FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Russia and China's Enduring Alliance

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Several commentators, among them Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute and Edward Luttwak of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have suggested that U.S. President Donald Trump should take any efforts to warm relations with Russia one step further and try to enlist Moscow's help in balancing a rising China. Trump views China and Islamist extremism as the two principal challenges to U.S. security, and he sees Russia as a potential partner in combating both. The thinking goes, then, that Trump should run a version of the diplomatic play that former U.S. President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger followed in the early 1970s when they thawed relations with Beijing to counter the Soviet Union. This time, however, Trump would partner with Russia to balance China.

The proposal entices with visions of ambitious strategic gambits across Eurasia, in Trumpian vernacular the "big league" of geopolitics. Nixon going to China was one of the most consequential diplomatic deals in U.S. history. What better way for the dealmaker in chief—especially one who regularly consults with Kissinger—to burnish his credentials than carrying out a version of it for himself? In theory, the move would adhere to traditional maxims of geopolitics: namely, the imperative to maintain the balance of power on the Eurasian continent. U.S. strategists have relied on this principle to varying degrees since at least World War II. Further, a strategy that engages with Russia to counter China might lend a degree of coherence to the Trump administration's otherwise disjointed foreign policy.

ALLIED ENOUGH

The problem for Trump is that Sino-Russian ties have been improving more or less steadily since the waning years of the Cold War. The thaw between the two communist powers began in the early 1980s and was followed by normalized relations in May 1989. Beijing and Moscow established a "strategic partnership" in 1996 and signed a Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001. Chinese and Russian leaders now refer to the relationship as a "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination," a convoluted term for a not-quite alliance. Last September, Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi proclaimed that "the depth and scope of coordination between both countries are unprecedented." Robust cooperation has accelerated since Xi Jinping became China's top leader in 2012; he reportedly has a warm personal relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The two countries cooperate closely across a number of fields. On energy, Russia became the top oil supplier to China in 2016. Crucially for China, it transports supplies overland rather than through contested sea lanes. The nations have partnered on military exercises, including in the Mediterranean and South China Sea, as well as on some joint technology development projects. They have revived their languishing arms trade relationship. In 2015, Beijing agreed to purchase both Su-35 fighter jets and the S-400 Triumf surface-to-air missile system from Moscow. The two countries have also embarked on a number of symbolic people-to-people projects, such as beginning the long-delayed construction of a bridge across the Amur River. And in June 2016, Presidents Xi and Putin agreed to work jointly to increase their control over cyberspace and communications technologies.

A shared political vision for world order provides the foundation for Chinese-Russian cooperation. It is defined primarily by the desire to see an end to U.S. primacy, to be replaced by multipolarity. Once this vision is realized, each nation would command an effective sphere of influence in Asia and eastern Europe, respectively. For now, though, China and Russia have tenser relations with the United States than at any point since the end of the Cold War. This is primarily because of maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas—including over the Diaoyu/Senkaku, the Paracel, and the Spratly island chains—and the war in Ukraine, making the Sino-Russian partnership more important than ever. A recent op-ed in the Chinese Communist Party mouthpiece *People's Daily* called that relationship "the ballast stone in maintaining world peace and stability."

In the 1970s, it was deep discord in the Sino-Soviet relationship that helped convince China to align with the United States. This discord culminated in border clashes in 1969. By 1972, relations between the two communist powers had deteriorated from frosty to outright frozen. When Kissinger came calling, Beijing already saw Moscow as a bigger threat than Washington. For Russia today, the opposite is true. Moscow sees Washington as the primary adversary despite hopes that Trump will repair the relationship.

To be sure, there is some potential for a rupture between China and Russia. Moscow worries about a lopsided economic relationship based on trading Russian resources for Chinese finished goods. China's growing influence in Central Asia and the sparsely populated areas of eastern Russia, Moscow's arms sales to India and Vietnam, and China's theft of Russian weapons designs all threaten to derail the partnership. But the United States' ability to fuel those disputes in order to foster divisions remains limited at best. Moreover, Xi and Putin have found a modus vivendi that downplays and contains those frictions while focusing on the cooperative aspects of their relationship. When Chinese leaders talk about a "new type of great power relations" with the United States, they envision something much like the Sino-Russian relationship as a model.

WEAK RETURNS

In exchange for turning against China, Moscow might seek the lifting of sanctions imposed following the annexation of Crimea, an end to U.S. support for a free and independent Ukraine, and acquiescence to the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. It may also demand a removal of missile defenses from Europe, the cessation of NATO expansion, or, even better from a Russian perspective, the abolition of NATO altogether. Granting Putin's wishes on these issues would undermine the seven-decade U.S. investment in a Europe whole, free, and at peace—an

investment that propelled the United States' ascension to postwar primacy in the first place. What is more, accepting Russia's acquisition of territory by force would undermine U.S. arguments about the prohibition of such actions under international law when Beijing asserts its expansive claims in the East and South China Seas using force.

Even if Trump convinced Putin to end Moscow's partnership with Beijing, Russia would still have little capability to thwart China's bad behavior in places that matter. Russia's Pacific Fleet, although relatively sizable in number, suffers from severe shortfalls in maintenance, and many of its assets are aging. Planned additions to the fleet—including extra missile defense systems and submarines—will bolster deterrence capabilities but have limited applicability to the types of sea patrol tasks necessary to counter China's maritime assertiveness. In theory, Moscow could help arm Asian nations to contribute to the balancing effort, but direct U.S. and other allied assistance could easily substitute for that, building relationships more advantageous to U.S. interests in the process.

Putin would also need to patch up diplomatic relations in Asia if he planned to balance against Beijing. Doing so would require a substantial diplomatic investment and, likely, Russian concessions. Putin's ballyhooed rapprochement with Tokyo seems to have run aground despite clear eagerness on the part of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe for a deal to address the dispute over the Northern Territories islands, which Russia calls the Southern Kurils, as well as a peace treaty officially concluding World War II. And Russia's continued support of North Korea and staunch opposition to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defense system has made for rocky relations with Seoul. The Russian position on the South China Sea—studied aloofness while agreeing to joint naval exercises with China—means that strategic relations in Southeast Asia would also require substantial diplomatic spadework (Putin's warm relations with President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines notwithstanding).

FINDING LEVERAGE

A better U.S. strategy for competing effectively in the no-holds-barred contest of great power politics—including in "triangular diplomacy" with Moscow and Beijing—would focus on two lines of effort. First, the Trump administration should work with both Russia and China where possible. Those efforts should seek to forge a trilateral understanding on contentious issues affecting strategic stability, such as nuclear and missile defense issues, twenty-first-century definitions of sovereignty, and rules for armed intervention. Trilateral discussions should also build practical cooperation on areas of mutual interest, such as climate and energy, counterterrorism, and nonproliferation. Addressing frictions head-on and building habits of cooperation could mitigate strategic distrust among the three great powers by lessening the worry that two will cut deals at the expense of the other.

Second, Washington must continue to do the hard work of maintaining and building support among current U.S. allies and partners in both Europe and Asia, along with other increasingly powerful middle-tier states such as Brazil, India, and Vietnam. Such ties give the United States leverage over China and Russia, neither of which has similar worldwide networks of friendly states. The United States must assess the costs and benefits of finding and keeping friends overseas in a manner that looks beyond the narrow transactionalism Trump espoused on the

campaign trail. Put simply, when considered in the context of a global competition for power and influence, a vast network of allies and partners starts to look more like an asset than a liability.

Trump seeks "good deals" with Russia. Cozying up to Putin in hopes of receiving Moscow's help in balancing Beijing would not be one.