

# Chinese president's "historic visit" to Russia

John Chan  
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Less than a week after the National Peoples Congress (NPC) installed Xi Jinping as Chinese president, he made his first state visit on March 22-24—to Russia. The trip was designed to boost the “strategic partnership” between the two countries, whose economic and strategic interests are threatened by the aggressive policies of the US and its allies in Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Before his departure, Xi declared: “The fact I will visit Russia, our friendly neighbour, shortly after I become China’s president, is a testimony to the great importance China places on its relations with Russia.” In Moscow, he repeatedly emphasised the “special importance” and “priority” of Russia in China’s foreign policy. In turn, Russian President Vladimir Putin described Xi’s trip as an “historic visit” that had brought “positive results”.

China and Russia have developed close ties over the past decade. The two countries formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 to block the growing US intervention in Central Asia, which intensified after the US-led occupation of Afghanistan. Their strategic partnership has increasingly assumed the status of a quasi-military alliance, in particular following the outbreak of the global financial crisis in 2008. US interventions in Libya and Syria, its threats against Iran, and its “pivot” to Asia have all undermined the vital interests of Beijing and Moscow.

China’s different relations with Russia and the US were underscored by their contrasting responses to Xi’s inauguration as Chinese president. Putin was the first foreign leader to congratulate Xi, whereas Obama phoned Xi to demand an end to alleged Chinese-backed hacking of US companies, and tougher measures against North Korea.

The Obama administration has delivered some rough lessons to Xi during the past year, since he visited Washington as the heir apparent to Chinese President

Hu Jintao. At the time, Xi urged the US to respect China’s “core interests”, which include vital shipping lanes through the South China Sea and East China Sea, which carry energy and raw materials from the Middle East and Africa.

President Obama responded by more openly backing the Philippines and Vietnam to assert their territorial claims against China in the South China Sea. With Washington’s tacit support, Japan deliberately heated up its dispute with China over small rocky islets in the East China Sea, known as Diaoyu in China and Senkaku in Japan. The US also exploited North Korea’s nuclear test this year as the pretext to boost its anti-ballistic missile systems in the Asia Pacific.

Washington’s actions are driving Russia and China to bury their differences and come together to oppose the US. In the Middle East, Russia and China have blocked resolutions in the UN Security Council that would open the door for Western military intervention against the Assad regime in Syria. Similarly, they have opposed military threats against Iran over its nuclear program.

Xi told Russian students at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations: “Strong Chinese-Russian relations ... not only answer to our interests but also serve as an important, reliable guarantee of an international strategic balance and peace.” Without naming the US, he said: “No country or bloc of countries can again single-handedly dominate world affairs.”

Asked by a student about Russia’s fear of “Chinese economic expansion” in Russia’s Far East, Xi insisted that the “China threat theory” was groundless and unnecessary. As far as both governments are concerned, their past differences are far outweighed by their mutual fear of the US. Xi’s trip was marked by closer collaboration in the key areas of defence and energy, where there have been longstanding disagreements.

Late last year, China placed major military hardware orders with Russia, including for four advanced Amur-1650 diesel attack submarines and two dozen SU-35 long-range fighters. The Indian media immediately pointed out that Moscow had broken its long-standing “geopolitical rule” of selling less advanced weaponry to China than to India, in order to maintain the regional balance of power. Russia’s sale of the latest offensive weapon systems to China for the first time in nearly a decade is clearly calculated to beef up the Chinese military against the growing US threat in the Asia Pacific, where Russia also has major interests.

In a symbolic demonstration of greater military cooperation, Xi became the first foreign leader ever to visit Russia’s military command centre in Moscow. Xi told Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu that the relationship between the two militaries was of a “special nature”.

Putin and Xi declared, in a joint declaration, that they “oppose a country or a bloc of countries unilaterally and without limit strengthening anti-missile capabilities, harming strategic stability and international security.” It was a pointed reference to the US deployment of anti-ballistic missile systems in Europe and Asia that undermine the effectiveness of the Russian and Chinese nuclear arsenals.

Russia and China will also hold large-scale joint military exercises—“Peace Mission 2013”—during June in the Sea of Japan. The exercises will involve Chinese warships crossing through the Tsushima Strait between Japan and Korea, as well as the La Perouse Strait north of the Japanese island of Hokkaido, to meet up with the Russian Pacific Fleet. The naval exercises are obviously meant to send a message to Japan, and the US, that China and Russia intend to pursue their vital interests in these waters, including their territorial disputes with Tokyo.

China and Russia also signed key energy deals during Xi’s visit. Russia’s state-owned Rosneft will triple its oil sales to China to 45-50 million tonnes a year over the next 25 years in exchange for additional loans of \$US2 billion. Russian gas giant Gazprom, after a decade of disagreements with China over prices, finally signed a memorandum of understanding to supply China with at least 38 billion cubic metres of gas from 2018—more than Gazprom’s current exports to

Germany. Other agreements included a \$2 billion deal to develop Russia’s coal resources in the Far East.

Xi underscored the economic and strategic importance of the energy deals, saying: “Oil and gas pipelines have become the veins connecting the two countries in a new century.” China’s energy demands have vastly increased over the past two decades, forcing it to import gas and oil, particularly from the Middle East and Africa. The shipping routes across the Indian Ocean through South East Asia are, however, dominated by the US navy, leaving Chinese imports vulnerable to a US blockade. Under Obama’s pivot to Asia, the Pentagon has strengthened its control of key naval “choke points”, such as the Malacca Strait between Indonesia and Malaysia. Access to Russian oil and gas would largely neutralise the US threat to China.

Xi’s visit to Russia marks a significant turning point. The eruption of US militarism is driving Russia and China toward their own military alliance.



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