

China and Russia: The New Rapprochement and the End of a Unipolar World

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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 Russian-Chinese rapprochement is a natural result of broader changes taking place in world politics, while the U.S. policy hostile to both countries 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 Russian-Chinese 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 encourage the authoritarian regime of either country. The adherents of this ideology generally support U.S. and EU 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

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

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 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 particular 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, those 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. China 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. Russia also provides some 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 SCO to achieve common aims: economic development of this region, support for political stability, and maintenance of secular regimes in power. Both 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, Russia will try to also maintain cooperation with the European Union as far as it can. At the same time, as part of its pivot to Asia, it will develop multilateral cooperation with other Asian players, including those with which China 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 Russian-Chinese 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 country. 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. Beijing, 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 Russia's 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."² However, Russia's and China's understanding of win-win cooperation and their vision of the future world are very different from those of the United States.

² "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.

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 contain 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.