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Putin in Beijing, May 16-17 2024

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On May 16-17, 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin visited his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping in Beijing. The visit marked Putin's first overseas trip since beginning his fifth term as President of Russia. It took place amid growing Western criticism of China's economic and political support for Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine. Last month, while visiting Beijing, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken once again warned China against supplying Russia with components critical for its war effort.

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the two countries have deepened their economic, political, and military collaboration. They have increasingly promoted themselves and each other as the harbingers of a new "multipolar world order," free from perceived American hegemony and bullying. China has supported Russian narratives about the war and its underlying causes. While stopping short of supplying weapons to Russia, it has exported large amounts of dual-use items with military applications, sometimes bypassing sanctions by shipping through third countries.

The visit also came on the heels of a Russian military escalation in Ukraine, which appears to have resulted in new territorial gains for Russia, while Ukraine awaits much-needed weapon deliveries from the West.

What were China and Russia hoping to achieve with the meeting? What were the main outcomes of the meeting? What does the visit mean for the future direction of China-Russia relations?

How does Russia view the purpose of the visit?

From the Russian side, the visit fulfils several purposes. Firstly, it's about ensuring continuity and strengthening strategic, political, and military relations, as well as personal connections.

This is especially vital following Putin's recent government reshuffles after his re-election, which gave expanded responsibilities, powers and resources to officials experienced in working with their Chinese counterparts. Thus, in his first visit abroad after his re-election, Putin brought along his A-team of ministers, military top brass, and economists, for whom deeper contacts with Beijing will be crucial in the years to come as Russia becomes more dependent on China. This includes new Defence Minister Andrey Belausov, new Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak with responsibility for energy export, and First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov with responsibility for industry.

Secondly, the visit, like previous ones, serves as important strategic signalling towards the West of a united Russian-Chinese axis capable of withstanding any form of external pressure. Thus, Putin's visit should be seen in the context of Russia's ongoing tug-of-war with the West for China's attention. Importantly, Ukraine and the West want China's participation in the upcoming peace summit in Switzerland in June to increase its legitimacy globally and incentivize countries from the so-called "Global South" to join, while China has not yet announced its decision.

Thirdly, it's about improving trade relations, including managing Western sanctions. China's economic support to Russia has been crucial for keeping the Russian economy alive and bolstering Russian war efforts. Chinese exports to Russia in 2023 were up 47 percent compared to 2022, representing 45 percent of total bilateral trade turnover. However, in March and April 2024, for the first time since mid-2022, Chinese exports to Russia declined compared to the same months the year before. This decline comes amid growing pressure on China from the West as well as increasing reports of Chinese-Russian payment problems, and likely reflects growing fear and caution from Chinese actors and banks. Thus, as previously during the war, Russia and China must find and coordinate new ideas for circumventing the reach of the West.

How does China view the purpose of the visit?

By meeting with Putin and through the events leading up to it in the past few weeks, China is making its priorities clear and signaling to the world that the Sino-Russian alliance remains strong in the face of mounting Western pressure.

Before receiving Putin in Beijing, Xi Jinping made a brief trip to Europe, his first in over five years, where he met with French President Emmanuel Macron, a staunch advocate for a European foreign policy independent of the United States. He also visited Serbia and Hungary, countries with close ties to both China and Russia.

Xi is likely to have carefully planned his trip ahead of Putin's visit, so that he could brief the Russian leader about the outcomes, especially regarding his meeting with Macron. Since the invasion, China has needed to balance its political and economic backing of Russia with the need to preserve stable relations with the EU, which it views as a crucial trade partner, and to prevent Europe from fully aligning with the US's hardline approach to China. Xi's decision to visit these countries just as Russia makes gains in Ukraine signals not only his priorities but also his confidence. He believes there is still sufficient support in Europe for engagement with China to prevent a coordinated European hardline approach from taking shape.

China likely also hoped to deepen coordination with Russia in some areas, including the economy and military, and to discuss how to cooperate in addressing challenges from the West, including sanctions.

What was the outcome of the visit?

In terms of concrete outcomes, on Thursday, May 16, the two sides released a list of 10 jointly signed agreements,[1] as well as a joint statement[2] (below: the Joint Statement) expanding on various aspects of their bilateral relations. Compared with what Russia presumably wants and what could be expected, the new agreements are somewhat underwhelming. They include the establishment of a nature reserve, improved sanitary measures for Russian exports to China, and cooperation between Russian and Chinese state media actors. Moreover, the long-awaited *Power of Siberia 2* natural gas pipeline project – which has been indefinitely delayed for many years due to China's inaction – was not mentioned, suggesting continued Chinese hesitation in infrastructure projects that would increase China's energy dependence on Russia.

However, while the lengthy 7000-word Joint Statement consists largely of material seen many times before in joint statements and speeches, it also covers cooperation goals on a huge number of areas, from political and economic to cultural and humanitarian. Moreover, it also includes several interesting passages hinting at the two sides' views and potential compromises and discrepancies on various issues:

- *How Putin's victory in the 2024 elections confirmed the Russian people's support for a foreign policy of forging closer ties with China.* Along with a lengthy section on boosting people-to-people cooperation and contacts, this could be seen in the light of the Kremlin's potential worry about and attempts to counter rumoured dissatisfaction among the Russian population regarding the country's growing dependence on China.
- *The rise of the Global South and a polycentric and multipolar world order, based on international law and the UN Charter.* To counter and undermine the West's talking points that Russia and China are threatening the liberal world order, the text here – using Western-inspired rhetoric – builds a narrative distinguishing *international law* from the West's *rules-based order*, suggesting that it in fact is the West that is revisionist and trying to replace the current world order.
- *The "inviolability of the results of the Second World War and established world order", and connections between the respective historical victories of the Soviet Union and China*. Connected to the previous point, the sides here also make the interesting ideological move of joining forces in the war of history.
- *The importance of various international organisations and groupings such as the UN, the WTO, the G20, BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)*, reflecting the ongoing battle with the West for influence in multilateral organisations and cooperation. The statement also includes several references to cooperation within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), despite the fact that Russia – historically the biggest BRI investment destination – saw no BRI investments in 2022, and only one deal in 2023.

1 Document list in Russian on the Kremlin's official website.

2 Statement in Russian on the Kremlin's official website. Statement in Chinese on the Chinese Foreign Ministry's official website.

- *The need to observe international obligations on the immunities of states and their properties (including sovereign reserves).* This comes against the background of the ongoing Western debates whether, and growing political will, to seize the approximately 300 billion USD of frozen Russian assets in Western financial institutions and use them to support Ukraine. This has met with fierce Chinese overt, and allegedly even stronger direct covert, opposition.

- *A long section on nuclear weapons, the need for stability between nuclear powers and the prevention of nuclear war, and joint resistance to the "destabilizing actions of the United States".* In criticising US behaviour, the section connects nuclear stability with the central Russian-Chinese concept of "indivisible security" – that states must not strengthen their own security at the expense of others. This idea, which Russia has used to justify its invasion of Ukraine, is based on a deliberate and misleading re-conceptualization of official OSCE documents and does not consider its original connections to democracy, human rights and the right of all countries to choose their own security alliances.

  However, the section also emphasizes the need for *all* nuclear powers to show restraint and that "nuclear wars cannot be won and must never be unleashed", potentially hinting at Chinese displeasure (yet again) with Russia's nuclear threats.

- *A section on the inadmissibility of military alliances and "block structures"*, which are classic Chinese talking points when criticising the US. Interestingly, in the Joint Statement Russia and China seem to have agreed to include and approve each other's typical criticism of the West, suggesting substantial efforts to further align political views and narratives.

- *Condemnation of military actions of the United States and its allies that "provoke confrontation" with North Korea, and the need for the United States to "renounce blackmail, sanctions and pressure".* This passage should be seen in the context of China's views of the growing Russia-North Korea relations (and possible Russia-China-North Korea triad), and relatedly, Moscow's recent political backing of Pyongyang, including through vetoing the renewal of the UN expert group on North Korea sanctions. While there are reasons to believe China might be sceptical of this development, the inclusion of this passage in the text suggests Chinese tacit approval of Moscow's policy towards Pyongyang.

- *Cooperation on the Arctic, and transport between China and Europe through Russia*. Both are related to Chinese access to Russian territory and might reflect China's growing demands as Moscow becomes increasingly dependent on Beijing's support.

- *A section on the "Ukraine crisis", repeating previous positions such as Russia appreciating China's neutral position and willingness to play a constructive mediating role, and the need for the conflict to be solved in accordance with the UN charter, indivisible security and the "legitimate security interests" of all parties.* While not new, this repetition is interesting because of its timing, in view of ongoing Ukrainian-Western efforts to involve China in the upcoming peace summit to maximize legitimacy and global support for Ukraine. Importantly, Beijing, again, does not openly support Moscow in the war in the Joint Statement.

What does the meeting mean for the future of China-Russia relations?

The meeting between Putin and Xi is the latest step in a long-term strategic partnership between Russia and China. This partnership serves various long-term goals and purposes, with the ultimate aim of replacing the US-led world order with one more favourable to authoritarian states.

Some conclusions can be drawn about what this visit and its outcomes mean for the future of the relations.

Firstly, this type of visit plays an important role in ensuring continuity, predictability and longevity in government-to-government relations, not least between ministers and their respective counterparts. The Russian delegation's considerable size was significant in this regard. Thus, especially as Russian economic and military dependence on China deepens, this meeting enables further strengthening and tightening of relations between various government ministries and agencies.

Secondly, while the visit resulted in an extensive and detailed statement fleshing out the two countries' strategic alignment and their far-reaching cooperation goals – similar to the "no-limits" statement of February 4, 2022 – the two countries have a history of not matching high-flying words with actions. In this regard, the underwhelming list of cooperation agreements seems to hint again at this discrepancy between rhetoric and reality.

Thirdly, the visit comes at a crucial time in both Russia-China and China-Western relations, as well as in Russia's war against Ukraine. As Russia hopes to count on continued Chinese support for its war economy, while the West aims to coerce Beijing into distancing itself from Moscow, how China acts in the coming months will have decisive effects on all these developments. The outcome from the meeting suggests that China will continue to balance stronger support for Russia with maintaining working relations with the West.

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About NKK

The Swedish National China Centre was established in 2021 as an independent unit at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI). The Centre conducts policy-relevant research and aims to contribute to a long-term improvement in the state of China-related knowledge in Sweden. Any views expressed in this publication are those of the author. They should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the Swedish National China Centre or UI.

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