

Research Reports

Research Group on 'Russia in an Era of Great Power Competition'

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Deepening Russia-China Relations – Russia's Growing Presence

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Introduction

How is the relationship between Russia and China faring amid the emergence of serious issues related to the stability of the Central Eurasian region one after another, such as developments in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 and in Kazakhstan in January 2022? To present the conclusion first, Russia's presence seems to be increasing as the bilateral cooperation between the two countries deepens.

As I pointed out in my paper for our 2020 Study Group Report, the relationship between the two countries is characterized by the fact that, although China is much larger economically, Russia maintains an independent position and has not been reduced to a lower-ranking partner of China.¹ Russia has acted as an equal partner with China on the Belt and Road Initiative, recognizing that China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" and Russia's "Eurasian Economic Union" (EAEU) are linked, and played the role of mediator in the Sino-Indian border dispute that flared up again in 2020. In terms of nuclear power cooperation with China, Russia demonstrated its supporter's role by extending a helping hand to China in response to the decoupling of the United States and China. Casting a sidelong look at Western diplomatic boycotts, President Vladimir Putin showed himself to be very understanding of China by announcing that he would attend the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics.

Moreover, Russia is also a security collaborator for China. Russia's presence on this front appears to have increased in dealing with the situation in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021 and that in Kazakhstan in January 2022. In this article, I would like to examine Russia's cooperation with China in terms of security and the ever-increasing presence of Russia from the Chinese perspective.

1. Afghanistan issue and Russia-China relations

In the summer of 2021, the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan and the resumption of power by the Taliban raised fears around the world that terrorism would return to Afghanistan and destabilize the region. That Russia and China, which are geographically close to Afghanistan, took this threat more seriously at this time can be seen from the fact that President Xi Jinping and President Putin stressed during their televised meeting on June 28 that they would closely monitor the situation in Afghanistan and jointly maintain peace, security and stability in the region.² At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Foreign Ministers' Meeting held in the Tajikistani capital Dushanbe on July 14, a joint statement was adopted calling for an early ceasefire, a cessation of violence, and a peace process for Afghanistan. This again showed the sense of urgency felt by Russia and China.

In addition, it is worth noting that in the first half of August, more than 10,000 troops took part in the Russia-China joint military exercise "Zapad/Interaction-2021" held in China's Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region. China's Ministry of National Defense announced that it would "demonstrate the resolve and ability to attack terrorist forces and jointly maintain peace and stability in the region" through this exercise, and it is clear that the exercise was conducted in view of the situation in Afghanistan.³ As can be seen from the aforementioned Russia-China summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Foreign Ministers' Meeting, and the Russia-China joint military exercises, the two countries share interests, and are willing to take joint action, in the area of "counterterrorism".

There is another side of Russo-Chinese collaboration – opposition to the United States – that cannot be overlooked. The "counterterrorism" concerns that both countries had about the destabilization of Afghanistan were very real, given the "war on terrorism" being waged in Chechnya and Xinjiang. Russia and China thus did not hide their critical stance toward the United States as it withdrew from Afghanistan. After a meeting of foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi singled out the United States as liable for the region's instability, blaming it for having created the Afghanistan problem.⁴ At the time, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov declared it obvious to everyone that, though the Americans claimed to have completed their mission, that mission had ended in failure.⁵

During the Russo-Chinese summit telephone conversation of August 25, 2021, President Xi implicitly criticized the United States for imposing a Western-style democratic system on Afghanistan, stating that "only the person wearing the shoes can tell whether the shoes fit his feet" and called for "deepening anti-interference cooperation" between China and Russia. President Putin is also known to have responded by saying, "The situation in Afghanistan shows that external forces imposing their political models will only bring destruction and disaster," and stating that he would cooperate closely with China.⁶

In this way, the two countries agreed to criticize the US' irresponsible intervention in Afghanistan and its summer 2021 withdrawal, coming together in their usual criticism of the United States. At the same time, Russia seems to have strengthened its position as China's collaborator in preventing regional turmoil by conducting military exercises with China from the perspective of "counterterrorism". In China, the issue of Afghanistan is considered to be directly linked to the stability of Xinjiang, and Russia has further enhanced its presence as a strong partner in ensuring regional stability.

2. The Kazakhstan problem and Russia-China relations

In January 2022, Russia and China agreed to contain the turmoil in Kazakhstan. In this case, both were intent on suppressing the "color revolution", although there was also a "counterterrorism" aspect to their actions. On January 6, when the Russia-led military alliance the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) decided to send troops to Kazakhstan, China also began to show its support for quelling the uprising.

On January 7, President Xi Jinping sent a message to Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in which he conveyed his support for putting down the unrest by using the armed forces, expressing his firm opposition to attempts by outside powers to bring about a "color revolution".⁷ Subsequently, on January 10, the Russian and Chinese foreign ministers held a telephone conference in which the Chinese side supported the dispatch of CSTO troops on the premise that they would respect Kazakhstan's sovereignty. During the conversation, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said that China and Russia must strengthen their cooperation, oppose the intervention of outside powers in Central Asia, and prevent "color revolutions" and the "Three Evils" from causing chaos.⁸ The "Three Evils" is an expression used by China to refer to terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism in the context of its "counterterrorism" policy in Xinjiang. This clearly indicates concern that the situation in Kazakhstan could spread to Xinjiang.

Russia's actions ultimately won China's support, albeit on the condition that Kazakhstan's sovereignty be respected. What is important here is that Russia, which regards Central Asia as its sphere of influence, has made China recognize its influence in Kazakhstan. In recent years, China has been making inroads into Central Asia, once considered Russia's backyard, on economic and some security issues. It has become clear, however, that Russia still has influence in terms of security, and that China has no choice but to acknowledge this.

Conclusion

Russia and China appear to have entered into a more cooperative relationship through the aforementioned two issues that arised between late 2021 and early 2022. Although there are some differences between the two issues in terms of what Russia and China regard as a common threat, the context of a joint struggle against a common threat, whether it be "terrorists" or "color revolutionaries," has become increasingly emphasized.

From China's perspective, it has become clear once again that Russia is indispensable in dealing with the situations in Afghanistan and Kazakhstan, which are directly linked to the stability of Xinjiang. For China, the presence of Russia as a security partner has inevitably increased in importance.

¹ Jun Kumakura "Russia-China Relations in 2020: The 'Belt and Road Initiative' and the Border Conflict between China and India", Report of the Study Group on "Russia in the Era of Great Power Competition", Japan Institute of International Affairs, 2021, pp. 79 -84. <https://www.jiia.or.jp/pdf/research/R02_Russia/08-kumakura.pdf> (All quotes in this article last viewed on January 27)

² For China's concerns about the Afghanistan issue and recent relations between China and Afghanistan, see my paper below. Jun Kumakura, "China's Deepening Involvement in Afghanistan: To What Extent Do Chinese and Russian Interests Coincide?" Chuo Koron, October 2021, pp. 68 -75; "What is the East Turkistan Islamic Movement? - China's 'Counterterrorism' Logic and Xinjiang Policy", Foreign Affairs, No. 69, September 2021, pp. 56 -61.

<http://www.gaiko-web.jp/test/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Vol69_p56-61_east_turkestan_islamic_movement.pdf>; "China Seeks Engagement with Taliban Regime: No Specific Policy or Direction Yet" Nippon.com, November 2021. <<https://www.nippon.com/ja/in-depth/a07802/>>

³ Ministry of National Defense of China, "July 2021, Ministry of National Defense Regular Press Conference", July 29, 2021. <http://www.mod.gov.cn/jzhzt/2021-07/29/content_4890594.htm>

⁴ China News Service "Wang Yi Talks about U.S. Army's Withdrawing from Afghanistan: U.S. Should Be Responsible for Stable Transition", July 18, 2021. <<https://www.chinanews.com/gn/2021/07-18/9522636.shtml>>

⁵ ИТАР-ТАСС, "Лавров заявил, что миссия США в Афганистане провалилась," 16.07.2021. <<https://tass.ru/politika/11921031>>

⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China "Xi Jinping Speaks with Russian President Vladimir Putin on the Phone", August 25, 2021. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zyxw/202108/t20210825_9136997.shtml>

⁷ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China " Xi Jinping Sends a Verbal Message to Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev", January 7, 2022. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202201/t20220108_10480233.html>

⁸ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, "Wang Yi Speaks with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the Phone", January 11, 2022. <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/wshd_665389/202201/t20220111_10480941.html>