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'RUSSIA-CHINA: IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNEQUAL RELATIONSHIP'

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A brief background of world events will help set the context for assessing this relationship. Without delving into why Russia did what it did in Ukraine, over the past few years we have witnessed major powers attempting to consolidate or expand their territory – as in the case of China – or their areas of influence.

This prompts recall of the rather prescient remarks made by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair in October 2001. He said “The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor from the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause. This is the moment to seize. The kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us reorder this world around us.”

The remark not only reveals the lingering imperialist mindset, but gives an insight into the thinking of the major powers who are reluctant to yield power and influence to the emerging new global power centres. In this backdrop AUKUS can be seen as a pre-emptive attempt to retain and spread Western – in reality Anglo-Saxon --- military power into Asia. It also sets the stage for big power competition.

China and Russia have a deep partnership in terms of economy, energy, trade and military supplies and, importantly, a shared ideology. The arrangement, which got steadily consolidated since 1990, suits a financially weaker Russia which receives payments in USD and consumer goods. But even deeper is the close relationship between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin. Xi has invested heavily in this relationship. This has trumped long abiding mutual suspicions.

Both are autocrats with unchallenged decision-making authority. They are creatures of their respective Communist Parties, their thinking has been moulded by their Party, they are both committed to their ideologies, and they share similar global ambitions. Additionally, both share a strong suspicion and dislike of the US and West which, they assess, exercise hegemony over the international world and trade order. They also see the US as intent on weakening them through ‘colour revolutions’ and by encroaching into their periphery. Putin’s justification for the war in Ukraine and the Joint Statement issued after the Xi-Putin Summit in Beijing on February 4, 2022, are cases in point.

More importantly, the former Soviet Union and its successor state Russia and China have stood together for decades on the international stage. As two ‘communist’, or socialist,

countries they have an adversarial relationship with many of the world's democracies and the West. China, for years the junior partner and treated as such by the CPSU and Soviet Union, witnessed the decline of the latter from the mid-1980s. Their roles got reversed as the Soviet Union became economically weaker and the shelves in its stores became bare, more so after disintegration of the Soviet Union. As China grew stronger and economically more powerful it still, however, took comfort from Russia being another large 'communist' power – in fact if not in name! The recent developments in Ukraine and prospect of Russia being defeated, therefore, are a cause of serious worry for Chinese communist leaders.

Xi especially has closely watched developments in Russia and, like virtually the entire Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leadership, was particularly disturbed at the downfall of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Like most CCP members brought up on communist ideology, Xi admires Stalin and views Khrushchev disparagingly as a 'revisionist' and Gorbachev as the 'traitor' who brought about the dissolution of the Soviet Union. A 100-minute movie made by China's central Propaganda Department and screened in late March for Party members throughout China eulogised Stalin and Mao, implying of course that Xi was of similar stature!

These close historical ties are reflected in China's categorisation of its levels of partnership with various countries. The highest formulation "Comprehensive strategic partnership coordination relations" is used only to describe its relationship with Russia. The only other country with a separate stand-alone relationship is Pakistan. Describing the depth of Sino-Russian relations, a senior Russian diplomat said that the two sides consult each other on each issue before taking a step. More recently, the joint statement issued after the Xi-Putin Summit in Beijing on February 4, 2022, reiterated that there are "no limits" to China-Russia friendship.

While Russia lost the propaganda war from the very start as the Western media dominates print, radio and TV, it is nevertheless difficult to form a definitive assessment of the situation in Ukraine. What is clear is that the protracted war with no outer time horizon is certainly not to Beijing's liking. It has made Beijing very uncomfortable. Recent articles in the official Chinese media, while justifying Russia's invasion of Ukraine and enumerating its benefits for China, also candidly itemised some of the failures responsible for the lack of progress by the Russian Army. Chinese military planners have envisaged as doctrine a short sharp conflict using overwhelming cyber and firepower and ending in decisive victory. None of this is happening. On the contrary, the long drawn out war has -- to China's surprise -- seen the US and West shed their differences and come together very quickly and raised the worrying prospect of Western sanctions against Russia being extended to China. Such a development would have enormous repercussions for China's economy and Xi's continuance in office.

China, which is more integrated with US and Western markets, will be far more severely impacted than Russia in case it is hit by sanctions. For example, 75 percent of China's goods trade is still invoiced in dollars. Being barred from the dollar-clearing system and SWIFT would have unfathomable consequences for both Chinese banks and the global economy. The Chinese leadership has now seen how rapidly almost 600 leading multinationals and western consumer goods companies (like Starbucks, Mc Donald's, Louis Vuitton etc) exited Russia. China has not yet been able to boost domestic consumption and reduce dependence on exports – its exports to US exceed USD 600 billion annually. Importantly, the children and

relatives of over 70% of the CCP's Department Heads study in the US and West where CCP members have also parked their mainly 'illegal' assets. All this will end.

The CCP is thus far holding firm on its support to Russia. China's official media and traffic on its heavily censored social media continue not to allow use of words like "invasion" or "war" and quickly remove articles anticipating Russia's defeat. Its social media is awash with posts criticising the US, West and Ukraine and denigrating Ukrainians and Ukrainian women.

The conversation between US President Biden and Xi on March 18, 2022, showed no change in China's position. Just days earlier Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi spoke to EU's Borrell and said China will not mediate until Europe lifts all sanctions against Russia.

The same day that Xi and Biden spoke, a Global Times Commentary (March 18) in English asserted China's position. It described "China-Russia relations, the most strategic asset that cannot be damaged by US provocation" and emphasised that leaning on Moscow will only "undermine the China-Russia relationship and sabotage mutual trust". It stressed that the "Russia-China comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination has stood the test of time and is rock solid".

Chinese officials are being very careful not to attract sanctions and are mindful of US Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo's redline to Chinese technology firms that might plan to do business and supply services to Russia, warning that they will be cut off from the services and supplies they need to continue operating. Chinese companies like Lenovo and Huawei continue to operate in Russia including with Russian government entities, and China National Petroleum Corp. is operationalising the plan -- agreed during the Summit -- to establish a new pipeline with an annual capacity of 10 billion cu. meters. China's coal companies and some banks have, however, temporarily ceased operations for fear of attracting sanctions.

But dissenting voices are being heard and, in some cases, possibly allowed. A number of comments critical of China's support to Putin and Russia are being posted on the social media and being rapidly deleted. The first indication of dissent noticed was the statement protesting the Russian invasion of Ukraine issued on February 26 by five Chinese Professors of prestigious Chinese Universities, which was posted on China's social media but promptly deleted by Chinese censors. More negative sentiments were expressed soon thereafter in an 'open letter' circulated on WeChat on March 3 by over 200 alumni of China's prestigious Tsinghua University, mostly living in China, who demanded that the university divest Putin of an honorary doctorate awarded in 2019.

Prominent, however, was the article by Hu Wei, Vice Chairman of the Public Policy Research Center of the Counsellor's Office of the State Council, Chairman of the Shanghai Public Policy Research Association, Chairman of the Academic Committee of the Charhar Institute and a Professor and doctoral supervisor, who expressed strong reservations about China's present policy. By March 7, the original post had been viewed 185,834 times and been recycled by numerous outlets. The article was deleted after a week, suggesting possibly that others in the Party apparatus supported it, and Hu Wei could face punitive action because of his criticism of Xi's policy.

In his article titled 'The Possible Outcome of the Russia-Ukraine War and China's Choice', Hu Wei, argued that China needs to safeguard its own national interests and cease supporting

Russia. He emphasised 'The bottom line is to prevent the United States and the West from jointly sanctioning China'. Stating that Putin's plans for a blitzkrieg have clearly failed, Russia is fast getting isolated, and events are leading towards a World War, he unequivocally recommended that China needs to cut ties with Putin in the 'next one or two weeks' and 'give up neutrality'.

Hu Wei said a protracted war would have major strategic repercussions; the Russian people will face increasing hardships with Western sanctions reaching an unprecedented level; and the anti-war and anti-Putin forces will get mobilised raising the possibility of a mutiny. He assessed that if Putin is removed due to civil strife, coup d'état or other reasons, Russia will succumb to the West, or even be further dismembered. Russia's status as a great power will come to an end.

Spelling out the impact on China, he said the confrontation with Russia will be defined as a struggle between democracy and dictatorship and this will have an effect on other countries. 'The US Indo-Pacific strategy will be consolidated' and Japan and other countries will draw even closer to the US. 'The power of the West will increase significantly, NATO will continue to expand, and the influence of the United States in the non-Western world will also increase, more third world countries will embrace the West and the West will have more "hegemony" in terms of military, values and institutions, and its hard power and soft power will reach new heights'. The United States and Europe will 'form a community of shared future more closely' and US leadership in the Western world will be paramount.

He emphasised that if China does not take measures to actively respond, it will face further containment from the US and West and become the main target for strategic containment. The "anti-China" coalition comprising Japan, South Korea and Taiwan will coalesce and China will face military encirclement of the United States and NATO, QUAD (US-Japan-India-Australia Quadrilateral Alliance), and AUKUS, as also challenges from Western values and systems.

Most recently on May 10, former Chinese diplomat to Ukraine, Gao Yusheng, posted an article on the Phoenix website frankly anticipating Russian defeat in its war against Ukraine. It was taken down within hours.

The authorities have reacted to the criticisms which, in effect, challenge Xi Jinping's policy. Two lengthy articles by the Head of the People's Daily Sichuan Branch and Zhang Zhikun, Senior Researcher of the PLA-affiliated Kunlun Policy Research Institute, published on April 24 and 29 respectively sought to explain China's position and support for Putin. They described Putin's action as resistance against US and Western hegemony over the world order, a confrontation between democracy and other systems of governance and highlighted the advantages of the conflict to China. Nonetheless both expressed concern about the protracted war in Ukraine and imposition of sanctions. The appearance of these articles indicates that while the CCP leadership is presently unwilling to alter its policy towards Putin and Russia, this is being debated within the CCP echelons. The two articles also underscore the solid nature of Sino-Russia relations and the bond between Xi and Putin.

Quite apart from calls to Xi to dilute support for Russia, there are other factors that could compel such a decision. Among them is that Russia's usefulness as the supplier of military hardware and technology will be diminished. Russia already faces shortages of microchips and other vital components etc, which are all imported, for its weapons systems. Despite its problems with Ukraine, Russia was till now able to meet China's requirements. China, however, hedged its bets and forged ties with Ukraine by signing its first ever security agreement with a foreign power. China remains dependent on Russia for military supplies and technology, but will try to lure more Russian scientists. Russia is also China's most secure source for Oil and Natural Gas. Much of China's purchases are paid for in US Dollars and consumer goods and there are large numbers of Chinese workers in Russia's far east. But Russia's most useful, though intangible, role remains that of being the largest ideologically compatible state with China. The most worrying scenario for Xi Jinping is the Ukraine conflict ending in defeat for Russia – either because of internal unrest or inability to seize the objectives – or Putin being removed and the Russian Federation disintegrating, leaving China as the lone communist state standing against the West.

This evolving relationship is a matter of concern for India too. China will not change its policy towards India unless it obtains sizeable concessions. Russia is already China's junior partner. This will become more obvious after the Ukraine war, which will probably leave Russia exhausted, considerably weakened and diminished. As the sanctions take effect and it is unable to obtain critical parts, Russia's ability to manufacture and supply military hardware and equipment will be adversely impacted. Russia will become even more dependent on China. Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan's visit to Moscow on February 24 displayed the extent of forward movement in their bilateral relations at a time when Sino-Pak ties are already extremely close. These warn of unwelcome developments for India.

India needs an urgent comprehensive and objective review of its relations with Russia. They can certainly no longer continue as before. The recent announcement sharply reducing defence imports point to promotion of 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' but this needs to be enlarged to include other products and areas of cooperation to compensate for dependence on Russia and China. India needs to take advantage of the world's most advanced hi-technology, capital available for investment and huge markets available only in the US and West. They also have neither borders nor seriously clashing interests with India, which can be a reliable partner. India has a short window to ramp up indigenous production in critical sectors if it wants to be independent and rise to be a major power. A readily discernible deadline is 2035.

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