

# A RELATIONSHIP OF CONVENIENCE: THE RUSSO-CHINESE STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP



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In the past two decades, Russia and China have developed a rather unique strategic partnership, largely predicated upon deepening their economic ties and criticizing the West. As evidenced by the recent \$400 billion gas deal signed in May, one of the major strengths in the Russo-Chinese relationship pertains to energy cooperation. In fact, many of the agreements between China and Russia relate to Russia supplying either oil or natural gas to China. Beyond this, Russia and China have also cooperated on developing nuclear power energy. Another strength in the Russo-Chinese relationship pertains to regional and international cooperation. Together, Russia and China have collaboratively facilitated the creation of several regional and international institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), BRICS, and most recently the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building in Asia (CICA). Additionally, they have cooperated on numerous international and regional issues most notably: the 6 party talks, vetoing UN intervention in Syria, the non-militarization of space, opposing sanctions on Iran, etc. It is important to note, that cooperation between Russia and China on regional and international issues often times involves opposing the West in some capacity.

Despite the strengths in the Russo-Chinese relationship, it is evident that their strategic partnership is fraught with underlying issues. Primarily these issues emanate from historical mistrust, conflicting interests in Central Asia, and competing desires to project power in the Asia Pacific region more generally. Key examples that demonstrate this include: Russia's reluctance to sell China its newer weapons, Chinese expansion into the Russian Far East, and an increasingly unequal economic relationship. Although, these types of issues undoubtedly complicate their relationship, they also provide key insights regarding the Russo-Chinese strategic partnership. Accordingly, an analysis of Russia's position on key Chinese island disputes and China's position on the Ukraine Crisis both demonstrate underlying issues while also revealing the true nature of Russia and China's relationship.

Since the result of China's islands disputes will have critical implications for China both internationally and domestically, these island disputes have become a foreign policy priority for the

Chinese. Particularly, due to historical issues, sovereignty over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands is extremely important to China. Yet, despite this importance, China's strategic partner, Russia, for the large part has maintained an ambiguous position and has never explicitly stated whether or not they support China. For example, in 2010 President Hu and President Medvedev signed a joint statement indicating that the two countries "will protect the accomplishments of World War II and the postwar international order." Considering the Chinese assert that the Potsdam Declaration signified that Japan surrendered its rights to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, many in China have taken this as Russian support for China in the dispute. However, this position should be reevaluated in light of recent joint statements between the two countries. Today, joint statements between President Putin and President Xi simply indicate that the two states will support each other's "core interests," making Russia's position on the issue even more ambiguous. Interestingly, however, in May of 2014 Russia and China held joint naval exercises near the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. While publicly, Russia's position has remained unchanged, perhaps this is indicative of subtle support for China. However, given Russia's desire to avoid any actions that would escalate its own territorial dispute with Japan over the Kurile Islands, this seems unconvincing.

Similarly, Russia has also maintained an ambiguous and rather neutral position on the South China Sea Island disputes, another foreign policy priority for China. Despite Chinese efforts to garner public support, Russian government officials have remained silent on the issue. In large part this is due to the burgeoning relationship between Russia and Vietnam, one of the main contenders in the South China Sea Islands disputes. In recent history, to the dismay of the Chinese, Russia and Vietnam have deepened cooperation between their respective defense ministries and last year Russia sold Vietnam \$714 million worth of weapons. Equally concerning from the Chinese perspective, Russia and Vietnam have collaboratively pursued energy exploration in the South China Sea. While the Chinese have urged Russia to suspend these energy endeavors, Russia has ignored these requests and has continued its energy cooperation with Vietnam. To the Chinese, this presents a clear issue as Russia has abstained from supporting its position and even more problematically has sought to strengthen its relationship with the adversary.

While naysayers may be quick to take Russia's position on the Chinese Island disputes as indication of weaknesses in their relationship, this perspective is simply unfounded. In international relations, strategic partnerships are increasingly used by states that want to deepen economic, political, military, or potentially even cultural ties with another country. By virtue of the fact that these partnerships are "strategic" in nature, these relationships focus on areas of mutual interest. That being said, the relationship between Russia and China is consistent with a strategic partnership. More importantly, Russia taking an ambiguous stance on the Chinese Island disputes is also consistent with a strategic partnership because it is not an area where the two countries have mutual interests. In fact, in both island disputes Russia has conflicting interests namely, avoiding escalation with Japan and increasing energy cooperation with Vietnam, that directly conflict with supporting China. If anything, Russia's ambiguous stance solidifies the nature of the Russo-Chinese strategic partnership by demonstrating that in the event of conflicting interests Russia will refrain from staunchly supporting or condemning its partner.

Whereas the aforementioned island disputes are a top priority for China, the Ukraine Crisis is a comparable priority for Russia in terms of significance. Interestingly, similar to the Russian position on the Chinese Island disputes, China maintains an ambiguous stance in regards to the Ukraine Crisis. Following the Russian government's decision to authorize President Putin to utilize military force in Crimea, Chinese government officials publicly reaffirmed China's position of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries while stating that China respects "the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine." Although this may seem to indicate that China was unsupportive of Russia's actions in Crimea, government officials also stated "There are reasons for why the situation in Ukraine is what it is today," suggesting that there may be justifications for either Crimea's actions or Russia's military intervention. Considering that China prides itself on combatting separatism and protecting territorial sovereignty, especially in light of its domestic issues with the Uighur and Tibetan population, its neutral yet ambiguous position on this issue seems logical.

The ambiguity in China's position vis-à-vis the Ukraine Crisis was further demonstrated during the UN Security Council Resolution vote regarding Crimea's referendum, when China abstained from voting. According to the Chinese, the draft resolution would further escalate the situation in Ukraine and should thus be avoided. Chinese government officials were very adamant about avoiding escalatory measures and made it clear that they would condemn any actions that would further complicate the situation. Although they didn't elaborate on the types of actions they feel would complicate the situation, it seems that these comments were intended for Russian and Western audiences alike. In the subsequent UN General Assembly Resolution regarding the Crimean referendum, the Chinese again abstained from the vote providing identical reasons for their abstention. However, it is important to note, unlike China's neutral stance with respects to the referendum, the Chinese were quick to voice their oppositions to any sanctions against Russia.

Similar to the implications of Russia's position on the Chinese island disputes, China's position on the Ukraine Crisis also demonstrates that the relationship is consistent with a strategic partnership. Considering the salience of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries in Chinese foreign policy in addition to the importance of preventing separatist movements in Chinese domestic policy, it is clear that Russia's role in the Ukraine Crisis is not an area of mutual interest. By China taking a neutral stance with its abstentions in the UN, China's actions reflected those consistent with a strategic partner. That being said, what does this mean for the Russo-Chinese relationship more generally? Essentially these two cases demonstrate that like many strategic partnerships, the Russo-Chinese relationship lacks the strength of a formal military alliance. While to some this may seem like a flaw inherent in not only the Russo-Chinese relationship but to strategic partnerships more generally, it highlights an advantage that draw states to these types of relationships in the first place: namely that these relationships allow for extreme flexibility and have minimal risk of entrapment.

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