Vladimir Putin’s Meeting With Xi Jinping Marks an Important Step in Eurasian Future

The past week saw what was arguably the most important encounter for a considerable period of time. The Russian president Vladimir Putin travelled to Beijing as the honoured guest of Chinese president Xi Jinping. It was their first face to face meeting for more than two years. The two leaders did not waste the opportunity and devoted themselves to covering issues that mattered.

Prior to this summit, the respective foreign secretaries of the two countries Sergey Lavrov and Wang Yi also had a meeting. The focus of the meeting was also significantly reflected in the statement after the meeting made by Wang Yi. He pointed to what is arguably the most important development occurring in the world today; the increasing cooperation of the Belt and Road Initiative with the Eurasian Economic Union (the EAEU).

There was considerable agreement between the two countries, reflected in the final communiqué. The different emphasis between the concerns of the two great powers and the preoccupations of the West were striking. Both countries are against NATO expansion which Russia in particular sees as an existential threat. They favoured the United Nations as the medium for seeking justice in international relations, rather than the more narrow and manifestly self-interested version of international agreements the Americans and their allies favour.

Both Russia and China oppose interference in their internal affairs, something the Chinese in particular are against, given the constant attempts in recent years by the Americans to create trouble in Xinjiang province and to oppose the reunification of Hong Kong into the People’s Republic. Both policies are seen as blatant interference in China’s domestic affairs, particularly, as in the Xinjiang example, where it is accompanied by a massive campaign to portray Chinese policy as amounting to genocide of the Uighur people, despite the clear evidence to the contrary.
President Putin had an op-ed published in Xinhua, a Chinese media outlet, which details what he and Xi had discussed. Importantly, the op-ed pointed to the drive by the two countries to strengthen the role of the United Nations in global affairs and to prevent the international legal system, with the United Nations Charter at its centre, from being eroded.

And important component of that drive was to consistently expand the role of national currencies and maintaining mechanisms to offset the impact of unilateral United States sanctions. This is very important. The United States has consistently used the central role of the United States dollar in international trade as a vehicle for affecting the national policies of the countries forced to use the dollar. That is now changing, and the pace of change is expected to grow in the forthcoming years as more and more countries abandon the dollar as the means of international trade payments.

Putin’s article defined the Russia - China strategic partnership as “sustainable, intrinsically valuable, not affected by the political climate and not aimed against anyone. It is underpinned by respect, regard for each other’s core interests, adherence to international law and the United Nations Charter.”

Such a message is immensely appealing to much of the global South which for decades has been dictated to by the United States. It stands in stark contrast to the worldview as expressed by NATO which sees the dominance of United States political views, enhanced by NATO’s military power, as the cornerstone of its continued attempts to dominate the world.

The China-Russia policy to oppose the attempted United States hegemony rests on a soft power alternative, the strengthening of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Belt and Road Initiative. The SCO has recently welcomed Iran as a full member, making it the ninth member State along with China, India, Russia and the five “stans” of Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. There are in addition three observer states and six dialogue Partners, of which the most important is Turkey in terms of population and economic and political power.

The BRI has a far broader reach, with currently more than 140 members, region extensively into Africa and Latin America. The association is historically unique. It reaches more countries than any western alliance, military or otherwise. It poses a threat to United States dominance never seen before and as such represents a major threat to that dominance. Its very success explains a lot of United States hostility toward China, which for the first time since at least the end of World War II faces a serious challenge to its assumed hegemony.

The big difference between the BRI and the United States system is that the BRI makes no attempt to dictate the internal policies of its members. It sees the United Nations as the governing body for international relations. The United Nations is accordingly awarded prime status, as Putin’s article makes abundantly clear.

The unresolved issue for the future of the Eurasian region will be the role of Turkey. It clearly harbours ambitions of a larger role in the Islamic states that stretch across the Eurasian heartland. The Turkish role is complicated by its concurrent membership of NATO. The issue will be whether Turkey’s ambitions for a larger pan Asian role are independent of NATO’s ambitions, or whether Turkey will be seen as a stalking horse for NATO.

The recent experience of Kazakhstan which saw an attempted overthrow of its government by forces that notably including a large Turkish element is a warning to other Islamic influenced nations in the region. It would be idle to assume NATO will accept its defeat and Kazakhstan as the last word in its ambitions for the region.

For NATO to gain a hole in the region would also pose a threat to the SCO. They have been defeated in their ambitions to capture Kazakhstan. It would be a huge mistake to assume that the ambitions have been put to rest. China and Russia must remain constantly alert to this threat.

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