

IS A CHINA-RUSSIA ALLIANCE ON THE HORIZON?

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EAI Background Brief No. 934

Date of Publication: 10 July 2014

Executive Summary

1. Russian President Vladimir Putin's two-day state visit to China in May 2014 is a milestone in bilateral relations, possibly also marking the beginning of a massive strategic shift in geopolitics across Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific. It appears that Western sanctions against Russia's annexation of Crimea are driving Russia into the arms of a rising China.
2. "A new stage in Russian-Chinese relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction" has been declared. A total of 42 agreements was signed, including a \$400 billion mega-deal in natural gas. The contract will enable Russia to diversify its pipeline routes and help China shift away from coal.
3. The area that raises most concern to the West is military cooperation. During Putin's visit the two countries held the largest joint naval exercise near the disputed Diaoyu/Senkaku islands. It is reported that President Xi Jinping personally requested for the site after several previous failed proposals by China.
4. The pair also promised close coordination in foreign policy, mutual support in enhancing each other's international standing, and joint effort to establish "an international system that is more just and equitable". China's rapid growth and Russia's return to great power status provide the two countries with an opportunity to articulate an alternative path to modernity and development.
5. There is potential for a Sino-Russo alliance. The strengths of the two nations complement each other well and they have shared views on many important international issues. However, their grand strategies point to a possible collision course in Central Asia. China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" and Russia's Eurasia integration project present two different strategic visions for Central Asia.
6. The prospect of alliance is also undermined by asymmetric relations in geography, size of GDP and population, as well as mutual distrust rooted in history and territorial issues. Chinese officials have refused to endorse Moscow's decision to

recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states while Russia has not supported China's extensive maritime claims in the South China Sea.

7. The game played by both parties is one of power balancing rather than alliance. By pursuing independent foreign policy both maximize their options and opportunities. Large and small triangle dynamics characterize their relations with each other and with other regional and global players.
8. President Xi's "new concept for Asian security" explicitly opposes alliances and favors multilateralism. Both China and Russia prefer a multipolar new world order. In the long run, China and Russia alike need more cooperation from the United States and the European Union than from each other.
9. However, there is the possibility of the two being forced into alliance. The United States has constructed networks of security alliances on both sides of Eurasia which may compel them to do so if they feel cornered. With declining power the United States will increasingly rely on these alliances to balance the rising power of China and Russia. States in Europe and the Asia-Pacific should avoid such an eventuality.