

Russia-China Relations

—By Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur, VSM (Retd.)

A discussion implies examining or considering something in detail, usually in a conversation. It could also connote a debate or an argument about some contentious issue. The primary aim of a discussion is to arrive at some agreement or a correct decision, and its purpose is to obtain various shades of opinion and ideas on the subject under consideration. In this regard, it is significant to mention that the process of discussion is as important as the final decision arrived at. Calling a group of persons to participate in a discussion could be termed a group discussion, and it is a very common activity in most organisations, formal or informal, big or small. In addition, most organisations and well-reputed educational institutions are also conducting interviews and group discussions as an essential part of their selection process to select candidates to appoint managers or screen candidates for admission to Management Courses. Therefore, acquiring critical skills to participate in a group discussion effectively assumes significance. It must be appreciated that while a person engages in a group discussion or a meeting in an office scenario, group members complement each other and deliberately avoid being competitive. On the other hand, in a test situation, candidates taking part in a group discussion, in their enthusiasm to score over others, do become more competitive rather than remaining complementary to each other. Despite this, a group discussion must generate more light than heat and rationality, and logical thinking must always get priority.

Consequent to clearing the CAT, nine candidates were called to participate in a group discussion session during the process of screening candidates for selection to undergo an MBA course from one of India's top management institutes. Three assessors were deputed to assess these candidates. The candidates were made to sit in a semi-circle. All candidates had arrived wearing formal dress and, after checking their identity, etc., were allotted Identification Numbers prominently displayed on their shirts so that these numbers were easily visible to other candidates and the three assessors. The candidates were asked to address



Wing Commander Dinesh Mathur is a senior selector and trainer. He has worked as a selector at two Services Selection Boards and as Chief Instructor at Defence Institute of Psychological Research, New Delhi. He has conducted many interviews and group discussions during the last two decades and has authored four books, including two on Interviews and Group Discussions. He has received Vishisht Seva Medal awarded by the President of India and Commendation by the Chief of Air Staff.

each other by these numbers, not names. This was done to prevent any caste, religion and domicile bias among the candidates and between the candidates and the assessors. Subsequently, a detailed briefing was conducted to inform this group discussion's do's and don'ts. They were informed that the three assessors would not interfere in the conduct of this group discussion, and candidates were free to speak as much as they desired and as many times as they wished. But, they should see to it that all candidates get a chance to express their ideas. They could converse in Hindi or English, but they must speak in an orderly fashion which meant that only one person should speak at a time, and they should not turn this GD into a fish market. Any candidate could initiate the discussion, and one should also conclude it. After mutual consultation, they were given three topics and asked to pick one topic for GD. The group of these nine candidates chose to discuss this topic. They were given two-minute time to jot down some points on a piece of paper to recall during the group discussion. They were finally informed that this group discussion must be concluded in about 25-30 minutes.

Thereafter, the group discussion proceeded in the following manner:

Candidate No. 9 : Good morning, friends. I hope all of you are feeling fine and waiting to discuss this critical current topic. As we know, Russia and China are two neighbouring big countries sharing an international boundary of about 4300 km. These two nations have a long and rather complicated history, marked by times of friendship as well as disagreement. In the past, they have had differences of opinion on issues like Communist doctrine, Covid-19 and shared border, etc. Of course, the Chinese and Russian political systems have quite a few similarities as well. Both are known to be authoritarian regimes with power in the hands of a single, long-serving leader. China is a one-party state led by the Chinese Communist Party, while Russia is a multi-party system dominated by President Mr. Vladimir Putin's United Russia Party. In the past, both governments have cracked down on domestic opponents. The Chinese economy is the second largest in the world, behind the United States, and more than eight times the size of Russia's economy. However, interestingly, in the recent past, consequent to the visit of Chinese President Mr. Xi Jinping to Russia, the two countries are now sharing a very close relationship, which has serious repercussions for international politics and global order. That is why this topic is being so widely discussed now. You may now express your views. Thanks, friends.

Candidate No. 8 : I think Number 9 has really introduced this topic quite well.

Candidate No. 5 : Yes, I agree. While Number 9 has given some basic facts about these two nations, I feel there is certainly a need to touch upon some important historical aspects of the relationship between these two countries. This approach would help us to understand this topic better. Do you agree?

Candidate No. 6 : OK, I can cover some important historical aspects. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, China soon established good neighbourly relations with the communist Soviet Union. Right up to the mid-1950s, the two nations enjoyed strong ties. But when Nikita

Khrushchev became the leader of the Soviet Union, an ideological rift surfaced. This rift became an open hostility, and in 1969, a military clash took place at Zhenbao (Damanskii) Island between these two nations. This became so severe that Chinese leader Mao normalised its relations with the United States to balance against the Soviet threat. These tensions continued till late 1980s.

Candidate No. 7 : What happened after that?

Candidate No. 3 : I would like to add that thereafter, under Deng Xiaoping, China adopted a more pragmatic and less ideological approach and this reduced tensions between the two nations. This led to the 1989 Sino-Soviet Summit in which Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev visited China to normalise relations. Thereafter, the two countries agreed to resolve their border dispute. Subsequently, relations between the two countries continued to improve and in 2001, the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation was inked. In the same year, Russia joined China and other nations to form the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which aimed to promote cooperation between several countries across the Eurasian continent. After that, military and economic cooperation between the two nations continued to grow.

Candidate No. 9 : Yes, I recall this led to the upgrading of their relations to a "comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation for the new era" in 2019. In this context, China's decision not to oppose Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea played an important role in cementing the relationship between the two nations. By 2019, both nations had serious grievances with the United States. For China, the issues were control of the South China Sea, trade policies and technology policy. For Russia, the main issue was severe economic penalties imposed by the US and Europe to punish its seizure of Crimea from Ukraine.

Candidate No. 2 : But there must also be some issues on which Russia and China differed.

Candidate No. 6 : Yes, I recall China had not recognised Russia's annexation of Crimea and Russia also did not support China's claims in the South China Sea. Nevertheless, China and Russia currently enjoy the best relations they have had since the late 1950s. Although they did not have any formal alliance, the two nations have an

informal agreement to coordinate diplomatic and economic moves besides building a coalition against the United States. Both share a deep suspicion of Western interference and a strong desire to impose tighter control over their own population.

Candidate No. 5 : We have been discussing the historical and political aspects of relations between Russia and China. I think we must touch upon economic relations between them as well. This, I consider, is also very important. Am I right?

Candidate No. 3 : Yes, quite right. I can talk about this aspect. The economic relations between Russia and China indicate mixed trends. The trade between the two nations was running between \$5 billion and \$8 billion per year in the 1990s, but grew gradually to touch \$100 billion until the 2008 crisis. Between 2008 and 2009, when Russia had a financial crisis, there was a sharp increase in borrowing from China. But, this trend was short-lived. Trade slumped back to about \$60 billion in 2015 and 2016 but started to recover once again in 2017. Both countries were planning to raise the trade volume substantially thereafter.

Candidate No. 2 : In fact, the aggravation of relations between Russia and Western countries also contributed to an increase in trade relations between Russia and China. Both countries had planned to increase bilateral trade to about \$200 billion.

Candidate No. 4 : Yes, we understand the trade between them kept increasing, but can some friends tell us what all materials or products they are trading in?

Candidate No. 9 : Most of the Russian exports to China are mainly from the mining and petrochemical sector. In fact, more than 50% of Russia's exports to China come from mineral fuels, oil and petroleum products, followed by wood and wood products, non-ferrous metals, fish and seafood and chemical products, etc. And the main categories of imports to Russia from China are machinery and equipment, clothing, chemical products, footwear and furniture, etc.

Candidate No. 5 : Friends, I feel participating in international organisations like BRICS and Belt and Road Initiative must have impacted the economic ties of Russia and China with other countries as well.

Candidate No. 6 : Yes, quite right. Participation in BRICS and RIC (Russia-India-China) did help in boosting Russia-China economic relations. Russia and

China had declared that they wanted to transform BRICS into a mechanism of cooperation and coordination on a wide range of global financial and political problems. In this regard, to increase closer economic partnership, the BRICS Development Bank was also established and efforts were made to make a joint front to impact global economic governance and the Belt and Road Initiative.

Candidate No. 3 : In this context, I would like to add that China also went for a big new economic initiative—the "New silk road" or the Belt and Road Initiative. This project was designed primarily to strengthen economic ties and cooperation and to attract investors from Asia and other parts of the world. The zone of this project extended from China to Europe through Central Asia and Russia, as it is a significant transit logistical link between China and Europe. Thus, through BRICS and Belt and Road Initiative, Russia and China had planned to increase bilateral trade to about \$200 billion in the next few years.

Candidate No. 2 : I think we have adequately covered the economic relations between Russia and China. We should briefly touch upon their military and energy relations as well. These also indicate their close relationship.

Candidate No. 9 : Yes, I can add that after the European Union arms embargo on China which was imposed due to the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989, China had become a client for Russian military exports. In 1993, the two countries signed a five-year defence cooperation agreement and a border security agreement subsequently. Russia also supplied fighter aircraft and jet engines to China. Later, China focussed on domestic weapon designing and manufacturing and became competitive in the global arms market. Russian and Chinese warplanes have been conducting joint patrols over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea.

Candidate No. 6 : I would like to add that due to its close proximity to China and position as one of the world's largest oil producers and natural gas exporters, Russia has been an obvious choice for meeting the increasing energy demands of China. Their energy relations are related to oil, gas, and coal and they also have partnerships with regard to nuclear and renewable energy technology.

Candidate No. 3 : With all the inputs we have discussed, it is quite apparent that relations between Russia and China are now superior to the political and

military alliances of the Cold War era. The two countries also declared in a joint statement on February 24, 2022, that this friendship had no limits and there were no forbidden areas of cooperation. Their close relationship was very much at play just prior to the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022.

Candidate No. 9 : Russia-China relations came in focus when China declined to call it an invasion, prompting America to warn that any country backing Russia's aggression would be 'stained by association'. Soon after that, Russia vetoed the draft UNSC resolution condemning the invasion, and China abstained. It was also reported that Russia had asked China to give it military equipment and support, but the West warned China of the consequences if China gave Russia material support. America also indicated that it could militarily defend Taiwan if it was attacked by China.

Candidate No. 6 : While the Russia-Ukraine conflict continued, on the anniversary of Russia's invasion in February 2023, China came out with a plan for a political settlement of the war, portraying itself as a mediator in the conflict and avoided calling Russia an invader which could hurt its relationship with that country. Ukraine also expected China to use its good relations and influence on Russia to bring an end to this war. But, the Chinese proposal did not receive a favourable response from the US and Western countries.

Candidate No. 3 : Friends, recently in March 2023, Chinese President Mr. Xi Jinping visited Russia to meet President Mr. Vladimir Putin and received a red carpet welcome against the background of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This visit once again brought Russia-China relations into focus. The Chinese described this visit as a journey of friendship, cooperation and peace, but, this visit came amid growing friction with the US. An isolated Russia badly needs trade with China, which the latter is also more than happy to do. In fact, trade between the two countries has already reached \$190.27 billion by the end of 2022.

Candidate No. 9 : I would like to add that during this visit, both parties did not highlight the conflict. Russia's failures on the battleground and its international isolation are problems that neither Russia nor China wanted to highlight, and the visit was scripted to cover a broad array of bilateral and international issues. Apparently, their interests are overlapping, but certainly

not identical. Currently, Russia is in a difficult spot and would like more support from China—political, economic and even military. China wants to help but does not want to risk Western sanctions.

Candidate No. 1 : I think all said and done, this visit brought the two countries even closer in their effort to jointly counter America and the Western world.

Candidate No. 9 : Interestingly, Mr. Xi's visit to Russia, just after the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant against Mr. Putin for "war crimes," has certainly signalled a tighter Russia-China embrace, which may cause headache for some countries, including India. I feel this new development suits China nicely. China can use Russia to blunt the US-led effort to counter China in East Asia while helping itself to all the Russian energy it needs. We have to now acknowledge that Russia and China have established an all-weather friendship.

Candidate No. 8 : Can somebody tell us the international repercussions of this all-weather friendship between Russia and China?

Candidate No. 6 : Yes, I think a number of countries would not prefer such close relations between Russia and China. Since Russia now has Chinese backing in East Asia, recently, Russian nuclear-capable bombers flew over the Sea of Japan to coincide with Japan PM's recent visit to Ukraine. Chinese naval activities could increase in the Indian Ocean Region, which will pose serious troubles for India. It is hoped that close Russia-China relations would not impact Russia-India relations, especially in defence matters. Additionally, there are growing signs of a China-Russia-Iran trilateral understanding, which could negatively impact India.

Candidate No. 7 : Let us hope that this close relationship between Russia and China will not adversely impact world peace in the years to come.

Candidate No. 4 : Friends, I think we have discussed some significant aspects of Russia-China relations. The time allotted to us is getting over now, and we must conclude this discussion.

Candidate No. 1 : If you agree, can we ask Number 3 to conclude this discussion?

Candidate No. 8 : Yes, Number 3, you please conclude now.

Candidate No. 3 : Friends, we all had a very informative and fruitful discussion on this current and much internationally discussed topic. We briefly looked at some important historical aspects of this topic, which helped us understand various developments

that have led to the current close relationship between these two countries. We discussed the topic quite comprehensively, covering political, economic, trade, military, and energy relations between Russia and China. After that, we also reflected upon the impact of this relationship on the geopolitical equations that have significant implications for India as well, since it has strategic military relations with Russia. I think we all stand hugely benefitted from the information we have gathered while discussing this topic. We end with the hope that this relationship will not disturb world peace in the days to come.

Thanks, and have a good day.

Critical Assessment of Candidates' Performance

Good: 3, 6 and 9

Looking at the performance of all participants, it is apparent that these candidates have come well-prepared to participate in this group discussion. They clearly made efforts to collect adequate data and information on this topic and that is why they could speak with the required self-confidence. The information put forward by these candidates was also not disputed or contradicted by other candidates. They spoke and allowed other candidates also to express their ideas. Therefore, it can be said that they have made a major contribution to the entire GD proceedings. In view of this, the performance of these candidates has been assessed as 'Good'.

Average: 2 and 5

These candidates took part in this group discussion and contributed to taking this GD forward. They also intervened at crucial junctions and gave suggestions so that all aspects of this vast topic are discussed. However, their total contribution remained fairly limited. They had some knowledge of this topic, which was considered not quite adequate. It goes without saying had they prepared this topic adequately, they could have performed much better. They need to appreciate that to effectively take part in a competitive GD like this, they are required to put up more effort. Due to all these reasons, their performance has been assessed as 'Average'.

Below Average: 1, 4, 7 and 8

*Looking at the overall performance of these candidates, it is obvious that they had come for this group discussion without taking pains to prepare this topic. They only spoke once or twice merely to mark their participation. They did not make any noteworthy contribution to this group discussion. Throughout the discussion, they either prompted other candidates to speak or appreciated those who were speaking. Because of all these, the performance of these candidates has been assessed as 'Below Average'. **CSR***