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CHINA BAILING OUT RUSSIA: SIGN OF ROLE REVERSAL?

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The ethnic mobilisation in Ukraine since 2013, the historic 'return home' of Crimea to Russia and the rigid sanction politics has illuminated an intensifying dissonance in the relations between Russia and the US. While the Western alliance has been basking in the successful impact of sanctions on Russian economy, the Kremlin on the other hand has not been far behind in its retaliation. Russia has successfully used its energy market as a leverage to counter the stringent measures by the Western alliance especially on Europe. However, given Russia's contemporary economic situation and geostrategic dilemma characterised by hostility towards the US, Russia neither can act in isolation nor has the required capability in order to succeed in challenging the US hegemony in international relations.

The Kremlin is in need of a partner that shares similar concerns and has the capability to counter the pre-eminence of the US in the existing global order. Hence, it has begun reviewing its focus on the South Asian region, more importantly, towards China, which has made a remarkable growth in international relations. Similar to Russian worries, Beijing is also concerned about US global supremacy especially with regard to its 're-balancing strategy', aimed primarily to halt Beijing's global ambitions. This has given way to inevitable competition between US and China.

Given the current geopolitical situation i.e. the Western sanctions and efforts to politically isolate Russia on one hand and arrest China's growing territorial ambitions on the other, has only pushed both Moscow and Beijing into each other's arms. This has



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accelerated Washington's worries as furtherance of a long-term strategic partnership is mostly a counterweight to the US influence in the current international system.

China has demonstrated its support for Russia on Ukraine crisis by abstaining its vote in UN Resolution against Russia's accession of Crimea, signed of a 30-year agreement worth \$400 billion for the purchase and sale of natural gas between China National Petroleum Corporation and Russian gas giant Gazprom, the zero dollar agreement aimed at devaluing the US dollar currency value and the establishment of a New Development Bank by BRICS member states. These are few of the calculative measures adopted by both Russia and China to challenge the US' authoritative conduct of global politics. Additionally, Russia is also aware of the importance of the Chinese veto power in the UN Security Council which can be manoeuvred in its favour in the future.

However, given the nature of evolving geopolitical dynamism, the growing strategic partnership between Russia and China should be critically analysed to understand whether the old adage 'a friend in need is a friend indeed' fits in determining China standing by Russian side especially in its hour of distress or is it the sign of role reversal where Russia is now being pushed as the 'junior' in the partnership. As the latter seems to fit the occasion, it is important for Russia in particular to evaluate the repercussions it may have on Moscow's global ambitions.

Firstly, there is widening disparity in China's global presence and economic progress in the 21st century compared to that of Russia's current global status. Besides, despite convergence of common security concerns and the relations being substantive in nature, the growing gap between the two countries has also caused discomfiture to Russia. The most observable of this growing space is in the sphere of defence relations between the two countries. It is a well known fact that China for long has been heavily dependent on Russian defence equipments but since 2005, China is no longer the largest client nation of



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Russia as it has adopted indigenization of its defence industrial complex. More to the point, the Chinese defence equipments are now mostly domestically sourced and currently are weapons provider for about 35 countries, in particular Pakistan, Bangladesh and the former Republic of Burma, Myanmar, as noticed by SIPRI. Not to forget, China has the reputation of 'reverse engineering' of Russian weapon system which has created more misgivings towards Chinese intentions.

Secondly, Central Asia is seen by Moscow as its strategic backyard and was once the invincible player in the region and continues to hold influence but China is becoming the decisive player through Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Furthermore, the growing influence of Beijing in Central Asia may cause diplomatic awkwardness between the two countries as it is also planning to re-open the "New Silk Road" which is likely to be longer than the ancient route and have greater economic significance. Moscow also fears that the PRC may exert geopolitical pressure on a weakened Russia through high economic investments in the Republics on developmental projects and expand its energy markets.

Moreover, China is the 'all weather' friend of Pakistan and has constantly rendered defence and economic support. It is argued that the Gwadar port- part of its 'string of pearls' strategy, is of strategic relevance to China. In 2012, it declared that it would take control of the port as it believes that it is a prospective zone to serve as an oil pipeline hub for its growing energy needs and expand its trade relations with the Central Asian Republics.¹ Such worries and strategic calculations by China are already being voiced in Moscow. Hence, to balance the growing influence of China in Central Asia, Russia has long been supportive of India's permanent membership in the SCO and is interested in India playing a more visible geopolitical role in the organization.

Thirdly, Russia has been struggling with its demographic decline and the inflow of Chinese population providing cheap labour may be a lucrative offer. But, the Russians are



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concerned with the increasing Chinese incursions into its territory, as this would lead to 'Sinification' of the local Russia population. If left undetected, in few decades from now it will not only surpass the Russian population in the bordering areas but may cause demographic asymmetry. This will only augment Russia's internal security concerns alongside its external threats. Consequently, Russia should also not forget that the border dispute near Ussuri River between China and Russia was a compromise made by Moscow to Beijing at a time when Russia- post Soviet disintegration was at a dismal status. Currently, given the economic situation of Russia and its desperation to stabilize its economic and global status, China will see this as an opportunity that will benefit its interests.

Fourthly, Russia has also made inroads into countries like Vietnam with which it has trade relations with China of \$13 billion. Both Vietnam and Russia are strongly endorsing the free trade zone and has envisaged political integration with Vietnam through peaceful nuclear energy, oil and gas production and military- technical cooperation. In addition, Vietnam has signed a contract for six submarines from Russia. China on the other hand has territorial dispute with Vietnam that is often escalated to armed confrontations over some of the islands in the Sparty archipelago and the Paracel islands in South China Sea. The very fact that Russia is penetrating into areas of Chinese strategic relevance is to monitor the situation in the region and protect its investments and further gain distribution of the market for its goods, military aspect and nuclear cooperation with the country.²

Lastly, Russia should be aware of the trade volume between the US and China. Despite the hostility in relations, there is also a sense of compatibility between the US and China. Hence, assuming that the relations between the two countries would persist and grow- the mutual gains from an expanding economic relationship will remain the single most important peace-inducing force at work in U.S.-China relations. Although there is competition enhancing tendencies, Xi's administration has sent a clear signal to the United



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States stating “You lead the world – I only want to lead China”.³ Which in other words means that as long as the US respects Chinese interests and gives scope to its growth in global politics, China would continue to co-exist with the US in the international system. This is a note of caution for Russia as China may not collaborate in challenging the preeminence and afford any military adventurism against the US on behalf of Moscow.

Hence, it can be said that regardless of the multifaceted and substantive nature of strategic partnership between Russia and China, the relationship is defined by numerous ambiguities and contradictions blanketed with prejudice and strategic competition. The future of the partnership between Russia and China is profoundly uncertain but if it is able to survive the test of time, the relations will be able to achieve high economic growth, successfully engage in resolving global issues, and importantly, promote each other’s national interests without much suspicion, hostility and fear of the other.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

End Notes

¹ Gulam Asgar Mitha, “Middle East: The Regional Chessboard”, *Oriental Review*, October 20 2014.

² Rostam Falyokov, “Vietnam, Customs Union Close in on Free Trade Agreement”, *Russia and India Report*, November 17 2013. www.gazeta.ru

³ Yang Hengjun, “China vs. the US: Who Blinked?”, *The Diplomat*, February 20 2015.
