

CSAG INFORMATION PAPER:

Xi-Putin Meeting in SCO Summit

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1. **Subject:** Xi has put on some weight; Changing dynamics between Xi and Putin and the consequences.
2. **Purpose.** To provide a perspective on the implications of the Xi – Putin meeting at the 22nd SCO summit amid Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine and as Xi's first visit abroad since COVID19 outbreak.
3. **Some Conditions Under the Meeting.** The meeting between Chinese and Russian leaders was significant as it was held amid the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine and as it was Xi's first visit abroad since the COVID19 outbreak. The last meeting between the two leaders took place in February in China, just before Russia launched its attack on Ukraine. Since then, the West has put heavy sanctions on Russia, so it must try to alleviate the effects with those countries who are willing to participate. China buys more Russian oil, gas and coal under sanctions and is now the largest buyer of Russian oil. On the other hand, for the first time since the launch of the BRI initiative, China has stopped BRI investments in Russia. So far, China has been silent or accepted the Russian invasion, but in a moderate, almost neutral tone, and it has also complied with the western sanctions put on Russia. In February and earlier the two leaders have assured their alignment and that there are no set boundaries for cooperation. Historically this is new. But after the Russian illegal invasion of Ukraine their relations are not asymmetrical anymore because now Russia needs China far more than China needs Russia. Their alignment will hold its balance as long as China benefits sufficiently from it, although China will not abandon Russia as a partner against the West.
4. **Assessed Objectives for the Meeting.**
 - a. Putin to assure Xi for support and show to the world he is not isolated.
 - b. Putin to secure/ grow trade with China to help mitigate the effects of the sanctions. Economic cooperation is paramount to Russia.
 - c. Xi to leverage the Russian situation and grow influence over alignment.
 - d. Xi to show his power in the region.

- e. Both to keep CHN and RUS together opposing the West but, also to present SCO as counterweight towards the West and seek alike countries.

5. Outcomes and Implications. There were not much agreed between the two leaders, so the most significant outcome of the meeting was the realization of changing dynamics of Putin – Xi relations. Both Putin’s and Xi’s public announcements undoubtedly display how the weight of power has shifted between them in favor of Xi. Putin admitted that he understands China’s concerns related to Ukraine. He also renewed his support towards the One China policy. Meanwhile, Xi did not mention Ukraine in his public announcements, instead he expressed support for Kazakhstan sovereignty. Both of their announcements related to Ukraine, but especially Putin forcing to admit China’s concerns suggests that Russia did not consider the possibility of the war in Ukraine to be nothing but a swift victory. Xi’s messages also shows that he is not the unreserved ally Putin would like, and that Xi’s support has boundaries, regardless of their past assurances. From a Chinese point of view, the war in Ukraine is harmful in many ways, e.g., driving up energy and food prices and affecting China’s strategic economic objectives. In the long run, Xi will grow his influence over Putin, as Russia will be forced to accept more Chinese conditions to get what it needs. China also wants to keep the CASA region stable, not least because of BRI. Xi mentioning that China will support Kazakhstan to protect its sovereignty (a known Chinese policy) is something that cannot be interpreted as favorable for Russia. In this way, China acts as a stabilizing power over Russia, tilting the balance further in Xi’s favor. They will continue to work together in their common perspective of opposing the US and the West and setting their own kind of world order. In this matter, Xi does not have many options, so China still needs to do a balancing act of complying with sanctions and standing with Russia (unwillingly accepting Russia’s war in Ukraine). For the future, they could try to shift the SCO more towards being an organization that works as a counterweight to the Western alliances

At the summit, Iran signed a MoU to become an official member of the SCO in 2023. It needs to be highlighted because it has implications related to – and with – the Sino-Russo relationship. It is a way to circumvent some of the sanctions faced by Iran and Russia, but for the other members it is accepted mostly for economic reasons. This move, together with the fact that Russia is seeking to trade with Iran and cooperate in FMS, raises Iran’s weight in its neighborhood and beyond. The trio – despite their competing aims and weight – will become a more recognizable force in the AOR for the US in the sphere of strategic competition: Iran will have more opportunities to fund its malign actions and it can increase ITN activity, it will continue to fund its development of TBM, UAV, cyber and satellite capabilities, and Iran’s role in contained strategic competition will grow and Chinese and Russian influence in the AOR will grow.

6. Recommendations for USCENTCOM.

- a. Actively engage and continue to assure AOR countries of US commitment in the AOR (security partner of choice).
- b. Seek to take advantage of the current strategic atmosphere and build (on) permanent structures to consolidate initiatives (TF59, IAMD and CoE’s).

- c. Lead the implementation of integrated deterrence together with AOR countries (ME) to deter Iran, but also to limit the space for Chinese and Russian influence in the AOR.