



Why America Should Fear a Russia-China Alliance

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September 9, 2020

The United States is the world's strongest nation. It has the largest, most productive economy. America's military is peerless. The United States also enjoys unmatched "soft power," with a globe-spanning culture and appealing values.

Nevertheless, the Trump administration's attempt to run the world from Washington, treating allied states as vassals, has faltered. America's most desperate adversaries, including Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, and Syria, have rebuffed U.S. pressure. And when pressed by the United States for support against Tehran European governments sided with the latter.

Perhaps most ominous are the growing if still limited ties between China and Russia. Tension between the two nations is real but antipathy to Washington binds them together. Although some analysts dismiss the importance and sustainability of the relationship, Thomas Joscelyn of the Foundation for Defense of Democracy contended: "the Xi-Putin partnership is arguably the most dangerous relationship on the planet today."

There was nothing inevitable about cooperation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Russian Federation. Relations between the Soviet Union and PRC sometimes were anything but friendly. Ideological differences joined nationalistic passions in 1956 after Nikita Khrushchev made his famous denunciation of Joseph Stalin. Bilateral relations rapidly deteriorated: in 1969 the two governments fought an undeclared border war for several months.

This environment invited Richard Nixon to transform U.S. relations with China three years later. After Mao's death in 1976 bilateral ties substantially expanded, as economic reforms advanced by the new Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, turned the PRC into an important trading partner.

Moscow attempted to ease the breach exploited by the United States and relations eventually normalized. When the Cold War ended there was no reason to expect Washington to end up at odds with both countries. But after the West launched its economic war on Russia a few years ago Beijing and Moscow took their relationship to a higher level, though not into a formal alliance, which remains unlikely. Observed Alexander Gabuev of Carnegie Moscow Center: "China and Russia's budding relationship is still primarily transactional."

However, the two governments continue to draw closer. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have met more than thirty times. Last month Xi called on the two countries to "oppose hegemony and unilateralism," obviously directed against you know who. Noted historian Matthew Dal Santo,

“Russia and China are closer today than at any point since the Sino-Soviet split that Nixon’s China policy seized advantage of.”

Their relationship has military implications. They have reduced the need to hedge against each other, allowing both to concentrate on the United States and its allies. By cooperating militarily they enhance their ability to project power and restrict U.S. dominance. As yet they are better able to thwart Washington’s plans than impose their own, but together they provide a substantial counterweight to American ambitions.

There is more to the relationship, of course. Together they cooperate to circumvent economic sanctions, pursue shared objectives in international organizations, and improve cyberwarfare capabilities. The PRC gains military technology and training; Russia makes commercial sales, acquires sanctioned technology, and receives economic investment.

Both Beijing and Moscow are awful regimes. But the United States (and to a lesser degree European) hubris encouraged them to become confidantes. Now, even advocates of unbridled American primacy have grown nervous about the world’s second-most powerful economy and its second-most powerful military working together.

China poses a greater challenge though. Economic connections and other connections between America and the PRC are great, but the tension between a rising and an existing power reflects the so-called Thucydides Trap, captured by Thucydides’ classic history of the Peloponnesian War. Even if the United States and China avoid conflict, their ambitions will continue to clash. Washington should adopt reasonable accommodations rather than reflexively resist Chinese objectives while maximizing international support for America’s position and minimizing backing for the PRC.

In pursuing the latter Washington should begin with Russia. Moscow’s substantial weaknesses make the condominium with China particularly important but also most uncomfortable. Moreover, America’s and Europe’s estrangement from the Russian Federation makes little sense. Despite hysterical fearmongering by those who see Moscow as an enemy, Russia poses minimal threat to America and almost as little danger to Europe.

Indeed, in his early years, President Vladimir Putin evinced little hostility toward the West. His shift reflected a changed sense of threat, which was an outgrowth of the aggressive United States, and to a lesser degree, European policies. (That does not, of course, excuse his domestic repressions and foreign depredations.)

The Soviet Union’s implosion left Russia as a skeletal power, weak and unstable. Moscow’s temporary impotence allowed the West to carelessly treat the once-grand empire and threatening superpower as if it posed no threat—violating pledges not to expand NATO, dismantling Serbia with nary a nod to Russia’s concerns, pushing “color revolutions,” and preparing alliance membership for Georgia and Ukraine.

In 2014, there was pressure from Europe and America to divert Ukraine economically to the West, followed by support for a street putsch against an elected (though highly flawed) leader oriented toward Russia. Those events put Moscow’s historic naval base at Sebastopol in Crimea at risk. Putin, no fan of liberty or democracy, reacted brutally.

Russia's response was wrong but did not threaten any member of NATO. In fact, Putin's objectives were rather modest, a one-off strike largely designed to preserve the base for the Black Sea fleet and prevent Kiev's membership in the transatlantic alliance. American policymakers should consider how they would have reacted had the Soviet Union helped overthrow Mexico's elected pro-American leader, set forth its list of approved government officials, pushed to shift trade away from the United States to Soviet clients in South America, and invited the new government to join the Warsaw Pact. Washington would have been overcome by mass hysteria and war fever.

Russia is no more threatening today. It has recovered from its nadir but it is still no match for America. Today Moscow is a great power akin to pre-1914 Imperial Russia, which insisted on international respect for its borders and interests. Moscow's nuclear arsenal provides a powerful deterrent, but Russia is in no position to force its will on the United States. Grappling for influence in countries such as Syria is standard great power politics—and there Moscow has much greater, historically rooted interests than America. The chief flashpoint is Washington's insistence that it is entitled to essentially impose the Monroe Doctrine on Europe, with the unlimited right to intervene militarily in Russia's neighborhood. It should surprise no one that Putin refuses to surrender his foreign policy to America.

Additionally, the Europeans, whatever their rhetoric may be, don't have much reason to fear Moscow. The continent vastly outdistances Russia with eleven times the economic strength and three times the population. Countries that refuse to spend much on their militaries do not fear invasion, irrespective of their rhetoric. Even Poland and the Baltics barely break that barrier. If they really feared invasion, then they would develop serious territorial defenses to make aggression too costly for Moscow to contemplate.

Of course, critics of a Russo-rapprochement have assembled a long list of particular offenses and impossible demands. For instance, they point out, Putin is an authoritarian—of which the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny is but the latest evidence. However, Washington long has embraced its favorite dictators throughout South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Remember Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who slices and dices his critics?

There are angry charges of Russian interference in America's elections—yet the U.S. interfered in more than eighty foreign elections between 1945 and 2000. American policymakers also are shocked, shocked that Moscow promotes its interests in Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela, Cuba, and elsewhere, just like Washington pushes its agenda in the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, Mideast, and elsewhere, all closer to Russia than America.

The former wrongly backed war against Ukraine and for Syria's Assad regime, critics note; the United States launched or supported illegal military action against Iraq, Serbia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Moscow may have paid bounties to kill Americans in Afghanistan. In practice, this is little different than Washington providing lethal military aid to Ukraine, for use to kill Russian soldiers and ethnic Russian insurgents. (It is also like America's long-ago assistance to the Afghan Mujahedeen, which killed thousands of Soviet military personnel.)

America's mistakes and misdeeds do not justify Moscow's far worse behavior, but Russia is no outlier in the international system and its illicit behavior is negotiable. Or, at least, it would be if the United States deigned to talk about such issues. America current policy of insisting that Moscow drop its policies because it doesn't like them has failed. Why, for instance, should

Russia abandon an ally of decades, Syria, because Washington seemingly expects to dominate every nation in the Middle East? And Moscow, whether the government is led by Putin or someone else, is likely to surrender Crimea only after America returns Texas to Mexico. Thomas Graham, who handled Russia for the National Security Council under President George W. Bush, has noted that “Other than the Russians capitulating, I have no idea what the administration is trying to achieve concerning Russia.”

Washington should take a different path. Top American leaders should sit down with Russian policymakers and look for compromises that both sides can live with. Admittedly, as Australian Member of the House of Representatives Dave Sharma observed, “the statecraft required is not easy, and the realpolitik underpinning it might be hard to stomach.”

Nevertheless, support for the idea is growing. Henry Kissinger, architect of the breakthrough with China, reportedly urged Trump administration officials to do the same with Moscow today. When asked about the possibility Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, hardly a diplomat’s diplomat, responded: “I do think there’s that opportunity.” Elbridge Colby, a principal at the Marathon Initiative and former Pentagon official, opined: “Our goal should be to ensure a lot of space between China and Russia.”

Moreover, a group of distinguished foreign policy analysts recently used Politico as an outlet to call for a renewed effort to negotiate with Russia, writing that “Our strategic posture should be that which served us well during the Cold War: a balanced commitment to deterrence and détente. Thus, while maintaining our defense, we should also engage Russia in a serious and sustained strategic dialogue that addresses the deeper sources of mistrust and hostility and at the same time focuses on the large and urgent security challenges facing both countries.”

What kind of compromise would be acceptable? There are many possibilities. For instance, America could announce the end of NATO expansion, which increases America’s obligations far more than its resources, and military assistance to Kiev. In return, Russia could halt support for ethnic Russian separatists in the Donbass and guarantee free Ukrainian maritime access. Ukraine could follow through on the Minsk Protocol, approving constitutional guarantees for greater regional autonomy.

On Crimea, the United States and Europe could accept annexation *de facto* but not *jure*. If Russia wants official recognition, then it could hold an internationally monitored referendum. Indeed, Washington’s demand that Crimea be returned without a vote would be unfair to Crimeans. America should not barter its future as if it were a commodity. Irrespective of the past, their consent should determine their future.

Washington and Moscow should agree to mutual disarmament when it comes to electoral interference, including partisan involvement packaged as “democracy promotion,” an American favorite. The West could drop complaints over South Ossetia and Abkhazia—in which indigenous nationalism goes back centuries—and the United States could stop augmenting its financial contributions and troop deployments to Europe if Moscow dropped threatening and hostile actions, from cyberattacks against America and Europe to military maneuvers. Russia could end support of Venezuela’s Nicolas Maduro and intervention in Libya if Washington stopped trying to push Russia out of Syria and overthrow the Assad government.

On other issues of disagreement, the two governments could either engage in traditional horse-trading or agree to disagree. Washington's determination to stand on dubious, and often hypocritical, principle guarantees prolonged, and perhaps eternal, Russian hostility. America's only benefit is the satisfaction of infusing U.S. foreign policy with an abnormally noxious concentration of sanctimony.

Unfortunately, perennial hawks seem horrified by the idea of revived détente. They prefer permanent confrontation, forever growing military outlays, an ever-expanding NATO alliance, and constantly increasing sanctions. Yet their inflated threat claims inadvertently demonstrate the need for a dramatic change in policy. For instance, John Rood, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, argued: "in many ways, Russia's the larger near term threat [compared to China] because of the overwhelming lethality of its nuclear arsenal and also because of some of the behavior that the Russian government has exhibited." His claim is exaggerated—Moscow would fight the United States only if forced to—but, if true, it illustrates why Washington should engage Moscow and seek to moderate its behavior.

Matthew Kroenig of the Atlantic Council contended that "Putin cannot be trusted to abide by arms control agreements or cease-fires in eastern Ukraine." The Russian leader doesn't need to be trusted when his actions can be monitored. Anyway, lack of trustworthiness is not a problem just for Russia: U.S. officials misled—and possibly lied to—the Soviet and Russian governments about expanding NATO after the collapse of the Soviet empire. Washington did not live up to its implicit commitments to Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi. Donald Trump trashed the Obama administration's agreement with Iran. The president's critics were agog that he removed American troops stationed with Syrian Kurds.

Perhaps reflecting such behavior, Vasily Kashin at Moscow's Higher School of Economics wrote: "First, there is no trust between Moscow and Washington and, second, Russia believes U.S. domestic politics is too chaotic and extremist to make any deal-making or subtle maneuvers very likely." However, little subtlety would be necessary to propose broad reciprocal actions, especially if tied to rolling back of one or more sanctions. Moscow could decide whether to accept the invitation.

Former NATO ambassador Kurt Volker claimed the failure of "multiple attempts by U.S. administrations to work together" with Russia. He complained that "The fundamental fallacy in such an argument is to believe that U.S. policies drive Putin's actions. They don't." For Volker "working together" must mean Moscow subordinating itself to Washington's demands. His "America as Vestal Virgin" thesis is unsustainable.

As Mark N. Katz of George Mason University pointed out, even before Putin's rise "Russians became frustrated with how the weak state of the armed forces serve (in their view) to encourage the United States and the West to undertake military actions." Katz cited NATO expansion, attacks on Serbia, the Iraq War and multiple color revolutions. "It was in response to this U.S. tendency to act unilaterally in ways to which Moscow objected that Putin implemented a military strategy aimed at thwarting U.S. unilateralism as well as building up Russia's own ability to act unilaterally."

A long list of the usual hawkish foreign policy suspects wrote in Politico to ask what possible "acceptable resolutions" were possible to resolve U.S.-Russian differences? In horror they cited ideas like leaving Georgia and Russia out of NATO, accepting Russian control of Crimea, and

ignoring Moscow's human-rights violations, and concluded that "any 'rethink' involving such trade-offs is not worth pursuing."

This argument reflects the madness afflicting the bipartisan War Party in Washington. Foreign policy has become a tool for micro-managing the globe, not ensuring the safety of the American people. Adding countries in conflict with Russia to the transatlantic alliance is dangerous and goes against U.S. interests. Moscow will not surrender Crimea absent defeat in a full-scale war, irrespective of America's demands.

Washington ostentatiously, even cheerfully, ignores grievous human rights violations in many nations—Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Turkey, and the Central Asian states, to start. The militaristic policies lauded by the hawkish Greek Chorus, such as providing lethal aid to Ukraine, enhancing U.S. military presence in the Baltics and Poland, and maintaining sanctions, have not acted as an "incentive for Putin to change," as claimed, but instead have assured Russia's continuing hostility and determination to retaliate.

Although Kroenig acknowledged that the Russo-Chinese entente "is worrying," he contended that Russia "does not want to be openly antagonistic" toward the PRC and "does not bring much to the table." Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, observed: "I just don't see Russia as currently oriented playing a role" in containing the PRC. And although she took an approach from a different direction, Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Minister, has assured the public that the United States would not succeed in attempting "to provoke a public clash between Russia and China."

That said, Washington's objective should not be to make Russia an American ally, but to prevent it from becoming a Chinese one. As Dal Santo has observed: "balancing China alone is far more realistic than balancing China and Russia together." Even benevolent neutrality, leavened with a greater willingness to challenge the PRC when Moscow's interests are at risk, would be good for the West.

Perhaps the most bizarre hyperventilation over proposals to shift U.S. policy came from James Gilmore, a neither memorable nor successful presidential candidate now serving as U.S. ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe. He called the putative reformers' article a "shameful document" and said their arguments were "the Russian message that we see here in Vienna." He insisted: "We have a right to hold Russia up to the proper standards of conduct of international relations and foreign policy."

Alas, that argument suffers coming from someone officially representing a nation that routinely engages in aggressive wars, attempts to overthrow foreign governments, and supports nations that flagrantly violate international law and human rights. The question is: would a deal with Moscow increase the likelihood that it holds to "the proper standards of conduct of international relations and foreign policy"? The current policy toward Russia manifestly has failed to chasten Moscow. It is time to try a different approach.

Finally, some critics might be inclined to try to outwait Putin. However, his successor is likely to adopt a similar nationalist approach. Unfortunately, liberalism is a dead force in Russia. "Even if Putin's eventual successor is more democratically inclined, it does not follow that Russia will embrace a worldview more favorable to the United States. The disagreement cuts to the heart of national identity and purpose," according to Thomas Graham, Jr., and Matthew Rojansky, of the

Council on Foreign Relations and Woodrow Wilson Center. The reformers writing for Politico similarly observed: “the reality is that Russia, under Vladimir Putin, operates within a strategic framework deeply rooted in nationalist traditions that resonate with elites and the public alike. An eventual successor, even one more democratically inclined, will likely operate within this same framework.” Indeed, the much-feted Alexei Navalny appears to be a hardline nationalist who opposes Putin’s misrule, not ideology.

Even among those who prefer better relations between Washington and Moscow, there is skepticism that they are attainable. For instance, Lyle Goldstein of the U.S. Naval War College has argued that “China and Russia have a very similar worldview right now and they’re supporting each other pretty strongly. I don’t see a lot of cracks.” Meanwhile, analysts Andrea Kendall-Taylor, David Shullman, and Dan McCormick doubted “efforts to lure Russia away from China would be successful . . . because Putin views the United States and not Beijing as a threat to his hold on power.” Katz suggested that “Putin, it appears, may actually prefer a state of hostility with the United States and the West, given his fears that friendly relations are more likely to undermine him.”

Although powerful forces are pushing China and Russia together, differences between them are real. The PRC has used its greater economic strength to win influence in Central Asia, once part of the Soviet Union. Moreover, Imperial China lost territory to Imperial Russia, including Vladivostok, which some Chinese imagine recovering. Moscow is likely to be increasingly dissatisfied playing number two to Beijing, which seems inevitable as the economic gap between them grows.

Nevertheless, punitive allied actions are inflaming the two governments’ current hostility toward and fear of America. The United States should work to eliminate or moderate factors pushing them together. There is no guarantee of success, but Washington should play the long game.

Foreign policy is the art of the possible, distinguishing between reality and fantasy. American policymakers need to recognize that Russia has separate interests that it will pursue irrespective of Washington’s wishes. Despite near-hysteria among U.S. policymakers who cannot understand foreign rejection of American hegemony, most contested issues—such as Syria and Crimea—are not particularly important, let alone vital, to the United States. In any case, Russia has repeatedly demonstrated that it will not surrender to Washington.

The United States and Europe should seek a civil, cooperative relationship with Russia. Doing so would be the best way to counter today’s informal alliance between Moscow and Beijing. But that requires America to compromise on its own outsize geopolitical ambitions. This approach would do far more to enhance American security than launching another Cold War.

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