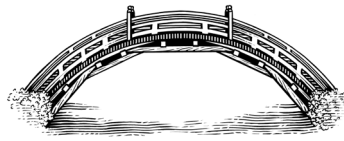


ROUNDTABLE

The Strategic Implications of Russia-China Relations:
Regional Perspectives



Brian Franchell

Angela Stent

Yu Bin

Alexander Lukin

Tomohiko Uyama

Hiroshi Yamazoe

Robert Sutter

Introduction

Brian Franchell

The Sino-Russian relationship has progressed considerably since Mikhail Gorbachev called for creating “an atmosphere of good-neighborliness” with China in 1986.¹ The delivery of ten Russian Su-35 fighter jets to China in late December 2017 is a testament to this, especially considering that 30 years ago nearly two million troops were amassed along their shared border.² Since the demise of the Soviet Union, the two countries have gradually improved relations, developing their defense relationship in the 1990s, jointly declaring the establishment of a partnership of strategic coordination in 1996, and resolving the border issue in 2008. Yet the pivotal moment occurred in 2014 with the onset of the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions that pushed Russia toward strategic dependence on China, eliminating any flexibility it previously had. The momentum in the relationship has only continued since then. Although there are clear checks on the depth of the partnership, discussed in the essays in this roundtable, the common interests behind this intensification of cooperation seem to be increasing.

There is considerable agreement among experts about the trajectory of positive Sino-Russian relations, as well as the causes of closer cooperation between the two countries across numerous energy, economic, political, and security issues. There is less agreement, however, about the implications that heightened cooperation might have for the global system and regional relations. This roundtable offers a spectrum of perspectives in response to these questions, including from the key states involved (China, Russia, and the United States), as well as on what closer Sino-Russian cooperation means for neighboring countries in Central and Northeast Asia.

In the first essay, Angela Stent looks at U.S. policy objectives toward Russia on the issues of Syria, North Korea, counterterrorism, cyberthreats, and sanctions and examines the degree to which the trajectory of

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¹ “Excerpts from Gorbachev’s Speech,” *New York Times*, originally given June 28, 1986, published in English translation, July 29, 1986 ~ <http://www.nytimes.com/1986/07/29/world/excerpts-from-gorbachev-s-speech.html>.

² “Russia Delivers Second Batch of Su-35 Fighter Jets to China,” TASS Russian News Agency, December 22, 2017 ~ <http://tass.com/defense/982446>.

Sino-Russian relations might affect these objectives. She stresses that across these issues there are no significant points of contention that the United States might exploit to drive China and Russia apart. The two countries' suspicion of the United States and mutual desire to forge a new international order drive the partnership. Closer cooperation will likely hinder the realization of U.S. policy objectives, and the United States must be careful to avoid policies that further bind the two countries together.

Providing a historical context for the relationship, Yu Bin assesses the trajectory of Sino-Russian relations over the past three hundred years. He observes that the two countries have moved from a relationship characterized by volatility to a more pragmatic and institutionalized coexistence. Touching on the Chinese perspective, Yu characterizes the strategic partnership as a dynamic and flexible one that moves beyond the conventional concept of zero-sum geopolitics. For Yu, the direction of the two countries' relations with the West will be a critical determinant as to whether the partnership moves toward a true alliance.

Alexander Lukin provides a Russian perspective on the relationship, arguing that the Sino-Russian rapprochement is the result of the countries' shared geopolitical views. China and Russia desire both to counter the West's dominant influence in the global system and to encourage the development of a multipolar world. Western policies intent on preserving a preeminent position have only served to accelerate the deepening of Sino-Russian cooperation, though the formation of an alliance is unlikely. Any attempt to drive a wedge between them to counter China's rising influence would fail because of their mutual interests. Lukin asserts that the United States must forfeit its hegemony and join Russia and China to find new principles that suit a multipolar world order.

Turning to Central Asia, Tomohiko Uyama compares Russia's and China's activities and influence in the region, noting that each country's individual engagement is much more significant than their bilateral cooperation. Russia exerts unrivaled influence in the political and security realms, and a de facto division of labor is forming, with China taking an increasingly prominent role in economic engagement. The United States' engagement with Central Asia has been mostly unsuccessful, in part because of its emphasis on Afghanistan. This contrasts with Japan's greater success in engaging the broader region with economic assistance, technical aid, and cultural exchanges. To prove themselves as helpful partners to the Central Asian states, the United States and Japan should cooperate with China,

Russia, and the European Union in promoting security and prosperity, which will help mitigate overreliance on China and Russia.

In Northeast Asia, and from the perspective of the U.S.-Japan alliance, Hiroshi Yamazoe contends that the primary concern is Sino-Russian cooperation in the military sphere, particularly Russia's transfer of advanced hardware to improve China's military capabilities. The somewhat limited nature of Sino-Russian joint military actions to date does not require an immediate response from the U.S.-Japan alliance. However, Yamazoe explores three potential scenarios that would significantly challenge the alliance and that it should take care to avoid. One of the core policy implications distilled from these scenarios is that China presents a more serious challenge to the U.S.-Japan alliance than Russia and therefore requires more attention and resources in the long term. Although the alliance should adopt some countermeasures in response to growing Sino-Russian cooperation, it must also avoid actions that push Russia and China closer together.

Providing a broad U.S. perspective, Robert Sutter highlights the findings of the National Bureau of Asian Research's current project on Sino-Russian relations, of which this roundtable is a part. He emphasizes that heightened cooperation between China and Russia is increasingly undermining U.S. interests abroad and argues that this closer relationship is the product of several common objectives. Even though there are clear brakes limiting the extent of cooperation, the drivers carry more weight, to the distinct disadvantage of the United States and the West. No easy policy solutions exist to ameliorate this situation. What is needed is a wide-ranging strengthening of economic, military, and diplomatic power by the United States in support of the U.S.-backed international order.

The essays in this roundtable move beyond an assessment of the implications of stronger ties between China and Russia to examine the strategic triangle and regional dynamics. This diverse grouping of essays demonstrates considerable uncertainty about what the budding Sino-Russian relationship means for the future of the U.S.-supported international system. Within this roundtable, there is a consensus that attempts by Washington to undermine the relationship in the near term by pulling one country away from the other will fail due to their lack of trust in the United States and the common interests driving their cooperation. What is perhaps even clearer is that as Washington and other Western capitals have become increasingly mired in domestic troubles and retreat from global leadership, a strategic window has opened for Beijing and Moscow to advance both their individual and mutual interests. ◆

The Sino-Russian Partnership and Its Impact on U.S. Policy toward Russia

Angela Stent

During the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, candidate Donald Trump suggested that it was important for the United States to improve relations with Russia because closer ties might induce Moscow to join Washington in pressuring Beijing to change its policies. In 2015, he had said, “I think [Putin’s] dislike of President Obama is so intense, that it really has affected the whole relationship. We’ve driven them into the arms of China, so that now these two are together, which has always been the great sin. Don’t ever let Russia and China get together. We’ve driven them together.”¹ The idea that there is a triangular relationship between the United States, Russia, and China and that the United States has both a Russia and a China card to play goes back to the days of the Sino-Soviet split in the Cold War. Indeed, the Nixon administration was able to play the China card and pressure the Soviet Union quite effectively in the 1970s. But those days are long gone, and today the United States faces a completely different situation. As a senior Chinese official has stated, “Relations among China, Russia and the United States currently resemble a scalene triangle in which the greatest distance between the three points lies between Moscow and Washington.”² If any country has a card to play, it is China.

This essay examines the United States’ key policy objectives toward Russia and discusses the extent to which the Sino-Russian relationship can facilitate or hinder these objectives. It starts out from the premise that the key drivers of U.S. policy toward Russia and China differ considerably. The major driver behind U.S.-Russian relations is that the United States and Russia are the world’s two nuclear superpowers with the lion’s share of nuclear weapons. They are also on opposite sides of a number of international conflicts and have a limited economic relationship. A key

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¹ Julia Limitone, “Donald Trump: Vladimir Putin Can Be Dealt With,” Fox Business, August 20, 2015 ~ <http://www.foxbusiness.com/features/2015/08/20/donald-trump-vladimir-putin-can-be-dealt-with.html>.

² Fu Ying, “How China Sees Russia,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2016 ~ <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2015-12-14/how-china-sees-russia>.

driver of the U.S.-Chinese relationship, by contrast, is the fact that the United States and China are the world's two economic superpowers. Differences over security issues such as Taiwan or the South China Sea have also played an important role, but trade and investment questions loom much larger in this relationship than they do in U.S.-Russian relations. The stakes in the U.S.-Russian relationship are therefore of a very different order of magnitude than those involved in the U.S.-Chinese relationship.

Following a brief assessment of the current state of the Sino-Russian partnership, the essay examines U.S. policy objectives toward Russia on six key issues: Syria, Ukraine, North Korea, counterterrorism, cyberthreats, and sanctions. It then concludes by discussing policy options for the United States.

The Outlook for the Sino-Russian Partnership

Russia and China have over the past decade developed an increasingly robust, pragmatic partnership. After the 2014 annexation of Crimea and the launch of a war in southeastern Ukraine, the West's imposition of sanctions against Russia and attempts to isolate it pushed Moscow more closely toward Beijing and increased Russia's dependence on China. Although the Sino-Russian relationship is asymmetrical and by no means tension-free, the idea that Russia could be persuaded to loosen its links to China today is illusory. The deepening Sino-Russian partnership represents one of the most concrete and durable achievements of President Vladimir Putin's foreign policy, and he is not about to jettison it.

Understanding the stakes involved for both sides is important for assessing how this partnership affects U.S. policy. It has played a significant part in elevating Russia's role as an independent center of international power. The partnership has also enabled Moscow to raise its stature by associating with a rising China as relations with the United States have soured. China's support for Russia in the UN Security Council and refusal to join the Ukraine-related sanctions—although some Chinese banks do in fact adhere to the financial sanctions out of concern for possible U.S. extraterritorial retaliation—have served to legitimize Moscow's actions in Ukraine and Syria. In return, the partnership is useful for China because Russia supplies it with hydrocarbons and advanced military hardware and supports it on all major foreign policy issues.

Both countries believe that they were unfairly treated in the past and that the current international political and financial order continues to deny them equal treatment in setting the agenda and determining

institutional rules. They both advocate the creation of a “post-Western” multilateral international order, one in which the United States no longer determines the rules of the game. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has argued that NATO is obsolete and has advocated “a post-West world order when each country, based on its sovereignty within the rules of international law, will strive to find a balance between its own national interests and the national interests of partners.”³ This new order would highlight the role of multilateral organizations in which Russia and China play important roles but from which the United States is excluded, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), as well as the Eurasian Economic Union. Chinese leaders also stress the need for sovereignty and multilateralism but emphasize the role of economic organizations that do not include the United States such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Belt and Road Initiative. Moreover, both countries pursue a strict policy of noninterference in each other’s domestic affairs and criticize the West for lecturing them on human rights and democracy.

U.S. Policy Objectives toward Russia

Despite ongoing congressional and other investigations into Russian activities during the 2016 presidential campaign and contacts between members of the Trump campaign and Russian individuals, the administration is pursuing a cautious policy of engaging Russia on a series of issues that are national security priorities for Washington. The U.S.-Russian relationship is worse than it has been at any time since Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, and the U.S. domestic investigations may make it difficult to develop relations. Currently, the consensus policy in the administration is to pursue a pragmatic, targeted approach to Russia. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has laid out the three pillars of the administration’s policy: push back against Russian aggression when appropriate, engage with Russia on issues of mutual interest that advance U.S. national security interests, and seek to anchor the relationship through strategic stability talks. This is not a “reset” reminiscent of previous U.S. administrations, with expectations of improving ties, but rather an attempt to normalize relations where possible. U.S. policy toward Russia focuses on six major sets of issues, and China is a player in several of them.

³ “Lavrov Calls for ‘Post-West’ World Order; Dismisses NATO as Cold War Relic,” Deutsche Welle, February 18, 2017, <http://p.dw.com/p/2Xp91>.

Syria. The United States has ceded much of the initiative in Syria to Russia and has also accepted that Bashar al-Assad will remain in power for the foreseeable future. The most pressing issue is deconflicting U.S. and Russian air operations in Syria to reduce the risk of midair crashes. This necessitates regular contacts between military representatives from both countries. Beyond that is the challenge of maintaining the “safe zones” that Russia agreed to create. The United States is also participating as an observer in Russian-led talks aimed at ending the conflict and seeking reconciliation between the various factions in the civil war. China is not a party to these peace talks but has backed the Russian position, occasionally abstaining in UN Security Council votes on resolutions condemning Syrian chemical weapons attacks that Russia has vetoed. China has thus enabled Russia to pursue its objectives in Syria. Beijing and Moscow clearly have an agreement to support each other’s positions in the United Nations and not to interfere with their respective interests in Syria, Ukraine, or the South China Sea. It is highly unlikely that the United States could persuade China to change its position and back the Western powers’ Syrian policy in the UN Security Council.

Ukraine. China has similarly backed the Russian position on Ukraine. Although abstaining in the UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia’s annexation of Crimea in 2014, it has criticized the West’s policies toward Ukraine. When Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 was shot down over southeastern Ukraine, China refused to endorse Western claims that Ukrainian separatists had shot down the plane with a Russian-made missile. Beijing has thus given Russia cover for its actions in Ukraine and ensured that the West is unable to isolate Russia by strengthening Chinese ties to Moscow after the annexation of Crimea. Current U.S. policy seeks to move forward the stalled Minsk process designed to end the conflict. Ambassador Kurt Volker is negotiating with Vladislav Surkov, Vladimir Putin’s envoy for Ukraine, as well as with his Ukrainian, German, and French counterparts. There is also discussion of deploying UN peacekeeping troops to the region to facilitate an end to hostilities. China backs the Minsk process and has not criticized Russia for the annexation of Crimea. Although China is increasing its own economic ties to Ukraine, it has refrained from political involvement in this dispute. As in the case of Syria, the United States will not be able to secure Chinese support for a tougher policy toward Russia on the war in Ukraine.

North Korea. Although the focus of U.S. policy toward North Korea is to seek Chinese help in reining in Kim Jong-un’s nuclear program, Russia

is a player in this conflict and has recently stepped up its economic links to the country. It also hosts North Korean laborers, thus boosting Pyongyang's earnings. Like China, Russia does not want to see regime collapse and seeks to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula, fearing a united Korea under Western domination more than a nuclear-armed North Korea. It opposes the deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missiles on the Korean Peninsula. Neither China nor Russia is willing to significantly increase pressure on North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, and Russia might further strengthen its links with the country if China distances itself more. Russia has so far been content to follow China's lead in dealing with North Korea and is unlikely to pursue policies that might be supportive of U.S. goals if they were to alienate China. Attempts by the United States to seek Russian assistance in pressuring the Kim regime are unlikely to bear fruit as long as U.S.-Russian relations remain as adversarial as they currently are. Russia and China will continue to support each other on the North Korean issue even though Russia has recently sought to benefit economically from China's imposition of financial sanctions on North Korea. Both countries are united in advocating that Washington negotiate directly with Pyongyang.

Counterterrorism. In the past the United States and Russia have achieved limited counterterrorism cooperation, which the Trump administration now seeks to improve in order to more effectively counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). However, such cooperation is challenging because Washington and Moscow often do not agree on who is a terrorist. Russia, for example, has targeted Syrian opposition groups whom the United States and its Middle Eastern allies support. Russia defines as a terrorist someone who threatens Russians either at home—with a focus on groups emanating from the North Caucasus region—or on foreign soil. Nevertheless, attempts to improve joint work countering ISIS will continue. This is an area where China could cooperate with Russia and the United States. While Beijing, like Moscow, remains preoccupied with its own homegrown terrorism emanating from the Uighur-majority areas, it too is committed to combating ISIS. Trilateral cooperation on terrorism is thus theoretically possible but would require a more viable consensus on how to define a terrorist.

Cyberthreats. China and Russia represent the two greatest cyberthreats to the United States. Washington and Beijing signed a cybersecurity agreement in 2015, and even though there are different interpretations about its effectiveness, at least both sides have agreed on some rules of the road. The U.S.-China agreement states that neither government will knowingly

support cyber-enabled theft of intellectual property for commercial gain. While it outlines broader goals for cyber norms, the focus is on commercial espionage. Chinese commercial espionage activities targeting the United States have declined since the 2015 agreement.⁴ China and Russia also signed a cybersecurity agreement in 2015. It focuses on mutual assurance and nonaggression in cyberspace and builds on an earlier multilateral SCO cyber agreement. Both sides pledged to engage in enhanced interaction and information exchange between their respective law-enforcement agencies on cybercrime and terrorism. It is unclear how well this agreement is working. The United States, however, has no such agreement with Russia. In view of all the issues involved in Russia's alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. election, it would make sense to explore whether the two sides could begin talks on a similar agreement. Moscow has expressed interest in talks on cybersecurity, but so far the Trump administration has demurred. If the United States were to engage Russia in negotiations, then China would presumably be supportive.

Sanctions. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and the launch of a war in southeastern Ukraine, the Obama administration imposed sanctions by executive order on Russian individuals as well as on financial institutions lending money to Russia and on the transfer of advanced technology in the energy sector. After President Trump's election, the U.S. Congress became concerned that he might lift these sanctions by executive order in the absence of any progress on Ukraine. It intervened to ensure that the president cannot unilaterally lift sanctions by passing the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. This legislation imposes more draconian economic sanctions and also opens the way to sanctions on more Russian individuals. Russia has vigorously objected to these measures. Given the extraterritorial reach of this legislation, its scope could extend well beyond Russia. Although, as noted above, the major Chinese banks have tacitly observed these sanctions, smaller Chinese financial entities have lent money to Russian firms. Moreover, while Sino-Russian energy agreements do not involve the most advanced technology, they nevertheless have enabled Russia to continue to develop its energy sector. China, therefore, provides Russia with the wherewithal to grow economically in the face of tougher U.S. sanctions. Indeed, the latest congressional legislation may well have the effect of making Russia more dependent on China.

⁴ Yuxu Wei, "China-Russia Cybersecurity Cooperation: Working towards Cyber-Sovereignty," Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, June 21, 2016, <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/china-russia-cybersecurity-cooperation-working-towards-cyber-sovereignty>.

Conclusions

There are no major issues of contention between the United States and Russia where China is likely to support U.S. policies over those of Russia. Whatever the strains in the Sino-Russian relationship, which may well increase as China's Belt and Road Initiative proceeds, the two countries have a compelling reason to strengthen their developing partnership. Their suspicion of the United States and commitment to forging a new global order will continue to bind them together.

While pursuing its agenda with Moscow, Washington should realize that the Sino-Russian partnership could make the achievement of its goals more difficult. But Washington should also ensure that it does not pursue policies that could drive the two countries closer together. As long as the investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election and links between Russian individuals and members of the Trump campaign are ongoing, the administration will have to approach Russia with extreme caution. It must continue to build better defenses against a range of Russian cyberactivities, especially those on social media. However, in its attempt to deter future Russian interference, the administration must approach the sanctions question with greater flexibility, so that these newly enacted congressional restrictions do not increase the Kremlin's dependence on China. The United States should also resume a broader range of bilateral contacts, especially with the Russian military. Moreover, it should engage in discussions about pressing arms control issues to provide the Kremlin with a greater stake in relations with the United States on issues where China is not involved. In devising a balance between deterrence and engagement, the United States should understand that Russia might be willing to re-examine elements of its relationship with China—but only if it believes that the United States is willing to deal with it as an equal and respect what it considers its legitimate interests, as China does.

Ultimately if the United States wants to prevent the Sino-Russian partnership from further challenging U.S. interests, it must remain an active participant on the world stage. Withdrawing from global leadership, questioning alliances, and jettisoning the commitment to the liberal internationalist order could well facilitate the Sino-Russian drive to usher in a post-Western order where the United States has a diminished role—even if there is so far no agreement on what the rules of this order should be. ♦

Between Past and Future: Implications of Sino-Russian Relations for the United States

Yu Bin

The “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” between China and Russia is frequently described as making relations between the two large powers the “best in history” and as serving as a model of a “new type of major power relations.”¹ This depiction has generated sharply different assessments in the West regarding the partnership’s scope, strength, sustainability, and likely impact on the regional and global orders. The recently published U.S. National Security Strategy, for example, defines China and Russia as “revisionist powers” because they “challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.”² According to the report, Moscow and Beijing are “determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence.”³ It is not uncommon for U.S. national security strategies to treat Russia and China as U.S. rivals. The 2017 version, however, repeatedly pairs the two with a heightened level of alarm. Moreover, the document discusses the challenge from China and Russia ahead of rogue powers such as North Korea and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

This alarmist view, however, is in contrast to a more cautious assessment that emphasizes the differences between the two large powers. Bilateral ties are perhaps not as solid as officially articulated. More precisely, Russia and China are in a marriage of convenience or a “wary embrace.”⁴ Deep within the psyche of the two cultures, there are too many sociological and psychological hurdles to overcome for a

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¹ “China, Russia Pledge Coordination on Strategic Security,” Xinhua, July 26, 2017 ~ http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-07/26/c_136475098.htm.

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 2017), 25 ~ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

³ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008); and Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Sydney: Penguin, 2017).

normal and genuine strategic partnership.⁵ Russian and Chinese views and corresponding policies toward the outside world also indicate a more complex interactive mode of convergence and divergence.

These different assessments of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership leave considerable space for further intellectual inquiry. Regardless of whether the current relationship is best for either country or represents a threat to the West, it is entirely different from the preceding three hundred years. During the post-Cold War decades, the two Eurasian powers have transformed a largely asymmetrical and highly ideological relationship into one of pragmatic interaction and coexistence. This essay first reviews the past to understand the development of the bilateral relationship and then assesses the policy implications of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, including its potential and limitations.

A Glimpse of History

The long and tortuous process of Sino-Russian intercourse can be understood in three broad phases: imperial “fatal attraction” (the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries), revolution and the curse of ideology (the “short twentieth century”), and pragmatic coexistence (1989 to the present).

Imperial fatal attraction. Until the end of the twentieth century, the Sino-Russian relationship seemed destined to be one of asymmetry, incongruity, and paradox. This was the case even when the two civilizations were briefly “integrated” by the Mongols in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Mongol rule, however, gave rise in Russia to a nearly permanent fixation on the East as the “Mongol yoke,” a source of fear and a threat to Russia’s national identity. As a result, successive Russian regimes, be they tsarist, Communist, or post-Soviet, all have regarded Asia as alien and difficult to engage, at times viewing it as a threat and at others as an object of contempt or puzzlement.⁶ This has been the case despite the fact that China too was a victim of Mongol rule.

Russia started its relentless eastward expansion in the sixteenth century. By the mid-seventeenth century, and barely 60 years after crossing the Urals, Russia had acquired a permanent outlet to the Pacific Ocean even before it did to the Baltic or the Black Sea.⁷ Following the

⁵ This is the theme of Bobo Lo’s *Axis of Convenience*.

⁶ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), 132.

⁷ John J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 19–20; and Robert J. Kerner, *The Urge to the Sea* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942).

initial contact with China in the seventeenth century and the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, Russia renewed its eastward drive in the eighteenth century and was poised to take advantage of the Western “scramble for China” in the mid-nineteenth century.⁸ Unlike the infamous Opium Wars (1839–42 and 1856–60) fought by the European powers, however, Russia’s huge territorial gains in China’s lightly populated and thinly governed northern territory went largely unnoticed. A prominent Chinese Russologist nonetheless describes Russia’s eastward pivot from the mid-seventeenth century onward as leading to a “historical encounter” between the two large powers.⁹

Revolutions and the curse of ideology. At the dawn of the twentieth century, both Russia and China were ripe for social revolutions as a result of internal decay, corruption, and defeat in foreign wars. For much of the “short twentieth century,” Communism largely meant one-sided domination by the Soviet Union, which in China enjoyed unprecedented and unparalleled influence compared with any other Western power.¹⁰ In the early twentieth century, for example, the timing of the Bolsheviks’ unilateral declarations (July 25, 1919, and September 27, 1920) to end Russia’s extraterritorial rights in China were perhaps the most powerful catalyst for many young aspiring Chinese intellectuals to switch their beliefs from liberalism to Bolshevism. Both the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party were molded after the Soviet Communist Party, ideologically and organizationally. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Stalin actively manipulated Communist-Nationalist collaboration and conflicts in China’s domestic politics.

The Sino-Soviet “honeymoon” of the 1950s, though brief, turned out to be volatile. Massive Soviet input into China’s domestic organization—such as through economic and military assistance, technology transfers, top-down bureaucracies, and five-year plans—produced both friendship and friction. Despite practicing the same ideology, Moscow and Beijing actually pursued different priorities at home and abroad. Toward the late 1950s, policy

⁸ See Robert Bickers, *The Scramble for China: Foreign Devils in the Qing Empire, 1832–1914* (New York: Penguin Global, 2011).

⁹ Zhao Huasheng, “Zhonghe guanxi de moshi” [Modes of Sino-Russian Relations], in *Zhonghe guanxi de lishi yu xianshi* [Sino-Russian Relations: History and Reality], vol. 2, ed. Guan Guihai and Luan Jinghe (Beijing: Social Science Academic Press, 2009), 40.

¹⁰ The phrase “short twentieth century” was coined by the late British historian Eric J. Hobsbawm to highlight an extremely violent part of human history: the two world wars and the Cold War—all within the twentieth century and paralleling the rise and fall of the Soviet Union. See Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Michael Joseph, 1994).

disagreements between the two Communist giants became open as Moscow and Beijing accused each other of betraying Marxism. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Sino-Soviet ideological polemic assumed a military dimension when millions of forces were deployed along the seven-thousand-kilometer Sino-Soviet border after a border clash in 1969. From “honeymoon” to “divorce,” the ideological factor seemed to exaggerate the friendship during good times and amplify disagreements when things turned sour. Both phases were highly emotional, leading to a state of affairs that prevented pragmatic compromise and conflict management when needed. It is thus not surprising that the process of normalizing relations began with minimizing and neutralizing the ideological factor in bilateral relations.

De-ideologization for pragmatic coexistence. With respect to the ideological factor in bilateral relations, two distinctive stages are discernible: the de-ideologization of the 1980s and the disappearance of ideology in the 1990s. Up to the late 1980s, Beijing and Moscow gradually defused their ideological passions. Since the 1990s, both sides have departed significantly from their respective past legacies. Socialism is no longer an issue between Moscow and Beijing. Indeed, managing the transition away from the past with minimum social tension and political instability is perhaps most important for the two nations. Meanwhile, both sides carefully define the outer and inner limits of their cooperative and competitive relations, regardless of the labels applied—“friendly” (1992), “constructive” (1994), “strategic” (1996), and “comprehensive and strategic” (2012).

Given this historical trajectory, particularly in the post-Soviet period, the two powers have finally moved away from a love-hate oscillation and toward more pragmatic mutual expectations and complex reciprocity. Short of major disruptions in their domestic climates or systemic wars, Moscow and Beijing are set to coexist with one other for the long term.

Policy Implications

The strategic partnership—a league of its own? In the past 25 years the strategic partnership between Russia and China has become a highly institutionalized process providing both countries with more predictable and stable returns and assurances in a rapidly changing international environment and specifically in their important, albeit volatile, relations with

the United States.¹¹ The partnership is not problem-free, and in October 2017 Vladimir Putin even described some of the issues as “controversial” and “contentious.” But the fact that the problems are deliberated, “resolved with compromised solutions” without “driving the situation into an impasse,” is in itself a marked contrast with the highly politicized experience of the 1950–70s.¹² Xi Jinping has described Sino-Russian relations as “mature, solid, and unaffected by outside environments.”¹³

Given the largely institutionalized strategic partnership and converging ideational constructs regarding the existing international system, Beijing and Moscow may be reluctant to reciprocate any overture by Washington with the purpose of driving a wedge between them unless Washington makes explicitly clear in words and deeds that it will forever renounce its habitual interferences into other countries’ domestic affairs. This is not because China and Russia are anti-West but largely because of their own volatile and costly experiences in the twentieth century. Living with one another without sentimentality, but with sensitivity to the lessons of history and each other’s vital interests, is a tacit consensus in the psychology of many Russian and Chinese political elites.

Reluctant allies? The partnership is not a typical alliance, which requires a clearly defined third party as its target. At this point, neither China nor Russia is ready or willing to take that path. They are therefore “reluctant allies” at best. In essence, the strategic partnership has been an adaptable, dynamic, and open-ended process through which both sides manage important bilateral, regional, and global affairs. That said, it could be highly effective in synchronizing joint actions, particularly on military-security issues of mutual grave concern. One example is the joint naval transportation of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013–14.¹⁴ Another case

¹¹ There have been a growing number of intergovernmental functional committees between the two countries at various levels and in various areas, such as head of state, head of government, ministerial, regional, societal, academic, cultural, athletic, public health, and educational. The two countries have also steadily broadened and deepened their consultations and coordination in multilateral forums, either those of their own creation (e.g., Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and BRICS) or global governing bodies such as the United Nations. Military-military relations, too, have gone from the earlier arms transfers and confidence-building mechanisms along the border regions to include joint R&D and regular ground, naval, and aerospace exercises, in either bilateral or multilateral formats.

¹² Vladimir Putin, “The World of the Future: Moving through Conflict to Cooperation,” Valdai Discussion Club, Office of the President of Russia, October 19, 2017 ~ <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/55882>.

¹³ “Xi’s Moscow Visit Witnesses Stronger China-Russia Ties,” Xinhua, July 5, 2017 ~ http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-xivisitgermany/2017-07/05/content_30001609.htm.

¹⁴ See Yu Bin, “‘Western Civil War’ Déjà Vu?” *Comparative Connections* 16, no. 1 (2014): 92–97 ~ http://cc.sis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/1401qchina_russia.pdf.


is the two countries' response to the United States' deployment of missile defense in South Korea in 2017. Chinese and Russian defense agencies conducted two computerized missile defense simulations in May 2016 and December 2017 and held four joint briefings on missile defense issues in multilateral forums in twelve months.¹⁵ The potential for Russia and China to move toward a real alliance, therefore, may not be as strong or weak as it appears, depending on external circumstances, particularly their respective relations with the West.¹⁶



In actuality, the current strategic partnership has been significantly facilitated by Western policies since the late 1990s. Putin, for example, was widely expected in his first few months in the Kremlin to correct Boris Yeltsin's overly pro-China stance.¹⁷ His initial pivot to the West and deliberate distancing of Russia from China confused Beijing and delighted the West.¹⁸ In the Russian view, it was primarily NATO's eastward expansion (in 1999, 2004, 2009, and 2017), Washington's unilateral ending of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (2002), and the Iraq War (2003) that gradually and effectively ended Russia's unrequited love of the West.

A not-so-strategic triangle? The prospect of turning the strategic partnership into an alliance would mean a significant reduction of both sides' respective freedom of action. Beijing and Moscow seem to be pursuing the twin goals of maximizing their respective interests while retaining adequate flexibility and freedom of action, particularly with regard to their U.S. relations. As a result, Moscow and Beijing have not been overly sensitive to each other's positive or negative relations with Washington over delicate issues, at least not publicly. From their perspectives, the zero-sum strategic triangle that existed between the three states during the Cold War is no longer the case. Instead, a "not-so-strategic triangle," or non-zero-sum triangle, may be more desirable.¹⁹ Continuous confrontation between any

¹⁵ The four joint briefings took place in October 2016 in Beijing on the sidelines of the 7th Xiangshan Forum, March 2017 in Geneva on the sidelines of the Conference on Disarmament, April 2017 on the sidelines of the annual Moscow Conference on International Security, and October 2017 at a session of the UN General Assembly's First Committee.

¹⁶ This is borrowed and twisted from the famous remark, sometimes attributed to Otto von Bismarck, that Russia is never as strong or as weak as it appears. Cited from Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945–2006*, 10th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008), 370.

¹⁷ Yu Bin, "New Century, New Face, and China's 'Putin Puzzle,'" *Comparative Connections* 2, no. 1 (2000)  http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/0001qchina_russia.pdf.

¹⁸ Yu Bin, "Strategic Distancing...Or Else?" *Comparative Connections* 2, no. 2 (2000)  http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/0002qchina_russia.pdf; and Yu Bin, "Putin's 'Ostpolitik' and Sino-Russian Relations," *Comparative Connections* 2, no. 3 (2000)  http://csis.org/files/media/isis/pubs/0003qchina_russia.pdf.

¹⁹ Yu Bin, "The Three Players," *Harvard International Review* 26, no. 2 (2004)  <http://hir.harvard.edu/article/?a=1227>.

two of the trio is not in anyone's interest. In other words, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is transcending the conventional wisdom of the zero-sum game of geopolitics, or at least has tried to avoid it.

Back to the past and future? In a more historical sense, it can be argued that these two non-Western powers are actually returning to the core of the seventeenth-century Westphalian system of sovereignty that has been largely cast aside in the West by mainstream liberal interventionism since the end of the Cold War. Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow are also looking beyond Western realism's paradigm of the clash of civilizations.²⁰ In the age of WMDs, there is perhaps no choice for major powers other than coexisting peacefully if possible. The alternative could be much worse than the pre-Westphalia Thirty Years' War, the bloodiest single conflict in Europe until the two world wars, which unleashed the most destructive power in human history. The coexistence of civilizations, therefore, should rightly be the vision for Beijing and Moscow, as well as for the rest of the world, including the United States. ◆

²⁰ Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 3 (1993): 22–49.

A Russian Perspective on the Sino-Russian Rapprochement

Alexander Lukin

A rapprochement between Russia and China is clearly taking place today. Yet as cooperation between Moscow and Beijing has increased in recent years, significant differences have emerged between how Russian and Chinese pundits view the relationship and its prospects, on the one hand, and how observers outside the two countries perceive it, on the other.

Most U.S. and European experts who come to Moscow to study Russian policy toward China are convinced that Russians should be wary of China as posing an imminent threat. They speak of the risk of economic dependence, the threat of demographic expansion, and even a potential military threat resulting from China's increased defense spending and modernization of its army. When I point out that what they refer to as "economic domination" in the case of China's trade with Russia they call "investment and increased trade" in the case of relationships between other countries, that statistics indicate a nearly complete lack of Chinese migration to Russia, and that Canada, for example, does not consider the U.S. Army a threat because the two neighboring countries share very similar approaches to the outside world and have no intention of fighting, my Western colleagues greet me with surprise and even frank incomprehension.

This essay argues that the Sino-Russian rapprochement is a natural result of broader changes taking place in world politics, while the U.S. policy hostile to both countries has had the effect of accelerating that process. It analyzes the causes of this rapprochement, outlines the growing shared interests between Russia and China, and discusses possible changes in U.S. relations with both countries under the Trump administration.

The Causes of Sino-Russian Rapprochement

The dominance of "democratism" has caused the West, at least since the presidency of Bill Clinton, to pursue a course that is anathema to the approach of the traditional "realists"—Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger, and even Zbigniew Brzezinski—who attempted to exploit tensions between China and the Soviet Union and use one against the other. Today, democratism makes such an approach impossible because it refuses to

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encourage the authoritarian regime of either country. The adherents of this ideology generally support U.S. and European Union policy aimed at pressuring both China and Russia toward greater democratization and forcing them to abandon measures that hinder the United States and its allies from pushing this agenda. That naturally prompts Moscow and Beijing to resist by teaming up to coordinate their foreign policies. As a result, most advocates of democratization in the West simply try to turn a blind eye to the negative consequences of this policy of simultaneously pressuring Russia and China by claiming that the two countries are not in fact drawing closer or that the rapprochement is only temporary and superficial. Western observers also often exaggerate real and perceived differences between Beijing and Moscow while ignoring the similarity of their approaches.

In fact, the current Russian-Chinese rapprochement is the natural outcome of broader developments in international relations in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many in the United States and Europe were intent on achieving a system of world unity based on Western principles and values. In response, the major non-Western states began working together to create a counterweight to the preponderant influence of the West and its desire to build a unipolar world.¹ Several new non-Western centers of power came to replace what had previously been a single Soviet center of power. Although not unilaterally inimical to the West, as the Soviet Union had been, these weaker centers of power were nevertheless worried about Washington's use of pressure tactics in pursuing its narrow interests and therefore sought opportunities to coordinate efforts as a counterweight to Western influence in the world. They viewed a world unified on Western terms as a form of hegemony, a sort of restoration of the colonial system that would inevitably fail to give due consideration to their interests.

The Russian-Chinese rapprochement stems from the fact that the leadership and elite of both countries share similar views on the geopolitical situation in the world, the main trends and dangers that exist, and the favorable prospects for the relationship to develop and find expression in the emergence of a multipolar world. Russia and China, along with other such states, want to found a new international order that places them on an equal footing with the United States and its allies and does not relegate them to the status of dependents. What the West refers to as a desire by Russia and

¹ The West is understood in this essay in purely political terms as a combination of countries allied with the United States and of which the United States is an informal leader.

China to establish spheres of influence, Moscow and Beijing consider the minimum expression of their rights and interests as major world powers. In an ideal multipolar world in which everyone recognizes the rights of each center of power, Russia and China would be equidistant, figuratively speaking, not only from each other but also from all other such centers, including the United States. Russian-Chinese rapprochement would lead only to a normalization of relations, without the need for the two countries to support each other in countering the West.

However, the policy of the West aimed at preserving its monopolistic position in the world has had the effect of accelerating the rapprochement between Moscow and Beijing. Western actions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Syria, Ukraine, and the South China Sea—viewed by both Moscow and Beijing as aggressive—have consistently led to a deepening of Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation. This trend gained momentum following the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and U.S. attempts to counter Chinese influence in the South China Sea. The trend of rapid rapprochement might slow if the West were to pursue less aggressive policies. However, it will proceed regardless because, as the weaker centers of power in the emerging multipolar world, Russia and China strategically need each other more than the West needs either of them.

The Outlook for Russian-Chinese Relations

The short-term outlook for Russian-Chinese relations does not depend much on the changes in the international situation (or international events). The partnership between the two countries has developed steadily as a result of their common interests and the underlying global trend away from a bipolar world order toward a multipolar one. In fact, relations have continued to progress for more than 30 years now, despite changes in leadership, national economic models, and even political systems.

One can identify several shared interests between Russia and China. Both countries generally desire to break free of a unipolar system and transition to a multipolar world. As major countries with their own approaches to international problems, they can more freely realize their economic and security interests in a world where there is not one but several leaders, with none able to impose unilateral conditions on others.

In addition, both Russia and China wish to preserve a system of international law based on the principle of the sovereignty of states, with the UN Security Council as the highest authority. Their veto rights in the

Security Council equalize their influence with that of the West, at a time when within all other parameters they fall far short of a united West. The principle of the absolute sovereignty of states does not allow the leading center of power to impose its will on other states on matters of internal politics. Russia and China, which differ from Western states in their internal political structure, react with great caution to concepts that undermine sovereignty or justify “humanitarian intervention.”

Russia and China also share economic interests. Both countries seek to reform the international financial system—for example, by increasing the role of non-Western states in the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and widening the use of regional currencies in international trade. They, moreover, depend on each other as trade and economic partners. Since 2010, China has been Russia’s top trading partner, satisfying the market not only for consumer goods but also increasingly for machines and equipment. It is one of the top ten investors in the Russian economy. Although Russia only accounts for about 2% of China’s foreign trade, China receives goods it cannot obtain from other suppliers due to sanctions from the West, such as weapons.² Russia also provides items, such as energy resources, that China cannot otherwise obtain in sufficient quantities at acceptable prices and with maximum diversification.

In terms of political interests, the rapidly rising cooperation in border areas plays a significant role in the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East and Northeast China. Russia and China cooperate in Central Asia through the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to achieve common aims: economic development of this region, support for political stability, and maintenance of secular regimes in power. Both countries negatively react to outside advice on their internal political structure, calling this “interference in one’s internal affairs,” and also support each other in the battles against separatism and Western ideology.

Yet despite these shared political, security, and economic interests, the establishment of a formal Russian-Chinese alliance remains unlikely. Russia values its political and economic partnership with China but prefers not to tie its channels of cooperation to one country exclusively. Therefore, it will try to also maintain cooperation with the EU as far as it can. At the same time, as part of its pivot to Asia, Russia will develop multilateral cooperation with other Asian players, including those with which China

² For trade data, see Fung Business Intelligence, “China’s Trade Performance (2015),” Business Policy and City Clusters in China, February 2017 ~ https://fbicgroup.com/sites/default/files/IG_06_GDP.pdf.

has uneasy relations, such as India, Japan, Vietnam, and Indonesia. China is an important strategic partner, and precisely owing to ties with it (as with other Asian countries), Russian policies are able to be less one-sided. China, for its part, values its relationship with the United States and the EU states, with which it has close economic ties. A stable Russia, which can become an independent center of power, interests Beijing as a counterweight to its complex partner-competitor relations with the United States and Western Europe and as support for its own independent foreign policy. Yet China considers Russia, compared with the Western countries, as a friendlier but less economically significant partner. Moreover, the United States is much more important strategically for China, despite tensions between the two countries, because so much depends on the United States. Therefore, even while developing its strategic partnership with Russia, China will simultaneously strive to build mutually beneficial relations with other states, even if those states are hostile to Russia—China’s close partnership with Ukraine being one example.

Donald Trump’s rise to power and his new approach to relations with Russia and China raise questions about the prospects for a Sino-Russian rapprochement. During the campaign, Trump stated opposing goals with regard to each of the two countries, promising to improve cooperation with Russia, primarily to fight international terrorism, while promising to apply heavy pressure on China to force concessions from it on a number of issues. This approach is very deliberate and stems from the outlook of Trump and the political forces he represents. In the first decade after the end of the Cold War, both major U.S. political parties pursued the ideology of “democratization”—the global spread of U.S. values through diplomatic and political programs abroad. Trump and his supporters now hold that the main objective is just the opposite: to improve the standard of living and the economy in the United States and to force the whole world to either serve that purpose or stay out of the way. The Trump administration’s downplaying of democracy promotion could have brought positive changes in U.S. relations with Russia and to a lesser extent with China, but the U.S. Congress has constrained the administration’s ability to implement these ideas.

Originally, the Trump administration considered Islamist terrorism the primary external threat to the United States. It argued that radical Islamists not only threaten U.S. interests abroad but also infiltrate U.S. territory under the guise of refugees and migrants to undermine the country from within. From this perspective, it is logical that Russia, which is not a serious


economic rival of the United States but possesses considerable military might, could prove a useful ally in the fight against Islamism. Feuding with Russia is pointless: as Trump has said, it makes more sense to mend fences with Moscow.

However, Trump's campaign promises have been met with resistance from U.S. policymakers and the Washington elite. Trump has had to soften his position on many fronts, including his approach to Russia and China. Not only has cooperation between the United States and Russia not improved, but a serious break between the United States and China is also unlikely. It remains unclear whether Trump can make any fundamental changes to Washington's relationship with Beijing. China, with its economic might, does present a challenge to the United States. Because the interconnections between the Chinese and U.S. economies run so deep, any drastic moves could prove disadvantageous and injurious to both—something the authorities in Beijing and Washington will have to keep in mind. China, at least, would go to great lengths to avoid a conflict with the United States, with the possible exception of sovereignty disputes in the Taiwan Strait or the South China Sea. The numerous articles critical of Trump published by the tabloids controlled by the Chinese Communist Party, such as the *Global Times*, were probably intended more as a warning, a kind of initial negotiating position, than an indication of possible political moves by the Chinese leadership. (In the same way, Trump's questioning of the United States' long-held "one-China" policy was most likely a negotiating position and not an expression of actual policy.)

But even if relations were to improve considerably between Moscow and Washington and the confrontation between China and the United States were to deepen, it would have little influence on Russian-Chinese relations overall. Of course, Moscow would not want to find itself in a position of having to choose between the two countries, but if forced, it would unquestionably choose China.

One thing is certain: anyone in Washington who thinks that the United States can use Russia as a pawn in its confrontation with China is sorely mistaken. Russia's pivot to Asia, which is the result of its actual interests as well as a reaction to the inimical attitude of the West, is largely irreversible. China extended support to Russia at a difficult time by expanding trade and economic cooperation and expressing understanding of its approach toward the crisis in Ukraine (although not fully approving of Russia's actions). Moscow realizes that, despite a number of problems, Beijing is a more reliable partner than the West. This is primarily because Beijing, like

Moscow, long ago abandoned all ideological goals: China is not attempting to impose Communism or Confucianism on Russia. Whatever challenge China might pose for Russia, it is not an existential threat, unlike that posed by the West prior to Trump's election. For this reason, Russia will never align itself with the United States against China. In fact, Beijing would even look favorably at a certain warming of relations between Moscow and Washington. Both Russia and China believe that the "three countries should work with rather than against each other" and "should pursue win-win rather than zero-sum outcomes."³ However, Russia's and China's understanding of win-win cooperation and their vision of the future world are very different from that of the United States.

From this standpoint, it would make more sense to search for new general principles and rules of world order that would suit all countries than for the United States to continue attempting to use Russia and China against each other. Current U.S. policy takes the contradictory approach of exerting pressure on both countries, surrounding them with military bases, and bolstering inimical military alliances with their neighbors, while at the same time trying to reach separate agreements with each country on specific issues. Such new principles of world order would also serve to restrain emerging powers such as Russia and China that increasingly act at their own discretion in the absence of such rules. However, that would require the United States and its allies to relinquish the monopoly on interpreting international law to which they have become accustomed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although Western elites will find this prospect extremely objectionable, the West must inevitably relinquish that dominant role because its influence in world politics is clearly decreasing, while that of other players is growing. 

³ "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 8, 2017.  http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1444204.shtml.

Sino-Russian Coordination in Central Asia and Implications for U.S. and Japanese Policies

Tomohiko Uyama

The decline of U.S. power, often noted on the global stage in recent years, has been evident in Central Asia for over a decade. U.S. diplomacy toward this region has not been especially successful, even in earlier years. The United States has not been able to turn Central Asian countries' multi-vector diplomacy and initial admiration of the West into favorable relationships with these countries, whereas Russia and China have maintained and expanded their influence. The initiation of construction on non-Russian routes for Caspian oil and gas pipelines in the late 1990s and the opening of U.S. military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 2001 were seen as U.S. successes, but these victories proved illusory and short-lived. The Uzbek and Kyrgyz governments decided to close the bases in 2005 and 2014, respectively. At the same time, China increasingly began to import Central Asian oil and gas, while Russia continues to wield political influence over the region. As Gallup and other opinion polls show, Central Asia is the most pro-Russian and one of the least pro-Western regions in the world.¹ It is also moderately pro-Chinese. A large number of Central Asians share many Russians' view of the West as morally corrupt and conspiring to rule the world,² and the unilateral actions by the United States and NATO to topple the regimes of some countries in the Middle East made this view even more plausible.

It is evident that the aggressive behavior of Russia and China, including in Crimea, the Donbas, and the South and East China Seas, poses threats to their neighbors in particular and the world order in general. Neighboring Russia and China, Central Asia is a target of their expanding influence, and some people in the region are worried about the potential threat to the

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¹ "Rating World Leaders: 2016," Gallup, October 12, 2016 ~ <http://news.gallup.com/reports/196373/rating-world-leaders-2016.aspx>.

² One can often hear such opinions in private conversations with Central Asian peoples. Particularly in Kyrgyzstan, where freedom of speech is most developed and U.S.-funded NGOs are most active, even public media organizations distribute conspiracy theories accusing the United States of orchestrating revolutions and terrorist activities to sow chaos in various parts of the world. See Noah Tucker, "Public and State Responses to ISIS Messaging: Kyrgyzstan," in *Kyrgyzstan: Political Pluralism and Economic Challenges*, ed. Marlene Laruelle (Washington, D.C.: George Washington University, Central Asia Program, 2017), 76–82.

sovereignty of the Central Asian countries. On the other hand, in the eyes of countries not aligned with the United States, unilateral U.S. behavior could pose an equal or even heightened threat, as it can target any part of the world. U.S. unilateralism is so unpopular that Russia and China are often considered to be relatively benign great powers.

This essay will examine Russia's and China's activities in Central Asia and assess the implications for U.S. and Japanese interests. The first section will assess Russia's and China's respective roles in the region. The second section will then discuss U.S. and Japanese relations with the Central Asian states and consider options for dealing with Russian and Chinese influence, even possibly by cooperating with those countries on economic and security initiatives.

Central Asia as a Showcase of Russian and Chinese Soft Power

Russia and Central Asia are connected with each other by the Russian language and the common history of the tsarist and Soviet periods. Russian media is popular in Central Asia and conveys Russia's worldview to the region. In poorer countries such as Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, a large number of migrant workers are drawn to Russia, reinforcing economic ties. In short, Russia has tremendous soft power in Central Asia. When the Ukrainian crisis occurred, some Central Asians sympathized with Ukraine, regarding Russian imperialism as a common enemy, but even more people sympathized with Russia, thinking that both Russia and Central Asia are victims of Western dominance of the world.³

China is less familiar to Central Asians and perceptions of the country are more ambivalent, but its economic power is very attractive. Moreover, China has acquired a reputation for extensively engaging in economic cooperation in a quick and flexible manner without meddling in political affairs. Projects related to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are seen as opportunities for Central Asian countries to improve infrastructure and expand their external economic activities.

One of the "merits" of Russia and China for Central Asian political leaders is authoritarianism. Not only can organizations such as the Shanghai

³ A number of opinion polls were conducted on Central Asian attitudes toward the Ukrainian crisis. For example, in an April 2014 poll conducted by Strategy, a Kazakhstani center for sociological and political research, 62% supported the Russian position, while only 5% supported Ukraine. "Mneniye Kazakhstantsev ob oslozhnenii Rossiysko-Ukrainskikh otnosheniy izuchili sotsiologi" [The Opinion of Kazakhstanis on the Complication of Russian-Ukrainian Relations Studied by Sociologists], *Tengri News*, April 22, 2014 ~ https://tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/mnenie-kazhantsev-oslojnenii-rossiysko-ukrainskih-254080.

Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) function as clubs of authoritarian states,⁴ but the fact that China and Russia have risen under authoritarian regimes emboldens Central Asian politicians and helps them reject criticism from domestic opposition and the West.

Russia and China typically engage Central Asia separately. Cooperation between the two countries is carried out in the framework of the SCO, but their individual engagement is much more active. Their relations in Central Asia would be better described as a division of labor than an active collaboration.⁵ Russia is influential in the political and military spheres as well as in organizations promoting regional cooperation, epitomized by the EEU. The common language, political culture, and deep personal connections between the elites enable Russia to exert unrivaled influence on the politics of Central Asian countries. China, for its part, wields influence through trade, investment, and infrastructure building.

Given the differences in ability and interests between the two countries, this division of labor is an effective form of coordination in preventing third countries from gaining serious power in Central Asia. Russia does what China cannot do, and China does what Russia cannot do. In particular, the absence of Russian attempts at hindering China's economic activities in this former Soviet region is remarkable. Some observers have asserted for several years that Russia is annoyed by China's increasing role and that confrontation between them is inevitable, but this is not happening. Although more active Russian-Chinese cooperation, such as linking the EEU and BRI, largely still exists only on paper, it does not pose a serious problem to the two countries.

The Central Asian states mostly benefit from their relations with Russia and China, both economically and in terms of security. But their overreliance on these larger neighbors can be dangerous. Kyrgyzstan's debt to China is around \$1.64 billion (August 2017), and Tajikistan's is around \$1.20 billion (December 2016), amounts that will be difficult to repay.⁶ Likewise, Central Asian countries' dependence on Russia for security restricts their own diplomatic options, as shown by their awkward reaction

⁴ Alexander Cooley, "Authoritarianism Goes Global: Countering Democratic Norms," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 3 (2015): 49–63.

⁵ Daniyar Kosnazarov, "Sino-Russian 'Division of Labor': Keeping Central Asia Stable?" *Silk Road Reporters*, February 16, 2015.

⁶ Ministry of Finance (Kyrgyzstan), "Struktura gosdolga KR po sostoyaniyu na 31 Avgusta 2017 g." [Structure of State Debt of the KR as of August 31, 2017], October 6, 2017 ~ <http://www.minfin.kg/ru/novosti/novosti/struktura-gosdolga-kr-po-sostoyaniyu-na-31-avgusta.html>; and Ministry of Finance (Tajikistan), *Otchet o sostoyanii gosudarstvennogo dolga na 2016 god* [State Debt Report for 2016] (Dushanbe, 2016) ~ http://minfin.tj/downloads/otchet_2016.pdf.

to the annexation of Crimea despite their usual sensitivity to issues of sovereignty and territorial integration.

Implications for the United States and Japan

The expanding influence of Russia and China in Central Asia contrasts sharply with the United States' diminishing role in the region. U.S. policy has miscalculated on several fronts. First, geography still matters. For Central Asians, Russia and China are giant and more or less familiar neighbors who must always be reckoned with, while the United States and other developed countries are far away and less understood. As was shown by the Bush administration's operations in Afghanistan, Iraq, and surrounding regions, including Central Asia, the idea that the United States can exert its power globally irrespective of distance has proved untrue. Instead of devising a more sophisticated strategy, the Obama administration lowered the priority of Central Asia in U.S. foreign policy, further damaging U.S. credibility there. The Trump administration seems even less interested in the region.

Second, the condescending attitude of the West has evoked antipathy. In particular, Central Asians discern in the Western approach to democratization a double standard, dependent on the geopolitical and economic interests of the West. Although the Central Asian populaces do not always enthusiastically support their leaders, Western criticism of their countries' lack of democracy offends national pride and threatens sovereignty. Even in relatively democratic Kyrgyzstan, people have reacted harshly to Western criticism of human rights conditions and ethnic policies, such as the repression of ethnic Uzbek leaders after the violent clash between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country in 2010.

Third, the United States has put too much emphasis on Afghanistan since 2001, making its Central Asia policy dependent on Afghan issues. This has made unclear what the United States wants to achieve in Central Asia itself, and the protracted, unresolved conflict in Afghanistan has discredited the United States and NATO in the eyes of Central Asians. As U.S. interests in Afghanistan have waned, the United States' attention to the region has also decreased.

An interesting case that contrasts with the United States is Japan's policy toward Central Asia. Accentuating economic and technical aid and cultural exchanges, Japan has been engaging Central Asia constantly, with

modest success.⁷ Although its presence in this region is far from strong, and Central Asian political leaders often complain that the scale of Japanese investment is too small, especially compared with Chinese investment, Japan has nonetheless succeeded in establishing a positive image for itself and has maintained friendlier relations with regional states than most other developed countries have.

The West and Japan must be united and stand firm against threats posed by Russia and China on territorial and security issues, but at the same time they must stop demonizing these countries on other issues. Russia and China feel marginalized in the Western-dominated world, and more than a few people in Central Asia share this feeling. The United States and Japan must show respect for their potential and encourage their participation in developing the global economy and resolving conflicts in regions where Moscow and Beijing do not pursue narrowly self-interested goals.


Although democratization around the world, including in Russia and China, remains an important goal, directly criticizing the political leaders and systems of specific countries is often counterproductive because it hurts national pride. Emphasis must be placed on helping democratizing countries, such as Ukraine, rather than on criticizing nondemocratic ones. Even more important is restoring the moral authority of the West and developed countries, because distrust in them produces distrust in liberal democracy. It is crucial that the United States and other developed states make their internal democratic systems function well and demonstrate that their foreign policies are just and fair. They must prove that they are not depraved, nor religiously and racially prejudiced, and are more capable than Russia and China of constructing a fair and prosperous world.

With regard to Central Asia, some U.S. observers may dismiss this region's importance for the United States. But the reasons for Central Asians' disillusionment are similar to other non-Western (especially Muslim) countries, and the United States' improvement of relations with Central Asia could be a touchstone for recovering its popularity in the world. Therefore, the United States first should make clear that it wants to develop relationships with Central Asian countries not merely as neighbors to Afghanistan, nor as a field for rivalry with Russia and China, but because it attaches special importance and respect to them.

⁷ Christopher Len, Tomohiko Uyama, and Hirose Tetsuya, eds., *Japan's Silk Road Diplomacy: Paving the Road Ahead* (Washington, D.C.: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2008).

Second, the United States and Japan need to recognize some of the benefits that Russia and China have brought to Central Asia. Instead of downplaying Russian and Chinese initiatives, U.S. and Japanese leaders should work to make Central Asia an area for cooperation between Russia, China, the United States, Japan, and the European Union on the common goals of prosperity and security. When direct cooperation with Russia and China is difficult, international organizations can help. Japan, for example, has been cooperating with China through the Asian Development Bank on improving transportation infrastructure in Central Asia for a long time.

Third, the United States and Japan can contribute to alleviating the Central Asian countries' overreliance on Russia and China. Japan should enhance trade and investment. The United States should build an international security regime to stabilize Afghanistan and the surrounding region, thus securing the cooperation of Russia and China in resolving the Afghan problem and at the same time restraining their excessive influence on Central Asian security. One of the urgent tasks for the United States and Japan is either to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or to work out a scheme of collaboration with it. This could enable the United States and Japan to more closely monitor China's financial activities in Central Asia and beyond. Developed countries' engagement with BRI could also be useful to make Chinese foreign economic activities comply with international rules and standards. Japanese interest in cooperating with BRI, visible in government and business circles since the summer of 2017, is welcome.

In sum, the United States and Japan need to recognize that Russia and China are prime partners of Central Asian countries, but this reality should not serve as a pretext for abandoning the region. The United States and Japan must prove that they are also useful and indispensable partners, capable of both cooperating with and restraining Russia and China when necessary. 

Sino-Russian Cooperation from the Perspective of the U.S.-Japan Alliance

Hiroshi Yamazoe

This essay assesses the implications of relations between China and Russia for the U.S.-Japan alliance, taking into consideration the impact of the Sino-Russian partnership as well as the challenges that each country poses. Differences in interests and the nonbinding nature of the strategic partnership currently prevent the relationship from becoming a formal alliance. Still, China and Russia have overlapping interests and their cooperation is growing, a trend that is unlikely to be slowed by the policies of other states.

This essay imagines the impact of the partnership on the U.S.-Japan alliance in three scenarios in order to better understand what situations the United States and Japan want to avoid. The general finding is that, while the United States needs a long-term strategy for countering Russian challenges in limited areas, the U.S.-Japan alliance should develop even longer-term and more comprehensive efforts to counter China's challenges without expecting a quick victory or exacerbating Sino-Russian collaboration.

The Current Status of the Sino-Russian Relationship: Nonbinding Cooperation

From the viewpoint of the U.S.-Japan alliance, Sino-Russian cooperation in the military sphere is of key concern. Russia's transfer of military hardware aids China's military buildup (Su-35 fighters and S-400 surface-to-air missiles are recent examples). Chinese capabilities have been growing on their own, but some dimensions (such as jet engines) still depend on Russia and benefit greatly from Russian transfers. Meanwhile, Sino-Russian naval exercises have been developing in sophistication and political messaging. However, the experience that the two countries gain jointly has only slightly increased the vast experience each has been acquiring individually. The exercises in the Baltic Sea in July 2017 and around Vladivostok and Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk in September 2017

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NOTE ~ The views expressed here are those of the author alone and do not represent the views of the Japanese government, NIDS, or any other organization.

included new elements such as submarine rescue and passage through the Sea of Okhotsk. Still, Ethan Meick assesses that Sino-Russian military-to-military cooperation, though achieving a higher level, has not yet developed into a comprehensive, alliance-like security relationship.¹

What concrete joint actions by China and Russia, then, could realistically undermine the U.S.-Japan alliance? Sino-Russian joint opposition to U.S. initiatives in missile defense has gained significant attention, but this opposition will not deter the United States and its allies. Debates in South Korea or Japan are not changed by Russia aligning itself with China against missile defense programs in Asia. Moreover, other states are not joining the Sino-Russian chorus against the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile system. Finally, China never hesitated to criticize THAAD from the outset, even without Russia also objecting, just as Russia does not hesitate to criticize NATO's missile defense program absent China's input.

Other differences concerning international norms also distinguish the two countries. Russia is more assertive in attempting to establish international norms on information space. Meanwhile, since 1972, it has continued to observe the maritime safety customs of the Incidents at Sea Agreement, despite tensions with U.S. forces in Europe, and this shared U.S.-Russian custom has implications for China's behavior in maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas.² In 2004, Russia also joined the Proliferation Security Initiative, an effort that China does not support.

In the context of both the advances in Sino-Russian cooperation and these differences in each country's individual positions, one other important feature of the strategic partnership is its nonbinding nature. This relationship is different from an alliance in which allies commit to each other's defense in the event of a contingency. Moreover, as one expert points out, unlike balancing or bandwagoning, strategic partnerships do not prevent states from pursuing similar partnerships with others.³ One can even argue that Russia and China cooperate because of mutual mistrust. The 2008 resolution of their border demarcation, for instance, was

¹ Ethan Meick, "China-Russia Military-to-Military Relations: Moving toward a Higher Level of Cooperation," U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, March, 20, 2017.

² Igor Denisov suggests that China's stance runs contrary to Russia's adherence to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). See, for example, Lora Saalman, ed., "China-Russia Relations and Regional Dynamics," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2017, 54.

³ Vidya Nadkarni, *Strategic Partnerships in Asia: Balancing without Alliances* (London: Routledge, 2010), 45.

far less costly than the kinds of military confrontations they experienced during the Cold War era.⁴ In today's maritime domain, Russia could choose to support some of China's claims, but it does not want to sacrifice flexibility by consistently adhering to China's position. Russia is unwilling to involve China in talks with Japan over the Kuril Islands (or what Japan calls the Northern Territories), just as China has no intention of revising Mao Zedong's support for Japan's claim in that dispute. China, moreover, elects not to support Russia's position concerning Crimea or other parts of Ukraine and thus provoke European countries.

This status of Sino-Russian relations is not the most favorable for Japan, yet Japan still retains ties with Russia to preserve strategic flexibility and prevent Russian overdependence on China. In fact, Japan has maintained a consistent position on international norms in its engagements with Russia, including during the 2016 talks between Shinzo Abe and Vladimir Putin. The institutions of the U.S.-Japan alliance are strong and are not undermined by Japan's position toward Russia. Whereas U.S. foreign policy is focused on countering Russian activities in Europe, the United States can maintain a relatively cooperative stance toward Russia in the Arctic and Pacific—essentially identical to Japan's position.⁵

There is thus no urgency for the U.S.-Japan alliance to counter Sino-Russian joint actions, nor can Russia be expected to balance against China anytime soon. However, we should always be aware of the possibility for a major change in the nature of diplomatic relations. The next section considers three scenarios that, though low-probability, would produce undesirable outcomes for the U.S.-Japan alliance and regional stability more broadly.

Scenarios for the Sino-Russian Partnership

Scenario 1: Russia offers ad hoc support to China within the current limits of cooperation. This scenario considers the possibility of minor troubles even under current conditions wherein China and Russia avoid coordinated action that binds either country's position. China's priority regions are the Korean Peninsula, the East China Sea, the South China Sea, and the waters beyond them in the Pacific, whereas Russia prioritizes the

⁴ Hiroshi Yamazoe, "Russia's Security Relations with China: Less Future Risks, More Practical Benefits," *Russian and East European Studies*, no. 40 (2011): 79–90.


⁵ For the U.S.-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, see Andrey Kortunov and Olga Oliker, eds., *A Roadmap for U.S.-Russia Relations* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), chap. 3.

former Soviet space, Europe, the Middle East, the Sea of Okhotsk, and the Arctic Ocean. Chinese and Russian actions regularly overlap only around islands in the East China Sea. Chinese vessels try to undermine Japan's effective control over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and the Japan Coast Guard and Self-Defense Forces are frequently obliged to respond. Japan Air Self-Defense Force scrambles from April 2016 to March 2017 in response to Chinese and Russian aircraft numbered 851 and 301, respectively. While the number of scrambles in response to Russian flights has remained fairly consistent since 2012, the number of responses to Chinese activities has increased markedly in this time period by over 500.⁶

There were two curious cases of Russian actions in the East China Sea in 2016 (but not in 2017): in June, Russian vessels approached the Senkaku Islands with the Chinese navy following, and in November a Russian helicopter appeared near the islands. If Russia wanted to, it could provoke Japan by acting simultaneously with China on a regular basis, thus straining Japan's capacity to respond to daily and increasing Chinese activities. This would not mean that Russia wishes to assume constant political involvement in Sino-Japanese tensions, nor that China has invited Russia to do so. Instead, Russia may temporarily exploit these tensions and subsequently return to its normal neutrality. Indeed, if Russian relations with Japan were worse and Russia had less incentive to keep Japan interested in economic cooperation, then the likelihood of Russian pressure on Japan and coordination with China for this purpose would be higher.

Scenario 2: Russia switches from a nonbinding partnership to fixed support for China. Russia currently tries to avoid solely collaborating with or committing to China's positions because it still hopes for a rapprochement with the United States and other players should circumstances eventually permit. If Russia were to give up this hope, it might decide to form a bloc with China to aggressively counter the more dangerous U.S. enemy.

That could occur if U.S.-Russia tensions were to expand from Europe, North America, and the Middle East to affect other aspects of their relationship. For example, a series of skirmishes and retaliations at sea might compel the United States to treat Russia as a violator of maritime security norms. In this scenario, Russia would have less incentive to sustain these norms and more motivation to support China's position

⁶ A jump in the number of scrambles in response to Russian flights occurred in 2014 with 473 that year. For data, as well as information on flight routes, see "Statistics on Scrambles through Fiscal Year 2016," Ministry of Defense (Japan), Press Release, April 13, 2017  http://www.mod.go.jp/js/Press/press2017/press_pdf/p20170413_02.pdf.

in maritime disputes. Another flashpoint could be the Russian Far East. Currently the Russian military is trying to improve its defense capabilities to protect the Sea of Okhotsk, yet it has not achieved the capacity to repel imminent U.S. offensives. If the United States faced serious obstacles from Russia in its operations concerning North Korea or China, and found it necessary to prepare for an all-front escalation contingency against Russia, then the U.S.-Japan alliance would be deployed to the Russian Far East theater, and Russia would find it difficult to sustain operations against the alliance without support from China.

If Russia were to face such a threat from the alliance, it could propose a simultaneous military maneuver with China to undermine U.S.-Japan positions—such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea—in return for Chinese military support or pressure against states sanctioning Russia. China would gain more know-how and military experience from such cooperation with Russia, while Russia would surrender its advantage and limit its ability to prepare for a future clash with China. In these circumstances, both China and Russia would take assertive actions to jointly disturb the operations of the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Scenario 3: The United States retreats, Russia grows, and China assumes prominence over the long term. This more hypothetical scenario assumes that the United States' commitment to alliances decreases and imagines a very different international order from the current U.S.-led one. In this scenario, Russia would exercise greater influence in Europe at the expense of Western institutions. Although a great-power clash in Europe would remain unlikely, Ukraine would be more dependent on Moscow, and the three Baltic states (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) would formally switch from being full members of NATO to special partners under a fragile NATO-Russia guarantee of their neutrality. NATO's shrunken membership would reduce it to a collective defense body whose security is guaranteed by Germany and France rather than the United States. Russia would feel existentially more comfortable, enjoying increased influence in global affairs and a decreased sense of encirclement. Europe would live under a fragile peace, but one less dangerous than in any year before 1990 because Russia's drive for revisionism would have been weakened and made more complicated by NATO and the neutral states.

In East Asia the situation would be more serious. North Korea would command the capability to strike U.S. facilities and population centers, yet it would not cease its provocations against South Korea. China would possess even greater economic and military power. Benefiting from

favorable conditions for trade, China would not have suffered a major direct military clash with other states. To the contrary, an increasing number of states would now be heavily dependent on its goodwill and subject to its arbitrary decisions in the case of disputes. Russia would begin to suffer from Chinese economic dominance in its eastern territory and would no longer need a formidable China to resist retreating U.S. power. South Korea, due to dependence on China, would be forced to develop a more delicate and complicated foreign policy. In this era, the U.S.-Japan alliance might appear more vulnerable than it really is. Yet still unable to accept China's dominance, Japan would pursue alternative diplomatic initiatives, such as stronger ties with India and potentially Russia, in an effort to supplement the U.S.-Japan alliance.

Peace in East Asia may endure in this scenario, but the characteristics of China and the United States would make numerous situations quite dangerous. The United States would retreat from its commitments in Europe and the Middle East but remain engaged in the Pacific. Dominance in maritime trade and navigation would be highly important. Nevertheless, based on the U.S. retreat elsewhere, it might appear that the United States is also retreating from Japan. The Chinese leadership, now possessing greater capabilities, might then prioritize grand ideas for the rejuvenation of its civilization and unknowingly misread U.S. resolve in the maritime domain, heightening the risk of escalation. To avoid misperceptions and misjudgments, the U.S.-Japan alliance would need to send clear messages of resolve through proportionate military development and activities sufficient to prove, beyond doubt, that both the United States and Japan would be willing to assume the costs and risks of protecting their mutual interests.

Implications

These three undesirable scenarios have implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance. First, countermeasures against Russia should take care not to conflate the U.S.-Russia rivalry in Eastern Europe with the challenges posed by China. Even if Russia were to attain a change in the status quo there, China still poses more serious problems as a rising power and requires more resources from the U.S.-Japan alliance. The United States and Japan should not make the situation worse by motivating China and Russia to join forces—even though their existing behavior continues to necessitate U.S. countermeasures. Given current conditions and the nature of the Sino-Russian partnership, the United States and Japan cannot expect to put

an end to the two powers' cooperation, let alone reverse their alignment. Nevertheless, the alliance can adopt countermeasures that do not drive them closer together.

While the challenges posed by Russia in Europe can be countered by the powers there, Japan can also contribute to a stable future along with the existing norms. For example, the United States and Japan should support Ukraine to establish a successful society, but not in a manner that advocates permanent detachment from Russia.⁷ Russian participation in positive dialogues, such as military-to-military contacts and nonproliferation, should be continued and encouraged. Negative effects by Russian actions in the Asia-Pacific are still limited, and the U.S.-Japan alliance should not take an offensive posture into the Russian Far East or the Arctic region unless Russia becomes involved in military complications over China or North Korea. As far as problems with Russia are concerned, the West is more than capable of playing this protracted and somewhat familiar game.

The game of managing challenges associated with China's rise is much less familiar, and much more demanding. Playing it well will require the allocation of immense resources and sophisticated long-term planning. Of course, China's positive commitment to trade within the existing norms supported by the United States should be encouraged. At the same time, however, the U.S.-Japan alliance needs to counter China's actions in the long term if the country intensifies dangerous attempts to challenge freedom of navigation not only in the South China Sea but in the wider Indo-Pacific as well. With Xi Jinping's increasingly ambitious "dream," China will seek to extract gains from its international position whenever possible. Insufficient messaging by the U.S.-Japan alliance to counter these ambitions might result in Chinese miscalculation, leading to severely unfortunate consequences for China, the United States, Japan, and the entire region. ◆

⁷ In this direction, Japan has been implementing an assistance program in Ukraine providing \$1.86 billion. Embassy of Japan in Ukraine, "Japan's Assistance to Ukraine," November 14, 2017 ~ http://www.ua.emb-japan.go.jp/itpr_en/en_oda.html.

America's Bleak View of Russia-China Relations

Robert Sutter

The partnership between Russia and China has matured and broadened since the Cold War, and it has strengthened significantly in the last decade. The dispositions of President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping support forecasts of closer relations over the next five years and probably beyond. The momentum is based on (1) common objectives, (2) perceived Russian and Chinese vulnerabilities in the face of U.S. and Western pressures, and (3) perceived opportunities for the two powers to expand their influence at the expense of U.S. and allied leaders, who are seen as cautious, distracted, and in decline.

One hundred leading U.S. specialists on Russia and China participating in the NBR project “Strategic Implications of Russia-China Relations” are in broad agreement on the causes of the challenges that Russia and China pose to the United States.¹ They agree that Sino-Russian relations increasingly undermine U.S. interests and that past views of the relationship as an “axis of convenience” with little significance for the United States no longer hold. While some see a de facto alliance, others discern a more contingent relationship. All favor broadly strengthening U.S. economic, diplomatic, and military might to change the prevailing international balance of power in ways that improve the U.S. position in the face of opposition by Russia and China. In terms of tactics, the specialists vary in the mix of incentives and disincentives—so-called carrots and sticks—that they suggest employing to deal with this challenge. Notably, some seek advantage in improving U.S.

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¹ Now entering its second year, the project has involved 30 commissioned papers, formal presentations at three workshops, and one public panel discussion by leading specialists in the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and Europe. Additionally, 20 in-depth private interviews and consultations with 40 specialists inside and outside the U.S. government were conducted by the principal investigator, some project participants, and staff from the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR). The specialists participating in the workshops from Japan, South Korea, and Europe generally agreed with the negative findings for U.S. interests and the need for strengthening the United States. Russian and Chinese specialists disagreed. The project's publications thus far include Michael S. Chase, Evan S. Medeiros, J. Stapleton Roy, Eugene Rumer, Robert Sutter, and Richard Weitz, “Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines,” NBR, Special Report, no. 66, July 2017 ~ <http://www.nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=349>; and Shoichi Itoh, Ken Jimbo, Michito Tsuruoka, and Michael Yahuda, “Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente,” NBR, Special Report, no. 64 ~ <http://www.nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=34>.

relations with Russia to counter the much more powerful China, while others see major disadvantages in overtures to Moscow.

This essay begins with an examination of the causes and drivers of the closer Russia-China relations that have emerged in the last decade. It then analyzes the roadblocks, or “brakes,” that will slow the developing relationship, in particular identifying how the two countries diverge on many of their most important foreign relationships. The next section studies the strategic consequences of tighter Sino-Russian cooperation for U.S. interests. The final section identifies policy options and provides an outlook for 2018.

The Causes and Drivers of the Sino-Russian Relationship

Counterbalancing U.S. global influence and revising the international order. Russian and Chinese interests converge most prominently on their mutual desire to serve as a counterweight to perceived U.S. preponderant influence. China sees Russia as a useful counterbalance to constrain and weaken U.S. power, and Russia values Sino-Russian cooperation for the same reason. Both seek greater dominance in their respective regions, and the United States stands in the way.

Countering perceived U.S. promotion of democracy. The governments in Moscow and Beijing feel vulnerable and sometimes threatened in the face of U.S. promotion of human rights and democracy, motivating closer cooperation in response. Both states in theory support a doctrine of noninterference in the internal affairs of other states.

Opposing U.S. military advances in areas important to Russia and China. Both countries perceive the United States as encroaching on areas of strategic interest. Targets here include opposition to U.S. missile defense systems, U.S. military reconnaissance along the Russian and Chinese borders, and U.S. long-range strike capabilities.

Opposing U.S. policies on space and cyberspace security. China and Russia work together to influence rules and norms for outer space and cyberspace to their advantage at the United States’ expense.

Sharing a strongly engrained common identity and strategic culture. Moscow and Beijing (and Presidents Putin and Xi) share a negative view of the intentions of the United States and its allies that reinforces cooperation against perceived outside threats. This view colors how both leaders perceive global affairs and the international order.

Selling and developing advanced weapons and military technology, and cooperating on other defense activities. Sino-Russian national security collaboration includes arms sales, defense dialogues, and joint exercises. These influence third countries and seek to change the balance of power to the disadvantage of the United States.

Linking trade and investment. Russia has mitigated Western sanctions with Chinese purchases of Russian oil and gas, while China also supplies capital. China has likewise looked to Russia to diversify and secure its energy supplies.

The Brakes on Closer Sino-Russian Relations

Economic asymmetry and longer-term military and political implications. Russia increasingly plays the role of a dependent junior partner. Moscow accommodates China's economic dominance and greater overall influence in key areas along Russia's periphery in Mongolia and Central Asia. These trends jeopardize Russian influence and belie Russia's continued strong drive for status as an international great power.

Asymmetrical tools of power for advancing national interests. Russia has a limited tool kit for exerting international influence. Though the country possesses nuclear weapons, military power, and the means for cyber operations, covert operations, and intelligence in nearby areas, these tools are juxtaposed with large economic and demographic weaknesses and the absence of compelling soft power. China features the full range of international security, economic, and diplomatic tools, which are growing rapidly. Unlike Russia, China has an enormous stake in and is much more integrated with the world economy. It favors global stability that supports development. Beijing seeks a gradual erosion of the U.S.-led international order while continuing to benefit greatly from various aspects of that order.

Limits on arms sales and defense cooperation. As China's military modernization has taken shape, Russia has less to offer the country as a source of advanced military hardware. Moscow also restricts sales of some advanced weapons that Beijing might use to threaten Russia.

History, distrust, and divergence regarding the Russia-China-U.S. triangle. Both Moscow and Beijing are familiar with and influenced by the history of duplicity and distrust that characterized their often confrontational relationship in the past and their respective dealings with the United States aimed against one another.

Divergence on foreign relations. Russia and China diverge in their policy approaches to many important countries in the region. China supports Russia in its periodic dramatic shows of force to advance its interests at U.S. expense, but it also seeks a stable working relationship with the United States. Beijing does not want to be seen as an adversarial revisionist power and formally eschews an alliance with Moscow. Possible moves by the Trump administration to ease tension with Putin's government could prompt Chinese concerns about whether Putin might shift Russian policy closer to the United States, negatively affecting Chinese interests.

In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe continues his strong efforts to improve relations with Russia. This raises the possibility that Moscow may be persuaded to improve relations with Tokyo, countering China's hard line against Japan. Elsewhere in East Asia, North Korea, Taiwan, and the South China Sea are more important for China than for Russia. Russia's involvement in North Korea may complicate China's policy. On the other hand, Russian demonstrations of support for Chinese interests regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan through rhetoric and military exercises mirror Chinese posturing in support of Russian actions in Syria. Such posturing, however, underlines the two countries' continued ambivalence about supporting each other with binding commitments. Russia also has close relations with India and Vietnam, including the large-scale provision of military equipment to help secure them against China's rise.

In Central Asia, both sides have failed to effectively coordinate their economic strategies. China has much more to offer the region and has gained political influence through its Belt and Road Initiative. A looming question, and a potential source of tension, is whether China's growing economic role will inevitably lead to a more significant security role, and if so, how Russia will respond. Farther west and southwest in Europe and the Middle East, China's ever-growing interest in the economic penetration of Europe and the Middle East requires stability that is challenged by Russian assertiveness, potentially heightening frictions between the two sides going forward.

The Strategic Consequences of Sino-Russian Cooperation

The drivers of Russia-China cooperation are accelerating the bilateral relationship beyond the capacity of the brakes at the United States' expense. The influence of U.S. policy on key areas of cooperation—notably sales of advanced weapons, energy-related trade and investment, and cooperation

in the United Nations and elsewhere against various Western initiatives—is low. Preoccupied with troubles at home and abroad, U.S. and allied leaders are creating a balance of international power that favors further advances and challenges from a rising China and resurgent Russia, both of which are averse to the U.S.-backed international order.

Today, Russia and China pose increasingly serious challenges to the U.S.-supported order in their respective priority spheres of concern—Russia in Europe and the Middle East, and China in Asia along the country’s rim. Russia’s challenges involve not only military maneuvers and incursions but also cyber and political warfare that has threatened to undermine elections in the United States and Europe, European unity, and NATO solidarity. China’s cyberattacks, by contrast, have focused more on massive theft of information and intellectual property aimed at accelerating Chinese economic competitiveness and thereby dominating world markets in key advanced technologies at the expense of leading U.S. and other international companies.

The two countries thus work separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in the political, economic, and security domains. In terms of global diplomacy, Beijing and Moscow support one another in their respective challenges to the United States and its allies and partners around the world. These joint efforts involve political, security, and economic measures both in multilateral forums and in bilateral relations with U.S. adversaries such as North Korea, Iran, and Syria, in addition to other steps to challenge regional and global norms and institutions backed by the United States.

As indicated above, the U.S. position in the triangular relationship among the United States, Russia, and China has deteriorated. Russia’s tension with the West and ever-deepening dependence on China, alongside active U.S. constructive engagement with China, have given Beijing the advantageous top “hinge” position in the triangle that Washington used to occupy.

U.S. Policy Options

Up to this point, it has been hard to find instances when Russia took substantial risks in support of China’s challenges to the United States that did not involve overlapping Russian interests, and vice versa. Nevertheless, as the Russian-Chinese relationship has become closer, U.S. government and other specialists are carefully examining the behavior of both sides for

signs of closer collaboration that could bring negative implications for the United States.


No quick fixes. The absence of easy options to remedy the increasingly adverse situation reinforces the bleak American view of Sino-Russian relations. The circumstances today are very different from those that enabled Richard Nixon's Cold War breakthrough in playing the China card against the Soviet Union in a period of intense Sino-Soviet confrontation. In the contemporary relationship between the two countries, any U.S. overture to accommodate either state in seeking leverage over the other risks being interpreted as another sign of U.S. weakness.

Major recommendations in the NBR project call for wide-ranging measures to strengthen U.S. economic, military, and diplomatic power and influence. This strengthening would enable a more favorable balance of power supporting the U.S.-backed international order that is now challenged by Russian and Chinese actions. Building national power at home and abroad requires greater domestic cohesion and less partisan discord and government gridlock. Strategies employed need to be realistic and effectively implemented. It is worth emphasizing that these are long-term policy choices requiring prolonged whole-of-government approaches that are difficult to carry out amid high-profile distractions. These recommendations are in line with those of earlier authoritative studies by policy-oriented research organizations dealing with Russia and China.² However, unlike those studies, the NBR project sees the United States not as a constant among variables—that is, not as an actor that is necessarily assumed as able and willing to employ the demanding recommendations offered by the project. Rather, U.S. policy and behavior are viewed as major uncertain variables that have impacts on the Russia-China relationship.

Playing the long game. Whereas the Russian and Chinese specialists in the NBR project tend to support U.S. accommodation of Russian and Chinese

² Major studies include Julianne Smith, "A Transatlantic Strategy for Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Task Force White Paper, August 29, 2016; Angela Stent, "Russia, China and the West after Crimea," Transatlantic Academy, 2015–16 series, no. 8, 2016; Kathleen Hicks and Lisa Sawyer Samp, *Recalibrating U.S. Strategy toward Russia: A New Time for Choosing* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017); Eugene Rumer, Henry Sokolsky, and Andrew S. Weiss, "Guiding Principles of a Sustainable U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia: Key Judgments from a Joint Task Force," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Policy Outlook, February 9, 2017; Julianne Smith and Adam Twardowski, "The Future of U.S.-Russian Relations," Center for New American Security, January 11, 2017; Robert D. Blackwill and Ashley J. Tellis, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy toward China* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2015); Orville Schell and Susan L. Shirk, chairs, "U.S. Policy toward China: Recommendations for a New Administration," Asia Society and University of California–San Diego, Task Force Report, February 2017; and Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World* (Sydney: Penguin, 2017).

ambitions, the American specialists argue that any such accommodation should be backed by a strengthening of the United States and should avoid undermining the resolve of either Washington or its allies and partners. The American specialists agree that the influence of U.S. policy on key areas of Russia-China cooperation, notably weapon sales, energy-related trade and investment, and cooperation in the United Nations and elsewhere against various Western initiatives, remains low. More promising targets for increasing U.S. influence involve exploiting differences between China and Russia. Such differences include China's rise in power at a time when Russia remains hobbled by demographic and economic weaknesses and Russia's alienation from the U.S.-led international order at a time when China continues to rely on it. Meanwhile, Russian and Chinese ambitions for dominance in their respective regions make regional governments that are negatively affected more inclined to work closely with the United States in seeking strategic counterweight.

Outlook for 2018. Given the uncertainty regarding U.S. policy toward Russia and China, the NBR project offers alternative policy choices rather than specific recommendations to U.S. government decision-makers. It shows the pros and cons of long- and short-term U.S. policy choices to enable policymakers with different views on Russia and China to choose an appropriate path forward.³ Longer-term choices range from accommodating Russia and/or China to supporting U.S. international primacy; in between these extremes are choices that mix U.S. strengthening and accommodation. Shorter-term policy choices involve the United States, without significant strengthening, seeking to gain an advantage by tilting for or against Russia, China, or both. The path that Washington decides to follow will likely be the most important determinant of the impact of Russia-China relations on the United States over the next year. 

³ It should be noted that the U.S. administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy also sees grave dangers from Russia and China and argues for U.S. strengthening in response. This signals the government's intention to pursue a more clearly defined direction in dealing with Russia and China. See White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 2017).

