

Issue Brief

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The 2026 Beijing China-Russia Summit:
Key Outcomes and Implications

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Abstract

The China-Russia summit in Beijing in May 2026 followed the U.S.-China summit by only a few days. It served as a symbolic diplomatic event that projected both countries' strategic solidarity to domestic and international audiences as they advanced their vision of a multipolar world. Both countries described each other as "strategic bulwarks" amid a complex international environment and reaffirmed their commitment to comprehensive cooperation and solidarity in security and economic affairs. Yet beneath the summit's elaborate diplomatic rhetoric lay a stark reality: the two sides failed to conclude a deal on Power of Siberia 2. This outcome showed that even within the broader narrative of a common front against the United States, pragmatism continues to govern economic matters involving vital national interests. The summit also suggested that the power hierarchy in the China-Russia relationship is gradually sharpening in the context of the prolonged Ukraine war. The future of China-Russia strategic cooperation and solidarity, including its trajectory and potential fracture points, continues to draw close attention.

Keywords

China-Russia summit, Xi Jinping, Putin, strategic cooperation, Power of Siberia 2

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A China-Russia summit took place in Beijing on May 20, 2026. The state visit, Putin's twenty-fifth trip to China, attracted intense international attention, coming just days after U.S. President Trump had departed from the country. The Xi-Putin summit is a significant event with the potential to affect not only China-Russia bilateral relations but also international relations more broadly. This issue brief therefore examines the timing and proceedings of the 2026 Beijing China-Russia summit, its key outcomes, and the subtle sources of tension that emerged, and offers a comprehensive assessment of its significance.

Timing and Proceedings of the Summit

The timing of the May 2026 China-Russia summit drew public attention because it took place just days after Trump visited China. The fact that Xi Jinping and Putin met at the same venue after the two leaders had gathered at the center of strategic competition stimulated political speculation. Some observers argued that China had carefully orchestrated the sequence to showcase its elevated standing, while others suggested that Putin reacted to concerns that Sino-American reconciliation and coexistence might become a reality. Although it is difficult to assess the validity of these claims at this stage, the summit is generally understood to have been an independent China-Russia diplomatic event that had long been in preparation and remained separate from the U.S.-China summit.

As officials emphasized throughout the events of May 20, the China-Russia summit marked two major bilateral anniversaries: the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of their strategic

cooperation framework and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation (hereinafter “the Treaty”). Article 25 of the Treaty sets its validity period at twenty years and allows five-year extensions. China and Russia agreed to a first five-year extension in 2021, and with another five years now having elapsed, 2026 provided the moment to discuss a second extension. Given the significance of this milestone year, it is reasonable to assess that China and Russia finalized the summit schedule and began preparations well in advance. In that sense, the unusual back-to-back summits in Beijing—first U.S.-China, then China-Russia—most likely reflected an accidental coincidence caused by Trump’s delayed China visit amid the prolonged Middle East war.

The volatile nature of today’s international relations, combined with the transactional approach of the United States in the Trump 2.0 era, has altered conventional understandings of summits. During the Trump administration, some summits at times appeared as precarious as walking on ice. In general, however, summits function as symbolic ceremonies in which leaders formally approve and announce the results of working-level consultations on bilateral, regional, and international issues. When particularly sharp and sensitive issues remain unresolved, leaders sometimes settle them through direct talks. As a basic condition, a summit usually presupposes a high likelihood that the participating states will reach positive agreements.

Against that backdrop, the back-to-back U.S.-China and China-Russia summits in Beijing in May 2026 present a striking contrast. The 2026 Beijing U.S.-China summit ended without a separate joint statement or agreement document. As a result, the international community struggled to reconcile the many differences between the U.S. and Chinese accounts of the outcomes, and major gaps remain in assessments of its substance. By contrast, the Xi-Putin summit closely followed the conventional model of a summit as a symbolic ceremony aligned with established diplomatic norms. China and Russia publicly released the full text of both the joint statement and the declaration signed by the two leaders in near

real time. They also promptly posted the list of forty cooperation documents signed at both governmental and non-governmental levels on their official websites.

The China-Russia summit unfolded in the following sequence: on the evening of May 19, ① Putin arrived in Beijing and was received by Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi; and on May 20, ② the two sides held an official welcome ceremony at Tiananmen Square, ③ Xi Jinping and Putin held a one-on-one meeting with a limited number of attendees, ④ they then held an expanded meeting with large delegations, and ⑤ they signed the joint statement and declaration. The program continued with ⑥ a joint press announcement, ⑦ the opening ceremony of the China-Russia “Year of Educational Cooperation,” ⑧ Putin’s meeting with Chinese Premier Li Qiang, and ⑨ a private informal tea session between the two leaders with only a small number of key aides present. The program also included a special personal moment: Putin reunited with Peng Pai, a boy he had met during his Beijing visit twenty-four years earlier and who is now a thirty-six-year-old engineer. Putin’s brief stay of 23 hours and 20 minutes in Beijing thus amounted to a carefully choreographed and polished state diplomatic event.

Key Outcomes

Given the commemorative character of the bilateral relationship at this juncture and the rapidly shifting international situation, the summit had to function as a special symbolic ceremony addressed both to the peoples of the two countries and to the wider international community. Xi Jinping and Putin needed to show that China-Russia relations had moved in a rational direction after a long period of discord, and that this reorientation would improve both peoples’ welfare, advance their national development visions, and help shape an alternative multipolar world. They also used the summit to declare, based on past achievements, that bilateral strategic cooperation would continue unwaveringly, and to secure public affirmation of that commitment.

The summit's meaning took concrete form in two documents. The first was the China-Russia Joint Statement on Further Strengthening Comprehensive Partnership and Strategic Cooperation and Deepening Relations of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation (hereinafter "the Joint Statement"). The second was the China-Russia Joint Declaration on the Formation of a Multipolar World and a New Type of International Relations (hereinafter "the Joint Declaration"). As its length suggests, the Joint Statement comprehensively and systematically covered five domains: ① the history and principles of bilateral relations, ② economic and technological cooperation, ③ social and cultural cooperation, ④ global security, and ⑤ global governance and international and regional affairs. Each domain set out both countries' shared perceptions, commitments, and priority areas for cooperation. The Joint Declaration addressed three main themes: ① an assessment of the current international situation, ② four guiding principles for building new-type international relations, and ③ a declaration of both countries' commitment to further advancing a shared vision in that direction.

A rough summary of the Joint Statement and Joint Declaration is as follows. First, the two countries agreed to extend the Treaty, signaling their determination to build on three decades of strategic cooperation and pursue long-term, stable cooperation that would not bend to transient interests. Second, China and Russia declared their intention to expand cooperation across all fronts, moving beyond narrow issue areas and categories and raising the qualitative level of the bilateral relationship. Third, Beijing and Moscow, drawing on their shared understanding of the causes of chaos and disorder in the current international environment, emphasized that they would serve as each other's "strategic bulwarks." They pledged to lead the formation of a multipolar international order and a new type of international relations.

Their positions on Northeast Asian security and Korean Peninsula affairs also deserve attention. First, China and Russia described South Korea-U.S.-Japan military and security cooperation as "military bloc formation" and as "NATO's expansion into the Asia-Pacific," thereby signaling strong caution. In particular, they

explicitly argued that the United States' development of a next-generation regional missile defense system, redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons, and moves toward nuclear sharing undermine global strategic stability. They also identified Japan's military buildup and changes in its security policy as factors that revive militarism and undermine regional peace, and they pledged to respond jointly to any attempts to undermine the "outcomes of World War II" (the postwar order). Second, on the Korean Peninsula issue, China and Russia identified U.S. pressure on North Korea as the root cause of heightened tensions on the peninsula. In the same vein, they called for an end to Western unilateral sanctions and military demonstrations against North Korea, and they stressed that North Korea's legitimate security concerns must be addressed first. Third, Xi Jinping and Putin highlighted the need for trilateral economic cooperation linking China's three northeastern provinces, Russia's Far East Primorsky region, and North Korea. In this connection, they referred to cooperation within the Greater Tumen Initiative (GTI), the expansion of logistics networks in border areas, and consultations with North Korea on coordinating sea-access rights through the Tumen River to the East Sea.

Power of Siberia 2

Nevertheless, the summit did not produce smooth agreement on every issue. Power of Siberia 2 deserves close attention because it reveals the hidden side of the bilateral relationship. This project has long served as a highly sensitive and closely guarded issue in China-Russia relations. It remained one of the summit's key unresolved items, and working-level negotiations continued until the very last moment without producing agreement, leaving the final decision to the two leaders.

Immediately after the summit, the Kremlin stated that the two sides had made "overall progress" on the route, construction method, and other aspects of Power of Siberia 2 at the stage of a legally binding memorandum of understanding. At first glance, this may sound like significant progress, but in practice, it signaled that the two sides still had not reached a final agreement. Putin's

remarks in his May 9 interview with Russian journalists reinforce that conclusion. At the time, Putin said, “I would not wish to speak prematurely on this matter, but according to my colleagues’ reports, most of the key issues have already been resolved. I would be very pleased if a final agreement could be reached during this visit.”

Power of Siberia 2 is a pipeline project stretching approximately 2,600 km, designed to transport natural gas from the Yamal gas fields of western Siberia to China via Mongolia. If completed, it could supply China with up to 50 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year, making it a truly massive undertaking. Although feasibility studies and technical planning for the route and construction method have already been completed, China and Russia have spent six years locked in intense negotiations over the final agreement. The key sticking points reportedly remain the supply price, flexibility in purchase volumes, and cost-sharing for pipeline construction.

In reality, Russia entered these negotiations from a deeply disadvantaged position. After the outbreak of the Ukraine war, Western sanctions cut Russia off from most of its pipeline export routes to Europe. Russia therefore needed to develop alternative markets urgently, and China effectively became its only viable option. This gave China a superior bargaining position in a monopsony-like structure. With access to abundant alternative supply sources, China dragged out negotiations and demanded a discount of roughly half the existing Power of Siberia 1 supply price.

The energy supply crisis triggered by the outbreak of the Middle East war and the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, however, created an opportunity to rebalance the bilateral dynamics around this issue. Russia’s value as a cheap and stable energy supplier for China came into sharper focus. Throughout the summit, Putin repeatedly emphasized that Russia stood ready to supply all types of fuel to the Chinese market stably and without interruption. By

invoking the Middle East war, Russia sought to push China toward its pipeline as a safe overland supply route.

In the end, however, China again withheld its final signature at this summit. Most likely, Beijing remained wary of becoming overly dependent on Russian energy and believed it could still secure further price concessions. The protracted tug-of-war over Power of Siberia 2 stands in sharp contrast to the countries' political and security cooperation. The failure to conclude the deal shows that pragmatism still governs bilateral economic matters, even as China and Russia cooperate strategically against the United States. For Russia in particular, this outcome exposes one dimension of the deepening power hierarchy in the bilateral relationship, a hierarchy that the prolonged Ukraine war has reinforced.

The Beijing summit followed the U.S.-China summit by only a few days, and it succeeded as a symbolic diplomatic event that projected both countries' strategic solidarity in pursuit of a multipolar world to domestic and international audiences. Both countries defined each other as "strategic bulwarks" amid a complex international situation and reaffirmed their commitment to comprehensive cooperation and solidarity across security and economic affairs. Coordinated action in Northeast Asia and on the Korean Peninsula, grounded in a shared perception of threat, is likely to intensify further. Above all, the summit suggests that China and Russia intend to deepen cooperation with North Korea across multiple domains within bilateral and trilateral frameworks. South Korea now faces a more complex set of challenges as it seeks to institutionalize peace and coexistence on the Korean Peninsula.

Yet beneath the summit's elaborate diplomatic rhetoric lay another stark reality: the failure to conclude a deal on Power of Siberia 2. Despite Russia's pressure to shift the outcome by exploiting the geopolitical crisis created by the Middle East war,

China withheld its final signature, remaining wary of deepening its energy dependence on Russia and of the buyer-dominant logic that shaped the negotiations. This outcome showed that thoroughgoing pragmatism still governs economic matters involving vital national interests, even within the broader narrative of a common front against the United States. In the end, the summit offered clues that the power hierarchy in the China-Russia relationship is gradually sharpening in the context of the prolonged Ukraine war. The future of China-Russia strategic cooperation and solidarity, including its trajectory and possible fracture points, continues to attract close attention.

The views and opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the official position of INSS.