

China and Russia: The Bilateral Relationship That Matters

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Which is the most important bilateral relationship in the international arena today? Many analysts would argue that it is the relationship between the United States of America and China that has the greatest significance for the world.

Some see it as the relationship between an established power and a rising power which has often led to war in the past. They quote the great 4th century BC Greek historian, Thucydides who had observed that "it was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable." Contemporary thinkers like Graham T. Allison who coined the term 'The Thucydides Trap' point out that over the last 500 years there have been 16 instances in which an established power had felt threatened by a rising power and 12 of them ended in war. One of the most devastating was the war between Britain and Germany which was at the crux of the First World War from 1914 to 1918. On the other hand, the US took over the mantle of British imperial power after the Second World War in 1945 in a relatively peaceful manner.

I do not see the US and China going to war. Burdened by perpetual wars and massive debts running into trillions of dollars, a huge segment of the US populace has no appetite for another conflagration that will further sap the nation's energies. At the same time, the Chinese leadership knows that a war with a technologically superior military power will be a severe blow to the country's economic and social development which remains its foremost goal. However this does not mean that the US and China will be able to transact a peaceful transfer of power. The US it is obvious is not prepared to accept with equanimity its overall decline as a hegemon. This is why there will be skirmishes and conflicts from time to time as we witness the end of the era of US helmed Western global dominance and the birth of a new phase in international relations.

At the core of this new phase is another bilateral relationship which I regard as far more critical in shaping the present and the future. This is the relationship between China and Russia which is at its zenith at this point in time. It is a relationship that covers the entire gamut from finance, energy and agriculture to military and security ties and to close coordination on regional and global political issues. The leaders of the two countries, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, who have forged a strong inter-personal bond, approved in July 2017 the 2017-20 implementation outline for the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation between China and Russia.

This ever strengthening bond between the world's most populous nation and its biggest geographical entity will not only hasten the demise of US hegemony but will also accelerate the emergence of a multi-polar global order. A number of other states are already linked to

China and Russia through BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). These bodies are further buttressed by initiatives such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) project and the Eurasian Economic Union. Though the participants in all these endeavours are not always on the same page on various challenges confronting the human family today, they will help to diffuse and disperse power at the regional and global levels. A multi-polar world by definition will allow for the growth of multilateral institutions and the enhancement of international law. In short, it will be good for global peace.

Of course, the developing Sino-Russian bond is not without its challenges. Let us not forget that China and Russia (the Soviet Union) in spite of their common communist ideology, quarrelled with one another from the fifties to the eighties, over a variety of issues pertaining to economic approaches, political strategies and simply power and influence in other parts of the world. This time however by emphasising solid economic cooperation and forging common political positions on global conflicts that affect both nations, Presidents Xi and Putin have succeeded in anchoring Sino-Russian ties in shared interests that really matter to them. Besides, the US's pursuit of its hegemonic agenda in the vicinity of China and Russia has undoubtedly brought the two states closer together. Chinese and Russian leaders are only too aware that there are concerted moves by the intelligence apparatus in the US and elsewhere to drive a wedge between China and Russia. If anything it has increased their determination to remain united.

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