



**China-Russia Relations:
Politics of “Reluctant Allies”**

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The China-Russia relationship was both extraordinary and ordinary. On one hand, both sides were visibly, albeit reluctantly, moving toward more security-strategic coordination to offset growing pressure from the US and its allies. On the other hand, they continued to interact with a mix of cooperation, competition, and compromise for interests and influence in a range of areas including trade, investment, and regional development. None of these trends was definitive, given the complex dynamics between the two, as well as their respective relations with others, which are beyond the full control of either Moscow or Beijing. The asymmetry between “high” and “low” politics in their bilateral ties may be normal, if not necessarily desirable. Nevertheless, the scope, speed, and sustainability of the emerging Sino-Russian strategic alignment, deserves careful scrutiny.

Growing ties?

Both sides used the term “unprecedentedly high level of trust” and “best ever” to describe the bilateral relationship. Nevertheless, neither side would define the steadily warming ties as an alliance. In an interview with Chinese media on June 17, President Putin offered his own interpretation of Russia’s relationship with China: “As we had never reached this level of relations before, our experts have had trouble defining today’s general state of our common affairs. It turns out that to say we have strategic cooperation is not enough anymore. This is why we have started talking about a comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration.” “‘Comprehensive’ means that we work virtually on all major avenues; ‘strategic’ means that we attach enormous inter-governmental importance to this work.”

Regardless of the wording of their growing ties, the substance of the China-Russia relationship appeared to deepen and broaden over the summer. From May 26-28 the two militaries held their first ever joint command/headquarters missile defense exercise, named *Aerospace Security 2016*, in Moscow at the Aerospace Defense Forces Central Scientific Research Institute. The goal was to practice interoperability for joint operations between Russian and Chinese air defense and missile defense groups for territorial defense against accidental and provocative ballistic and cruise missile strikes. Ten days later (June 9), Russian and Chinese warships entered the waters “in a contiguous zone” near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands, to the surprise of the Japanese. During the second four months of 2016, Russia consistently sided with China over the South China Sea (SCS) issue, and opposed outside interference in the SCS disputes. The two sides were also

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actively preparing for a joint naval exercise in the South China Sea planned for September, the first of this kind between the two navies.

Putin: “speedboat to China”

Just one day after the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit in Tashkent (June 22-23), the Russian and Chinese presidents met again, this time in Beijing. However, President Vladimir Putin spent less than **24 hours in China** for his 15th visit to China as Russian president. Russian media described it as a “**speedboat to China**,” while Chinese media described it as a “**hurricane visit**.” Putin spent more than five hours with President Xi. He also met separately with Premier Li Keqiang and Chairman of China’s Legislature Zhang Dejiang, as well as three vice premiers and two vice chairmen of the Chinese legislative body.

Despite its format and duration, Putin’s visit marked a significant movement toward some kind of de facto alliance, or “strategic alignment,” the favored term by Chinese and Russian pundits seeking to avoid more sensitive term “alliance.” The visit was viewed through a more political-strategic lens than an economic focus, particularly for Beijing. In the Great Hall of the People, the two presidents held “very intensive and productive talks” (**Putin’s words**) and “exchanged in-depth views on international and regional hotspot issues of common concern.” They agreed to the spirit of strategic coordination and everlasting friendship, increased mutual support, enhanced mutual political and strategic trust, and unswerving commitment to deepening their comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination. After the talks, the two presidents signed three joint statements: a China-Russia governmental statement, on strengthening global strategic stability, and on promoting the development of information and cyber space.

The joint governmental statement was perhaps the longest document (over 8,000 Chinese characters) ever issued by the two governments. It summarized the outcomes of the bilateral relationship since the signing of the China-Russia Good-Neighborly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation (Friendship Treaty), 15 years earlier. The statement claimed that the spirit and framework of the Friendship Treaty allowed the two sides to resolve the border disputes, which paved the way for turning the China-Russia border into of a line of peace, cooperation, and exchanges. The treaty therefore served the fundamental interests of the two countries and will guide future trajectory of the bilateral interactions. During his brief stay in Beijing, Putin also joined Xi for a ceremony for the 15th anniversary of the signing of the Friendship Treaty.

The joint statement on global strategic stability was the first of the kind **issued by the two governments** and voiced concern over increasing “negative factors” affecting global strategic stability. Without naming any specific countries, the statement said that “Some countries and military-political alliances seek decisive advantage in military and relevant technology, so as to serve their own interests through the use or threat of use of force in international affairs. Such policy resulted in an out-of-control growth of military power and shook the global strategic stability system.” Particularly, the statement expressed concern over the unilateral deployment of anti-missile systems all over the world – the Aegis Ashore ballistic missile defense system in Europe and the possible deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) in Northeast Asia), which severely infringe upon the strategic security interests of countries in the region. Aside from missile defense, the statement expressed concern about the looming arms

race regarding long distance precision attack weapons, such as the global system for instant attack, as well as the rising danger of chemical and biological weapons falling into the hands of nonstate entities for the conducting of terrorist and violent extremist activities.

Until recently, the concept of “strategic stability” has been used largely for issues of nuclear arms control between the US and Russia/Soviet Union. The China-Russia joint statement addresses the concept from a wider angle, covering both military-technical and political-strategic areas. The latter means that all countries and groups of countries should abide by the principle on use of force and coercive measures stipulated by the UN Charter and international law, respect the legitimate rights and interests of all countries and peoples while handling international and regional issues, and oppose interference in other countries’ political affairs.

The statement on promoting the development of information and cyberspace spelled out the “increasing security challenges” in this area, including the abuse of information technology. Countries should conduct dialogues and cooperate on how to guarantee the security of cyberspace and promote the development of information networks. The two sides therefore called for respect for countries’ Internet sovereignty and voiced opposition to actions that infringe on that sovereignty. They also agreed to strengthen network governance and crack down on terrorism and other crimes conducted through the Internet. Regular meetings on cyberspace cooperation will be held between Russia and China, according to the document.

Aside from these three general documents, the two foreign ministers also signed a Joint Declaration on Promotion and Principles of International Law, which was designed to target the South China Sea dispute. Again, the joint statement was unprecedented, reflecting both the growing challenge China faces over the South China Sea issue and the more active mutual support between Russia and China of the other’s vital interests.

President Putin’s hurricane-style visit to Beijing was also for promoting business. Putin brought with him more than 200 people, including almost all of the top officials from large state-run energy firms. The two sides signed more than 30 major contracts covering a wide range of items such as trade, energy, aerospace (*RD-180* rocket engines), nuclear energy, high-speed trains, cross-border E-commerce, joint development of wide-body passenger airplanes, heavy helicopters, etc. The two sides also signed a memorandum on the possibility of concluding an agreement between the Eurasian Economic Union and China. In the cultural arena, the two sides signed a document detailing planned Russian assistance for training Chinese hockey players and creating hockey clubs and training centers for teens.

SCO’s Tashkent Summit

Like China-Russia bilateral relations, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) also underwent some significant changes and developments over the summer. The Tashkent summit was held at the time of the 15th anniversary of the security group and it represented a major step forward for at least two areas: beginning the expansion process (India and Pakistan accession to full membership of the SCO presumably will occur in 2017), and starting talks on linking China’s Road and Belt Initiative and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) for the creation of a Eurasian economic network. The summit also addressed the joint fight against

terrorism, separatism and extremism, drug and weapon smuggling, dissemination of weapons of mass destruction, the development of economic and cultural-humanitarian cooperation among member states, and the situation in Afghanistan.

As in the past, the summit opened with an “exclusive meeting” of the heads of state of the six SCO members before inviting other non-core members (observers, dialogue partners, representatives of other international organizations, etc.) for an expanded session. At the SCO’s 15th anniversary, leaders believed that the Shanghai Spirit – mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations and pursuit of common development – served the needs and interests of the SCO member states and therefore should be upheld and continued. These sessions were described as reaching broad consensus on issues regarding SCO’s development, and those of regional and global importance. SCO leaders then signed the Tashkent declaration on the 15th anniversary of the establishment of the SCO, several resolutions to approve an action plan for the SCO’s development in the next five years (2016-2020), and the working reports of the SCO secretary general and the organization’s anti-terrorism institution. They also witnessed the signing of the memorandums of obligations for India and Pakistan to join the SCO, which is a key step for the two countries to obtain formal membership in the organization in 2017.

As a regional security group created by China and with the post-Soviet nations including Russia, the SCO had come a long way in its coordination against various separatist, extremist, and criminal activities. In its first few years of existence, The SCO’s Regional Anti-terrorist Structure (RATS) was unable to come up with even a common definition of terrorism given the diverse social and cultural background of the member states. Its performance improved after 2007 with a three-year program of cooperation in the fight against terrorism, separatism and extremism approved by the SCO Council of Heads of State. In the second three-year phase, RATS became more efficient and facilitated SCO law enforcement authorities halt preparations for more than 500 terrorist and religious extremism crimes, liquidate over 440 terrorist training bases, end the criminal activity of more than 1,050 members of international terrorist organizations, and seize 654 improvised explosive devices, over 5,000 firearms, 46 tons of explosives, and over 500,000 rounds of ammunition.

Presidents Xi and Putin met briefly in Tashkent ahead of the formal SCO sessions. One of the main issues discussed was the link-up of China’s Belt and Road [the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road] Initiative and the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The two also touched on cooperation in the economic and security areas within the SCO framework. Xi urged drawing up the Convention on Combating Extremism at the earliest possible time. Putin agreed on synergizing the EAEU and the Belt and Road Initiative within the SCO framework.

The SCO Summit also witnessed the third tripartite meeting of Chinese President Xi Jinping, Russian President Putin and Mongolian President Tsakhia Elbegdorj, which took place on the sidelines of the summit. The three leaders inked a development plan to build an economic corridor linking the three neighbors, pledging to boost transportation connectivity and economic cooperation in border regions. Much of this was an extension from the “road map” (consisting of 32 investment projects) for tripartite cooperation signed on the sideline of the SCO’s Ufa summit

in 2015. Largely initiated by Moscow, the project aims to benefit from China's Belt and Road Initiative through Mongolia, which has been in the Russian/Soviet shadow since the early 20th century. After the meeting, the three heads of state also witnessed the signing of a trilateral agreement on the mutual recognition of the customs supervision results on certain commodities. Xi presided over the meeting and was quoted as saying that China was satisfied with the momentum of the tripartite cooperation, which linked up the China's Silk Road Economic Belt, Russia's Trans-Eurasian Corridor, and Mongolia's Steppe Road.

South China Sea

For China, the SCO Summit provided a timely opportunity to gain support for its contestation over the South China Sea. Prior to the arbitration initiated by the Philippines, China had searched for diplomatic support for its stance calling for bilateral negotiations on the South China Sea disputes without outside interferences. The Tashkent Declaration issued immediately after the SCO summit states:

Member States reaffirm their commitment to maintaining law and order at sea on the basis of the principles of international law, in particular, those set out in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. All relevant disputes should be resolved peacefully through friendly negotiations and agreements between the parties concerned without their internationalization and external interference. In this context, Member States have called for the full respect of the provisions of the aforementioned Convention, as well as the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC) and the Guiding principles for its implementation.

All of the SCO member states except Russia are inland states with little direct interests in the issue of the law of sea in general and in the freedom of navigation in particular. The support from those Central Asian states in the form of the SCO's collective decision was both timely and significant for Beijing in its disputes with both South China Sea regional players (the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia,) and their external supporters (the US, Japan and Australia).

Prior to the SCO Summit, China also obtained support for its South China Sea position from Russia. The SCO Foreign Ministers Meeting in Tashkent on May 24 issued a joint statement supporting China's position. Shortly after this, the Russian Foreign Ministry reiterated its support for China's stance, saying disputes should be resolved through negotiations. "All relevant disputes should be resolved peacefully through friendly negotiations and agreements between the parties concerned, without internationalization or external interference," the ministry said in an online press note. On June 10, Russian Foreign Ministry official Maria Zakharova said in a briefing that Russia does not side with any of the parties to these disputes on principle, continuing, "We are firmly convinced that third parties' involvement in these disputes will only increase tensions in this region." The day of the SCO Summit, Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov attributed the tense situation in the South China Sea region to the interference from outside countries. In response, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson applauded the remark, calling it a just voice from the international community.

For much of July and August, China and Russia were actively planning a joint naval exercise in the South China Sea area. The two navies have exercised together before, but never in the South China Sea. The drills will "consolidate and develop" their comprehensive strategic partnership as

well as “enhance the capabilities of the two navies to jointly deal with maritime security threats,” said a Chinese spokesman in late July. On June 9, one Chinese and three Russian warships entered the waters “in a contiguous zone” near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands. Russia said that it was a normal operation in keeping with international vessel navigation and that Russia was surprised by Japan’s reaction. Chinese media in Hong Kong described it as “joint operation of Chinese and Russian naval forces.”

SCO growing pains?

Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov, the chair of the Tashkent summit, expressed concern that the first step toward SCO expansion with the acceptance of India and Pakistan as full members, no matter how significant for the future of the regional security group, may well be a source of its possible stagnation, unmanageability and even decline, given the “difficult and complicated” process. In their speeches at the summit, the Russian and Chinese presidents had considerable overlap regarding the current operation and future orientations of the SCO, particularly in the security areas. There was, however, a growing difference in Moscow and Beijing’s views regarding SCO expansion. While Moscow sees SCO expansion as leading to more influence and legitimacy for the regional group, Beijing perceives a more complex and perhaps less efficient decision-making mechanism with added members to an organization already plagued by internal and external contradictions and constraints.

With its growing influence, the SCO has received several membership applications. The regional group, however, has not been eager to expand its ranks from its inception. Part of the reason has been the belief, particularly by China, that the SCO still needs to improve its institution building and solidify the basis for cooperation, making hasty expansion is ill-advised. Expansion risks are internal conflicts, increasing decision-making costs and dampening the unity of the organization, argued Sun Zhuangzhi, secretary general of the SCO Research Center, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. Although the formal decision was made to accept India and Pakistan as full members of the SCO at the 2015 Ufa summit, China is still concerned about the mutual hostility between the two South Asian nations over Kashmir, Afghanistan, and other regional affairs. The intense rivalry between the two is unlikely to be dispelled any time soon. Together with their complicated relations with China and Russia, many Chinese analysts believe their admission may have negative effects on the SCO, bringing more internal conflicts and lowering the level of mutual political trust and the efficiency of multilateral cooperation.

President Putin attaches more importance to the expansion of the SCO in order to “strengthen its role in international and regional affairs.” Noting that its current “triple-6” construct (the six founding members, six observer states, and six dialogue partners) accounts for more than 16 percent of gross global product; their share in the world’s population, however, stands at 45 percent, remarked Putin in the expanded session of SCO’s Council of Heads of State in Bishkek. Reminding the audience that the decision to begin the India and Pakistan’s accession procedure was made last year in Ufa, Putin urged that “We hope that our partners will complete these steps as soon as possible.” Meanwhile, Putin called for “directly integrating India and Pakistan into the SCO’s regular cooperation mechanisms such as the Council of Heads of State and the regular meetings of member states’ foreign ministers.”

Iran was Putin's next focus for SCO expansion. Pointing to the fact that Iran had been a longstanding and active observer state in the SCO since 2005, he believed that there should be no obstacles in the way of a positive assessment of Tehran's membership application after the Iranian nuclear issue had been settled and the UN sanctions lifted. For Russia, Iran's SCO membership should have been granted in the "first wave" of the SCO expansion, along with those of India and Pakistan. "There is a position of Russia, with which the partners agree. We all understand that there will be India and Pakistan, and it would be logical to also include in this list Iran, which filed a request back in 2008 and has worked as an observer since 2005," said Russian presidential envoy on SCO affairs Bakhtiyer Khakimov in Tashkent.

President Xi Jinping of China made five points in his speech and SCO expansion came at the last point. He did mention India and Pakistan, but not Iran, for the SCO's current expansion. The goal for an open and encompassing SCO, according to Xi, was to perfect its organizational construct, broadening and deepening its areas of cooperation. The goal should also be its healthy operation, and its organizational expansion constitutes one of the means for that goal. For that purpose, Xi put the "Shanghai Spirit" on the top of his talking points: mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for diverse civilizations and pursuit of common development. In keeping with and promoting the Shanghai Spirit, Xi prioritized security (including Afghanistan) as the foundation for the SCO's development; trade, investment and infrastructure construction including China's Belt and Road Initiative as a means for "practical cooperation"; and people-to-people exchanges in health, environmental protection, youth exchange, etc. as "bridges" for future development. SCO expansion came as the last item in Xi's priority list.

China's reluctance to move ahead with Iran's SCO membership may well be technical, particularly the timing of Iran's accession. For Beijing, granting the two South Asian countries SCO membership is already a huge complicating factor, despite the added visibility of the SCO in world geopolitics as a result of the two new members. Another possible factor behind China's lack of interest in Iran's accession to full membership was perhaps Tehran's continuing rocky relationship with the West. Despite the fact that Western economic sanctions had been lifted following the nuclear deal in July 2015, the Islamic state continues to be viewed by the West as a problem as Tehran is involved in military activities in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. China may not want to turn the SCO into a regional group with more visibly anti-Western orientation with the inclusion of Iran as its "core" member states.

Russia, however, did not seem to be bothered by the perceived negative impact of Iran's accession to the SCO full membership. For several months, Russian diplomats had pushed the envelope for Iran's SCO acceptance. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov publicly raised the issue during the SCO Foreign Ministers Meeting in late May. "The Russian position is clear in its support of initiating the SCO admission process (for Iran) without delays, if possible," presidential envoy Khakimov told reporters. He did not name the objecting parties, but acknowledged that Russia's initiative for Iranian membership failed as the joint statement by the SCO heads of state did not mention Iran's accession to full membership status. Russia, however, would continue to press for Iran's inclusion, according to Khakimov.

Beyond the Iranian case, the idea of revising the SCO structure and procedure has also been tossed around, including the concept of a narrower format of permanent members of the SCO, exclusively reserved for its six founding members. This UN Security Council type of format, however, runs counter to the “Shanghai spirit” of equality and mutual respect. SCO’s customary decision-making model is by consensus but not by vote. There is debate as to what extent future members may be allowed to obtain this status. Alternatively, the SCO may have to slow down its accession process, allowing more time to digest the upcoming accession of India and Pakistan.

China’s experience in the SCO development is a mix of both fruitful outcomes and frustration over many issues within a multilateral environment. The diverse interests and policies of each member state, plus the consensus building decision-making style, made cooperation more difficult and less efficient, noted Yan Jin, an associate research fellow of the Institute of Russian, Eastern European, Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. China had proposed a SCO development bank in 2010. Russia, however, suggests building the SCO development bank on the basis of Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) or by expanding the functions of the SCO Interbank Consortium. Uzbekistan, which is not an EDB member, opposes Russia’s proposals. Kazakhstan favors China’s idea of the SCO free trade zone, which is also supported by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. However, it is opposed by Russia and Uzbekistan. For Russia, energy cooperation, particularly within the framework of Russia’s traditional domination of the Central Asia’s pipelines, should be one of the key goals of the SCO. Instead, most energy projects between the SCO members have been bilateral, such as the China-Central Asia gas and oil pipelines. And all of those mega financial institutions China has been creating in the past few years are outside the SCO framework.

These divergences are caused by diversifying diplomatic strategies and interests. Beyond these intra-SCO diversities and constraints, the global financial crisis, the sluggish prices of commodities and Russia’s economic deterioration have exerted negative effects as well. Outside powers have also deeply intervened in regional affairs, upsetting SCO members’ joint interests. The future growth of the SCO would only complicate, not simplify, the existing situation.

China’s more cautious approach to Iran’s accession to full SCO status apparently prevailed in both the foreign ministers meeting in late May and in the summit in late June. In the Tashkent Declaration of the 15th Anniversary of the SCO and the Joint Statement of the SCO Heads of State, as well as the Joint Statement issued at the end of the SCO Foreign Ministers Meeting, Iran’s accession was not discussed, to the disappointment of Moscow. India and Pakistan, however, have one foot inside the SCO. The coming of the “elephant” (India) into the SCO community is seen as favoring Moscow more at the expense of China’s influence within the SCO, given Russia’s more pivotal posture within the Russia-India-China triangle.

Tales of two Eurasian integrations: “Belt and Road” and EAEU

If there is anything that defines China’s foreign policy under President Xi, it is the Belt and Road Initiative. The Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road run through Asia, Europe and Africa, connecting the vibrant Asian economic circle at one end and developed Europe and the vast African continent at the other. Indeed, the SCO Summit appeared to be a major step forward for China’s Eurasian integration effort through the old Silk Road.

In September 2013, Xi kicked off his "Silk Road Economic Belt" concept during his visit to Kazakhstan. In October, Xi proposed a "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" design for the China-ASEAN relationship. Combined, they form the "Belt and Road" project to broaden and deepen China's economic interaction with the entire Eurasian continent. Call it the Xi Jinping Doctrine, which has both foreign and domestic implications. In geopolitical terms, it would help China avoid frontal confrontation with the US rebalancing to Asia-Pacific. It will also provide new outlets for China's excessive industrial capacities. Ultimately, a more integrated Eurasian continent would create a stable and sustainable environment for China's future development.

Russia's immediate reaction to China's Belt and Road initiative was quite negative, if not hostile (See Yu Bin, "[Putin's Glory and Xi's Dream](#)"). Xi's strategy was seen as competing with Moscow's traditional sphere of interests (Central Asia) and Russia's own integration efforts such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the then Eurasian Economic Space.

Despite Moscow's reservations, China continued to pursue its Belt and Road Initiative. In November 2014, China announced that it would contribute \$40 billion to set up a Silk Road Fund to finance projects. Meanwhile, China was also creating several other large-scale financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) with \$100 billion initial capital, the \$100 billion BRICS Contingency Fund, and the BRICS Development Bank (or the New Development Bank) of \$100 billion. In early 2015, China released an action plan on the principles, a framework, and cooperation priorities and mechanisms of the initiative.

Finally in May 2015, when Xi visited Moscow for the 70th anniversary of Russia's V-D parade, the two leaders reached a "broad consensus on jointly building the 'Silk Road' Economic Belt and cooperating on Eurasian economic integration." The two sides then signed the Joint Declaration of the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China and the Eurasian Economic Commission Regarding Launching an Economic Partnership Agreement between China and the Eurasian Economic Union, which represented a major departure from Russia's guarded posture regarding China's Silk Road policy. Nothing really happened in the following year after many brainstorming sessions at the expert and academic levels. The two sides were simply unable to find any mechanism to link the Chinese and Russian visions for Eurasian integration. In March 2016, the Valdai Discussion Club published a report titled "Toward the Great Ocean 4: Turn to the East," which articulated a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" as a linkage between China's Belt and Road initiative and Russia's the EAEU.

Some Chinese experts do not see how Russia's Greater Eurasian Partnership tallies with China's interests for at least two reasons. One is that Russia certainly does not want to see China unilaterally engage with Central Asian countries to advance its Belt and Road Initiative. Second, Russia's new Greater Eurasian Partnership design means that the discussion about integration of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the EEU would be held at a multilateral platform.

In early 2016, China and Russia started preparation work for the trade agreement between the EAEU and China. Meanwhile, President Putin started to entertain the idea of creating a broader economic partnership between the EAEU, the SCO, and ASEAN, according to Foreign Minister

Lavrov. The idea of a trilateral economic union was officially articulated on May 17 by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov. “The idea of combining the integration process, a kind of integration of integrations, is completely logical.... An interesting initiative has been put forth by Russia – an initiative to form a broad economic partnership of the EEU, the SCO and ASEAN,” Morgulov told a press briefing in Sochi. In his speech at the Saint Petersburg Economic Forum on June 18, Putin’s vision for an extensive Eurasian partnership continued to evolve to include CIS countries, South Asian countries, and even the EU. In almost all of these blueprints for future Eurasian integration, China’s Belt and Road Initiative would be embedded in this grand design of the Russians for almost the entire Eurasian continent.

While Putin was stretching his imagination for creating a huge economic space with Russia at the center of a web of commercial deals, his Chinese counterpart was busy reaching out to countries along the old Silk Road. In January 2016, President Xi traveled to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran. All agreed to expand cooperation in the Belt and Road Initiative. Prior to the SCO Summit in June 2016, Xi paid official visits to Serbia, Poland, and Uzbekistan to enhance Belt and Road cooperation. In all of these places, dozens of large trade and investment deals were inked. By the time of the summit, more than 70 countries and international organizations were participating in the construction of Belt and Road projects. Chinese enterprises have invested a total of \$14 billion in countries along the route and created about 60,000 local jobs.

Given the huge difference between China’s more tangible Belt and Road projects and Russia’s grand and still-emerging design, it is not a surprise to see that both the Tashkent declaration and the Joint Statement of the SCO Heads of State this time explicitly embraced China’s Belt and Road Initiative. None of them, however, mentioned Moscow’s Greater Eurasian Partnership.

China-Russian alliance: to be or not to be?

Many in the West believe that Russia and China are trying to create a new world order to replace the US as a global leader. Chinese and Russian pundits, however, seem to care far less about the format of bilateral relations than the complex chemistry between the two. In a broad sense, they tend to see that Russia and China are trying to adjust themselves to the new emerging geopolitical configuration, namely, NATO expansion into the post-Soviet space and the US pivot to the Asia-Pacific. From China’s perspective, which is increasingly shared by the Russia, the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) is aimed at deterring and undermining growing Chinese power and influence in the region. “The only way to break through this geopolitical encirclement for China is to move closer to Russia and the EEU. The successful advancement of the ‘Belt and Road’ may reduce the dependence on routes through the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca. So it may ease tensions between China and the US. The realization of the project will give independence and geopolitical and geo-economic leverage to Russia and China,” observed [Oleg Ivanov](#), vice rector of research at the Moscow-based Diplomatic Academy, in late June.

Shi Yinhong, professor at the School of International Studies at China’s Renmin University, echoed this sentiment, arguing that the US has negatively affected global stability and “severely infringed upon the strategic security interests” of countries like China and Russia with its “unilateral deployment of anti-missile systems all over the world.” As both countries were “ostracized” by the US, it was “not difficult” to understand their current move toward closer ties.

In August, Moscow and Beijing apparently stepped up their coordination in dealing with the perceived threat from the THAAD deployment in South Korea, as [talks of joint counter-measures](#) to offset it were proliferating in both the public and official space in the two countries. On Aug. 11, Russian Ambassador Denisov was [quoted](#) as saying that the two countries were coordinating efforts to prevent further escalation of tension in Korea.

The current strategic partnership relationship between Moscow and Beijing is “still not” an alliance, and “these are Beijing and Moscow’s real thoughts,” said an editorial of Beijing’s *Global Times* after President Putin’s China trip in late June. The factors behind their “reluctance” in moving toward an alliance are that:

- A China-Russia alliance would impact the world situation in a game-changing way, and neither country hopes for that. Instead, they want each of them to develop comprehensive diplomacy and maintain relations with the West.
- However, the United States’ strategic squeezing of the China and Russia has intensified, and this has increasingly shaped the necessity for China and Russia to support each other on core issues. The China-Russia joint statements mentioned the word “support” 18 times, and it has to be said that the US factor “contributed” to this...
- There is still a lot of strategic space for China and Russia to support each other further, and the more pressure the United States puts on them, then the more intensified such mutual support will be.

The editorial was the brainchild of Hu Xijin (胡锡进), editor in chief of *Global Times*. The opinion of this Russian-speaking journalist veteran may not represent the entire spectrum of the China’s Russian studies and decision making community. His view, however, draws heavily from the elite and popular opinions about Russia and China-Russia relations. It should be noted that like Russia, there has been a growing public space in China about Russia and Russian-China relations, thanks for the proliferation of social media of various kinds. Hu Xijin’s editorials and op-ed pieces (with the pen name of Shan Renping, 单仁平) would at best compete with multiple opinions in the Chinese society. This emergent public space in China also features more and more foreign inputs from various sources, including some from Russia.

Regarding the frequent disagreements and even contractions between the Eurasian giants, the editorial argued that the West cannot understand the open nature of China-Russia relations and Westerners tend to miss the point about the nature of China-Russia relations in that temporary inability to conclude talks on specific cooperation or difficulty in implementing something will not shake the overall bilateral relationship. For those who think bilateral relations are like they are today because of Putin, this is at best a fallacy. China-Russia relations began during the Yeltsin era, but Yeltsin was once one of the “most disliked” Russian leaders by Chinese society, so China and Russia getting closer was a product of the times, said the editorial.

Russian scholars tend to see that the Russian-Chinese relations are already the relations of allies in many aspects, all that is lacking is the official label – something that could be changed

relatively swiftly if (and when) it is expedient. In their assessment of relations, Vasilij Kashin and Anastasiya Pyatachkova noted “The abundance of coordination mechanisms and this scale of military cooperation obviously go beyond the framework of ordinary good-neighborliness.”

Even in the Chinese scholarly community, opinions are diverse. Shen Dingli, deputy dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University, argued that Russia’s heart is always with the West. Its biggest hope is to earn the respect from the West and integrate into the West. Russia’s own “turn to the East” strategy, its current Greater Eurasian partnership, and its collaboration with China is therefore more a matter of expediency instead of a “strategy,” wrote Shen in an [opinion piece in Global Times](#). Shen further pointed out that Russia is also on guard against China, particularly over China’s growing influence in its peripheral countries via the “Belt and Road” Initiative. As a leading foreign policy specialist, Shen is known for his realist mindset and is also a well-respected expert on the US and China-US relations. His strong questioning of the current state of Beijing-Moscow relationship, though rooted in historical and theoretical bases, may well be a sign of the division among both policy and academia groups regarding the degree, scope, and even limits of China’s tilt toward Russia.

Realists in China’s policy and academic community, however, also produced entirely opposite policy prescriptions from those of Shen. Yan Xuetong, dean of the Qinghai University’s School of International Affairs in Beijing, has been a leading advocate for China to abandon its non-alliance foreign policy. Instead, he argues that China should actively pursue a balance of power foreign policy by seeking, building, and maintaining a viable alliance network.

Both Shen and Yan are “American watchers.” But even some engaged in the Russia studies questioned the wisdom of embracing Russia’s “greater Eurasian partnership” without fully understanding the nature of the Moscow-led EAEU and the purpose of Putin’s emerging greater Eurasian partnership plan. Han Kedi, an associate research fellow of the Institute of Russian, Eastern European and Central Asian Studies at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, pointed to the very low yield from those numerous deals inked by the two sides in the past. Indeed, it was the implementation, not the cheers for signing the contracts that mattered. The real obstacle was Russia’s unsatisfactory domestic investment environment. Yet, it has not showed a sign of willingness to compromise in negotiations with foreign companies. Indeed, China should learn from Russia about how to safeguard its own interests, argued Han. Specifically, Han questioned the wisdom of China providing large payment in advance before the project is carried out, which leaves China with little space for any debt default or breach of contract. At the higher level of strategic interactions between the US and Russia, Han saw both Washington and Moscow trying to maintain dominance in the Asia Pacific (for US) and Eurasia (for Russia). “Uniting with one side to oppose the other does not serve China's national interests. China must ponder how to keep its diplomatic independence,” insisted Han.

Han’s unusually critical views of Russia and Russia’s China policy drew strong reactions from both China’s domestic sources and from the Russians. In late July, *Global Times* carried a sharp rebuttal by [Georgy Zinoviev](#), charge d’affaires ad interim of the Russian Federation in China, who categorically repudiated almost every point Han made. Aside from its obviously official tone, Zinoviev’s argument was far more persuasive than Han’s in his more comprehensive grasp of the

nature and trajectory of the bilateral relationship. To counter Han's harsh critique of Russia's position on the South China Sea, Zinoviev wrote:

The 'proof' of the South China Sea issue is that Russia emphasized the importance of protecting freedom of navigation there – same as the US and Japan, as Mr Han points out. Well, not only them, but also China and actually everyone else supports freedom of navigation and no one opposes it. Russia's position is clearly stated in many cases, including bilateral and multilateral documents and can easily be analyzed and compared with positions of other states. No one willing to do so objectively would reach same conclusions as Mr Han.

Han's view has a lot of appeal even beyond the Russian studies community in China. His urge to think before jumping into Moscow's still-developing concept makes a lot of sense. In early July, Chinese pundits engaged in serious discourse about the goals and likely impacts of Russia's greater Eurasia partnership. Xing Guangcheng, director of the Institute of Chinese Borderland Studies under the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, went so far as to argue that it was actually in China's own interests to see Russian success in creating and running both EAEU and the greater Eurasian partnership projects. Russia's success would provide China with more opportunities. At a minimum, it would reduce China's workload in negotiating trade deals by working with a group of nations, instead of making deals with each individual state. Wu Dahui, a prominent Russia specialist at Qinghua University, believed that the timing of Putin's proposal for a greater Eurasian partnership was a strategic calculation. It was put forward on the eve of UK's referendum regarding its EU membership, which may lead to greater disintegration of EU. The US effort to create separate trading blocs (TTP for Asia-Pacific and TTIP for Europe) has been seriously challenged by anti-globalization populism across the West. Putin's greater Eurasian partnership, therefore, engages multiple parties: China's Belt and Road, Russia-led EAEU, India, Pakistan, ASEAN and EU (this writer would even add Japan onto Putin's matrix), at a time when West-led regional and trade blocs are facing growing challenges. If this is what Putin has in mind, his reaching out to China in late June was by no means be a tactical move based on short-term expediency.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations

May – August 2016

May 4-6, 2016: Speaker of the Russian State Duma Sergei Naryshkin leads a group of Russian lawmakers for a visit to China to attend the second meeting of Sino-Russian Parliamentary Cooperation Committee. They meet Zhang Dejiang, chairman of the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress and President Xi Jinping.

May 20-22, 2016: Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Foreign Ministers Meetings is held in Tashkent. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov meets Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines.

May 24, 2016: The 18th round of strategic consultation between Chinese and Russian militaries is held in Beijing, co-chaired by Adm. Sun Jianguo, deputy chief of Joint Staff Department of China's Central Military Commission, and Lt. Gen. Sergey Rudskoy, deputy chief of General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces.

May 26-28, 2016: Russia and China hold their first joint computer command-headquarters missile defense exercise, *Aerospace Security 2016*, in Moscow.

June 3, 2016: Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov and Deputy Chief of the Joint Staff of the Chinese Central Military Council Adm. Sun meet at the Shangri-La Dialogue.

June 6, 2016: Third Sino-Russia Northeast Asia Security Talks are held in Beijing. Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister Kong Xuanyou and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov jointly chair the talks.

June 8, 2016: SCO defense ministers meet in Astana. They agree to improve security coordinating mechanisms and to develop cooperation and information exchanges to counter military threats in direct vicinity of the borders of the SCO countries.

June 9, 2016: One Chinese and three Russian warships enter the waters “in a contiguous zone” near the Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands.

June 19-20, 2016: Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang and Russian Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Rogozin meet in Huangshan, China to coordinate President Putin’s visit to China.

June 22-23, 2016: Military officials from SCO member countries meet to prepare for the *Peace Mission 2016* military exercises to be held in Kyrgyzstan in 2016.

June 23, 2016: The China-Russia-Mongolia Trilateral Meeting is held on the sidelines of the SCO Summit in Tashkent.

June 23-24, 2016: SCO Summit is held in Tashkent.

June 3-6, 2016: Chinese Vice Premier Liu Yandong visits Russia to co-chair the seventh session of the China-Russia Committee on Humanities Cooperation with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Olga Golodets.

June 25, 2016: President Putin visits and meets President Xi Jinping and other senior leaders.

July 3-16, 2016: The Russian National Guard’s Special Forces conduct joint training exercise *Cooperation 2016* with China’s People’s Armed Police Force (APF).

July 12-14, 2016: Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang visits Russia to attend the third China-Russia Exposition and the chairmen’s meeting of the Joint Commission for Regular Meetings between the Chinese and Russian Prime Ministers in Yekaterinburg.

July 15, 2016: Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang meet on the sidelines of the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit in Ulaanbaatar.

July 18-20, 2016: Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi visits Ulyanovsk, to co-chair the first meeting of the Sino-Russian Regional Cooperation Council with Mikhail Babich, Russia's presidential envoy to the Volga Federal District meeting.

July 22, 2016: Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov and the Chinese Defense Ministry's head of international military cooperation, Maj. Gen. Xi Goweï, meet in Moscow to discuss bilateral military and military-technical cooperation.

July 25, 2016: Foreign Minister Lavrov meets Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the ASEAN-related events in Laos.

July 28, 2016: Fourth meeting on Northeast Asia security is held in Moscow, co-chaired by Chinese Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Kong Xuanyou and Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov. They voice serious concern over THAAD deployment in South Korea.

August 25, 2016: Russian and Chinese officials hold talks in Moscow related to missile defense and regional security.