

In Phone Call, Putin, Xi Emphasize That China and Russia 'Cannot Be Moved Apart'

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The two leaders discussed at length the recent developments in Russia-U.S. relations, a sign that such talks will not impact China and Russia's close partnership.

On February 24, China's President Xi Jinping held a phone conversation with his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in which the two men emphasized that no external force can drive a wedge between their two countries.

According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry readout, Xi told Putin: "History and reality make it clear to us that China and Russia are good neighbors that cannot be moved apart, as well as true friends that share hardships, support each other, and pursue common development." He later emphasized that the China-Russia relationship "has a strong internal driving force and unique strategic value. It is neither targeted at any third party nor affected by any third party."

Putin agreed. A statement from the Kremlin quoted him as saying: "Russian-Chinese political ties are an essential stabilizing factor in global affairs. This relationship is strategic in nature, not subject to political bias, and not aimed against anyone."

The message was clear: the recent resumption of dialogue between the United States and Russia will not impact China-Russia ties. Some Trump administration figures had argued that their efforts to normalize ties with Russia – including seeking an end to the Russia-Ukraine War on terms extremely favorable to Moscow – could drive a wedge between Beijing and Moscow.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, after talks with Russia in Riyadh earlier this month, spoke of "incredible opportunities" to partner with Russia, which he said "hopefully will be good for the world and also improve our relations in the long term."

Most analysts believe the prospect of a "reverse Kissinger" is vanishingly unlikely; the latest Putin-Xi call should put to rest any such hopes.

(However, China may be trying to obscure the strength of this message to foreign audiences. Notably, in the Foreign Ministry's official English translation of its readout, the line that China and Russia "cannot be moved apart" was removed.)

The call reportedly lasted over an hour and a half, a length all the more notable because Xi and Putin last spoke just over a month ago, on January 21. The frequency and length of their conversations itself is evidence that Moscow is taking pains to keep Beijing informed of new developments so as to avoid any disruptions to the China-Russia relationship.

The subject of Russia-U.S. relations was explicitly discussed during the latest call. “Putin informed his counterpart about the recent Russian-American contacts,” the Kremlin statement said. “The President of China expressed his support for the dialogue initiated between Russia and the United States, as well as China’s readiness to help find ways to settle the Ukrainian conflict peacefully.”

China’s own readout quoted Xi as saying that “China welcomes positive efforts made by Russia and relevant parties to resolve the crisis.”

China and Russia will be holding a number of exchanges this year. Not only is China hosting the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s annual meeting – which will see Putin visit China – but both countries are planning to host events celebrating the 80th anniversary of the end of World War II. China and Russia will use such commemorations to highlight their relationship and to boost their global standing by leveraging the 1945 victory in the “World Anti-Fascist War.”

China and Russia should take advantage of the anniversary to “jointly safeguard... the fruits of victory in World War II... and to call on all countries to observe the purposes and principles of the U.N. Charter, uphold universally recognized basic norms of international relations, and follow true multilateralism,” Xi said.