

No change in course: the Sino-Russian summit in Beijing

Michał Bogusz, Witold Rodkiewicz

On 19–20 May, Vladimir Putin paid a state visit to China to mark the anniversary of the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation. The two sides extended the treaty for a further five years and held a series of meetings in various formats; most notably, Putin held talks with Chairman Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang. The parties signed 42 sectoral and business agreements, as well as two politically significant documents: the Joint Statement on Further Strengthening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation and Deepening Relations of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation, and the Joint Declaration on the Formation of a Multipolar World and a New Type of International Relations. Putin and Xi also attended the opening ceremony of a two-year educational cooperation programme and delivered statements to the media.

Despite the extensive media coverage, Putin's visit was largely routine and did not introduce any significant changes to bilateral relations. For years, ties between the two countries have amounted to a *de facto* alliance aimed at fundamentally reshaping the international order and replacing the post-Cold War system with one centred on China, with Russia acting as its supporting partner. The visit signalled that the China-Russia partnership remains one of the pillars of the foreign policy of both countries and that any attempts to weaken it are unlikely to succeed. Beijing and Moscow have also used their partnership to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the United States. The messaging from both sides is built around the argument that the world is becoming increasingly unstable, that the West is a source of pressure and chaos, and that China and Russia together constitute the predictable core of a new, supposedly 'fairer' multipolar international order based on multilateralism.

Commentary

- **For Beijing, Putin's visit carried significant political value, reinforcing the narrative of China's status as a great power.** China demonstrated its ability to maintain parallel channels of communication with both the United States and Russia, while simultaneously promoting an image of a world in which Beijing, rather than Washington, acts as the stabiliser and arbiter of a new international order. Politically, Xi Jinping demonstrated strategic autonomy and once again ignored Western expectations that he would exert influence on Putin over Ukraine. This issue appeared in a press release only as part of an exchange of views and without further detail. China benefits from Russia's confrontation with the West and therefore supports Moscow politically and economically, while officially maintaining a language of neutrality and referring to the war as the 'Ukraine crisis', as it seeks to avoid bearing the costs of the conflict. Russia, for its part, accepted strongly critical language regarding Japan's plans to revise its national security policy. At

the same time, the absence of any agreements that could significantly reduce the economic asymmetry between the two sides suggests that China is deliberately prolonging negotiations over a new gas pipeline in order to strengthen its bargaining position vis-à-vis Russia.

- **The summit resulted in a large number of agreements, but these have not introduced any new momentum into China–Russia economic relations.** Although Putin was accompanied by a sizeable delegation – including five deputy prime ministers, the finance minister, the governor of the Central Bank, the heads of Russia’s leading energy companies (Gazprom, Rosneft and Rosatom), the director of the Federal Service for Military-Technical Cooperation and the deputy defence minister – the documents signed are likely to have only a limited impact on bilateral economic relations. The two sides concluded nine agreements between educational institutions and seven between media organisations, signalling their intention to further deepen cooperation and coordination in propaganda and disinformation activities. The remaining documents were memoranda of understanding (MoUs) or protocols of intent. The only concrete economic agreement concerns the joint construction of a second railway line at the Zabaikalsk–Manchuria border crossing.
- **The failure to sign a contract for the construction of the China–Russia gas pipeline (the western route), known as Power of Siberia 2, represents a major setback for Russia.** Ahead of the visit, Moscow had indicated that it would regard this agreement as the most important outcome of the summit and suggested that the two sides were highly likely to sign it. However, publicly available information indicates that they failed to make any progress in negotiations on the contract. In this sense, the summit represented a setback for Russian policy. Nevertheless, China’s demonstration of support for Moscow and for the Russian leader personally, together with assurances that the current course of deepening and intensifying relations with Russia would continue, remains valuable to the Kremlin amid mounting domestic difficulties, a stalemate on the battlefield, the effectiveness of Ukraine’s strategy of targeting Russian energy infrastructure and the White House’s waning interest in bringing the war to an end. The Kremlin also secured China’s official backing on a number of geopolitical issues important to Russia. The most significant of [these concerned support](#) for Russia’s efforts to safeguard its sovereignty and territorial integrity, amounting to a thinly veiled official recognition and endorsement of Russia’s actions aimed at establishing control over the Ukrainian oblasts that it has formally annexed.
- **China expressed support for Russia’s position towards Washington on strategic nuclear weapons.** Specifically, it endorsed freezing the ceilings on strategic nuclear weapons at the levels established under the New START treaty on strategic arms reduction, which expired in February this year, criticised US plans to build the ‘Golden Dome’ missile defence system, and characterised European plans and initiatives aimed at strengthening nuclear and conventional deterrence mechanisms as confrontational. This marks the first time that China has publicly endorsed the key elements of Russia’s antagonistic policy towards Europe, particularly in the military-strategic sphere, suggesting that Beijing may be willing to support Russia’s revisionist agenda in Europe.