Western Expansionism Turns Russia-China to a Strategic Partnership

In its latest meeting, the G7 countries - Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK, the USA and the High Representative of the European Union - “condemned Russian military build-up” on the Ukrainian border. While the statement does show the growing anti-Russia rhetoric in the West, the meeting drastically failed to contextualise how the West itself has been pushing for a crisis like-situation to grow. Russia’s build-up comes against the backdrop of increasing Western efforts to expand the NATO alliance to Ukraine and, thus, put direct - and perpetual - military pressure on Moscow. In the present context, the US and the UK led military alliance is paying particular attention to pushing NATO into unchartered territories to supposedly counter-balance Europe’s growing energy dependence on Russia. Notwithstanding the core purposes the G7 and the NATO countries are pursuing, West’s increasing pressure on Russia is directly pushing Moscow close to Beijing like never before. The consequent making of Sino-Russia strategic (political, economic and military) alliance stands to become the most serious and biggest challenge the western alliance has faced ever since its creation in the late 1940s.

In this context, if the G7 meeting was staged as a show of ‘western unity’ against Russia, it was, as it stands, swiftly responded by a virtual meeting between Russia’s Vladimir Putin and China’s Xi, with the later completely endorsing Russia’s position in the on-going crisis along the Russian-Ukrainian border. The G7, in other words, found its most powerful and formidable nemesis within three days of its meeting in England. But this Xi-Putin summit is not merely a meeting of two like-minded leaders. In reality, it signifies the coming together of two of the world’s most powerful countries to bring a systemic change away from Western/US hegemony. It is the making of an alliance that the West is itself pushing unwittingly against itself.

As it stands, China is not supporting Russia merely because Beijing principally agrees with Russia on key
international and regional issues. Very much like Moscow, Beijing, too, is facing Western diplomatic and political aggression, evident most clearly through its diplomatic boycott of Winter Olympics to be held in China in February 2022. The Putin-Xi meeting, besides reinforcing Russian position on NATO’s eastward expansion, was also keen to express solidarity on the Olympics games. As Putin reiterated: “We have always supported each other on issues of international sports cooperation, including in rejecting any attempts to politicize sports and the Olympic movement.” The meeting thus sent a powerful message of Sino-Russia solidarity to NATO, that is Russia could always rely on China in the event of any western aggression, especially in the form of financial sanctions. This was, in other words, a Russian rebuff of western claims that Moscow was ‘isolated’ on the question of preventing NATO’s expansion to Eastern Europe.

For the West, this alliance is formidable – not only because it involves some of the most powerful countries in the world, but also because it is durable. With both Xi and Putin likely to stay in power for few more years, the alliance is quite likely to flourish and challenge US/western hegemony in more direct and subtle ways than has been the case so far.

As such, whereas Putin and Xi reportedly agreed on a framework of mutual support against Western aggressive policies, they also agreed to further pursue the possibility of an independent financial structure for trade operations that could not be influenced by other countries. While this structure is yet to be formally announced, it does show a concerted Beijing-Moscow effort to build an international system not vulnerable to western manipulation, or available to be used as a mechanism of sanctions to pursue certain foreign policy goals.

Vladimir Putin accordingly called the growing Sino-Russia relations a “new model of cooperation … based, among other things, on the basis of noninterference in internal affairs and respect for each other’s interests.”

This mode is “new” primarily because it consciously extends beyond mere military cooperation i.e., joint military drills and common foreign policy outlook. What makes it really “new” is how it intends to change the very system that has been dominating the world since the Second World War. It is a system that gave birth to the forty-year long Cold War between the US and the Soviet Union, and it is the same US-dominated system that is pushing against the rise of competing powers to preserve the hegemony of its creator. While the US-dominated system remains faithful to the US and its allies, its built-in bias against non-Western states continues to provide conditions for the conflict to expand, as well as bringing other countries into a mode of very close cooperation.

The growing cooperation between Russia and China is, thus, also a crude reminder to the US that the West cannot simply browbeat Russia and China into accepting the US demands on Ukraine or Taiwan. The Xi-Putin had the kind of effect it was intended to produce. As some reports in the western media have indicated, President Biden is already ‘advising’ Kiev to exercise self-restraint. This advice comes against the backdrop of security proposals Russia sent to the US vis-à-vis NATO’s expansion to Ukraine.

These proposals are, as it stands, not only duly backed by China, but Xi was also keen to reinforce them by making it unambiguous that China will be prepared to expand cooperation with Russia and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) member countries to support security in the region. As Chinese foreign ministry statement quoting Xi said: “The Chinese side intends to continue to develop flexible and diversified cooperation with Russia and CSTO member countries and stand up for security and stability in the region.”

The evolution of Sino-Russia ties from friends into strategic allies looks both inevitable and irreversible. As some European diplomats have highlighted, this new balance is a strategic disaster for the West, a disaster of its own making indeed.

Salman Rafi Sheikh, research-analyst of International Relations and Pakistan’s foreign and domestic affairs, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”. 