China and Russia Relations

For Prelims: Location on Maps, South China Sea, Cold War, NATO, SCO, BRICS, Ukraine Crisis, Belt and Road Initiative, Eurasian Economic Union

For Mains: India and its Neighbourhood, Bilateral Groupings & Agreements, Groupings & Agreements Involving India and/or Affecting India's Interests, Effect of Policies & Politics of Countries on India's Interests, India-Russia-China Relations and way forward for India.

Why in News

Recently, in a joint statement, China and Russia affirmed that their new relationship is superior to any political or military alliance of the Cold War era.

- The statement comes amid the Russia's standoff with North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) on Ukraine.

What are the Historical Dynamics of China-Russia Relations?

- Despite being together in rejecting US unipolarity, the relationship between Russia and China is
complex and layered.
  ◦ Each has its distinct worldview and specific interests in its geographical region, and its own battles to fight.
- Relations between China and the former Soviet Union were frosty, marked by mistrust and doctrinal differences for most of the Cold War decades.
- The change came in 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev became the first Soviet leader to visit China since Nikita Khrushchev in 1958.
- Russia and China declared “mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual nonaggression, noninterference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence” as the basis of their bilateral relations.
- A decade after the Soviet Union broke up, disappointed and humiliated by the way the West had downgraded it, and deep in economic crisis, Russia turned to China.
- In 2001, the two countries signed the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, paving the way for expanding economic and trade ties, including sales of defence equipment and energy by Russia to China, and Russia’s backing for China’s position on Taiwan.
- In June 2021, the two countries extended the treaty at a virtual meeting where Russia claimed that “Russian-Chinese coordination plays a stabilising role in world affairs”.

What are the Current Developments in China- Russia Relations?
- Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea in Ukraine led to a sharp downturn in Russia’s ties with the US, NATO, and European Union (EU).
  ◦ This was also the turning point in Russia’s ties with China, which revealed the possibilities, potential, and the limits of the relationship.
- When the US, EU, and Australia imposed sanctions on Russia, Russia turned reflexively to China.
- Russia opened its doors wide for Chinese investments, and struck a USD 400 billion deal for Gazprom, the Russian state monopoly gas exporter, to supply 38 billion cubic metres (bcm) annually to China for 30 years from 2025.
- Earlier in January 2022, the two countries signed a deal for another pipeline, Power of Siberia 2, which will add 10 bcm of gas to the annual supply for 30 years.
- Since 2016, trade between the two countries has gone from USD 50 bn to over USD 147 bn.
- China is now Russia's largest trading partner. Towards a modus vivendi in Central Asia, the two countries agreed to work towards speeding up the linking of the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.
  ◦ With their ties closer than ever before, the crisis in Ukraine has been an opportunity for each country to express solidarity with the other’s grievance against the US.
  ◦ Should the West impose financial and banking sanctions on Russia, China is expected to assist Russia, perhaps with alternative payment methods.
- The recent joint statement backed the Russian opposition to any expansion of the Western military alliance in Europe.
- Russia reaffirmed support for the One-China principle, and opposed any form of independence for Taiwan.
- The statement also hit out “against the formation of closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region” and “the negative impact” of the US’s Indo-Pacific strategy.

How is Russia & China’s Interest Different?
- As several observers have pointed out, the China-Russia compact is not yet a formal security alliance against the West, nor is it an ideological partnership.
- Back in March 2014, in the vote on UN Security Council resolutions on the referendum in Crimea, China had abstained — and despite the recent bonhomie, has not recognised Crimea’s accession to Russia.
- China’s main security interests lie in Asia; Russia’s are in Europe. From Russia’s demands in ongoing negotiations with the West, it is clear that Russia is seeking the restructuring of European security.
- Russia, which wants to be recognised as a great power once again, has positions independent
of China on many issues — including on the relationship with India.

- As the smaller economy — Russia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is a tenth of China’s — but with a strong memory of its lost superpower status, Russia is not willing to become China’s junior partner.
- China drives a hard bargain. Russia is conscious that its gas exports to Germany and the rest of Europe gets much more revenue — and that China anyway has other pipelines to tap. Also, despite talk of Russia-China co-operation in Central Asia, Russia still sees the region as part of its sphere of influence.
- For China, war in Ukraine is the least suitable of options. It would take US military energies away from the South China Sea, but might also stall talks to resolve trade issues.
- China and the EU are each other’s biggest trading partners — China’s trade with Russia is small by comparison. China will not fight the war if it breaks out, but it will nonetheless find it messy and complicated to negotiate.
- As for Ukraine, it is a crucial link in Xi’s BRI project. China is also Ukraine’s biggest trading partner — and its agricultural exports, particularly corn, have sustained China during its trade war with the US.

What Policy Should India Follow?

- India’s best bet would be to treat its relations with both countries and the US separately — or it runs the risk of shrinking its own space.
- India’s relationship with Russia is not what it used to be, but there is much that both sides continue to see as mutually beneficial.
  - The Russia-China statement did not mention China’s border dispute with India; it only made a reference to developing cooperation among the three countries.
  - After the Russian-linked Redfish media teased a documentary that drew parallels between Kashmir and Palestine, the Russian embassy clarified that Redfish was not official media, and reiterated that Kashmir was an issue for India and Pakistan to resolve bilaterally.
- The structural constraints posed by the great power dynamic and vastly different appreciation of the regional security environment could be reduced if matters improve between the US and Russia.
  - A less conflictual relationship between the two will be a huge relief for India.
  - Also, the US-China quest for power or Russia’s deepening ties with China would have mattered less to India if its relations with China were more peaceful and stable.
- India should also promote mutually beneficial trilateral cooperation between Russia, China and India that could contribute towards the reduction of mistrust and suspicion between India and China.
  - In this context, the BRICS, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and RIC trilateral forum must be leveraged.

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