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LA STAMPA.it :: Monday 13 May 2013

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05/11/2013

Patriarch Kirill pays historical visit to China

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THE PATRIARCH OF MOSCOW AND ALL RUSSIA, KIRILL

On 10 May the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church was received by President Xi Jinping, leading to the creation of a new Moscow-Beijing axis

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The overture to Patriarch Kirill's official visit to China marked an important moment in relations between China and the Orthodox Church. Yesterday, in the Great Hall of the People, the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church had the privilege of meeting Chinese President, Xi Jinping. "You are the first Patriarch of Moscow and the first supreme religious leader from Russia to visit our country," Xi told Kirill, presenting this unprecedented event as a "clear sign of the strength and high level of relations between China and Russia." Russian news agency *RIA Novosti* reported that during their conversation, Kirill emphasised the "special relationship that has blossomed between Russia and China in recent years."

The large, 80-member-strong patriarchal delegation will be in Beijing until tomorrow, 12 May, when Kirill will celebrate the Divine Liturgy in the Orthodox Church inside the Russian Embassy. Kirill and his entourage will then move onto Harbin, in North-Eastern China, which is home to the country's largest community of Russian immigrants. The delegation will conclude its visit on 15 May, in Shanghai.

The official and ritualistic gestures and words that were exchanged give an idea of the importance of this meeting and the implications for relations between China and other Christian Churches, not just the Russian Orthodox one.

Kirill's visit to China shows that he recognises the inescapable influence of the figures and bodies that manage the religious policy imposed by the Government and Communist Party of China. When the Patriarch arrived at the airport he was greeted by the State Administration for Religious Affairs' (SARA) number two man. SARA had sent out the official invitation to Kirill, to visit China. Whether Orthodox Christianity is added to the list of religious faiths officially recognised by the State depends on this visit. If it is, Russian Orthodoxy would gain stronger footing in China, in full respect of the rules imposed by the civil authorities' religion policy. There are currently 20 thousand Orthodox Christians in China. At the moment, there are just two Shanghai-based elderly priests representing the Russian Orthodox Church in China.

Xi and Kirill's references to the good relations between China and Russia are proof that Patriarch Kirill's visit to China should be read in the context of an ever stronger political alignment between Moscow and Beijing. China's leaders recognise the Orthodox Church as an important element of the central role Russia plays on the world stage, whilst taking into account its links with Putin's network of power. The Chinese giant is a strategic asset in the Russian Orthodox Church's plans to expand, in a head to head race with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople (in 2008 it gained jurisdiction of the whole of China through the Orthodox Metropolitanate of Hong Kong). Seminarians are taught Mandarin at the theological seminary of Khabarovsk, on the Russian-Chinese border, in preparation for their mission beyond the Great Wall.

In June 2012 the Patriarchate of Moscow's "foreign affairs minister", Metropolitan Hilarion of Volokolamsk, paid an important visit to China, where he met the illegitimate Catholic bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin, President of the Chinese College of Bishops (a body that is not recognised by the Holy See). During Hilarion's visit, Bishop Ma Yinglin extended an invitation to Patriarch Kirill to visit China and meet with Catholic Chinese students.

The out come of Kirill's visit to China could be an important test for the Catholic Church. Another meeting between Kirill and an illicitly ordained bishop would be a kick in the teeth for the Vatican in terms of the thorny subject of illegitimate Episcopal ordinations. On the other hand, the fact that Kirill has been received by the leader of a country where state atheism still reigns supreme, could be a sign that Beijing too may be willing to resume high-level dialogue with the leaders of Christian Churches, starting with the Catholic Church.

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