and among localities. Xi noted the need to formulate appropriate "long-term plans and programs" to integrate China's Silk Road Economic Belt and Russia's Eurasia Economic Union (EAEU). He indicated that China was looking to work with Russia for Eurasian economic integration and development, rather than certain short-term "pivots" as frequently articulated by Russia as a result of its difficulties with the West. Putin echoed Xi's call for economic cooperation, but with more specific areas of interactions, such as energy, petrochemicals, finance, space, science and technology, and the manufacturing sector, among others.

The EAEU is a regional economic grouping that currently includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Its main objectives are to form a single market, create opportunities for the free flow of goods, services, investment, and labor forces within the borders of the member countries by 2025, while introducing a coordinated economic policy. The EAEU and its predecessor (the Custom Union) have long been promoted by Moscow. It was not until September 2013 when the concepts of the Silk Road Economic Belt initiative – together with the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road initiative, commonly known as the "Belt and Road" (B&R) initiative – were proposed by President Xi Jinping during his first official tour of Central Asia as China's head of state. The B&R strategy was the culmination of that 10-day trip. Since then, China's "Belt & Road" concept has been broadened to bring together countries in Asia, Europe, and even Africa via overland and maritime networks, with the purpose of boosting infrastructure building, financial cooperation, and cultural exchanges in those regions.

Moscow's initial reaction to Beijing's strategy was rather skeptical if not outright hostile (see [Yu Bin, "Putin's Glory and Xi's Dream: Russian-China Relations, September-December 2013"](#)). Moscow's skepticism toward the B&R became muted in 2014 when Western sanctions against Russia were tightened. It was obvious that Moscow was in a much weaker position to resist China's westward move, let alone to keep its Central Asian partners in line. The best alternative was to work with Beijing and benefit from China's investment spree. Prior to Russia's V-D parade on May 9, 2015, Presidents Putin and Xi signed a document to integrate China's B&R with the latter's aspiration under the EAEU framework. In the [joint declaration](#) for the "New Stage of the Sino-Russian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Cooperation" issued at the end of Putin's state visit to China on May 20, 2014, the Russian side recognized "the importance of China's B&R initiative and speaks highly of China's willingness to take into consideration Russia's interest during the planning and implementation of the B&R" (高度评价中方愿在制定和实施过程中考虑俄方利益).

For Putin and Xi, the more immediate challenge was how to maintain momentum in bilateral economic interactions. In the first six months of 2015, the value of bilateral trade fell 31.4 percent compared to the previous year. The main reason for such a sharp drop was the depressed energy prices. Russia's heavy dependence on energy exports to China was the structural cause for such a decline. Russia's imports also declined significantly due to the ruble's devaluation.

To reverse the downward trend in bilateral economic relations, Putin brought with him a sizeable delegation of functionaries and businessmen that included Presidential Staff leader Sergey Ivanov, three vice premiers – Olga Golodets, Igor Shuvalov, and Dmitriy Rogozin – several ministers, and the leaders of Rosneft, Gazprom, NOVATEK, Russian Railroads, the Russian Direct Investment Fund, Vneshekonombank, and the State Corporation for Atomic Energy. Following the formal meeting, Xi and Putin together witnessed the signing of 27 cooperative agreements in diplomacy, infrastructure, localities, education, science and technology, customs, economy, energy, finance, trade, electricity, communication, cyberspace, automobiles, and other areas. The signed documents were reportedly worth \$30 billion.

A long-expected, major gas deal between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC), however, was not signed – neither side gave a reason. Chinese media grouped the pending gas deal with other signed documents with a statement that Gazprom “[will sign a MoU with CNPC](#),” which was a strange description for a deal that had yet to be made. China and Russia signed a \$400 billion natural gas supply deal via an eastern route in May 2014. In November 2014, the two countries agreed to start negotiating a similar deal through a western route. Since then, plummeting world oil prices became a major stumbling block to finalize the western route deal. By the year end, [some calculations](#) show that at current prices, Power of Siberia, which is Gazprom's largest-ever project in terms of investment levels, would only start to make a profit in something like 30 years. For China, its slower economic growth and the stock market rout meant its energy demand would not be as strong as in the past decade. It is unlikely China will pay an excessively high amount for the Russian gas, given the weakness of both domestic and international markets. It appeared that both China and Russia were moving more cautiously and realistically, balancing the potential and limits of their economic relations.

The lure and lull of Russia's Far East

President Putin left Beijing after the summit, but did not go directly back to Moscow. His next stop was Vladivostok where he presided over the first East Economic Forum (EEF), which he had proposed to speed up development of eastern Russia and expand multilateral cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. Putin's presence in the EEF signaled a new importance of the Far East region for the Russian economy, largely because of the stagnation in the European part of Russia following the annexation of Crimea in 2014. In early 2015, Russia decided to form a special economic zone in Russia's Far East that gives generous tax incentives to corporations choosing to operate there.

“Today we see the future of the Far East as one of Russia's key centers of social and economic development, a center that should be effectively integrated into the quickly developing Asia-Pacific region,” Putin said in his speech at the EEF opening ceremony. He also proposed

extending the free port policy to more cities in Russia's Far East region, while the city of Vladivostok and 15 other maritime administrative districts were given that status in July 2015. Specifically, said Putin, the Russian government is prepared to lower the tariffs for transport, energy costs, electricity, and other goods and services, in order to attract investment.

Of the 300 foreign company representatives in Vladivostok, 130, or 40 percent, came from China, while 98 were South Korean and 54 Japanese. The Chinese business group was led by Vice Premier Wang Yang, who has been in charge of external economic relations for China. In their meeting on the sidelines of the EEF, Putin thanked the Chinese for dispatching a high-level delegation and a large number of company representatives to take part in the EEF. He said,

We are facing many tasks and problems today. The problems can, and must, be solved jointly. Together with our friend and colleague Chinese President Xi Jinping we discussed the whole range of issues of cooperation between China and Russia. In this context, cooperation between China and Russia in the Far East appears to be quite interesting, promising and important. Therefore we hope very much that our Chinese friends will show interest in those projects and opportunities which we are offering here, in the Far East.

Wang replied that China was willing to make a joint effort with Russia to "expand investment and cooperation in resource development, processing and manufacturing, modern agriculture, port logistics, infrastructure, and in other areas, so as to realize mutual benefits and win-win results and open up new spaces in practical cooperation between China and Russia." Wang also said China was willing to actively take part in the investment, construction, and operation of Russia's Vladivostok free port and special development zone. Following the meeting, Wang and Putin visited the ocean expo project in Russia's Primorsky Krai.

The large Chinese presence in the first EEF may not just reflect geographic proximity, but also a growing trend in China's overseas direct investment (ODI). In 2014, China's ODI surpassed foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country, marking a fundamental change in China's economic development. Meanwhile, foreign investors in Russia are now facing a quite unexpected incentive, that is, a sharp drop in US dollar terms of real annual wages in Russia. According to a study by Bank of America Merrill Lynch, real annual wages during the first half of 2015 were lower in Russia (\$565.4) than China (\$764.3) and Mexico (\$636.6). That was a 33 percent drop from the 2014 real annual wage in Russia of \$839.70.

Even under these favorable conditions, Russia's efforts to get China's investment did not seem successful. A few days after the EEF, the Russian president's envoy to the Russian Far Eastern Federal District Yury Trutnev seemed to blame the Chinese government for not encouraging Chinese investors to go to Russia. In his speech at the Summer Davos Forum, chaired by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang in Dalian on Sept. 9-10, Trutnev remarked that "We create the templates, but if the Chinese leadership says to Chinese businesses 'let's invest in the Far East,' then the process will get underway, and if it doesn't say this, then it won't." He even pointed to Chinese investment in Angola as a successful case of Chinese government-driven ODI: its capital Luanda "has been transformed with the help of Chinese investors." "Does Angola really have a more stable and favorable investment climate than Russia?" asked Trutnev.

The 20th Prime Ministers Meeting in Beijing

It has been 20 years since the prime ministers of the two countries kicked off their regular consultation in April 1996. Over the years, it has become the most comprehensive inter-governmental mechanism in China's external cooperation. In Beijing, Premiers Li Keqiang and Dmitry Medvedev discussed measures to offset the impact of the current economic slowdown and commodity price devaluation around the world. Thirty-three agreements were signed in the areas of energy, investment, finance, hi-tech, customs inspection, education, tourism, etc.

During the meeting, Li proposed to set industrial capacity and equipment manufacturing as new areas to power the two economies. He also urged the implementation of key bilateral projects and more cooperation in areas including energy, finance, aviation, agriculture, and military technology. In his press conference with Li, Medvedev did not directly comment on China's proposal for new areas of cooperation. Instead, he revealed that Russia and China only agreed that future agreements should be formed while taking into account mutual interests. For Medvedev, the new area of cooperation was in agriculture. After meeting Li, he told the press that, "China is the most populous country on the planet and Russia is the world's largest country with 10 percent of the world reserves of arable land. If we combine this potential, we will achieve a completely new situation. We have agreed to do this and signed a number of agreements to build our relations in this area." In a joint communique, equipment manufacturing was mentioned in a passing sentence. After their formal meeting, Li and Medvedev presided over the closing ceremony of the Years of Youth Exchanges and an opening ceremony of the Years of Russian and Chinese Media for 2016-17.

The 14th SCO Prime Ministerial Meeting: elephant's foot in the china shop?

Central Asian states were facing serious challenges in the last four months of 2015 for at least two reasons: the deterioration of Afghan security and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and beyond. In late September, the city of Kondozi, which has a population of 300,000, fell to the Taliban. It is the first provincial capital to fall to the Taliban since the US invasion and was perhaps the biggest success for the Taliban in 14 years. For Central Asian countries, it is alarming to see that these radical Afghani Islamists, who now control the city, are just 70km from the southern border of Tajikistan, and are not much further from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Already in mid-October, combat activities were reportedly taking place along over 60 percent of the common border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

For Central Asian states, the phenomenal rise of the IS poses a big threat as approximately 3,000 citizens from those countries are involved in IS activity in the greater Middle East. With the IS reportedly working to turn Afghanistan and the Central Asian states into a promising recruiting ground, the return home of seasoned fighters would be a nightmare, as well as for Russia as the chief security guarantor for many Central Asian countries.

On Nov. 3, top officials of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) met in Moscow to discuss responses to new threats and challenges. CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha, CIS Executive Secretary Sergei Lebedev, and SCO Secretary General

Dmitry Mezentsev attended the meeting, which focused on ways to bolster security and stability, respond to new challenges and threats, migration policy, and information support.

On Dec. 5-7, the SCO's military representatives held a meeting on security issues in Sanya, Hainan Province. They reportedly agreed to strengthen military cooperation in various sectors to deal with the complicated and unstable international security situation. Meanwhile, the Afghan government was requesting SCO membership and assistance, as well as Russian weapons.

Against this backdrop, prime ministers of the SCO held the 14th annual Prime Minister Meeting on Dec. 14-15 in Zhengzhou, China. As chair, Premier Li Keqiang proposed that the SCO establish six platforms for cooperation in the areas of security, production capacity, connectivity, financial cooperation, regional trade cooperation, and cooperation on social affairs and improving people's lives. Li's prioritizing of security issues for the SCO was in line with the original spirit of the organization when the Shanghai-Five morphed into the SCO on July 10, 2001, dedicated to enhancing security for China and the other five post-Soviet states. Its mission of combating terrorism, extremism, and separatism was declared two months before the 9/11 attacks against the US. By the end of 2015, both the deterioration of Afghan security and the rising IS threat presented new challenges for the regional security group, now occupying three-fifths of the Eurasian continent and a quarter of the world's population. For this purpose, Li proposed to speed up the drafting and signing of a SCO treaty for combating extremism (反极端主义公约).

The bulk of Li's proposals dealt with economic issues, including equipment manufacturing as a new area of economic cooperation for SCO members. Obviously, China wants to apply its comparative advantage in manufacturing infrastructure, and transportation/connectivity (Li's third platform) across the SCO area. Russia's agreement to cooperate with China for the integration of its EAEU and China's B&R provides an opportunity for China to turn the SCO into a gigantic economic entity. Li used the China-Kazakhstan inter-governmental manufacturing projects (52 by the end of 2015) to highlight the mutually beneficial nature of the bilateral cooperation in manufacture, co-production, local production, and job creation. For connectivity, Li urged the earliest restart possible of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railroad project, which has been delayed by Moscow.

Li's fourth platform for the SCO was the financing mechanism for the regional group. For more than a decade, China's effort to set up a SCO development bank has been frustrated by most SCO member states, including Russia. As a result, China has resorted to bilateral deals with individual SCO states for large-scale infrastructure projects. In the past few years, Beijing has successfully "bypassed" the SCO by creating several key financial institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Silk Road Fund and the BRICS New Development Bank. Meanwhile, the SCO still operates its low-capacity SCO Interbank Association, with the bulk of Beijing's investment and loans to Central Asian countries, totaling \$27.1 billion by the end of 2015, being handled through bilateral arrangements.

Li's fifth proposal was trade liberalization. Li reminded his SCO colleagues that China has set up 14 bilateral and multilateral free trade arrangements affecting trade relations with 22 countries. He argued that with a total GDP of \$13 trillion, intra-SCO trade volume is relatively low, making

trade liberalization and facilitation an important step. For this purpose, a SCO e-trade association is needed for cross-border e-trading business.

Finally, Li proposed more people-to-people exchanges. For this goal, China will provide 20,000 scholarships in the 2016-2021 years for citizens of the SCO member states.

China's proposals were comprehensive, if not overwhelming. In comparison, Prime Minister Medvedev only broadly talked about the need for an "SCO financial mechanism" for "easy-term loans." He also used the currency swapping mechanism between Russia and China to highlight the need to bypass the use of US dollars, which is increasingly important for trade with China.

Uzbekistan was the least enthusiastic about China's proposals. Uzbek First Vice Premier Rustam Azimov said bluntly that his country was unprepared to consider the proposal on the formation of a free trade zone, and intends to "strictly adhere to, and observe, the principles of continuity and consistent development of multifaceted cooperation to meet the interests of all member-states of the organization." With that opposition, the Joint Communique does not mention free trade. Instead, the [document](#) only states that the SCO would "support multilateral, open, non-discriminative and inclusive trade mechanisms on the basis of equality, mutual respect and mutual benefit."

Uzbekistan's opposition to China's economic initiatives is not new. As incoming members of the SCO, however, disputes between India and Pakistan became obvious regarding not only China's economic agenda, but also the group's overall cohesion. In his speech, India's Minister of State for External Affairs, V.K. Singh pointed to "zero tolerance towards terrorism" as the recipe to counter terrorism. Without naming Pakistan, he said: "Political convenience can no longer provide an alibi for backing terrorist groups ideologically, financially or through material support. Today, the world has realized that there are no good terrorists."

Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif strongly supported China's B&R project and declared that his country remained committed to making the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Project – a joint undertaking under the B&R framework – a resounding success. Singh, however, opposed the China-Pakistan economic corridor as it involved certain "sovereignty issues" because it passes through the "Pakistan-occupied Kashmir." Without stating India's backing for China's B&R, Singh proposed establishment of "new networks of physical and digital connectivity that extend from Russia's northern regions to the shores of the Indian Ocean." He stressed that India's conceptual "International North South Transportation Corridor" was an important step in that direction. Singh also suggested that SCO member countries could take advantage of India's rapidly growing market, while the SCO could become a major source of India's energy security. The SCO countries could also draw on India's strengths in financial management, especially microfinance, pharmaceuticals, services, food security and agriculture as well as training and capacity building.

"Long divided, the world will unite; long united, it will fall apart," so goes the most famous quote from *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (三国演义), one of the most popular novels in China written in the 14th century. It remains to be seen how the "elephant" (India) and the "dragon" (China) will interact within the SCO framework. And do not forget the "bear in the

north.” Though considerably weakened in the past quarter of a century, Russia’s enduring interest in Central Asia will not fade.

Breakthrough in military sales

In mid-November, Russia and China hammered out the last details of a \$2 billion sale of 24 *Sukhoi-35* fighters jets, the second major Russian arms sale to China in 2015. In April, the two countries reached an agreement for a \$3 billion sale of *S-400* air-defense systems, the most advanced air-defense system in the Russian arsenal. A spokesman for the Chinese Defense Ministry defined the contract as “a successful initial phase” (阶段性成果), which opens the possibility of future negotiations for further after-sale modifications, maintenance, and even technology transfers. The Russians will deliver the first four *Su-35s* to the PLA in 2016 and the remainder are expected by the end of 2018, according to the aircraft’s Russian producer, the Komsomolsk-on-Amur Aircraft Production Association.

The announcement of the *Su-35* sale occurred during the 20th meeting of the Russian-Chinese Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technological Cooperation, held in Moscow on Nov. 15-20. The meeting was chaired by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu and China Central Military Commission Vice-Chairman Xu Qiliang. The two sides discussed international and regional security and bilateral military-technological cooperation. Xu was received by President Putin on Nov. 17, who told his Chinese guest that “as the global situation is becoming increasingly uncertain, the Sino-Russian cooperation in military-technology area is a major stabilizer for the world.” He went on to say that, “We are determined to continue both military cooperation and our interaction in the military-technological field.” Xu’s group arrived in Moscow on Nov. 15 and its members included Miao Wei, the minister of industry and information technology, Yi Xiaoguang, the deputy chief of the General Staff of the PLA, and Liu Sheng, the deputy chief of the General Armament Department of the PLA.

Talks for sale of the *Su-35s* had been underway since 2008. For the PLA, this advanced fighter would serve several purposes. It will fill a gap between the current fleet of China’s third-generation of fighter-bombers (*Su*-series, *J-10*, *J-11*, *J-15*, etc.) and its fifth-generation stealth fighter (*J-20*), which is widely believed to be in serial production after 2017. The *Su-35* is very close to a fifth-generation combat aircraft (e.g., US *F-22* and *F-35*) in terms of flight maneuverability with an operational range (about 4,500km with two external fuel tanks), which is much greater than any of the *Su*-series fighters and their Chinese equivalents. This means the *Su-35s* would give China an edge in the South China Sea. Currently, “the PLA has a limited number of aerial refueling aircraft, and these tankers are not as good as those from the United States. That leads to a constrained operational range and flight duration for our existing fighter jets,” said Wang Ya’nan, deputy editor-in-chief of *Aerospace Knowledge* in Beijing. Fu Qianshao, an aviation equipment expert with the PLA Air Force, said the *Su-35* is sufficiently powerful to surpass the US *F-35 Lightning II*, due to its supreme maneuverability. “Despite the *Su-35* having no stealth capability, it can still rival fifth-generation fighter jets in other aspects. Its service will complement our existing fourth-generation fleet of *J-10s* and *J-11s*,” he said.

Beyond the immediate need in the SCS, the PLA is more interested in the *Su-35*’s onboard Irbis-E radar, which is said to be the most powerful onboard radar, capable of detecting stealth targets

such as US *F-35*s from 90km. For Chinese aircraft manufacturers, the *Su-35*'s 117S engine is a major attraction. Despite major investment in jet engine R&D, engine manufacturing for military aircraft is still the weakest link in China's aerospace industry. With the coming serial production of China's indigenously developed stealth fighter *J-20*, Russia's engine know-how could be valuable for China's own engine development. It is unclear if the \$2 billion deal includes technology transfers. The high cost (\$83 million per *Su-35*) and the open-ended definition of the signed contract ("a successful initial phase") seem to leave that door open. Interestingly, during Xu Qiliang's visit to Russia, he and his delegation, which included CEO of the China Aerospace Industry Lin Zuoming (林左鸣), visited the 117S manufacturer in Ufa, a sign of some breakthroughs in technology transfer of Russia's 117S engine to China.

To Syria: Russian might and China's modest mediation

Russia started bombing IS targets in Syria on Sept. 30. With significant ground support and intelligence from the Syrian military, Iraqi forces, Iranian Revolutionary Guards, and allied militias, Russian air strikes primarily targeted militant groups opposed to the Syrian government. Western observers also claimed that Russian bombs fell on "moderate" rebel groups, as well as those supported by Saudi Arabia and Turkey. After the downing of Russia's Metrojet Flight 9268 on Oct. 30 over the Sinai Peninsula, Russia started using its *Tu-160* and *Tu-95* strategic bombers for the first time. A week later, a Russian *Sukhoi-24* strike aircraft was shot down by a Turkish Air Force *F-16* for the alleged violation of Turkish airspace for up to 17 seconds. One of the two Russian pilots was shot to death while parachuting by the pro-Turkey rebel groups. Russia responded by intensifying air strikes in Syria and by deploying *S-400* air-defense systems in Syria. President Putin reportedly [ordered](#) the Russian military in Syria to destroy any threatening targets: "I order you to act as tough as possible. Any target that poses a threat to Russian [military] grouping or ground infrastructure has to be destroyed immediately."

Despite growing criticism from the West, Putin's strategy seems to have achieved some of its limited goals, including preservation of a functioning Syrian state that presumably also protects Russia's interests in Syria; reasserting Russian power in the Middle East, particularly enhancing its relationship with leading Shiite powers in the Middle East, which was the first time since Egyptian President Anwar Sadat booted Soviet forces from Egypt in 1973; moving the discourse away from Ukraine and forcing the West to engage again with Russia; gaining some traction for political settlement of the Syrian crisis (Vienna negotiations); and for certain tactical coordination (such as pilot safety while operating in the Syrian air space) between the Russian and US forces in the anti-IS operations. For all of these outcomes, *Forbes* declared Vladimir Putin to be the world's most powerful person for the third year running (Merkel and Obama assumed the 2nd and 3rd ranking).

In sharp contrast to the light on Russia, China has remained on the sidelines of the Syrian drama, which is now spinning out of control in the form of refugees (to Europe) and the re-infiltration of seasoned fighters back home for sabotage (Paris bombing, etc.) and recruiting.

In early October, Russian Senator Igor Morozov was quoted as saying that China was set to enter the Syrian conflict. "It is known that China has joined our military operation in Syria; the Chinese cruiser has already entered the Mediterranean, [and an] aircraft carrier follows it," he

said. Lebanese political sources close to the Syrian regime and Hezbollah also told London-based *al-Araby al-Jadeed* that Chinese fighters would “take part in Russian raids on Syria in a matter of days.” Meanwhile, the Europeans, who were overwhelmed by the flood of refugees, urged China to provide relief efforts for the crisis. “Any contribution from China’s side would be more than welcome,” German Ambassador to China Michael Clauss said in an interview with the *South China Morning Post* on Oct. 28.

In reaction to calls to do more to help resolve the Middle Eastern crisis, China’s Foreign Ministry spokesperson simply “noticed” (“注意到”) that “Russia began striking Islamic State targets in Syria on September 30 with the consent of the Syrian government.” Russia was encouraged to work with other parties (US, Europe, etc.) in its military operations against the IS. A week later, Foreign Minister Wang Yi stressed that China supports joint international efforts against terrorism, a political solution for the Syrian crisis, and alleviation of the humanitarian crisis. Beijing’s *Global Times* cited Wang in his meeting with visiting Syrian Presidential Political and Media Advisor Bouthaina Shaaban in Beijing as saying that, “China supports counter-terrorism actions that are in line with international laws and endorsed by involved countries . He was also quoted as saying, “We hope all parties could strengthen communication and cooperation, as well as join forces in counter-terrorism actions.” Similarly, Wang made a general statement about Syrian sovereignty that “China opposes easy interference in other countries’ domestic affairs. China supports Syria’s sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, as well as its approach to find its own path of development that is consistent with its national circumstances,” Wang told Shaaban. To clarify Wang’s “sovereignty” point, *Global Times* added that “Russia began striking Islamic State targets in Syria on September 30 with the consent of the Syrian government [emphasis added].

Following his meeting with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Oct. 29, Premier Li Keqiang told reporters that the urgency of resolving the protracted dispute was rising. “The most important thing is to seize the opportunity to implement a political resolution and set up an equal, inclusive and open political dialogue,” said Li. A political solution to the Syrian crisis, therefore, has been the most consistent message coming from Beijing. For this purpose, China again invited representatives of both the Syrian government (late December) and opposition (Jan. 5-8, 2016) for talks in Beijing. In late December, [Western media](#) reported that China had “allegedly committed more than \$30 billion to postwar reconstruction in Syria.

China’s Syrian policy, therefore, has not been as closely aligned with that of Russia as some Russian and Syrian sources suggested. At the very least, Beijing seems to pursue separate tracks between its strong support for combating terrorism and a rather vague stance toward conflicts between the Assad government and the moderate rebel groups. Tian Wenlin, a research fellow on Middle Eastern studies at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, said that it was unlikely that China would team up with Russia in airstrikes in Syria. “Diplomatic support from China should suffice at this time, and this was not only because the situation in Syria was quite complicated, but also it was geographically far away from China.” Compared with other powers, “China has little private interest in the area,” noted Tian.

Wang Jian, a researcher with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, said that compared with the US and Russia, China was not as decisive a power in the Syrian conflict. “China does not

have as strong an influence in the Middle East as the other UN Security Council permanent members,” the researcher said. Liu Zhongmin, a Middle East affairs expert from Shanghai International Studies University, said military intervention was impractical given China’s lack of military presence in the region. “China would like to play a constructive role, but this must be in accordance with its capacity,” said Liu.

The consensus for caution and impartiality in China’s Syrian policy was not reserved for China’s political and intellectual elites. A yearend survey conducted by *Global Times* of 20,811 respondents from 20 countries (including China, the US, Russia, Japan, the UK, Australia, France, Brazil and South Africa) showed a huge gap between Chinese and foreign perceptions of China as a global power. While nearly 70 percent of foreign respondents agreed that China is already a global power, only 27.9 percent of Chinese respondents affirmed this idea. “Chinese people have a better perspective of the country’s problems since they live there,” said Zhu Jiejun, a professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, adding that a more precise identification of China was that of a “developing great power,” a power with wider participation in global affairs but also a country facing poverty and imbalanced and unsustainable development (at home).

“Goldilocks” for Sino-Russia relations?

By the end of the year, President Putin’s assertiveness in the Middle East and Western criticism put China in a genuine dilemma between searching for a viable approach to deescalating the crisis and maintaining a delicate balance between the West and Russia. To drive home China’s long-standing position on noninterference in internal affairs and its strong record of defending sovereignty of states, the Dec. 18 *People’s Daily* carried a long assessment of Sino-Russian relations (also reprinted in [Foreign Affairs](#)) by [Fu Ying](#), chairperson of the Foreign Affairs Committee of China’s National People’s Congress. She provided a clear parallel between China’s policies toward the Ukraine and Syrian crises at a time of Russia’s cooling relations with the West and warming ties with China:

The crises in Syria and Ukraine illuminate the ways in which China and Russia have effectively managed their partnership. Many in the United States see China’s attitude toward the conflict in Ukraine as unclear or suspect that China has sided with Russia. In fact, after the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, the spokesperson for the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated unequivocally that Ukraine’s independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity should be respected. China emphasized that all the parties involved in the Ukrainian conflict should resolve their differences through dialogue, establish coordinating mechanisms, refrain from activities that could worsen the situation, and assist Ukraine in maintaining its economic and financial stability. China did not take any side: fairness and objectivity serve as guiding principles for Beijing when addressing international affairs.

China’s “fairness” regarding the Ukraine crisis, however, was conditioned by a caveat in that China was also:

...mindful of what led to the crisis, including the series of Western-supported “color revolutions” in post-Soviet states and the pressure on Russia that resulted from NATO’s eastward expansion. It is also worth noting that there have long been complicated historical, ethnic, religious, and territorial issues between Russia and the former Soviet republics. The Ukraine crisis is a result of all these factors. As Xi put it, the crisis is “not coming from nowhere.”

Despite the huge difference between Moscow and Washington over the Syrian crisis, Fu still believed the possibility that they might find common ground:

On Syria, the view in Beijing is that Russia launched its military intervention at the request of the Syrian government in order to combat terrorist and extremist forces. Although Washington has called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, it shares Russia's goal of taking on the Islamic State (also known as ISIS). So on the one hand, the United States has criticized the Russian intervention, but on the other hand, it has expressed willingness to work with Russia on counterterrorism. The Russian move, then, was not exactly what the United States wanted to see but was not an entirely bad thing for U.S. interests, either. From China's perspective, Russia and the United States share an interest in confronting the brutal terrorists of ISIS. The hope in China is that talks among Russia, the United States, Iran, and a number of other regional powers will make progress in resolving the conflict.

As former vice minister of the Foreign Ministry, Fu's background and training were largely associated with China's policies toward English-speaking countries (she was the Chinese ambassador to the UK in 2007-09 and ambassador to Australia in 2004-07). She also led the Chinese delegation in the early stage of the talks with North Korea. Her writing, therefore, is primarily targeted a Western audience. The goal was to define both the nature and parameters of the Beijing-Moscow relationship as one of partnership but not alliance.

Fu started by disputing two main schools of thoughts in the West regarding Sino-Russian/Soviet relations: the "marriage of convenience" and "alliance," or "threat," schools. She did this in a way that is remarkably similar to [this author's view](#) eight years earlier (Yu Bin, "In Search for a Normal Relationship: China and Russian Into the 21st Century," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly* 5, no. 4, November 2007, Stockholm, Sweden, 47-81). While the former view sees the link between Beijing and Moscow as vulnerable, contingent, and marked by uncertainties – a "marriage of convenience" – the latter view sees that strategic and even ideological factors form the basis of Chinese-Russian ties and predicts the two countries – both of which see the US as a possible obstacle to their objectives – would eventually form an anti-US, anti-Western alliance.

"Neither view accurately captures the true nature of the relationship," said Fu. She further argued that the Chinese-Russian relationship was complex, sturdy, and deeply rooted, and that their different approaches to the Syria issue would not rupture their relationship; nor would they form an anti-US or anti-Western bloc of any kind. What Fu implied in her long description of the evolution of the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship is that the multi-faceted and highly institutionalized interactions between Moscow and Beijing had assumed a life of their own, regardless of their respective domestic politics and global upheavals. And this is the case only after their long, difficult, and sometimes painful relationship since the 17th century.

Fu may have ignored a crucial historical lesson: the roller-coaster relationship China and Russia sustained in the second half of the 20th century between the brief heart-melting "honeymoon" of the 1950s and heart-breaking "divorce" of the 1960s-1980s. The two Eurasian giants have now been somewhere in between their "best" and "worst" relationship. Call it a marriage of convenience, or a "[normal relationship](#)," in which the two sides are now more realistic about each other without excessive dreams and expectations. Differences do occur but most of them

get resolved or managed without being politicized, ideologized, or escalated to a “divorce.” They may not “love” each other, but they have learned how to live with one another for practicality. It is not the best or the worst human and inter-state relationship, but is perhaps “just right.” One footnote for this Goldilocks metaphor: the search for the middle ground, or 中庸, was the essence of Confucianism, to which a steadily rising China is turning to as it returns to its cultural and civilizational roots.

Fu Ying’s reasoning was perhaps the most comprehensive interpretation of China’s seemingly vague and hesitant take on the Syria issue. Beyond the complexities and nuances in China’s articulation of its Syria policy, Fu also pointed out the differences in diplomatic priority and style between Russia and China.

For all this progress, differences still exist between the two neighbors, and they don’t always share the same focus when it comes to foreign policy. Russia is traditionally oriented toward Europe, whereas China is more concerned with Asia. The two countries’ diplomatic styles differ as well. Russia is more experienced on the global theater, and it tends to favor strong, active, and often surprising diplomatic maneuvers. Chinese diplomacy, in contrast, is more reactive and cautious.

Fu ended her piece with an analogy of a scalene triangle for relations among China, Russia, and the United States, in which “the greatest distance between the three points lies between Moscow and Washington,” and “within this triangle, Chinese-Russian relations are the most positive and stable.” However, she assured that “the sound development of Chinese-Russian relations is not intended to harm the United States, nor should Washington seek to influence it. Likewise, China’s cooperation with the United States will not be affected by Russia, nor by tensions between Moscow and Washington. China should neither form an alliance based on bloc politics nor allow itself to be recruited as an ally by other countries.”

Fu’s assurance to the West was timely. One, however, should not ignore a geopolitical fact of life regarding triangular politicking among nation-states. That is, any tripartite relationship is a dynamic process rather than a fixed object. Its shape and substance are inherently unstable and fluid, depending on how each side calculates its respective interests and pursues its interests. At the height of the Ukraine crisis, I shared Fu’s belief that Moscow and Beijing would not move toward an alliance, but with one [caveat](#):

In the final analysis, a real and tight alliance between Moscow and Beijing, similar to NATO and other US-led alliances, is neither likely nor necessary in the short and medium-terms, unless the core interests of both are perceived to be jeopardized at the same time. For better or worse, the current policies of the Obama administration – punishing Russia and hedging China with a largely militarized Asia pivot—are driving Russia and China to each other’s arms.

It remains to be seen if and how the last year of the Obama administration and his successor will contribute to the reshaping of that strategic triangle between Moscow, Beijing, and Washington.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations September – December 2015

Sept. 2, 2015: Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu meets Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission Fan Changlong in Beijing. Shoygu is quoted as saying that Russian-Chinese military cooperation had a stabilizing effect on the international situation.

Sept. 2-3, 2015: Russian President Vladimir Putin conducts a state visit to China, where he also joins China's celebration to mark the end of World War II on Sept. 3.

Sept. 3-6, 2015: Tenth meeting of heads of supreme courts of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states is held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Sept. 4, 2015: President Putin meets Chinese Vice-Premier Wang Yang on the sidelines of the East Economic Forum (EEF) in Vladivostok.

Sept. 10, 2015: Chinese Premier Li Keqiang meets Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yury Trutnev on the sidelines of the Summer Davos forum in Dalian, China.

Sept. 14, 2015: Premier Li talks by phone to Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev to discuss the upcoming regular prime ministerial meeting and the SCO prime ministers meeting.

Sept. 14, 2015: China's Deputy Representative for Korean Peninsula Affairs Xiao Qian travels to Moscow for a "working visit," and is received by Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov.

Sept. 16, 2015: The SCO held its *CentrAsia - Antiterror-2015* antiterrorism exercise in Bishkek.

Sept. 18, 2015: SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) meets in Tashkent to discuss the Islamic State threat to the SCO members and an action plan for experts from SCO member states' border guard services for 2016.

Sept. 21, 2015: Russian and Chinese military doctors conduct a large-scale drill in Khabarovsk Kray. The scenario is earthquake relief for 5,000 earthquake victims.

Sept. 30, 2015: BRICS foreign ministers meet on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

Oct. 1, 2015: President Putin sends congratulatory message to President Xi on the occasion of the 66th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Oct. 1, 2015: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets Chinese counterpart Wang Yi on the sidelines of the UNGA session to discuss Syria, terrorism, Korea, and information security.

Oct. 9, 2015: Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets co-chair the 16th session of the China-Russia Committee on Humanities Cooperation in Xi'an, China's Shaanxi Province.

Oct. 14, 2015: SCO holds its first anti-online terror drill in Xiamen, China.

Nov. 3, 2015: Top administrative officials of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) meet in Moscow to discuss the response to new threats and challenges.

Nov. 13, 2015: Eighth session of the heads of the SCO member countries' emergency situations services is held in Chengdu, China.

Nov. 15, 2015: BRICS leaders meet in Turkey on the sidelines of a Group of 20 (G20) summit.

Nov. 16, 2015: Director General of the Department of Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry Wang Qun and Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the Foreign Ministry Mikhail Ulyanov co-chair a new round of consultations on arms control and nonproliferation in Moscow.

Nov. 15-20, 2015: The 20th meeting of the Russian-Chinese Mixed Intergovernmental Commission on Military-Technological Cooperation is held in Moscow, chaired by Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu and Central Military Commission Vice Chairman Xu Qiliang.

Nov. 19, 2015: Both Russian and Chinese media report that a \$2 billion contract for 24 multi-role *Su-35* fighter jets was signed following a closed-door meeting attended by representatives in Komsomolsk-on-Amur. China's Defense Department confirms the report a week later.

Nov. 30, 2015: President Putin and President Xi meet after attending the plenary meeting of the UN Climate Change Conference in Paris. The talks focused on anti-terrorism and global issues.

Dec. 5-7, 2015: SCO military officers meeting on security cooperation is held in Sanya, Hainan Island. They discuss defense cooperation and forthcoming joint military drills for 2016.

December 14-15, 2015: SCO's 14th Prime Ministers Meeting is held in Zhengzhou, China.

December 16-17, 2015: The 20th Sino-Russian prime ministerial meeting is held in Beijing.

Dec. 31, 2015: President Xi and President Putin exchange New Year greetings.