

## Building solid ties on land

BY BUNN NAGARA

***At least as important as the disputes over East Asian waters are the blossoming relations and plans on mainland Europe and Asia.***



*Mutual interests: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (right) and his counterpart Wang Yi shaking hands during a news conference in Moscow, Russia. Because of several developments abroad, the bilateral relationship between China and Russia has now reached new levels with the prospect of developing further. Reuters*

RECENT reports and speculation on rising major power interests in the Asia-Pacific, notably in the East and South China Seas, paint a picture of “the great game” being played out strategically in East Asia.

The presence of US and Chinese naval forces in particular is said to be growing and occasionally poised to confront each other in the region. Some of these maritime issues may be significant, but being obsessed with them can also detract significantly from major-power bonding on the continent itself.

Unlike the purportedly competitive relationship between US and Chinese naval forces at sea, the relationship between Russian and Chinese planners on the Eurasian land mass is constructive and mutually reassuring.

Later in the week, several leading public intellectuals and scholars in Russia and China will converge in Shanghai for a two-day conference on “Cooperation Between China and Russia: The Process and Prospects”.

The event is co-sponsored by Russia’s Valdai Discussion Club, said to have the inside track with the highest levels of the Kremlin, and China’s East China Normal University (ECNU), with its Center for Russian Studies and the School of Advanced International and Area Studies.

Items on the agenda are as may be expected of two major powers with vast mutual interests: assessing current bilateral relations, evaluating common global challenges, exploring deeper cooperation and examining how both countries’ regional plans can develop useful synergies.

Cooperation between China and Russia over a range of issues is not new. However, because of several developments abroad, their bilateral relationship has now reached new levels with the prospect of developing further.

For Russia, the turning point came with Western sanctions following Crimea's 2014 decision to leave Ukraine to join Russia. This was followed by Western pressure resulting from Moscow's support for Bashar al-Assad's Syria.

All that made the Russian intelligentsia think long and hard about whether to continue their country's established but futile policy of looking West and identifying with Europe. The outcome was a consensus that Russia should seriously begin to look east instead.

For China, a still towering economy combined with global sourcing and market access issues has meant greater international activism. But this enhanced activism has often met with what from Beijing looks very much like US containment or curtailment.

Discouraged from more forays at sea in the east, China has tended to look landward to the west. This is where a natural partnership with neighbouring Russia in developing Eurasia is set to scale greater heights.

Both countries understand that whatever lingering border issues they may have are dwarfed by their larger common interests. And now endowed with more resources than ever, both are set to build a new and vital bridge between East Asia and Europe.

Russia as the largest country in the world straddles the continents of Europe and Asia, in the role of informal patron to its smaller immediate neighbours. China has the world's largest population and the most promising economy, with plans for building maritime-to-overland links between East Asia and western Europe.

The depth and breadth of cooperation that China and Russia are now forging have not been seen before. With the necessary political will and resources to build for the future, the fortunes of the Eurasian land mass should see much better times ahead.

Inevitably, this has lately become a major theme in bilateral gatherings. Valdai and the ECNU are at the centre of policy-related discussions on such topics as "Eurasia in the Future World System" in a Shanghai workshop last year, and "Eurasia 2020: New Scope of Cooperation" at a Russian summer school.

Institutions on the ground that can facilitate the process are already in place and will develop further. In 1996, China and Russia launched the Shanghai Five in Shanghai with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 2001, Uzbekistan joined and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was born.

In covering a range of concerns spanning culture, diplomacy, security and trade, the SCO is said to hedge against undue US influence and a symptom of growing multipolarity. India and Pakistan will join this year with Iran and Turkey expected to follow.

On Jan 1 last year, Russia formed the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) with Belarus and Kazakhstan, while Armenia and Kyrgyzstan joined soon after. Tajikistan also hopes to join. Russia wants to develop the EEU to be on par with the EU. In learning from the EU's successes and failures, the EEU's pace of development is considerably faster.

Integral to China's grand plans in the related intercontinental projects is its proposed One Belt One Road (OBOR), with the Maritime Silk Road (MSR) idea in South-East Asian waters representing the eastern end of the mammoth multilateral infrastructure-trade conduit.

Compared with the bountiful future that these projects hold for all nations in the swathe of territory they cover, quibbling over tiny islets seems petty and pathetic. But the disputes are not insignificant.

The dividends from OBOR and the MSR are likely to be great if the projects can eventually succeed. But just as the promise is huge, so are the risks of failure.

The two greatest challenges are inadequate regional support owing to a trust deficit following Beijing's assertive territorial claims in the South China Sea, and tension erupting into conflict resulting from this assertiveness.

Any ambitious intercontinental project requires the support and cooperation of all countries in its region of operation. With regional tension between China and both the Philippines and Vietnam over disputed islands and waters, the full complement of countries needed is not possible.

If the US wanted to stop the OBOR or the MSR as it tried to with China's proposed Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), it only needs to raise the temperature in regional waters to provoke alarming reactions from China's maritime forces.

Stiffer postures from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, Coast Guard or other official vessels in disputed areas will immediately appear to countries in the region as unfriendly and even threatening. It matters little even if such moves are said to be responding only to the US naval "pivot" to Asia.

Recent months and years have already seen a fair number of these provocations and counter-provocations. Although the MSR holds immense dividends for all countries in the region, its future may be mired in doubt.

For China, it may be more fruitful to focus on developing the land-based OBOR and the Eurasian connection where it faces fewer challenges. This is where its growing bonds with Russia will prove useful.

Furthermore, India, Pakistan and all the current SCO countries are already founding members of the China-led AIIB. The potential synergies between the SCO, the AIIB and OBOR up to its easternmost fringes on East Asia's coastline have been established.

Developing the immense land links to Europe will take considerable time, effort and expense. Once this is done, the atmosphere in maritime East Asia may have improved sufficiently for thorough-going work on the MSR to begin.

While India has occasionally been perceived to be aligning with the US, lately the perception is one of remaining true to non-alignment. Old border issues with China have also subsided. The road is now open for OBOR to forge ahead, at least before it narrows or closes again.

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