

Growing Russia-China entente is a singular failure of US foreign policy and it keeps on compounding with tragic mistakes

Sreemoy Talukdar

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Media reports say Xi Jinping is planning to travel to Moscow to meet Vladimir Putin as soon as next week. Blood pressures are right now shooting up in the West. The Chinese president's visit is part of his yet unconfirmed larger trip to Europe, and reports indicate that he may even conduct a virtual meeting with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, the first time since the start of the war.

It is possible that Xi sees for himself a larger diplomatic role, perhaps even a mediation along the lines of China's peace plan, or the so-called 'political settlement of the Ukraine crisis' that has found few takers in Europe.

Flush from brokering a détente between archrivals Saudi Arabia and Iran in West Asia, the Chinese president is revealing a vaulting ambition to become the world's leading power broker. Xi is keen to project China as part of the solution of world's intractable problems — driving a message that US-based 'international order' isn't the only one that works.

And yet, beyond the veneer of diplomacy, Xi's visit to Moscow reflects a defiant Sino-Russian alignment and a statement of intent from China. It is equally a stunning indictment of the failure of American foreign policy.

China evidently wants to keep Russia close, and Washington's red eye won't pass any muster. China's top diplomat Wang Yi was in Moscow last month paving the way for Xi's eventual visit, and during a meeting with the Russian president, Wang told Putin that while "Chinese-Russian relations aren't directed against any third countries", the ties "certainly can't be subject to pressure from any third countries." The dig at the US was clear.

Washington is feeling the heat. The US state department says it is worried at the growing Sino-Russian entente and has levelled unproven allegations against China that Beijing is considering providing weapons to aid Russia in its war against Ukraine. "We have not yet seen the PRC provide Russia with lethal aid, but we don't believe they've taken it off the table either," said state department spokesperson Ned Price. The allegations are meant to serve the role of a deterrent more than an indictment.

One isn't sure it's working. Pundits have split hairs on the 'limits' of Russia and China's 'no limit' partnership, but the Sino-Russian axis is tightening at a steady clip. China is the biggest buyer of Russian oil and gas, and Russia recently announced that it will invest almost \$100 billion in constructing two gas pipelines to China. Quoting deputy prime minister Alexander Novak, Russian news agency *Tass* has reported that Gazprom, Russia's state-owned energy giant, is accelerating the construction of the Far Eastern route, as well as the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline.

During the recently concluded Raisina Dialogue, Russian foreign minister Sergey Lavrov said that Russia's energy ties with the West is over, indicating that it would focus on new buyers. Given China's enormous thirst for fossil fuels, Russia hopes to recover some of the losses that it would incur at being divorced from the European market. Beyond energy, China's military, political and economic ties are also witnessing firm deepening.

Sanctioned heavily by the West, Moscow is now reliant more than ever on Chinese consumers and businesses. *Axios* reports that only 14 automobile brands are still selling cars in Russia — down from 60 — and 11 of those are Chinese.

In the military arena, Russian exercises with China are getting bigger, more complex, and frequent. According to China's defence ministry, Russian, Chinese and Iranian naval forces are taking part in a joint naval drill named 'Security Bond-2023' in the Gulf of Oman this week. Quite an exclusive club.

China might not be sending weapons to Russia yet, but *Wall Street Journal* reports, citing trade data, that Beijing is providing Moscow with military technology that would aid Russia on the battlefield. According to the report, Russian customs records show “Chinese state-owned defense companies are shipping navigation equipment, jamming technology and jet-fighter parts to sanctioned Russian government-owned defense companies.”

Xi recently welcomed to Beijing Putin’s key ally, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, and both leaders vowed to intensify their partnership. It is evident that the Sino-Russian axis is tightening, and it is doing so in a very lopsided way. This is bad news for the US, and indeed for India as well.

China alone has been described by the US as its ‘pacing challenge’, the “only country with both the intent to reshape the international order and, increasingly, the economic, diplomatic, military, and technological power to do it.”

This danger increases manifold if the world’s presumptive superpower that brings to the table a revanchist attitude, territorial aggression, and an ethno-nationalist imperial vision, is joined by a declining superpower that harbours a deep grievance against the West.

If US-China competition and US-Russia rivalry are two “conflict dyads”, as realist foreign policy scholar John J Mearsheimer points out, and if each of these dyads are deadlier than the one in Cold War, then it should have been in America’s vital national interest to reduce the risk of one dyad, so that it may focus on the other with greater resources and clarity instead of trying to both “walk and chew gum at the same time”.

In that sense, forcing Moscow towards Beijing with decades of hubristic foreign policies and letting Russia develop an entente with China — its biggest strategic threat — is a singular failure of American foreign policy, one that it keeps on compounding.

America’s distraction in Russia brings heaps of benefits for China. Washington is not only struggling to surge production for the weapons that Ukraine needs to thwart Russia, the proxy war is depleting the US of vital resources that it may need if China moves on Taiwan. A *Wall Street Journal* report reveals that America’s defence industry is struggling with the pace of manufacturing weapons, shipyards can’t match up to China’s building of naval fleet, and “weapon designers are rushing to catch up with China and Russia in developing superfast

hypersonic missiles.” US anti-ship cruise missile stockpile may run out in a week if war breaks out over Taiwan, reveals a CSIS study.

When it should have been America’s singular objective to drive Russia and China apart, US-led West’s liberal delusion and a maximalist foreign policy that ran roughshod over Russia’s core strategic interests have ensured that Russia ends up ensconced firmly in China’s camp.

Yet this wasn’t a given. Russia’s alienation and eventual transformation into a villain from the Marvel universe was caused largely by a dogmatic brand of liberal imperialism and America’s ideological arrogance at the height of its unipolar moment.

Even in 2000, when the US Senate had ratified the first wave of NATO’s eastward expansion despite vehement Russian protests — a provocation that was termed “a tragic mistake” by George Kennan in a 1998 interview to *New York Times* — Putin was still harbouring hopes of joining the NATO.

The Russian president had told George Robertson, who led NATO between 1999 and 2003, that Russia wanted to be a part of Europe. “When are you going to invite us to join NATO?”, Robertson recalled Putin, as saying. As Guardian had reported, “Putin told the late David Frost in a BBC interview shortly before he was first inaugurated as Russian president more than 21 years ago that he would not rule out joining NATO ‘if and when Russia’s views are taken into account as those of an equal partner’.”

“Russia,” Putin had said, “is part of the European culture. And I cannot imagine my own country in isolation from Europe and what we often call the civilised world.”

To quote Mearsheimer, “the West’s triple package of policies—NATO enlargement, EU expansion, and democracy promotion” in Ukraine — that culminated with the overthrowing of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich through a Maidan Revolution in 2014 eventually hardened Putin’s stance against the West.

The transcript of a leaked telephone call between Victoria Nuland — the then US assistant secretary of state who played a key role in the Maidan Revolution through which a pro-western administration was installed in Ukraine by overthrowing the democratically elected Yanukovich — and Geoffrey Pyatt, then US ambassador to Ukraine that was wiretapped and leaked to the media by the Russians, shows the extent to which Americans interfered in Ukraine’s election process.

Ted Galen Carpenter writes in *Cato Institute* that “the US-favored candidates included Arseniy Yatsenyuk, the man who became prime minister once Yanukovich was ousted from power. During the telephone call, Nuland stated enthusiastically that “Yats is the guy” who would do the best job. Nuland and Pyatt were engaged in such planning at a time when Yanukovich was still Ukraine’s lawful president.”

Diehard Atlanticists may identify Putin as the evil incarnate who decided to attack Ukraine without a backstory, but the truth is more complex, and a dispassionate view of events reveals that the West shares a disproportionate proportion of the blame for the eventuality that we are presented with today.

What’s more, Joe Biden and his friends across the Atlantic is doubling down on the mistake by painting the outcome of the war in apocalyptic terms — aiming for Russia’s complete and humiliating defeat and Putin’s eventual removal.

This won’t be easy.

Support within America for a bottomless supply of weapons to Ukraine is depleting with key Republican presidential hopefuls such as Ron DeSantis announcing that protecting Kyiv is not in US vital national interest. Ukraine is struggling with the loss of manpower and lack of weaponry and cracks have appeared between the US and EU over China.

As the war grinds on it will not only push a wounded Russia further into the arms of China, tying America’s political fate to the outcome of the war — that Biden administration has done — has resulted in maximalist and counter-maximalist positions on both sides. It is a recipe for escalation and disaster.