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Defense College



China and Russia: behind the friendship

Alessandro Politi

Director, NATO Defense College Foundation

The *Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development* (4th of February 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>) is a remarkable political document that has been unfortunately eclipsed by the increasing tension in Ukraine.

The document's relevance can be summarised in few points:

- The degree of political and diplomatic coordination in the short term and how far joint programmes are achieved in the medium term will show how concrete this joint statement is. To call it an alliance, quasi-alliance or an axis is an overestimation, while to think that this document is just a formal declaration is a serious mistake. There is an increasing political and diplomatic coordination between Beijing and Moscow, which the ongoing Ukrainian crisis is intensifying. The more the USA, major European and some Pacific countries will choose a hasty confrontation course, the more this coordination will become intense and effective. It is instead indispensable to start in parallel a serious diplomatic and political engagement (or conengagement) in order to avoid further rapprochements.
- Both sides express clearly their strong mutual support for the protection of their core interests, state sovereignty and territorial integrity, and oppose interference by external forces in their internal affairs. They believe in security indivisibility at global level, where no one can be separately secure and to detriment of others, and they advocate for this a global governance, the UN for the time being.
- The joint statement has political, diplomatic, geopolitical and geoeconomic value, but not a strategic-military significance, yet. Nothing is spelled out in these terms, but one should start to investigate about its strategic implications quickly. A rough sketch shows that at military conventional level the two parties are unable to offer each other a robust reciprocal support, because the trans-EuroAsiac logistic infrastructure (roads and railways) is simply too vulnerable and limited for interallied operations on the European and Pacific fronts. Likewise for maritime logistics because they are stifled by too many choke points. The picture is very different in terms of nuclear deterrent because the only global deterrent in the bilateral equation is Russian and this would imply an extended deterrence towards China (supposedly a very unpleasant scenario for both Chinese and US strategic planners).

- The parties themselves describe their relationship as a friendship, superior to Cold War alliances. This description has to be nuanced vis-à-vis some serious misalignments that are discernible in the statement.
- The most visible disagreements concern: the very guarded reciprocal backing that Chinese give to a just multipolar system of international relations and vice versa the Russians to the Chinese idea of “community of common destiny for mankind”; the insufficient practical integration between the Belt and Road Initiative and the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP); the silence on the Chinese-sponsored RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership) free trade zone in the Pacific; the missing mention of Crimea as integral part of the Russian Federation; the very cautious support by Russia of the Chinese-led Global Initiative on Data Security. These are not minor spots on a shiny paper full of aspects on which the parties agree, they touch essential political, geopolitical and geoeconomic aspects of a future global order that intends to start physically in the Asia-Pacific and Eurasian zones and virtually in a new internet and data alternative global governance. Moreover, the contrast between the mention of Taiwan and the silence on Crimea could not be starker.
- Finally, this document puts to rest the ongoing debate if China and Russia are revisionist powers: they are not. On the one hand they are basically conservative with regards to the Westphalian state and the essentials of the post-II WW order, especially for what we can qualify as the *UN acquis*. That said, they intend to be squarely reformist and alternative to the perceived existing US hegemony and this is clearly visible in the ideological construct of the statement. Its mainstays are: multipolarism, international law-based world order, country-specific democracy and global development defined by balance, harmony and inclusiveness. These are, we like it or not, a strong counterpoint to mainstream globalist thinking and practices and with these counterparts a next world war should be avoided.

The document is divided into four chapters and is 60 paragraphs long. For analytical purposes it is necessary to regroup this rather comprehensive declaration into three major strands: ideological, geopolitical and techno-economic.

The ideology of the declaration

Contrarily to what proclaimed by some pundits, ideology is not only alive but it is increasingly seen as an indispensable tool for the structuring of new global proposals, in addition to its value in public diplomacy, strategic communication and propaganda. The ideological foundation of the document is essential to understand its consequences

The two authoritarian governments, far from being generically revisionist, try to formulate and offer a vision that is both conservative of a classic Westphalian state order, protective of the *United Nations acquis* and reformist vis-à-vis a hegemonic “end of history” globalisation.

The first tenet is that globalisation is here to stay, but it is limited to the economic sphere, whereas its political companion is multipolarism. Multipolarism is not just something opposite to the briefly unipolar world under the US auspices from 1989 (fall of the Wall) until 2004 (failed pacification and victory in Iraq), multipolarism implies interrelation, interdependence and redistribution of power among States.

States are the main and almost only visible actor in the document, because society is mentioned only once (information society) and people 12 times, but in many cases the meaning indicates the population of a given country and region instead of a political and social active entity.

Values have an important role and are based on the UN Charter and the Declaration of Human Rights, i.e., the universal human values of peace, development, equality, justice, democracy and freedom. The different vantage point of China and Russia is that states have the right to independently determine the development paths of their countries and people.

For instance, human rights are universal, but they rights should be seen through the specifics of each country. On the one hand it is a contradiction in terms: either rights are universal (i.e., literally in a single way) or they are multiverse, in different fashions and directions. On the other hand, it is political common sense that rights are universal but their concrete application in specific contexts is different, as American blacks and many other populations in the world can show. The real problem is that states and not individuals, people or societies determine or participate significantly to the decisions about the development of the country.

It is evident and understandable the argument of these two countries against the Western-fits-all-sizes model, but it is evident that outside the state and its political machinery, there is very little room for any social actor, hence for freedom and democracy.

Unsurprisingly, a substantive part of the document is dedicated to democracy and quite at the top (para 3) with the statement “*The sides share the understanding that democracy is a universal human value, rather than a privilege of a limited number of States, and that its promotion and protection is a common responsibility of the entire world community*”. Much could be said about this and the following four paragraphs on the subject, but three points illuminate sufficiently the gist of the joint declaration:

- Democracy is a universal value, but it is not determined by specific practices that help identifying if a government is democratic or not;
- Democracies are proclaimed diverse, but again there is no objective parameter, only the fact that it is the people of the country who decide if their state is democratic. This is a rather circular argument because the way they decide if they live in a democracy cannot simply be to participate in whatever electoral process or in single party assemblies. If they take part, then they validate the democratic process in the country; if they rebel, they are against that peculiar form of democracy;
- China and Russia affirm that they are “*world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage [that] have long-standing traditions of democracy, which rely on thousand-years of experience of development, broad popular support and consideration of the needs and interests of citizens. Russia and China guarantee their people the right to take part through various means and in various forms in the administration of the State and public life in accordance with the law*”. Evidently one has to account as relevant tradition the Soviet democracy from 1917 till 1991 and, for China, the democratic experience that began with the Republic of China in 1911 (Sun Yat Sen revolution) and continued in 1949 (founding of the Chinese Communist Party and Mao Tze Tung’s New Democracy doctrine) until today.

The logical corollary of this position is that China and Russia do not accept interferences in internal affairs of sovereign states under pretext of democracy and human rights advocacy and consider that hegemony by certain states is not democratic and threatens peace and stability.

Towards the end there is an interesting and very restrained exchange of reciprocal ideological support: the Russian consider significant the Chinese idea of “community of common destiny for mankind”

and the Chinese do the same for the Russian efforts to establish a just multipolar system of international relations.

Part of the ideological basis rest on the role that the *UN acquis* (meaning the consolidated ideals, practices and roles of the United Nations Organisation) has in their vision of the world. Very high in the joint declaration, practically in the preamble, the United Nations are considered a driver in the “*international architecture and the international law-based world order*”. They are considered the base to foster genuine multipolarity, while the Security Council should play a central and coordinating role, promote more democratic international relations and ensure peace, stability and sustainable development across the world.

One could be tempted to liquidate these utterances as mere nonsense, but the reality is much more complex. First of all, these two governments are advocating an international law-based and not a rule-based international order: this means not only that they are opposing the US sponsored rule-based approach, but that they reject vague and de facto rules, generated by the then Washington consensus in favour of a solid, previously negotiated, international law-based order. In other words, they want a hard-wired world order and not a wishy-washy soft rule-based world order, prey to the appetites of private lobbies or powerful hegemons.

Secondly, Beijing and Moscow assign a central role to the UNSC (UN Security Council) because this body is where all five powers are on a rather equal footing and hence in a situation where international relations are more democratic and not hegemonic.

Per se, within the UN Charter and political framework, there is nothing illogical or fundamentally wrong in insisting on this *UN acquis*, but one should also take into account hard international politics realities. The silence of the drafters about the failure to reform the Organisation, the relatively reduced political weight of the UN and about the repeated bypassing of the UNSC by different major powers (USA included), speaks volumes. Both governments use the UN as political and argumentative bridle vis-à-vis Washington but know fairly well that the political substance in the UN is lacking since almost two decades (failed Secretary General Kofi Annan reform, 2004).

It is towards the end that comes to the fore the essence of this underlining of the UN “*The sides intend to strongly uphold the outcomes of the Second World War and the existing post-war world order, defend the authority of the United Nations and justice in international relations, resist attempts to deny, distort, and falsify the history of the Second World War*”. Clearly this paragraph is Russian-inspired and it transpires all the denied pride, rage

and humiliation in seeing the old Fascist Quislings in Eastern Europe and in the Balkans elevated to the rank of anti-Soviet nationalist patriots. Echoes of this political evaluation and sentiment are found also in Putin's ominous televised speech of the 21st of February 2022. But to Chinese ears too, this resonates regarding the end of the Second World War (1945) and of the civil war (1949), when the defeated Chiang Kai-Shek nationalists could escape their logical end due to American interference.

The Washington consensus born in Bretton Woods (1944) (a US master stroke together with the Marshall Plan, 1947), the Korea war (1950-1953) and the First Taiwan Strait crisis (1954) are seen as a substantial denial of the victory of the forces of social alternative and political justice against a self-perpetuating capitalist order. We might disagree, but it is important to read clearly the counterparts.

The Chinese integration to this belated claim regarding the II WW comes quite early in the document when global development is defined by balance, harmony and inclusiveness. Balance among powers so that there is no hegemon, harmony deriving from a world order not defined by alien criteria and inclusiveness because there will be no enemy or pariah states (the classical Chinese Tianxia concept of "all under heaven"), since there is an all-encompassing political (multipolar) authority. The dream of a benign empire, well-known since centuries also Asia, Europe, Africa and more recently in America.

The geopolitical side

This aspect of the joint statement is much simpler to summarise and we will start with the less visible sides. One of the most substantive is the engagement to advance in the development plans for the Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with a view to intensifying practical cooperation between the EAEU and China in various areas and promoting greater interconnectedness between the Asia Pacific and Eurasian regions. This was already agreed since 2015, in part carried out through a number of agreements and should be done through a parallel coordination between the BRI and the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP, launched in 2016). The unsolved issue is still the financing of the GEP projects, while BRI has a rather solid financial foundation

It is rather evident that this is the mainstay in a developing economic cooperation, that could bring to an economic integration, if (and it is a very big if) both sides will be comfortable in this interaction. Russia has no illusions that the overall correlation of forces in this partnership is neither balanced nor

promising to evolve more positively in the short-medium term, but it is an expedient choice, considering the necessarily frosty relations with the Euro-Atlantic community.

Consequently, Russia intends to work in the Chinese-sponsored Global Development Initiative, offering in exchange its evident supremacy in the basket of bilateral Arctic cooperation, something that should imply an intensified cooperation in the fields of sustainable and smart transport also along the new Arctic routes.

Climate change and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change are important subjects of this bilateral cooperation with some noticeable caveats. Both sides are fully committed to the Paris Agreement, but they oppose firmly the use of decarbonisation as a non-tariff trade barrier, while upholding the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities in fighting against climate change.

Predictable are the paragraphs where Russia supports the One-China principle, opposing the independence of Taiwan and where “*Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions, and will increase cooperation in the aforementioned areas*”. Factually common adjacent regions are Kazakhstan, Mongolia and North Korea, but one can easily extend the intent on the whole of Central Asia (as it happened precisely with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in 2001) and, through the non-interference principle, also to areas like Georgia, Ukraine, Tibet etc.

In this respect, whatever the practical value may be, the Chinese side expressed in return its sympathy and support for the Russian proposals to create long-term legally binding security guarantees in Europe.

Equally foreseeable is the para where both parts oppose any enlargement of NATO or are against politicisation and double standards in the global fight against terrorism under UN auspices, including the use of terrorist groups for geopolitical aims (e.g., jihadist groups to topple the Syrian government) or even in an anti-terrorist function (i.e., the so-called moderate Islamist armed groups).

In this respect also the positive welcoming of the Joint Statement of the Leaders of the Five Nuclear-Weapons States on Preventing Nuclear War and Avoiding Arms Races (3/1/2022) is an occasion to criticise the deployment abroad of nuclear weapons (i.e., the NATO double-key warheads in the

territory of some allies) and the unrestricted development of global anti-ballistic missile defence (ABM) systems (the USA withdrew from the ABM treaty the 13th of June 2002). In the same non-proliferation ambit also the AUKUS defence partnership (Australia United States, United Kingdom) is included under the fact the nuclear-powered submarines could create a precedent for nuclear-armed submarines employed by a non-nuclear weapon country like Australia.

Concerning disarmament, a point that is of serious concern to both parties is the US withdrawal from the Treaty on the Elimination of Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Missiles (IRM-SRM, under Trump, February 2019) and the consequent probable deployment or transfer of these missiles to allies in the Asia-Pacific and European regions. The two capitals support the Russian diplomatic proposal for a new agreement as well as the Russian-Chinese draft treaty on the prevention of placement of weapons in outer space and the use or threat of force against space objects.

Outer space and IRM/SRM are two subjects that, whatever the political and diplomatic framework may be, are of global importance and have a wide array of stakeholders that are included in bodies like the EU, NATO, SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation), Arab League, G-20, not mentioning the UN.

Quite interesting, without mentioning the Covid-19 pandemic, but with clear links, is the importance attached to the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), that the parties consider that should be institutionalised, strengthened with an effective verification mechanism, also through legally binding verification protocols. This is not necessarily the US approach, but China and Russia are in the mainstream of other member countries in demanding an effective verification system, something that the BWC lacks since its beginning.

The geopolitical aspect of the document is capped by the support to fora like the G20, the BRICS Plus/Outreach and, obviously, the SCO. The novelty for this now 20-year-old organisation is that its two main stakeholders want to expand it beyond its initial function, like: *“trade, manufacturing, transport, energy, finance, investment, agriculture, customs, telecommunications, innovation and other areas of mutual interest, including through the use of advanced, resource-saving, energy efficient and “green” technologies. cultural ties, education, science and technology, healthcare, environmental protection, tourism, people-to-people contacts, sports.”* In principle articles 1 and 3 of the Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization included these goals, but some of them are new in their formulation and anyhow it is remarkable that Beijing and Moscow desire to have now a fully-fledged, multi-dimensional regional cooperation body.

Finally, the Indo-Pacific area gets its share of attention through: the intention of strengthening the role of APEC as the leading platform for multilateral dialogue on economic issues in the Asia-Pacific region; the will of developing the “Russia-India-China” format and of intensifying the activities first with the ASEAN as central cooperation pivot in East Asia and then in frameworks like the East Asia Summit, the ASEAN Regional Forum on Security and the Meeting of Defense Ministers of the ASEAN Member States and Dialogue Partners.

No mention is made either of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), the heir of the great Obama initiative to create a TPP counterbalancing the growing importance of China, or of the Chinese-sponsored Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) agreement, recently entered into force on the 1st of January 2022.

The techno-economic part

One would expect that this strand of the joint declaration to be particularly marked by the claim of the centrality of the World Trade Organisation and its equalising rules, together with the condemnation of unilateral sanctions, extraterritorial jurisdiction and abuse of export control policies; in fact, the main concerns are elsewhere.

Some of the most important passages of the document regard Artificial Intelligence and Information and Communication Technology, like the following “*The sides attach great importance to the issues of governance in the field of artificial intelligence. The sides are ready to strengthen dialogue and contacts on artificial intelligence*”. What the two governments want is on the one hand an open, secure, sustainable and accessible ICT environment, but on the other the respect for national sovereignty and fundamental human rights and freedoms, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other States, as enshrined in the UN Charter.

In other words, an internationally open ICT environment, coupled with a strongly guarded national sovereign space: it is difficult not to conclude that a technical openness is welcome, but not the free flow of data among people. Even here, where some words could have been written on digital sovereignty vis-à-vis very powerful transnational commercial operators, states seem the only actors of the digital scene.

The UN is considered to be the most appropriate forum and in particular the UN Open-ended Working Group on security of and in the use of information and communication technologies (OEWG). Where the views of the two partners differ is on what to do. Whereas China proposes its Global Initiative on Data Security (in stark contrast with the past Trumpian approach of transnational US defined and controlled data security), Russia lends for the time being a very cautious in principle to the concept.

In any case, both capitals have presented a joint draft convention on countering the use of ICT for criminal purposes and have agreed to adopt in the near future a plan for cooperation between Russia and China in this area international information security

Complementary to these very important points are: the request for open, equal, fair and non-discriminatory conditions for scientific and technological development; vaccine cooperation against the coronavirus.

In conclusion, the Joint Statement is an articulated manifesto about the solid, but guarded friendship of two global powers and about an alternative multipolar world order, beyond a currently dysfunctional multilateral order, still informed by Washington's hegemonic consensus. How these claims and proposals should be managed and negotiated will mark the transition of the actual global and epochal crisis either towards a new era of shared prosperity or towards a Fourth World war.

Alessandro Politi

Director of the NATO Defense College Foundation. A specialist in political and strategic affairs, he has worked with different top decision makers in Italy and abroad both in public institutions and private companies. He teaches geopolitics, geo-economics and intelligence at the Italian MFA-affiliated SIOI School.



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