

The Putin-Xi Joint Statement on a ‘New Era’, A Shared Worldview

This is Russia and China declaring a shift in the world order, one in which the US does not lead.

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On February 4, on the sideline of the Beijing Olympics, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping met and issued a [joint statement](#) on international relations entering a new era. Richard Sakwa, Professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent called it simply, “a landmark document.”

In addition, Sakwa told this author that “it will go down in history as a signal moment” when the Western view of the world and international relations was fundamentally challenged.

Rather than setting out policies couched in direct complaints about the West, this document seemingly represents a confident shift in which Russia and China take the lead and lay out a set of principles and a new, shared worldview.

A clear declaration of principles like this by the two countries has long been anticipated. It is significant that they issued it together, and that it was done on the sidelines of an Olympics under (diplomatic) boycott by the United States, and at a time when a new cold war is emerging and red lines are being drawn by Putin over Ukraine and by Xi over Taiwan.

One of the 5,000-word joint statement’s most intriguing features is the fine-tuning of the characterization of their relationship. The Russia-China relationship is described here as a very close, comprehensive strategic partnership that may be, in Putin’s earlier words, “a relationship that probably cannot be compared with anything in the world.”

The partnership has also been described as based on three do’s and three don’ts: do be good neighbors, good partners, and good friends; don’t enter into an alliance, oppose each other, or take action against a third party. In a paper written in 2021, Igor Denisov and Alexander Lukin report a shift in which China’s foreign minister proposed replacing the three

don'ts with three no's: "no end lines, no forbidden areas, and no upper limits." Though this formulation is vague, Denisov and Lukin suggest there's been a degree of removing the limitations and moving closer to an alliance.

The joint statement may be the first official appearance of the three no's formulation: "Friendship between the two States has no limits, there are no 'forbidden' areas of cooperation." In adding that it is "a new kind of relationship" that is not "aimed against third countries" and is "superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War," it evokes [Xi's recent statement](#) that the "relationship even exceeds an alliance in its closeness and effectiveness."

The joint nature of the statement is, as Sakwa told me, itself "an expression of the principles contained in the document." In substance it is a catalogue of areas in which Russia and China will cooperate, including development, technology, transportation, climate change, health, terrorism, arms control, AI security, and more. They also claim their readiness to work with all international partners in a multipolar world.

The primacy of the Russian-Chinese vision here is clearly demonstrated by its inclusion at the top of the first paragraph. It lists "multipolarity" as the first of the "momentous changes" of the "new era." The two parties express their desire for the role of the UN in a world order not led by a hegemon that asserts its own standards on a unipolar chess board and poses "serious threats to global and regional peace and stability and undermine[s] the stability of the world order."

The joint statement also stresses that in the new era, "a trend has emerged towards redistribution of power in the world" so that each country has a voice that "promote[s] more democratic international relations." And that is where we get to the most remarkable aspect of the joint statement of all: the emphasis on democracy. In the Joint Statement on the International Relations Entering a New Era, Russia and China feel the need to lecture America and the West on democracy.

The lecture has two parts: democratic government within a country, and international democracy between countries in a multipolar world.

The introductory section calls for all nations to "champion such universal human values as peace, development, equality, justice, democracy and freedom." But it insists that "[t]here is no one-size-fits-all template to guide countries in establishing democracy," and so all countries must "respect the rights of peoples to independently determine the development paths of their countries."

Russia and China offer an unconventional definition of democracy, defining it simply as "a means of citizens' participation in the government of their country with the view to improving the well-being of the population and implementing the principle of popular government." It has, of course, been pointed out that this is a really low bar that Western democracies would never accept. Furthermore, it is not lost on the reader that the modern Russian and Chinese systems have never been known for adhering to "universal values" of "equality, justice" or even freedom, and that yes, their "templates" may be very well different. As such, Sakwa says that Russia and China are appealing to a "an underlying principle . . . of 'multiple modernities' . . . that there are different ways of being modern — not necessarily Western."

The document says that each country can choose its fit of democracy, taking into account its social, political, historical and cultural background and that only the people of the country can decide whether their country is a democracy. In this tradition, Sakwa says, “Putin has always considered himself a democrat,” and the document insists that Russia and China are “world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage [that] have long-standing traditions of democracy.”

Russia has always drawn from its own heritage in evolving its system of government. “That is why,” Sakwa says in his book, *The Putin Paradox*, “Russia’s ‘democratic revolution’ always looked anomalous from the perspective of classic theories of democratisation.”

But the most important part of the joint statement is a poke at American hypocrisy that insists on its own vision of democracy for nations but prohibits democracy between nations. Biden has defined his administration by the generational struggle between democracy and autocracy. The U.S. compels democracy upon countries. Hence, the embargo on Cuba cannot be lifted until Cuba becomes a multi-party democracy. But Washington also insists on maintaining a unipolar world in which democracy is denied between nations and the U.S. rules as an autocrat. “Some actors,” the statement accuses, “representing but the minority on the international scale continue to advocate unilateral approaches to addressing international issues and resort to force.”

Lukin points out that Russia and China have recently begun subscribing to the idea of “democratisation of international relations,” in which all nations have an equal voice. On the contrary, the U.S. has always hypocritically demanded democracy for each nation while insisting on its unique autocratic role at the international level.

It is at this global level that the two nations have staked out their alternative vision. At a time when crisis is bearing down on Eastern Europe in Russia’s backyard, and tensions escalate in China’s, it’s no small statement when they say their “friendship has no limits.”

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