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China is tightening its embrace with Russia as it builds bulwarks against the west

Bilateral ties between Beijing and Moscow represent an intensifying axis of authoritarianism

JAMES KYNGE



Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping at a reception following their talks this week in Moscow © Sputnik/AFP/Getty Images

James Kynge YESTERDAY

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His words were unscripted, but they spoke volumes. When Xi Jinping bade farewell to Vladimir Putin after three days of talks in Moscow this week, he looked the Russian leader in the eye and hardened his expression with a taut grin. “Change is coming that hasn’t happened in 100 years. And we’re driving this change together,” Xi said. Putin replied: “I agree.”

Xi was referencing one of his favourite slogans. “Changes unseen in a century” is well-known code in Beijing for the decline of the US-led west and the rise of China as the world’s pre-eminent power. For Xi, Russia’s war in Ukraine and the tenor of Beijing’s ties with Moscow are foremost about countering the US-led west. Their bilateral ties represent an intensifying axis of authoritarianism to oppose what Xi characterised this month as the “all-round containment, encirclement and suppression of China” by the US and its allies.

“In response, China now aims to build a countering coalition,” wrote Arthur Kroeber, Yanmei Xie and Tom Miller for Gavekal Dragonomics, a consultancy specialising on China. “The alignment with Russia is the core of this coalition and the central

message out of Moscow this week is that nothing . . . will weaken the China-Russia axis.”

The primacy of China’s anti-western orientation explains the public messages emanating from the Xi-Putin summit. While tensions between the US and China have been clear for several years, history may assign this week a special significance. Beijing’s anti-containment strategy is building in step with its tightening embrace of Russia. While few people know what Xi told Putin during private discussions, the public readout of their meeting suggests that the Chinese leader did not apply meaningful pressure on his “dear friend” to end the war in Ukraine.

A joint statement signed by Putin and Xi did not call for Russia to withdraw its troops from Ukraine, honour Ukraine’s internationally recognised border or even repeat the call for a ceasefire made in Beijing’s 12-point “position paper” on ending the conflict last month.

Instead, it used coded language to blame Russia’s invasion on Nato expansion, saying that the “legitimate security concerns of all countries must be respected and bloc confrontation should be prevented”. Further, it demanded that the UN charter must be observed – but failed to mention Moscow’s flagrant violation of the article in that charter which says UN members should refrain from the “use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”.

China’s credibility as potential peacemaker in the crisis has quickly evaporated. Despite hopes that Xi might contact Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy by phone after his visit to Moscow, no such call has yet been made. Indeed, a few hours after Xi’s departure, Russian air strikes pounded Ukraine once again.

Yu Jie, senior research fellow at Chatham House, a London-based think tank, says that since the minimum requirement for brokering peace is to be perceived as neutral and be prepared to talk to both sides, China has already discredited itself. “It would be very difficult for China to be a peace broker between Russia and Ukraine given the lack of direct contact with president Zelenskyy so far,” she adds.

Several commentators go further. Jude Blanchette, China expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington-based think tank, says that Beijing’s efforts to position itself as a peacemaker are aimed at shoring up deteriorating diplomatic relations in Europe, rather than actually altering the course of the war. China’s ultimate hope is for a Russian victory, Blanchette maintains. “A prolonged war fundamentally works against China’s own economic and diplomatic interests. but a war that ends with a Russian defeat would be a disaster for Beijing and

for Xi Jinping personally,” he adds.

The next test will be whether Beijing’s economic support for Moscow expands to include the supply of lethal aid. Chinese officials have denied that this is their intention. But even if they exercise restraint on weapons, China’s anti-western turn has already inflicted real collateral damage. Economic decoupling is accelerating, creating turbulence for companies operating in the world’s second largest economy.

On Friday, Chinese authorities raided the Beijing offices of US due diligence firm Mintz and closed its China operations. Beijing is also notifying foreign universities and research institutions that their access to China National Knowledge Infrastructure, a crucial database, will be curtailed, academics said. Multinational carmakers, meanwhile, are [rethinking](#) their reliance on the Chinese supply chain. Apple’s manufacturing partners, such as the Taiwanese company Foxconn, are ramping up investment in [production facilities](#) in India in a bid to diversify away from an overreliance on China.

The pressures motivating such decisions are unlikely to abate. In a long essay published in February on Aisixiang, the respected Chinese academic Zheng Yongnian predicted that confrontation between the PRC and the US will continue “for a long time”. “We need to be a responsible major power”, he argued, “centering on the goal of reshaping the world order.”

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