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As Xi Visits Putin, Allies Trumpet 'New Era' But Offer Little Substance

By Leyla Latypova

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Xi Jinping and President Vladimir in the Kremlin before Russian-Chinese talks. **Grigory Sysoyev / RIA Novosti / kremlin.ru**

Chinese President Xi Jinping's closely watched visit to Moscow this week has been filled with statements trumpeting a new era of relations between the two allies as they increasingly align themselves against the West.

But while it dominated headlines, Xi's reunion with Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin, who he has called a "dear friend," is unlikely to catalyze a major shift in bilateral cooperation — or in efforts to end the war in Ukraine, experts say.

"I don't think it's a new chapter, but rather a continuation of a relationship that has been well-established since the late 1980s and has been strengthening in all directions since then," Natasha Kuhrt, a specialist in Russian foreign policy and senior lecturer at King's College London, told The Moscow Times.

The Chinese leader's three-day visit to the Russian capital, his first since 2019, was preceded by articles penned by both leaders for flagship government-run newspapers.

"Russia-China relations have reached the highest level in their history and are gaining even more strength...with no one to constantly order and no one to constantly obey, without limitations or taboos," Putin wrote in a piece for China's People's Daily, which aimed to portray Xi and Putin as "good old friends" standing up to "fierce and aggressive" American hegemony.

The Xi-authored article for the state-run Rossiyskaya Gazeta daily, in contrast, was much more subdued in its praise for the strength of the Russo-Chinese friendship — a likely reflection of the unequal power balance within the alliance.

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"China is probably benefiting more than Russia [from this alliance], but Russia doesn't really have many other options," Kuhrt told The Moscow Times.

Xi arrived at Moscow's Vnukovo-2 Airport — where he was greeted by a Russian military band — just days after the International Criminal Court (ICC) issued a warrant seeking Putin's arrest, a surprise move that underlines the Russian leader's unprecedented international isolation since he invaded Ukraine.

But experts agreed that for China, Putin's newfound status as a leader wanted on war crimes charges carried little significance, as Beijing is not a member of the ICC.

To that point, Xi on Tuesday extended an invitation to Putin and Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin to pay a reciprocal visit to China "as soon as possible."

The two leaders' defiance of the Hague-based court could ultimately bolster their quest to strengthen their influence in the Global South, particularly in African countries that have long voiced concerns of being unfairly targeted by the ICC, according to Kuhrt.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine loomed over the Moscow talks as China has been looking to establish itself as an impartial mediator in the conflict.

"We are guided by the principles of the United Nations ... and promote a peaceful settlement" of fighting in Ukraine, Xi said following talks with Putin on Tuesday. "We are always for peace and dialogue," he added.

In addition to publishing a 12-point "political settlement" plan for Ukraine in February, Beijing also plans to arrange talks between Xi and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky once the Chinese leader returns from Moscow, The Wall Street Journal reported.

The planned online meeting with Zelensky "is an attempt [for China] to show its neutrality," said Temur Umarov of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

But Umarov cautioned that the symbolic gestures and signals from Beijing shouldn't be seen as an indication that China will ever take on a more active role in the conflict.

“If we take a look at this [peace] plan, we will notice that it is not a plan at all, but an outline of [China’s] position. It is impossible to solve anything with it...It is just a sequence of general statements some of which even contradict each other,” Umarov said.

If anything truly interests China in Ukraine, it is the possibility of investing in the country’s post-war reconstruction, according to Kuhrt of King’s College London.

“Ukraine hasn’t been critical of China, perhaps, for that reason,” said Kuhrt.

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Western leaders have criticized China’s proposed peace plan as being skewed toward Russia’s interests and have highlighted Beijing’s failure to condemn Moscow’s invasion of its neighbor.

Following Tuesday's talks in the Kremlin, Putin accused Kyiv of not being willing to implement China's proposals.

"Many of the provisions of the peace plan put forward by China...can be taken as the basis for a peaceful settlement when Kyiv and the West will be ready for it," Putin said. "However, so far we have not seen such readiness on their part."

In addition to the two countries’ geopolitical alignment, Russia has increasingly relied on China as an economic partner in the wake of last year’s sweeping Western sanctions on Moscow.

Beijing, meanwhile, is likely looking to exploit Russia’s isolation from global energy markets and negotiate an advantageous deal on gas sales via the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline, which is due to be complete in 2030, according to Kuhrt.

Russia is already selling gas to China at a 70% discount through the eastern branch of its Power of Siberia pipeline, which was partially completed in 2019 and quickly deemed to be largely unprofitable for Moscow.

But for Putin and Xi, a shared loathing for perceived U.S. global dominance may be the strongest shared interest of all.

The two signed a joint declaration Tuesday which accused the United States of "undermining" global security and expressed "concern" over NATO's growing presence in Asia.

"The parties call on the United States to stop undermining international and regional security and global strategic stability in order to secure its unilateral military advantage," the declaration stated.

While the Kremlin claims that it is already in direct confrontation with U.S.-led NATO on Ukrainian soil, Beijing, too, is believed to be preparing to face off with its key adversary in the future.

“Russia is one of the best [partners] for that future fight because it not only voices the same things about the U.S., but is also ready to go further than China by crushing its economy and putting the stability of its political regime under threat,” said Umarov.

“[Russia] is ready to bet everything just to stick it to the U.S.”

AFP contributed reporting.

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