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The Frail Foundations of the China-Russia Friendship

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VINCENT K. L. CHANG, JUN 8 2024

Even before Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing last month to bolster Russia's 'no limits' partnership with China, Western media had started to double down on the widely shared notion that the Ukraine war had only driven Beijing and Moscow closer together. Though not unfounded, such casual observations evince an incomplete understanding of geopolitical complexities and of Beijing's strategic views and obscure subtle but important recent changes in the China–Russia partnership. For not only has the power of balance in this relationship shifted further in Beijing's favor, but deep-seated defects in the relationship have also come to the fore. A look into the two countries' evolving memory politics reveals how Beijing as the newly emerged senior partner pursues a notably different policy agenda than its now junior partner in Moscow.

May is a month replete with historical symbolism in Russia. On May 9, coinciding with his first day in office for a new six-year term as president of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin oversaw a military parade in Moscow to mark the 79th anniversary of the victory of what is known in post-Soviet states as the Great Patriotic War of 1941–1945. In his address to the nation, as in previous years, he honored those fallen heroes and veterans of the former Soviet Union who freed Europe from Nazism and condemned attempts in the West to distort this historical 'truth.' Putin also reserved praise for the contributions of the other Allies but, contrary to last year when he expressly acknowledged the contributions of the United States and Great Britain, this time he singled out China and the courage of the Chinese people in resisting militarist Japan.

A week later, Putin arrived in Beijing for his first state call as newly elected leader. In an interview with China's state-controlled media on the eve of his visit, Putin praised their two countries' cooperation during the Second World War, highlighting China's contribution to the Allied victory. The Russian president even went so far to claim that 'it was China that held back major forces of Japanese militarists, making it possible for the Soviet Union to focus on defeating Nazism in Europe.' To Chinese audiences this may not seem unusual, as it dovetails with Beijing's recently revamped official reading of Second World War history. From a Russian viewpoint however, this is a striking concession indicating a major shift from Moscow's usual narrative that the Soviet Union deserves the main credit for defeating not just Nazi Germany but also Imperial Japan.

These shifts in Moscow's rhetoric on the Great Patriotic War and the contributions of its former allies demonstrate two things. First, that Moscow has abandoned its efforts – which continued even up to last year – to reach out to the U.S. for a revival of the 'spirit' of cooperation from this shared past. This is very clear from the hardened language in this year's Victory Day speech, in which Putin castigated the 'Western elites' that make it their policy 'to fuel regional conflicts, inter-ethnic and inter-religious strife and to contain sovereign and independent centers of global development.' Second, the shifted rhetoric implies an admission on Moscow's part of the changing balance in its relations with its main 'brother-in-arms' back then and today. Where until not long ago, China ostensibly served as the 'junior partner' in Moscow's Second World War discourse, Putin's remarkable statement confirms that the roles have now been reversed.

But while Putin has switched to a bellicose, anti-Western line of memory politics, the opposite has been true for his close friend Xi Jinping. After a rising trend of joint war remembrances, which saw Beijing and Moscow align their war remembrances for several consecutive years since 2015, the Chinese leadership suddenly changed course in 2022. Confronted with growing pressure at home over its zero-Covid policy and international pushback over its refusal to

denounce Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Beijing has since adjusted its memory strategies by shifting focus away from the Second World War to contemporary crisis response and peace-building efforts, thereby subtly dissociating its historical discourse from that of Moscow. A telling indication is that, contrary to previous years, no high-profile Chinese leaders attended Russia's Victory Day in 2023 and 2024.

A second clue that Beijing is careful not to escalate tensions with the West was offered this month during Xi's state visit to Serbia. In what was widely seen as a highly symbolic move, the Chinese leader arrived in Belgrade on May 7, precisely 25 years after U.S. stealth bombers dropped five satellite-guided precision bombs on the PRC embassy in Belgrade, killing three Chinese journalists and injuring 20 diplomats. During a 2016 state visit to Serbia – one of Europe's key allies of both China and Russia – Xi paid homage at the bombing site to the three Chinese who were 'martyred' in what some believe was a deliberate CIA attack on the Chinese embassy and what Beijing has recently termed a 'barbaric atrocity.' This time, however, to the surprise of many, Xi refrained from visiting the site, apparently to avoid fueling tensions with the U.S.

A third indication that Beijing's memory politics are geared toward improved relations with Washington is the recent flurry of Chinese 'people-to-people exchanges' with the family and friends of American heroes who served in China during the Second World War. Last summer, Xi wrote friendly letters to the descendants of U.S. Army General Joseph Stilwell, who is remembered fondly in China today for his bravery as commander of the China-Burma-India Theater, and to a surviving member of the American Volunteer Group, also known as the 'Flying Tigers,' who helped the Chinese air force to oppose the Japanese invasion. While the over 2,000 Soviet pilots who aided China during the early stages of the war enjoy scant attention in China's state media, these American war heroes are persistently hailed as virtuous epitomes of an 'enduring China–U.S. friendship.'

These recent trends of historical statecraft signal major differences between Russian and Chinese world views and strategic intent. As I and Eric S. Zhang have recently shown in a study of Second World War memory, Russian official discourse tends to be characterized by strong universalizing, ideological undertones that are prone to inviting principled external opposition, whereas Chinese historical narratives are shaped more flexibly around ad hoc, pragmatic policy goals in specific regions or issue areas. While Moscow is reactively and increasingly desperately clinging to its selective reading of the past, Beijing rather seems focused on completing a practical, pro-active and forward-looking agenda. This is not to deny the existence of shared values and strategic goals but to bring out the less obvious differences and the weak ideational underpinnings of their professed friendship.

China's emergence as the senior partner in its relationship with Russia, combined with the Chinese leadership's intent to improve relations with the U.S.-led West, might be good news. If Beijing truly thinks that it is imperative to avoid conflict with the U.S. and improve relations, it should continue to defuse potential memory wars with the West of the kind that Moscow is using to justify its aggression in Europe and that serve to precipitate and sustain actual armed conflict. It should proceed very carefully with plans announced in last week's joint statement to celebrate the 80th anniversary of the victory of the Second World War in 2025 together with Russia and to 'jointly promote a correct historical perspective' of that war. The wiser approach would be to continue down the path chosen in 2022 towards memory diversification and de-escalation.

Meanwhile, if Washington is serious about its desire to 'truly stabilize, improve, and move forward' its relations with Beijing, it should see the current state of China–Russia relations for what it is: a window of opportunity to not only 'thaw' bilateral tensions with Beijing but also ensure that the latter has alternatives to drifting further into Moscow's embrace. That is not to suggest that the West should try to drive a wedge between China and Russia, which Xi would not allow and would likely backfire anyhow. Rather, Washington should muster restraint in the use of measures, sanctions and threats that may enjoy strong bipartisan support but at the end of the day serve to increase tensions, push Beijing deeper into Moscow's embrace, and thereby feed self-fulfilling prophecies. With U.S. presidential elections nearing, it is doubtful whether a prudent policy is on the cards until at least the end of the year; the question is whether the current window of opportunity will still be open.

About the author:

Dr Vincent K. L. Chang (PhD, LLM) is assistant professor of the history and international relations of modern China at Leiden University and senior fellow of the LeidenAsiaCentre. He researches China's regional and global interactions and the associated contestations over norms and narratives. His work on war, diplomacy, nationalism and historical memory has appeared in leading academic journals including *International Affairs*, *Nations and Nationalism*, *Asia Europe Journal*, *Journal of Contemporary China*, and *China Quarterly* and on professional outlets including *The Diplomat* and *Verfassungsblog*. He is the PI of the project 'Global China's New Heroes: Martyrs and Memory Laws in Xi Jinping's China.'