

RUSSIA AND CHINA: AXIS OF REVISIONISTS?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The China-Russia relationship has become an increasingly robust, pragmatic strategic partnership since 2014, in part because the United States is pursuing policies that have driven the two countries closer together. Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are both authoritarian leaders whose primary preoccupation is regime survival and who are allergic to Western criticisms of their domestic systems and the repressive policies of their respective governments. China and Russia are revisionist powers in as much as they share a commitment to creating a “post-West” global order which takes their interests into account and is conducive to authoritarian rule.

Since Russia’s 2014 seizure and annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and the West’s subsequent attempts to isolate Russia, Putin has increasingly turned to China, which has enabled Russia to surmount the isolation and flourish on the world stage. Sino-Russian economic and energy ties are expanding. China is economically more important to Russia than vice versa and is Russia’s number one trading partner and the second-largest purchaser of Russian military hardware. The new Power of Siberia gas pipeline will increase their energy interdependence. Sino-Russian cooperation in the military and high-tech fields is also growing. Their joint military exercises and air patrols, as well as joint work on artificial intelligence and biotechnology pose challenges to the United States.

There are significant asymmetries in the relationship, and mutual mistrust remains, especially in Russia’s rapidly depopulating Far East, where Chinese traders and entrepreneurs are abundant. Nevertheless,

Russia appears to have accepted its role as a junior partner to China. This is in part because China, unlike the United States, is not perceived to represent a threat to Putin’s rule. Those who believe that Russia would be willing to distance itself from China and align itself with Washington against Beijing underestimate the extent to which China’s unequivocal support of Russia’s domestic system is an existential issue for the Putin regime. Moreover, the twin U.S. policies of sanctioning Russia and pursuing a trade war with China have pushed the two countries closer together. Washington could promote closer ties to Russia by lifting sanctions, extending the New START treaty and even modifying its stance on the Ukraine conflict. But it is unlikely that this would lead Russia to distance itself from China.

INTRODUCTION

Asked about Russia’s relationship with China at the Valdai Discussion Club in October 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the two countries “enjoy an unprecedentedly high level of trust and cooperation. This is an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership.” Then he revealed, “We are now helping our Chinese partners create a missile attack warning system. This is very important and will drastically increase China’s defense capability. Only the United States and Russia have such a system now.”¹ Shortly thereafter, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov clarified that “neither Russia nor China are planning to create a military alliance.”²

Is the burgeoning Sino-Russian partnership still an “axis of convenience” and a “wary embrace” of unequals, or is it developing into a more full-fledged

alliance that will represent an ongoing challenge to U.S. interests and could further undermine the post-Cold War international order?³ The Trump administration's National Defense Strategy warned that:

“The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by what the National Security Strategy classifies as revisionist powers. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model — gaining veto authority over other nations' economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”⁴

Certainly both the Russian and Chinese leaders go out of their way to stress how close their ties are. During a visit to Moscow in June 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping was extravagant in his praise: “Russia is the country I have visited the most times, and President Putin is my best friend and colleague.”⁵ Putin has reciprocated, telling the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, with Xi at his side:

“President Xi Jinping and I have established very positive personal relations. Yesterday, we spent a lot of time together and discussed a wide variety of matters. We parted at midnight Moscow Time or 4 am Beijing Time. We had a lot to discuss. Later, I said: ‘I have to apologize to you, I should let you go. Hosts should not treat their guests this way.’ But this indicates that our agenda is very extensive.”⁶

Russia and China are revisionist powers today in as much as they both seek to create a “post-West” world order — one of which the United States can no longer determine the financial and political contours.⁷ Even though the visions of Moscow and Beijing may differ, both aim for a world order more supportive of authoritarian regimes that prize sovereignty and non-interference in each other's domestic affairs. Thus, those who believe that Russia would be willing to distance itself from China and align itself with Washington against Beijing underestimate the extent to which China's unequivocal support of Russia's domestic system is an existential issue for the Putin regime. Moreover, the twin U.S. policies of sanctioning Russia and pursuing a trade war with China have pushed the two countries closer together. Peeling Russia away from China, as some in the United States suggest, would involve a significant

modification of current U.S. policy toward Russia in an age in which Russia has become a toxic subject in U.S. politics following Moscow's interference in the 2016 presidential election.

FROM THE SINO-SOVIET SPLIT TO THE UKRAINE CRISIS

Even if one discounts the lofty rhetoric, it is undeniable that today's Sino-Russian partnership represents a remarkable development, given where relations between the Soviet Union and China were 50 years ago. Tensions had risen to the point that Soviet and Chinese soldiers engaged in a brief border war in 1969 on the Amur River, leading the American journalist Harrison Salisbury to warn that a full-scale war between the two communist giants might become inevitable.⁸ For the Soviets, China arguably represented more of a threat than the United States during the Cold War, because Beijing challenged the fundamental legitimacy of Moscow's claim to lead the world socialist movement. The ideological polemics between the two communist giants were as extravagant as is today's mutual praise.⁹ Moreover, the Soviets worried that Mao Zedong's attitude toward the use of nuclear weapons was reckless and could endanger world peace.

Sino-Soviet relations began to thaw when Mikhail Gorbachev led the Soviet Union, but it was only after the Soviet collapse that Moscow began to pursue closer ties to China, tacitly admitting that Moscow bore the lion's share of the blame for the Sino-Soviet split. Russian President Boris Yeltsin began the decade-long process of negotiating the demarcation of the Russo-Chinese border, the world's sixth-longest. Russia and China also revived economic ties, and Sino-Russian relations improved as Russia's relations with the West deteriorated in the late 1990s. But it was only after Putin entered the Kremlin in 2000 that Moscow began more intensively to pursue close ties to Beijing. The border regulation was completed between 2004 and 2008, Russian arms sales to China increased, and both countries increased their cooperation in multilateral organizations, even as they sought improved ties with the United States.

The turning point came in 2014, as Russia's relations with the West sharply deteriorated after Russia's seizure and annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and

the launch of a war in southeastern Ukraine. The imposition of U.S. and EU sanctions and other attempts to isolate Moscow increased Russia's dependence on China. Putin promoted ties with Beijing to balance the increasingly adversarial relationship with Europe and the United States, and China has been instrumental in enabling Russia to avoid the isolation that the West sought to impose on Moscow. Indeed, the growing Sino-Russian partnership represents one of the most concrete and durable achievements of President Putin's foreign policy.

The close ties between Putin and Xi are based on a mutual interest in challenging a world order dominated by the United States and in maintaining domestic stability and preventing "color" revolutions at home. Both leaders support each other's foreign policies. Putin and Xi share a common set of grievances, a conviction that their countries were unfairly treated by the West in the past. They are critical of the current U.S.-dominated international order, which they believe, was imposed on them without consultation and disregards their legitimate interests.

DOMESTIC DRIVERS OF THE RELATIONSHIP

Putin and Xi are authoritarian leaders whose primary preoccupation is personal and regime survival. They are both allergic to Western criticism of their domestic systems and the repressive policies of their respective governments. They both place heavy emphasis on the concept of sovereignty and non-interference in other countries' internal affairs. They never criticize publicly each other's internal policies. China and Russia promote models of internet governance and censorship conducive to authoritarianism.¹⁰ They both favor influence and interference operations to seek to alter the political processes of other countries in ways amenable to their interests. While differing in their targets and approaches, Chinese and Russian influence operations increasingly draw upon similar tools (e.g., social media, state media, and co-opting media outlets in target countries) to induce instability in democratic societies.¹¹ But, while they promote instability in democracies, they are both preoccupied with preventing popular discontent from threatening their rule and support each other in repressing any hint of "color" revolutions.

During the summer 2019 protests in Moscow against the exclusion of opposition candidates for election to the municipal council, and during the ongoing protests in Hong Kong, Russian and Chinese spokesmen blamed the United States for inciting and supporting the protests and vowed that Beijing and Moscow would work together to combat Western interference. Xi warned: "The United States and some other Western countries have increased their interference in the internal affairs of Russia and China, threatened the sovereign security of the two countries, and impeded their economic and social development."¹² The head of the Russian Federation Council's Commission on Protecting State Sovereignty and Preventing Foreign Interference said in a statement that members of Chinese National People's Congress and Russian State Duma have ongoing discussions on the prevention of attempted foreign interference in sovereign states' affairs.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang elaborated further:

"China and Russia share common interests and aspirations in safeguarding national sovereignty and security, keeping stability and social order and opposing foreign interference. We both have the confidence and capability to keep prosperity and stability at home while rejecting external intervention. A certain country has added instability and uncertainties to the world by following unilateralism and bullying practices as well as blatantly interfering in other countries' domestic affairs."¹³

Some Americans have recently argued that the United States should attempt to "peel" Russia away from China.¹⁴ Any such endeavor would have to confront the fact that Putin can rely on Xi to support him unreservedly in a way that no United States president can.

ECONOMICS AND ENERGY

The Sino-Russian economic relationship is evolving from relatively modest to more dynamic, largely because of both countries' deteriorating ties with the West. Economically, China is much more important to Russia than vice versa. Indeed, China's economy is more than eight times the size of Russia's. Since 2009,

China has been Russia's largest trading partner. Their bilateral trade has risen to \$107 billion in 2018 (for comparison, U.S.-China trade that year amounted to \$660 billion), with the governments planning to boost it further to \$200 billion in 2024.¹⁵

While Russia would like China to invest more in the Russian Far East, Chinese companies have been wary because of the challenges of doing business in Russia. The structure of bilateral trade largely resembles that between a developing and a developed country. Mineral products and hydrocarbons make up 73% of Russian exports. Machinery and transport equipment constitute 52% of Chinese exports, with textiles and footwear at 15%.¹⁶

Last year, U.S. sanctions on Russia and the trade war with China led Moscow and Beijing to take a major step away from the use of the American dollar, agreeing to develop bilateral trade using the ruble and the yuan. Putin has said that both countries have signed agreements to expand the use of their currencies in bilateral financial operations.¹⁷ In 2019, the share of dollar payments for exports from Russia to China fell below 50% for the first time.¹⁸

China's main economic interest in the relationship is Russia's oil and gas. As China has modernized and its economy has grown, its demand for energy has increased exponentially. Russia has plentiful oil and gas reserves, but most of its energy exports have traditionally gone to Europe. Since the Soviet collapse, Russia has sought to diversify its energy exports, but energy relations with China have proven challenging, as the Chinese have been tough negotiators. Russia commenced deliveries of crude oil to China in 2011, part of a bilateral "loans for oil" deal whereby Beijing provided Moscow with a \$25 billion loan in exchange for oil deliveries until 2030.¹⁹ Russia overtook Saudi Arabia as the top source of China's oil imports in 2016.²⁰

Russia is the world's leading gas exporter and started negotiating with China to build a pipeline early in Putin's tenure.²¹ But Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) were unable to agree on a price, so China turned to Central Asia, concluding a deal for a Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China pipeline. The Russia-Ukraine conflict in 2014

provided China with new opportunities, as the Kremlin decided that it had to turn to China. In May 2014, Russia and China signed a \$400 billion deal to build a gas pipeline, dubbed Power of Siberia. Because Russia was in a weakened position, Beijing was able to achieve most of the goals it had pursued for some years: a cheap price and equities in the deal, including ownership of part of the pipeline infrastructure. The pipeline began operations at the end of 2019.²²

The latest area for energy cooperation is in the Arctic, where Sino-Russian cooperation is based on mutual interests. For Russia, China can provide the capital, technical expertise, and markets needed to develop its natural resources. For China, Russia facilitates Chinese economic goals in the region — particularly through the development of natural resources and use of shipping routes controlled by Russia.²³ China envisions a "Polar Silk Road" as part of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and is increasingly showing interest in commercial navigation via the Northern Sea Route. As a result of the 2014 sanctions on Russia, Exxon Mobil and other Western companies had to abandon cooperation with Russia on Arctic energy projects. Russian natural gas producer Novatek was determined to develop liquefied natural gas (LNG) export capacity north of the Yamal Peninsula but sanctions deprived it of access to Western financing. China stepped in with a \$12 billion loan and became partners in the project. The first Yamal LNG cargo reached China in August 2018. As the Financial Times observed, "No other business venture better illustrates Russia's resilience in the face of international sanctions."²⁴ The Yamal LNG project will also help China diversify its energy sources.²⁵

MILITARY TIES

Russia and China have also notably intensified their military ties since the onset of the Ukraine crisis. The three main areas of the bilateral defense relationship are military exercises, military-technical cooperation (including arms sales), and high-level military-to-military contacts.²⁶ China is the second largest buyer of Russian military hardware. Russia was traditionally careful not to sell China its most sophisticated weapons, because China was apt to reverse engineer Russian military hardware and sell it on the world market. But in 2015, as part of the post-Crimea intensification of ties, Russia agreed in a \$3 billion deal to sell China

Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 surface-to-air missiles, which will upgrade China's missile defense capabilities and could jeopardize Taiwan's aerial defenses.²⁷ The U.S. imposed sanctions on China for purchasing the Su-35s in breach of the congressionally-mandated Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).²⁸

The geographic scope of Sino-Russian military exercises has been expanding. In September 2018, China participated in Vostok (East) 2018, the largest Russian military exercise since 1981, held in Siberia and the Russian Far East. This was the first time that Russia had invited a foreign country not part of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, an alliance including Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan) to take part in a strategic exercise. China's interest in these exercises was to demonstrate that Russia and China stood together and to test its own military restructuring efforts.²⁹ Putin himself observed the exercises with Chinese Minister of Defense Wei Fenghe.³⁰ It was clear that both Russia and China wanted to signal that, in face of what they view as hostile U.S. actions, a strategic partnership between the two countries is emerging.³¹

In 2019, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) participated in another large-scale Russian military exercise, Tsentr (Center) 2019, held in western Russia and in Kyrgyzstan. The exercise also involved the participation of military personnel from Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) member states India, Pakistan, and Uzbekistan, as well as forces from CSTO member states. The principal aim of the exercise was to simulate a response to possible security threats in Central Asia — including fending off terrorist threats, but also repelling conventional military forces from an imaginary “terrorist state” to the southwest of Russia. While the focus of the exercise was officially on “counterterrorist” operations, the exercise also included repelling enemy air strikes and conducting combined conventional offensive air and ground operations. In other words, Tsentr 2019 featured an inter-state war component.

According to Alexander Gabuev of the Moscow Carnegie Center, “The drills reflect a much broader, longer-term [trend towards] the two largest Eurasian countries accommodating each other's interests and

forming a meaningful security partnership in time which was animated by rivalry with the U.S. on both sides. [Tsentr 2019] has symbolism in it and sends a signal that two militaries are working together to gain interoperability.”³²

Russia and China have branched out militarily to conduct joint aviation patrols, unsettling their neighbors. On July 23, 2019 the PLA Air Force and the Russian Air Force jointly conducted a long-range aerial patrol involving two Chinese Xian H-6K and two Tupolev Tu-95MS long-range, nuclear-capable bombers in the Indo-Pacific region. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the aim of the mission was to “strengthen global stability.” South Korea claims that its airspace was violated during this exercise and its air force jets fired 280 warning shots to ward off a Russian military plane that intruded upon its territorial airspace.³³

These joint patrols are part of a pattern of growing military cooperation between the two countries. In 2017 Russia and China adopted a three-year plan for military cooperation through 2020 at the initiative of the Russian Ministry of Defense. Both sides have now said that they will negotiate a new military agreement reflecting broader cooperation, including joint aviation patrols. The fact that Moscow is also helping Beijing develop its own ballistic missile defense system means that Russia is willing to collaborate with China on technology related to strategic nuclear arsenals, representing a new level in Sino-Russian military ties.³⁴ Nevertheless, Russia is also expanding its defense cooperation with other countries in the region who view China as a threat, such as India and Vietnam. And, since both Russia and China stress that they are not forming an alliance, neither country has to take risks supporting the other in areas where they have no common interests.

HIGH-TECH COOPERATION

On December 23, 2019, Putin signed a decree proclaiming 2020 and 2021 as the years of Russian-Chinese scientific, technical, and innovative cooperation. Russia and China have recently strengthened their technological cooperation, including fifth-generation telecommunications, artificial intelligence (AI), biotechnology, and the digital economy. This is in response to increased U.S.

pressure on both countries to limit their respective engagements in the global technological ecosystem through sanctions and export controls.³⁵ The strategic partnership between the two countries increasingly focuses on technology and innovation in a variety of fora.

Putin has stressed that Russia will become a global leader in AI.³⁶ Russia and China have prioritized their cooperation in the AI field and benefit from combining their respective strengths. China leads the world in subcategories such as connected vehicles and facial and audio recognition technologies, while Russia has strengths in industrial automation, surveillance, and defense and security applications.³⁷

The ongoing battle between the United States and China over Huawei has also pushed Russia and China closer together. Putin has called the American pressure on the Chinese mobile company the “first technological war of the coming digital era.”³⁸ Huawei has expanded its engagement in Russia, looking to work more closely with Russian scientists. It has announced plans for a fourfold increase in its research and development staff in Russia and the creation of the Huawei Innovation Research program in Russia.

Sino-Russian high-tech cooperation — especially in areas dedicated to enhancing government control over their citizens — should be of concern to the West. However, this cooperation is not tension-free and the stark differences between the economic systems and capabilities in Russia and China also limit cooperation. As the President of the Russian Academy of Sciences put it:

“The country’s development strategy says that by 2035 China should become a world leader in most scientific areas. The Chinese are fulfilling their strategies with terrifying accuracy. What should we do? We cannot keep up with them. But seeing what is happening, we don’t. In any case, we need to build some kind of curtain, we must build our cooperation correctly.”³⁹

In view of these asymmetries, the United States should re-examine the wisdom of pursuing policies in the high-tech area that push the two countries closer together.

POLITICAL TIES

Whereas at the highest political levels Sino-Russian relations are improving, the situation in Russia’s economically depressed and depopulated Far East (which two centuries ago was part of China) is more complex. When the Sino-Russian border opened up after the Soviet collapse, Russians feared being overrun by Chinese laborers who began to migrate to the Russian Far East. There are 6.3 million Russians in the areas bordering China, facing 109 million Chinese on the other side of the border.⁴⁰ Opinion polls show that the Russian population in the Primorsky Krai border region fear Chinese laborers less than they did 10 years ago, but a sizeable number believe that border clashes similar to those in 1969 are still possible. They remain suspicious of the Chinese who often dominate local commerce. They also are wary of China’s designs on their land. A Russian government proposal to lease 1,000 square kilometers of land to the Chinese was abandoned after the local population and their leaders objected.⁴¹ The contrast between the Chinese side of the border — with large, modern hotels and urban infrastructure — and the Russian side — with sparse and often dilapidated buildings — is striking. In 2007, both countries agreed to build a rail bridge across the Amur River joining Blagoveshchensk and Heihe; it was completed at the end of 2019. Local Russian officials hope that this will give impetus to the Far East’s modernization and economic development.⁴²

Beyond expanding bilateral ties, Russia and China have created multilateral fora in which they cooperate actively. The first is the SCO, founded in 2002 to manage Sino-Russian relations in their shared neighborhood, Central Asia, and to combat the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.⁴³ The SCO has become an important pillar of the Sino-Russian relationship. Its original membership consisted of Russia, China, and four Central Asian states, and it expanded to include India and Pakistan as full members in 2017; Afghanistan, Iran, and Mongolia are observer states that may follow suit. Its eight members account for 80% of Eurasia’s landmass, 43% of the world’s population, and a quarter of global GDP. In terms of geographic coverage and population size, it is the largest regional organization in the world.⁴⁴

Up till now, Russia and China have successfully managed their competition in Central Asia. Russia remains the predominant outside influence in the area, given the enduring linguistic, cultural, and personal ties between Moscow and many Central Asian elites. But China has emerged as the predominant economic power in Central Asia, given its energy needs and investment projects. The SCO provides a multilateral forum to regulate relations between Central Asian countries and their larger neighbors, but ultimately regional leaders understand that they have to balance China against Russia if they want to prosper and to retain their sovereignty.

The other multilateral forum which has persisted, despite some international skepticism, is the BRICS, including China, Russia, India, Brazil, and (since 2010) South Africa. Since its first formal meeting in 2009, the grouping has sought to institutionalize itself as an international economic organization that provides an alternative to U.S.-dominated institutions.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is an important venue where China and Russia support each other, often against the West. Their permanent seats — and vetoes — on the UNSC give them important leverage in their quest for a world order that gives them more agency and reinforces their concept of sovereignty. China has been an enabler of Russian actions in places like Syria and Ukraine. Russia's and China's support for each other has led them to veto Western attempts designed to bring humanitarian relief and punish those who promote ethnic violence. The major areas where they support each other — and often thwart the West — are the Balkans, Iran, North Korea, and Syria. China and Russia insist that the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries take precedence over Western concepts of humanitarian intervention — except, in the Russian case, when they apply to defending the rights of Russians living in post-Soviet states such as Ukraine. Moreover, Russia and China take a skeptical approach to Western military interventions justified on humanitarian grounds and the concept of the Responsibility to Protect. The UNSC has enabled Russia to exercise disproportionate international influence given its limited resources, and China has aided Russia in its return to great power status.

FUTURE AREAS OF CHALLENGE

Despite the reality of a strengthening Sino-Russian strategic partnership, the growing asymmetries in the respective capabilities of the two countries and lingering mutual mistrust suggest a series of ongoing challenges to the relationship. The first is the impact that China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative will have on Russian political and economic interests. Putin launched the major project for his third term as president, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), in January 2015. China in 2013 announced its intention to construct a "Silk Road Economic Belt," now known as the Belt and Road Initiative, which will eventually link China with Europe, involving a network of transportation and construction projects, including multiple-billion-dollar investment deals in Central Asia. Whereas the Central Asian countries were generally enthusiastic about these projects, Russia was more reticent, because it viewed BRI as a direct competitor to the EAEU. Seeking to assuage these concerns, Xi and Putin signed an agreement on the integration of the EAEU and BRI projects in May 2015. However, the two initiatives are quite different. The BRI transportation corridors will largely bypass Russia to the south, so it is uncertain how Russia will benefit from these massive infrastructure projects.⁴⁵ The BRI will promote globalized trade, financing and infrastructure and develop markets for Chinese goods. It will certainly expand Chinese geopolitical influence — all under the rubric of "connectivity." The EAEU is a far more inward-looking trade integration project designed to strengthen Russia's influence in Central Asia.

During the first BRI Forum in Beijing in May 2017, the Russian ambassador to China stressed that Russia and China were equal partners in this endeavor and that the BRI would not be detrimental to Russian interests.⁴⁶ While it remains unclear what Russia will gain from this ambitious project, the BRI appears to be flexible enough to encompass Chinese investment in Russian energy and infrastructure projects. China has already built a dry port in Khorgos on the border with Kazakhstan and plan more investments in Central Asia.

As the BRI develops, China will inevitably become more involved in the security of the countries through which its highways, railways, and pipelines pass. The previous “division of labor” between Russia and China in Central Asia may well change in ways that will raise Russian concerns.

More broadly, Russia and China are not natural allies. Most Russians identify themselves as Europeans and have culturally much more in common with Europe and the United States than with China. Many also are suspicious of China’s long-term goals vis-à-vis Russia and its depopulated Far East. Privately, Chinese experts are incredulous that Russia appears unable or unwilling to modernize its economy and are wary of the unpredictability of Russian foreign policy. They do not share Putin’s belief that Russia is a global power equal to the United States or China. For Russia, however, the partnership with China represents a geopolitical equalizer, counterbalancing the predominant power of the United States.

Another way of comparing the lofty rhetoric of close Chinese-Russian ties to reality is to look at where the Chinese send their children to study. There are upwards of 350,000 Chinese university students in the United States. By contrast, there are 25,000 Chinese university students in all of Russia.⁴⁷ This reflects a broader reality that civil society contacts between Russians and Chinese remain far more limited than those between Russia and the West or China and the West.

The asymmetries that currently exist between the two countries will only grow. China is a rising power, economically and militarily. Russia can project military power effectively on the world stage, but it remains an arms and raw materials exporting country with low rates of growth which has failed to modernize its economy. It is the junior partner in this relationship, a status which it appears to have accepted because it believes it can maintain and increase its global reach by partnering with the ascendant power in an era of U.S. decline. As long as China treats Russia as an equal, never criticizes it publicly, and is careful about not challenging it directly in their shared neighborhood, the partnership will continue to meet both sides’ interests.

Nevertheless, Chinese and Russian visions of the “post-West” global order they both espouse are very different. According to a senior Chinese official:

“China and Russia have different attitudes. Russia wants to break the current international order. Russia thinks it is the victim of the current international system, in which its economy and its society do not develop. But China benefits from the current international system. We want to improve and modify it, not to break it.”⁴⁸

Russia seeks to create a “democratic” world order, one in which the United States will no longer dictate its terms, a tripartite Yalta, where Russia, China, and the United States will between them recreate a Concert of Powers ruling their respective spheres of influence. Beijing would like to reform the existing international system and its vision of a future world order centers on a Big Two — China and the United States — with Russia in a secondary position, along with Europe, Japan, and India.⁴⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The United States faces three challenges from the China-Russia relationship, which has developed over the past decade into a robust, pragmatic partnership. Washington has to deal individually with both Moscow and Beijing but also increasingly with their combined activities that make it more difficult for the United States to pursue its interests domestically and internationally. As Washington confronts these two, difficult interlocutors, it must understand the stakes involved for both sides. The Sino-Russian partnership has enabled Russia to re-emerge as an independent center of international power. It has also allowed Moscow to elevate its stature by associating with a rising China as relations with the United States have soured. China’s support for Russia has served to legitimize Moscow’s actions in Ukraine and Syria by supporting Russia in the United Nations Security Council and not formally joining the Ukraine-related sanctions against Russia. In return, Russia is a valuable partner for China because it supplies China with hydrocarbons and advanced military hardware and supports China on all major domestic and foreign policy issues.

The major drivers of U.S. policy toward Russia and China differ from each other considerably. The key driver of U.S.-Russian relations is that they are the world's two nuclear superpowers, which possess over 90% of the world's nuclear weapons between them. The U.S. and Russia have a limited economic relationship, since the United States does not need Russia's two major exports — hydrocarbons and military hardware. The key driver of the U.S.-Chinese relationship, by contrast, is the fact that they are the world's two economic superpowers. Security issues have traditionally taken a secondary role to trade and investment questions, although they are becoming more salient as China becomes competitive in advanced technologies, its nuclear arsenal grows, and it asserts its sovereign claims to islands in the East and South China Seas and aims for unification with Taiwan. The stakes in the U.S.-Russian relationship are, therefore of a different order of magnitude than those involved in the U.S.-Chinese relationship.

China supports Russia on the major foreign policy issues which dominate the U.S.-Russian relationship. It has backed Russia's policies in the Syrian civil war, occasionally abstaining on UNSC votes which Russia has vetoed. Beijing has also backed Russia's actions in Ukraine, although it abstained in the U.N. General Assembly vote condemning Russia's annexation of Crimea and it does not recognize Crimea as part of the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, it has criticized the sanctions on Russia, has given Moscow cover for its actions in Ukraine and ensured that the West was unable to isolate Russia after the Ukraine events. Moscow in turn backs Beijing on North Korean issues, and shares Beijing's conviction that a united Korea under Western domination would be worse than a nuclear-armed North Korea. Counterterrorism is one area where the United States and Russia have cooperated, but both Russia and China remain preoccupied with home-grown terrorism as opposed to global terrorism. Indeed, there are no major issues of contention between the United States and Russia where China is likely to take the U.S. side, and the same is equally true for U.S.-China relations.

Regardless of the asymmetries and strains in the Chinese-Russian relationship, the two countries have compelling reasons to strengthen their partnership. Their shared suspicion of the United States and

commitment to creating a global order that will enable them to maintain their authoritarian regimes will continue to bind them together. What remains unknown is the extent to which both countries might join forces in the cyber area to undermine U.S. interests in the future.

Given these realities, it is unlikely that Washington could induce Moscow to distance itself from Beijing. However, if the United States decided to pursue rapprochement with Moscow, the two most important immediate steps would be to start lifting the raft of sanctions that the U.S. Congress has imposed on Russia and to enter into negotiations with Russia to extend the New START arms control agreement which expires in 2021. The latter would only require White House assent, and Putin has made it clear that he favors this extension. The former is much more difficult because Congress would have to agree to lifting sanctions, which is highly unlikely in the present situation. A further and more controversial U.S. move would be to recognize the incorporation of Crimea into Russia and to agree that Ukraine will remain a neutral country and never join NATO. These are certainly conditions Russia has demanded. There would, of course be considerable U.S. domestic resistance to these moves.

While Russia would no doubt welcome these initiatives and support an improvement in ties with the United States, would a U.S.-Russian rapprochement persuade Russia to distance itself from China and reverse the momentum in Sino-Russian military, technological, and economic cooperation? The evidence does not suggest that Russia would jettison these ties as a condition of improving relations with the United States as it seeks with China to create a world order favorable to authoritarianism. While there are sound arguments for the United States to seek more productive engagement with Russia, one cannot assume that this would lead to a cooling in Sino-Russian ties. But, going forward, the United States could play a role in ensuring that Moscow and Beijing do not further intensify their partnership by not pursuing policies that drive the two countries closer together.

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