



US Arrogance Encourages Sino-Russian Military Alliance

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Political relations between Moscow and Beijing appear closer than ever. The Chinese and Russian militaries are cooperating. Although the two authoritarian giants aren't likely to embark upon a campaign of world conquest, Washington has done much to bring together unlikely partners in opposition to US policy.

Americans should remember history.

In summer 1939 Germany appeared increasingly determined on war. Britain and France hesitated joining the Soviet Union to contain the Nazi regime, since Joseph Stalin also was drenched in blood. Poland doubted that Soviet troops would leave as readily as they came if invited in.

Still, the allied powers were certain that Germany and the USSR would remain at odds. After all, Hitler had devoted his career to attacking the Soviet Union and Bolshevism. Then came the Hitler-Stalin pact, division of Poland, conquest of the Baltic states, and Soviet-German economic cooperation. The deal lasted less than two years, but that was long enough for Berlin to defeat its west European adversaries. The ultimate consequence was to deliver much of Europe to Soviet control.

The U.S. and its allies risk a modern repeat of sorts. In October a Russo-Chinese naval flotilla essentially circled Japan. Reported CNN: "The route taken by the joint Chinese-Russian patrol, through the Osumi Strait at the end of their journey, as well as through the narrow Tsugaru Strait between the main islands of Honshu and Hokkaido earlier in the week, has also attracted a considerable amount of attention."

Equally significant, two months before, reported the *South China Morning Post*, more than 10,000 personnel from both nations conducted operations utilizing joint command and control: "The drills gave the PLA an opportunity to test its newest weapons, as well as showing an ability to work coherently with Russian forces." Artyom Lukin of the Far Eastern Federal University

opined: "It is getting clear that Russia-China military drills are not just symbolic shows of camaraderie, but are increasingly aimed at enhancing battlefield interoperability."

A full-scale military alliance remains very unlikely. First, neither the Russian Federation nor the People's Republic of China appears to have imperial designs like that of Adolf Hitler. He began consuming his neighbors' territory, Austria and Czechoslovakia, barely five years after taking power. After ruling Russia for more than two decades Vladimir Putin has only picked up Crimea and gained access to some geopolitical scraps – Donbass, South Ossetia, Abkhazia. Xi Jinping has been in charge in Beijing for a decade and his threats against Taiwan have yet to be turned into action. A reprise of the infamous Axis this is not.

Second, Beijing and Moscow share no territorial interests. There will be no Russian naval and air forces joining the People's Liberation Army in an amphibious assault on Taiwan. Nor will Chinese troops back the Red Army's progeny in a Blitzkrieg assault on Ukraine. Both regimes are ugly and willing to use violence but lack a common design to carve up the globe.

Third, the two have proved to be much more reluctant to use military force than the US. Neither Putin nor Xi is particularly squeamish, but both appear to be cautious. So far they have embarrassed Washington, which is filled with pundits, legislators, lobbyists, and think tankers warning that Moscow is about to swallow Ukraine, Europe, Middle East, Arctic, and more. A smaller but equally enthusiastic cadre of propagandists is now warning of an imminent Chinese sweep throughout Asia.

Compare US behavior. Since Putin was elected president, America launched an illegal war of aggression against Iraq; abused United Nations authority to protect civilians in Libya to initiate a regime change operation that unleashed a decade of civil war; supported illegal aggression by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates against Yemen; turned limited retaliation against the government of Afghanistan over 9/11 into a failed two-decade long nation-building exercise; shifted from a supposedly temporary operation against the Islamic State to an illegal permanent occupation of roughly a third of Syria in another illicit attempt at regime change; and launched seemingly endless drone attacks across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia that likely have killed more civilians and created more terrorists than that have killed terrorists. In these conflicts *hundreds of thousands of civilians have been killed and millions have been displaced.*

Nevertheless, the increasingly vibrant Chinese-Russian condominium is not benign. Moscow called their ties "an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership." Beijing cited an "all-encompassing partnership and strategic interaction." The potential impacts are significant.

Closer military cooperation will encourage concerted diplomatic action. Working together Moscow and Beijing can wield significant influence. Both possess UN Security Council vetoes and have close relationships with neighboring and developing states. They can counterbalance US demands, especially if Washington is poorly supported by nominal Asian or European allies. The confluence of Chinese and Russian influence is particularly strong in Central Asia and likely to grow in the Middle East.

Although the US is undisputed number one militarily – it ought to be, given the vast amounts of money Congress shovels into the Pentagon year after year – Russia and China are ranked two and three. Together they form a formidable coalition. Moscow has embarked upon a significant modernization project though, noted the International Institute for Strategic Studies, "The trajectory of the defense budget will be key to Russia's ability to continue delivering on its capability aspirations," and lower energy revenues have forced spending cuts. Beijing appears to be less inhibited. Noted IISS: "The PLA continues to boost its numbers of modern platforms, particularly in the air force and navy."

At the very least the two governments can cooperate in force training, weapons development, military exercises, arms sales, intelligence sharing, and other measures to better prepare both armed services for possible action against American forces. The PLA, in particular, can learn from more battle-tested Russian units.

Moreover, the close relationship creates the possibility of joint action, however unlikely it might seem, as well as coordination of independent activities. Imagine the PRC deciding to forcibly reassert control over Taiwan, leading to a burgeoning battle with the US. Moscow might use that fortuitous opportunity to create a "land bridge" to Crimea through Ukraine. Washington would be reluctant to escalate two simultaneous conflicts of such potential magnitude. Especially since neither threatened vital American interests. Coordinated action also likely would leave America's allies in both Asia and Europe wishing Washington well while excusing themselves as being busy, very busy, and thus unavailable for action.

Such a combination still would not pose an existential threat to America – neither Russia nor China is going to attack the US homeland and even together they could not dominate Eurasia with an independent Europe, India, and Japan. However, Moscow and Beijing could further undermine Washington's eternal attempt to exercise global hegemony, treating the Monroe Doctrine as authorization to intervene in China's and Russia's neighborhoods up to their borders and perhaps beyond. The brief unipolar moment of "what we say goes" unquestionably is over with these two great powers working together.

Yet advocates of a continuing American imperium typically dismiss the significance of cooperation between Beijing and Moscow. This response has the feel of police shooing bystanders away from brutal murder scene, stating "nothing to see here." While you might be concerned about the world's number two and three militaries combining against America, policymakers responsible for one disastrous war after another insist that they have everything in hand. What could possibly go wrong?

One contention is that there isn't anything for America to do about Sino-Russian cooperation, so don't worry about it. Both countries are irredeemably hostile and can't be convinced otherwise. Just take their opposition for granted and plan accordingly. That conveniently justifies an even greater increase in military outlays than planned, no matter how high they might already be, but no matter. The US is the unipower, essential nation, hyperpower, and so on, and thus is destined to win. At least as long as the taxpayers provide even more funds to the insatiable military-industrial complex.

The other standard response is that China and Russia aren't serious, and, irrespective of their relationship now, will inevitably break up. So there's no need to do anything because Moscow will end up on America's side. The Russians will set aside the "late unpleasantness" with America, recognize they are destined to lose the end of history argument, surrender to Washington's demands, and enthusiastically accept Moscow's designated role as US junior partner.

While anything is possible, both scenarios are unlikely. Russia does have many connections with the West, especially Europe. And differences between China and Russia over history, territory, influence, and more are very real. Yet Washington's notably hostile campaign in both word and deed against both nations has affirmed the desire of many Russian and Chinese elites to make their way without relying on America. Hence increasing political engagement as well as military cooperation with each other.

That's not all. The longer antagonism toward the US is the central organizing principle of Sino-Russian military relations, the more they will deepen. Argued Carnegie Moscow Center's Vassily Kashin: "with the irreversible worsening of their relations with the United States, both Russia and China have seen the obstacles to broadening their cooperation to more sensitive areas disappear. Furthermore, the arms race in areas of breakthrough technology (such as hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence, and automated systems) and the United States' attempts to activate the potential of its allies like Japan and Israel is actually pushing Moscow and Beijing to cooperate in these areas."

Moreover, even short-term collaboration between two antagonistic powers could yield profoundly negative consequences. Consider World War II. Remove the Hitler-Stalin pact and the period would still likely have been terrible, with destructive war, mass casualties, and difficult postwar recovery. Yet the material destruction and human cost likely would have been much more limited. Even if differences between Moscow and Beijing hinder full co-belligerency today, modest cooperation could encourage new or expand existing conflict.

Thus, Washington should seek to separate the PRC and Russia to the extent possible. That doesn't mean expecting either one to align with the US against the other, since their differences remain unlikely to lead to conflict. However, America and Europe should stop pushing Moscow and Beijing together.

As the weaker power Russia deserves greater allied love and attention. The Putin government and its successors should believe that they have more than one option, that they can lean West if circumstances indicate. Which would encourage Beijing to moderate its actions lest it push Moscow further toward America and the West.

Of course, the usual members of the War Party object to the argument that the US bears any blame for the poor state of Chinese and Russian relations with the US. In fact, Washington did much to inflame Russian hostility. Antiwar.com columnist Ted Snider contended: "It took Putin about 14 years to give up the transformational vision and accept the reality of the second cold war." In Snider's view it took longer for Beijing to decide that the US would allow it to only occupy a subordinate position in the so-called rules-based order.

This is obviously a controversial position, but Putin began his presidency without any evidence of ill will toward America. And Washington's policies, which reflect a consistently hostile policy toward both nations, have exacerbated any underlying proclivities toward confrontation. Once set in motion, cooperation between America's two leading geopolitical adversaries will create additional opportunities to undermine US objectives.

America's unilateral moment long ago disappeared. Yet US foreign policy remains imperious, and risks turning China and Russia into near military allies animated by shared hostility toward Washington. This strategy is stupidity squared. And it might just be enough to lead America into a losing war with both countries.

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