**Pax Russica-Sinica: making the world safe for authoritarians**

On 3 July, two of the planet’s three most powerful leaders met in Moscow. It was their 20th encounter at least since March 2013 and the latest in a long Sino-Russian discourse that began in 1618. The Russians and Chinese don’t leak transcripts, but Xi and Putin presumably welcomed a 37% increase in two-way trade in the first quarter of 2017—especially as the value of trade for 2016, US$66 billion, had fallen from US$88 billion in 2012
(<https://intmassmedia.com/.../russia-economic-turn-to-the-east>..; BOFIT Policy Brief: Heili Simola, Economic Relations between Russia and China – increasing interdependency www.suomenpankki.fi/bofit\_en/.../policy\_brief/.../bpb0616.... )

They doubtless passed over the reality that in recent years Chinese investment in Russia—as opposed to credits—has been under US$2 billion. That’s less than in countries in Africa and Latin America and in Kazakhstan, according to Andrei Klepach, chief economist at Vneshekonom Bank. The reason given by Xin Zhongyi, of Gerzhouba Corporation, is ‘the very specific Russian business culture’, to which the Chinese ‘hope to grow accustomed in 10–15 years’ (Kommersant, 31.05.2017, *Kitaiskie investitsii prinoravlivaetsya k rossiiskii spetsifike, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3312592>.* Russia’s 2016 GDP was one-tenth of China’s (the figure was 15% when measured in purchasing power parity) and China now accounts for 14% of Russia’s trade, so commerce, though growing, is not the mainstay of the present propinquity.

The relationship carries a heavy sediment of history, with [a tangle of unresolved tensions](https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/wary-embrace) (for a succinct overview see, A Wary Embrace <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/wary-embrace>. pp3-10). For now it rests firmly on converging perceptions of national interest. Both leaders present as tough men who deal ruthlessly with any threat to their pre-eminence. Putin has used military force externally four times (with at least 10,000 deaths in Ukraine alone). Xi has, in effect, changed China’s maritime borders, and is trying something similar on the Sino-Indian border, so far without bloodshed. Both depict their rule as the only alternative to anarchy and foreign depredation. Both control massive domestic paramilitary forces, suggesting that both, however oddly, feel insecure.

Under a constitutional amendment he oversaw in 2008, Putin can rule till 2024, and could be president for life. Xi shows an intent to emulate him. Both have built a cult of personality: a Russian poll (<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3336009>, Левада-центр»: россияне назвали Сталина, Путина и Пушкина величайшими людьми – Политика – Коммерсантъ) nominated Putin as the second-greatest figure in world history, after Stalin. The Chinese media was referring to Xi as ‘Uncle Xi’, until it was decided that that sounded undignified. AS the ANU’s China in the World Centre has noted that Xi has become ‘COE—Chairman of Everything’ (personal comment to the author)

There’s an important ideological dimension: under the guise of defending ‘traditional values’, both promote a cultural relativist challenge to the notion of universal human rights, and oppose humanitarian intervention and democratic revolutions or reforms anywhere, stigmatising them as a ‘Western’ conspiracy. Both will have been gratified by the swelling ranks of the dictators’ club. Their shared neighbour, Mongolia (the only country to have defeated them both), looks like the newest candidate member.

And both share a view of how the world should look that recalls Orwell’s *1984*, where the planet is divided into three spheres of influence. Putin has repeatedly called for NATO to be disbanded (<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/what-does-putin-want>)

and Lavrov for the building of a post-America world (<http://www.mid.ru/en/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2648249>

. For Putin, the US has no legitimate interests anywhere on the Eurasian continent. Xi, too, may wish the US to leave East Asia, though presumably in an orderly way.(comment by Prof. White at a public forum at the China in the World Centre, ANU).

Even given both men’s innate caution, when they met in Moscow they may have shared a wink of Schadenfreude over the most acute crisis in the US since the Civil War. For both Putin and Xi, former students of Marxism–Leninism, Trump may be proof that the contradictions of US capitalism are shunting it into the dustbin of history. That prospect might give Putin an inner glow, but Xi’s attitude may be ambivalent—he sent his daughter to study at Harvard, and in 2015 [the US took 18% of China’s exports](https://ustr.gov/) (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/chinas-exports-to-the-us/>)

.And both leaders would presumably much prefer a competent foe to the wrecking ball they now face.

Names matter, which is why Beijing and Moscow insist they are partners, not allies. In their view, alliances are hostile to someone, but, apart from their critics, they’d say they aren’t hostile to anyone, other than terrorists and separatists, as they define them. So they can’t be in an alliance.

But content matters too. They surely share intelligence on terrorists and ‘splittists’, and experience in bridling the internet. Russia has much to offer on cyber warfare, email hacking and fake news. But even the Russians must be impressed by the capacity for social control that China’s two million web-police demonstrated in erasing the death of Liu Xiaobo. In less than a second, Chinese face- recognition technology can check hundreds of thousands of images from ubiquitous video cameras against databases of all suspect people, nationwide.

At the [Hamburg G20 meeting](https://euobserver.com/foreign/138465), for the first time Xi and Putin collaborated against the EU, rejecting a proposal by Donald Tusk to ease refugee pressure on the EU by imposing UN-level travel bans and asset freezes on people smugglers (Andrew Rettman, Putin-Trump chemistry fizzles in Hamburg, https://euobserver.com/foreign/138465)

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Similarly, the unprecedented [joint naval manoeuvres in the Baltic](http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-china-are-sending-their-navies-the-baltic-sea-formal-21669%29) look like reciprocation for Russia’s partnering with the Chinese navy in the South China Sea and around the Senkaku Islands. In Vasily Kashin’s view, ‘the actual level of defense cooperation and policy coordination is that of an alliance’. ([http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-china-are-sending-their-navies-the-baltic-sea-formal-21669)](http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/russia-china-are-sending-their-navies-the-baltic-sea-formal-21669%29).

But as Bobo Lo has argued, crucial in determining the essence of Sino-Russian ties is that they remain less important to each than each’s relations with the US. And despite their confidence that their interests now converge, crucial too is the legacy of four centuries of dealings: a complete lack of illusions about each other. Both would endorse the Leninist principle of *kto-kogo*: all that matters is who will dominate whom. Today, the dominant party looks set to be China.