



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Xi and Putin in Beijing - are the boundaries of no-limits friendship appearing?



Vladimir Putin was treated as the chief guest at the third forum dedicated to the Belt and Road project in Beijing. However, upon returning home, he could not have been satisfied with the flashy protocol.

Putin returned from Beijing with the confirmation that he was the junior partner in the relationship with China and that he did not significantly influence the course of their strategic relations. This junior partnership is primarily related to the joint ambitions of China and Russia to reshape international relations to their own standards.

The official announcement of the host from the meeting between the Chinese and Russian leaders placed Putin in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and other multilateral initiatives in which both countries participate.

Putin cannot be satisfied with equalising Russia with dozens of other Chinese partners in the BRI, BRICS and other forums.

He wants exclusivity in the circle of Chinese friends, but it was absent on this occasion, despite the protocol facade in which Putin was the star of the meeting in Beijing.

A step back from the previous meeting

The previous meeting with President Xi last March was a win Putin was satisfied with. The Chinese leader visited him just a few weeks after the International Criminal Court issued an indictment and an arrest warrant for the Russian leader. Xi's arrival in Moscow at the time was a firm guarantee that Putin enjoyed the protection of a senior partner.

Russia and its leader regarded this visit as support for their invasion of Ukraine, which had just celebrated its first anniversary.

There was no mention of Ukraine in the statement from the last meeting between Xi and Putin, even though there is no doubt that it was one of the significant topics.

Russian aggression represents an increasing burden for Beijing, regardless of the fact that it greatly benefits from Russia's economic isolation. From the start, China has been exposed to accusations from the West that it supported Russian aggression, even though it rejected this, assuring the world of its neutrality.

China's attempt to present a peace initiative for the Russian-Ukrainian conflict on its anniversary last February was supposed to be a proof of Chinese neutrality and a move to cushion the pressure on Beijing.

However, it did not attract or raise any attention or affect the warring parties.

China measures the cost of supporting Russia

Chinese companies have been under increasing scrutiny from the West as potential violators of economic sanctions against Russia. Last month, the US government introduced trade restrictions against 11 Chinese companies, some of them for exporting drone parts to Russia.

Beijing did not want to pay the price for their political favour to Russia in this way, particularly in a year when the expected recovery of the economy after a 3-year lockdown was absent.

Vladimir Putin was not satisfied that there had been no advancement regarding the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline project during his meeting with Xi. Power of Siberia 2 is a gigantic corridor that should supply China, via Mongolia, with 50 billion cubic metres of gas per year.

There has not been any visible progress since the project's launch during the last meeting between Xi and Putin in Moscow last March, particularly from the Chinese perspective.

China, which has not yet stated its intentions with the gas pipeline, is essentially ignoring

this job, in which Russia is strategically engaged and which was one of Putin's principal topics before visiting Beijing.

Russia recognised a way around the massive European gas market's closure in China. However, this reorientation from the West to the East is not going at the pace that Moscow had hoped for.

Trade between the 2 countries has been increasing at great rates, which the 2 leaders once again boasted about. Since the beginning of the year, it has increased by as much as 36%, according to the Chinese customs administration, and by the end of the year it could reach \$200 billion - \$10 billion more than last year, as a record year.

However, the conditions of this growth are much more favourable to the Chinese economy than the Russian economy, considering that China purchases oil, as the principal import product from Russia, at a significant discount. Russia has no room to change this because of its isolation in the global market, and China is the buyer of as much as a third of its total oil exports.

Due to its economic isolation, Russia has become a significant market for Chinese technology, particularly cars, which increases the trade imbalance to China's advantage.

In this respect, China has no reason to change the status quo in relations with Russia, even in the context of aggression against Ukraine.

"China is not ready to throw Russia under the bus", said Alexander Gabuev, director of the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Centre. But this does not give Russia much hope of getting a more favourable partner status from China than the current one, in which it is paying a high price for the lack of other trade and political options.

Burden ahead of Xi's meeting with Western leaders

A new circumstance that does not go well with Russia's high expectations from a partnership with China is Israel's war against Hamas and the danger that the conflict will spill over into the region.

China also expects a chance to emerge as a potential peace mediator from this conflict and seeks to capitalise on its previously developed economic and political ties both with Israel and the Arab states in the region.

However, Russia's increasingly open affection towards Hamas, along with its previous close contacts with the leadership of the Palestinian terrorist group, create a new burden for Beijing in achieving its ambitions to assume a more significant role on the global stage.

President Xi is expected to hold significant talks with Western leaders at the China-EU summit by the end of the year, and to meet US President Joe Biden in November in San Francisco.

The Chinese leader will need to push for concessions regarding technology and the economy. However, his foreign policy towards the biggest hotspots - Ukraine and the Middle East - will also be tested.

The West has a firm and unified policy towards both crises and it acts as a support bloc for Ukraine and Israel.

Therefore, China will be exposed to the test of whether it is more crucial to partner with Russia, which plays a destructive role in both crises or "stabilise" economic relations with Western partners and competitors.

At such a crossroads where China, Russia and its leader will find themselves, there is little reason to expect Beijing will forget its principal interests and turn to "no limits friendship", as Xi and Putin described their relations a year ago.