

Why Trump Can't Break Russia Away From China

The conditions just aren't right for Kissinger-style triangular diplomacy.

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The 2014 Russian military intervention in Ukraine resulted in Western sanctions and strategic pressure that drove Moscow toward greater cooperation with China. Since then, the mercurial Sino-Russian “marriage of convenience” has evolved into a genuine strategic partnership based on overlapping interests, and mutual antipathy toward the United States. Although Russia and China are unlikely to declare a formal alliance, it is not in America’s strategic interests to confront a de facto Sino-Russian entente.

Donald Trump’s election generated hope in some conservative foreign policy circles that U.S. rapprochement with Russia could create distance between Moscow and Beijing. Proponents of rapprochement hearken back to Nixon and Kissinger’s “triangular diplomacy,” which exploited the Sino-Soviet split to achieve an opening to China, and positioned Washington for better relations with both Communist giants than they had with each other. Cato Institute fellow Doug Bandow espouses this viewpoint in a piece entitled “A Nixon Strategy to Break the Russia-China Axis.” He argues that improving relations with Russia “would have the salutary side effect of discouraging creation of a common Russo-Chinese front against the United States.” America’s leading offensive realist, John Mearsheimer, likewise claims that if “Washington had a more positive attitude toward Moscow,” this would engender better relations that would eventually lead Russia to join “the balancing coalition against China.”

Bandow and Mearsheimer’s arguments are based on a realist explanatory model, wherein relations between America, Russia, and China are conceived as a “strategic triangle.” According to this framework, it is logical for Trump to pursue Kissinger-style triangular diplomacy to seek an opening to the weaker power, Russia, in order to balance and attain leverage over the stronger power, China.

In the current international context, this approach is problematic for several reasons. First, the deep ideological fissures that drove the Soviet Union and China apart during the late 1950s and 1960s are nonexistent today. Furthermore, Sino-Russian geopolitical competition has lessened because Russia, unlike its Soviet predecessor, is a secondary power in Asia. As a result, there is little indication that Trump, despite his rapport with Vladimir Putin, can drive a wedge between Russia and China. Certainly there is room to improve U.S.-Russia relations from their current nadir, which could yield selective cooperation on mutual challenges such as the Islamic State (ISIS). However, there is little indication that achieving the modest improvements in U.S.-Russia relations that are politically and practically feasible would drive Moscow and Beijing apart.

The situation that Nixon confronted in Asia is not analogous to the one Trump deals with today. Unlike China and Russia at present, the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC) were locked in an intense ideological battle for leadership of the Communist world. As Lorenz M. Lüthi details in his cogent book, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, the Soviet and Chinese Communist parties developed intractable ideological differences in the 1950s over which socialist development model to pursue. Mao Zedong rejected the Khrushchev era model of Bureaucratic Stalinism in favor of a Revolutionary Stalinist model with Chinese characteristics that produced the catastrophic "Great Leap Forward." Ideological rivalry contributed to an acute security dilemma, particularly after China conducted a successful nuclear test in 1964. The convulsions unleashed by radical Maoism during China's Cultural Revolution further exacerbated Sino-Soviet enmity and deeply unnerved the Kremlin, which through 1970 deployed approximately 39 divisions along the Sino-Soviet border. The existential threat of war with the Soviet Union drove Mao to seek rapprochement with America.

Realists give short shrift to the role ideological factors play in fostering comity between Russia and China. In contrast to the days of the Sino-Soviet split, ideology is now a unifying factor in relations. Both countries harbor intense authoritarian nationalist opposition to Western and globalist ideologies, but no longer share the common Marxist-Leninist political orientation that produced the divisive ideological schisms of the Cold War. Despite their distinctive brands of authoritarianism (personalist dictatorship versus one-party Leninist state), Putin and China's ruling Communist Party have similar views of the threat posed by Western "universal values" such as democracy and human rights. They see "foreign influences," which they believe have penetrated their societies through globalization, the internet/social media, and NGOs, as the primary threat to their domestic grip on power. For China and Russian governing elites, these influences are a Trojan horse designed to spark destabilizing "color revolutions" that produce regime change in "non-Western" (i.e. authoritarian) political systems.

Since the 2011 Arab Spring, Moscow and Beijing's perception of this threat has only grown, as movements demanding democracy and reform have swept the globe and reached Russia and China's doorsteps through Ukraine's 2013-2014 Maidan protests and Hong Kong's 2014 "Umbrella Revolution." Western observers often discount Russian and Chinese state media's obsession with color revolution as authoritarian propaganda. Nonetheless, as long as Russian and Chinese elites operate under the assumption that the West is subverting their political systems and domestic legitimacy, they will be reticent to put much distance between one another.

Russia-China relations today are geopolitically dissimilar to the relationship in the 1960s and '70s. During that time, Moscow and Beijing saw each other as major security threats. By contrast, Russia and China's current strategic objectives are much more impeded by the U.S. and its European and Asian allies than they are by one another. China's core strategic objectives are focused on East Asia, restoring control over Taiwan and favorably settling maritime territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. Beijing's primary obstacle is American naval power, and the web of U.S. bilateral alliances (the "hub and spokes" system) with regional powers such as Japan and Australia. The main obstacle to Russia's efforts to secure spheres of interest on its Eastern European, and South Caucasian peripheries is the U.S.-led NATO alliance. The European Union Institute for Security Studies recently published a study of China-Russia relations containing an interview with a Chinese security expert that epitomizes this shared threat perception: "China feels pressure in the South China Sea, and Russia feels pressure from NATO

in the Baltic Sea. Russia faces anti-ballistic missiles systems in Romania and Poland, and China faces the same in South Korea and Japan. While NATO expands to the East, the U.S. is strengthening its military presence in Asia.”

Driven by ideological and geopolitical fear of the West, Russia-China alignment has engendered close collaboration in mutually beneficial areas. Cooperation intensified following Western imposition of sanctions on Russia in 2014. The most high-profile example came in May 2014, when after nearly a decade of negotiations, Moscow finally cut a deal with Beijing to export Siberian gas to China. This followed the 2013 announcement of a joint venture between Russian oil conglomerate Rosneft and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) to develop Eastern Siberian oil and gas fields. In the short to medium term, it will take time to overcome economic and logistical challenges to develop stronger energy linkages. However, over the longer term, the deals should prove mutually beneficial. Russia secures Chinese investment and locks in comparatively high prices; China diversifies its energy mix and gains access to new overland energy supplies, which Beijing considers less vulnerable to geopolitical turmoil and blockade than energy imported from the Middle East via maritime routes.

The arms trade provides another example of symbiosis in Russia-China relations. The trade helps Russia ameliorate its biggest weakness — a feeble and energy export-dependent economy — while helping China sustain its ongoing military modernization efforts. Historically, a major impediment to this trade was Chinese reverse-engineering of Russian/Soviet armaments, most notoriously Chinese development of the J-11B fighter, which is “a direct copy of the Su-27, a one-seat fighter that was developed by the Soviets through the 1970s and 1980s as a match for the U.S. F-15 and F-16.” The problem of Chinese reverse-engineering was so severe that Moscow placed an informal ban on exports of high technology military equipment to China in 2004. However, Putin’s recent approval of advanced weaponry sales to China such as the Su-35 fighter and the S-400 Surface-to-Air Missile system indicates the moratorium has been lifted. Notably, both parties agreed not to include technology transfer licenses in these deals, which should reduce the feasibility (and resultant friction) of Chinese reverse engineering. The trade will remain mutually beneficial so long as Russia’s economy leans on arms exports (defense manufacturing employs 2.5-3 million workers, around 20 percent of Russian manufacturing jobs), and China’s military industrial complex remain suboptimal at indigenously producing key technologies such as high performance jet engines and advanced conventional attack submarines. Russia will also increasingly rely on China as a key customer, as India, long the biggest buyer of Soviet/Russian arms, diversifies its suppliers and develops its domestic defense industry. China’s dependence on Russia for advanced military technology is further reinforced by lack of access to European and American technology due to a Western arms embargo on China in place since 1989.

Western observers often highlight the tensions lurking below the surface of Sino-Russian relations, particularly Chinese economic expansion into Central Asia, and Russian arms sales to China’s regional rivals, primarily India and Vietnam. Nonetheless, these sources of friction are manageable, and, furthermore, the United States has limited ability to exploit them. For example, it would not be in U.S. interests for Sino-Russian competition to intensify in Central Asia, as this would contribute to regional instability and hamstring regional cooperation against Islamist extremism. If the U.S. and Europe succeed in breaking Russian dominance of the arms trade with

India and Vietnam, this would actually have the effect of reducing a source of tension between Moscow and Beijing.

Since Washington will have difficulty exploiting divisions between China and Russia, it makes little sense to “freeze out” one party and pursue rapprochement with the other in the hopes of achieving the sort of realignment that Nixon pulled off in the early 1970s. This is evidenced by previous President Barack Obama’s experience with Russia and China. Although relations with both Moscow and Beijing became strained under Obama, the U.S.-China relationship, despite a growing rivalry in the Asia-Pacific region, remained more functional. It could even be said that Washington and Beijing have developed a peculiar sort of “special relationship.” This is best exemplified by continuing high-level engagement through the annual Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED), an intensive, routinized series of bilateral summits, where American and Chinese leaders engage on an array of international issues. Despite many disagreements, Beijing has a working relationship with Washington, and Moscow does not. As a result, China now occupies the position that Nixon’s America enjoyed during the 1970s: Beijing enjoys closer relations with the two other powers in the strategic triangle than they have with one another.

An effective strategy for Trump to forestall consolidation of a Sino-Russian bloc would be to opt for selective engagement with both Beijing and Moscow. Obviously, engagement would have to be coupled with continued hedging against intensifying security competition with Russia in Europe, and China in Asia. Nevertheless, the Trump administration should also recognize that the shared perception in Beijing and Moscow that Washington aims to subvert and internally weaken its non-democratic rivals is detrimental to relations with both Russia and China, and strengthens Sino-Russian cooperation. Consequently, special efforts should be made to assure Moscow and Beijing that Washington has no interest in interfering in their internal politics. This, rather than tilting toward Moscow, would go a long way toward assuaging the anxiety that Russian and Chinese elites feel about the United States. If Beijing and Moscow begin to see the United States as a normal state with its own interests and goals, rather than a fading hegemon bent on ideological dominance, it would help make triangular diplomacy possible once again.