

Putin's Visit to China Set to Bolster Ties

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President Vladimir Putin during a working visit to Beijing in 2009.

Amid a bitter crisis in relations with the West over Ukraine, Russia's President Vladimir Putin is moving to bolster ties with China.

Russia sees relations with China as a top priority and their ties now are the best ever, Putin said in an interview with the Chinese media released by the Kremlin Monday, a day before his trip to Shanghai.

He said that a deal on Russian natural gas exports to China is close to be signed, adding that it would allow Russia to diversify its export routes and let China meet its growing demand for energy.

Russia, which sends the bulk of its gas exports to Europe, has sought to develop an alternative export link to China, but the two nations have been locked for years in difficult talks over price.

Moscow sped up work on the contract amid the Ukrainian crisis, as the U.S. and the European Union have slapped travel bans and asset freezes on members of Putin's entourage over

Russia's annexation of Crimea and threatened to impose even harsher sanctions that would target entire sectors of the Russian economy.

"In the context of the turbulent global economy, the strengthening of mutually beneficial trade and economic ties, as well as the increase of investment flows between Russia and China, are of paramount importance," Putin said.

The two countries developed what they dub a "strategic partnership" after the 1991 Soviet collapse, including close political, economic and military ties in a shared aspiration to counter U.S. domination.

Russia has supplied sophisticated weapons to China, and the neighbors have conducted joint military drills. But many in Russia have felt increasingly uneasy about their powerful neighbor, fearing that Russia's population decline and a relative weakness of its conventional forces compared to China's military could one day tempt Beijing to grab land.

But seeking to offset Western pressure, Putin signaled Russia's intention to expand ties in the areas it had been wary to develop in the past.

He said that Russia would welcome more Chinese investments, in particular in a free trade zone currently being established in the far eastern port of Vladivostok.

"Obviously, we are interested in Chinese businessmen making use of these opportunities and become one of the leaders here, since both Russia and China will benefit from an accelerated development of the Russian Far East," he said.

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