

BACKGROUND

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Confronting the Eurasian Powers of Russia and China

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Abstract

What is often seen as joint collaboration, such as Russia and China's support for Bashar Assad's Syria, is arguably much more the result of each state pursuing its own interests, which happen to coincide. However, there have been several joint Russian–Chinese military exercises in the last years, and there has been some sign of expanding military interaction between the two states. The U.S. should recognize the limits of shared interests with both Russia and China—as well as between them—and pursue a policy of engagement with both Beijing and Moscow. Additionally, the U.S. should develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs with Central Asian countries, as well as highlight differences between Russia and China when appropriate.

Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are the leaders of Russia and China, respectively. One is a former KGB officer, the other a lifelong Communist Party official. Both are committed to ensuring that their respective nations gain in power and influence.

Russia, the largest remnant of the disintegrated Soviet Union, is clearly intent upon re-establishing itself as a great power. This includes dominating Central Europe, beginning with Ukraine and Belarus, and encompassing NATO members such as the Baltic states and various nations of eastern Europe—if it can get away with it. It also entails expanding Russia's influence in other key parts of the world, such as the Middle East, where Russia has just signed a lease to Syrian air and naval facilities for 49 years.¹

Xi Jinping, meanwhile, is pursuing the “Chinese dream” of the “Chinese revival.” These terms have been key themes since Xi took power in 2012. As Xi prepares for a major leadership conference this

KEY POINTS

- Chinese and Russian shared antipathy toward the United States is not the same as mutual sympathy toward each other.
- Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are fundamentally autocratic leaders, operating in governing systems that are essentially authoritarian. Both are therefore highly skeptical of the ideal of individual freedom as championed by the United States.
- What is often seen as collaboration, such as the two states' support for Bashar Assad's Syria, is arguably much more the result of each state pursuing its own interests, which happen to coincide.
- However, there have been several joint Russian–Chinese military operations in the last years, and there has been some sign of expanding military interaction between the two states.
- The U.S. should develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs with Central Asian countries, as well as highlight differences between Russia and China when appropriate.

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fall at the 19th Party Congress, demonstrating progress toward realizing these themes is likely to be a priority. For Xi, central parts of this effort include the modernization of the Chinese military, which is publicly stated as part of the Chinese dream, as well as the “One Belt, One Road” effort designed to expand Chinese economic and political ties through Central and South Asia to Europe and Africa.

Making the World Safe for Autocracy

At first glance, this would appear to make the Chinese and Russian leaders and their respective nations natural allies. After all, the United States is the largest obstacle to either nation dominating its respective region. The United States has consistently opposed Russian and Soviet efforts at hegemony over Europe, while the American-alliance structure in the Pacific offers states an alternative to “bandwagoning” with China.

Moreover, both nations harbor significant resentment against the United States and the world order it helped create. Today the Chinese and Russian political systems are much different, as are their economies, but on one level they see eye to eye more with each other than the United States. Both Putin and Xi are fundamentally autocratic leaders, operating in governing systems that are essentially authoritarian. Both are therefore highly skeptical of the ideal of individual freedom as championed by the United States.

Not surprisingly, there is a certain degree of shared interest in their respective foreign policy, as the two nations and their leaders strive to improve their places in the world. In supporting Bashar Assad’s Syria, for example, the two states’ concerns neatly coincide.

Russia has long supported the Assad regime in Syria. Russian and Soviet leaders supported Bashar Assad’s father, Hafez al-Assad. Moscow has long been the key arms supplier to Damascus. In return, Syria opened key port facilities at Tartus to Soviet as well as Russian naval forces and has allowed Russian aircraft to operate from Hmeymim Air Base near Latakia.

China, on the other hand, is not so much support-

ive of the Assad regime as it is unwilling to countenance the toppling of a sovereign foreign government. Both Russia and China arguably see the catastrophic situation in Libya as a cautionary tale against interfering in the internal affairs of other states. As important, said interference occurred in part because Moscow and Beijing acquiesced.

Muammar Qadhafi was toppled, after all, after the western powers had persuaded China and Russia not to veto the establishment of an aerial no-fly zone, ostensibly intended for humanitarian purposes. Western air forces, however, used that same no-fly zone to disrupt the Libyan military, facilitating the removal of the Libyan leader—to the detriment of both Russian and Chinese interests. Indeed, the Libyan civil war saw China conduct its first non-combatant evacuation operation after Libyan protestors threatened Chinese oil field workers.

Not only were Chinese interests directly harmed by the removal of the Libyan dictator, but a potential precedent was set for the exploitation of no-fly zones and other ostensibly humanitarian measures to facilitate regime change. For China, whose longtime concerns with sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs are well known, this line of reasoning is anathema.

For this reason, China and Russia have redoubled their efforts to strengthen sovereignty, and extend it into what had long been international common spaces. Both states, for example, seek to limit the free flow of information, which threatens their grip on their populations. Moscow and Beijing strive to limit the Internet and information flows through cyberspace. Similarly, both states have pushed space arms-control treaties that would asymmetrically disadvantage the United States—especially since neither China nor Russia are as dependent upon space for economic or military purposes.

Meanwhile, there has been some sign of expanding military interaction between the two states. This year, Chinese naval forces entered the Baltic for the first time in history to engage in joint military exercises with Russia.² These follow joint naval exercises in the

1. Rod Nordland, “Russia Signs Deal for Syria Bases; Turkey Appears to Accept Assad,” *The New York Times*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/20/world/middleeast/russia-turkey-syria-deal.html> (accessed August 18, 2017), and “Putin Signs Syria Base Deal, Cementing Russia’s Presence There for Half a Century,” Reuters, July 27, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-russia-syria-idUSKBN1AC1R9> (accessed August 7, 2017).

2. Andrew Higgins, “China and Russia Hold First Joint Naval Drill in the Baltic Sea,” *The New York Times*, July 25, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/world/europe/china-russia-baltic-navy-exercises.html> (accessed August 7, 2017).

Mediterranean in 2015.³ Russia continues to sell arms to China, albeit reluctantly.

Sino–Russian Rivalry

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Russia and China are allies. What is often seen as collaboration, such as the two states' support for Bashar Assad's Syria, is arguably much more the result of each state pursuing its own interests, which happen to coincide. Their shared antipathy toward the United States is not the same as mutual sympathy toward each other.

This is not the 1950s, when the Soviet Union and China shared common political and economic strategies and openly coordinated their defense and foreign policies. Today's Russian and Chinese political systems are very different. Not all autocracies are created equal. While Xi Jinping has greatly concentrated power in his own hands, the Chinese Communist Party Politburo retains significant power.

As important, the Chinese and Russian economic systems have significantly diverged. China is the world's second-largest economy and largest trading power. The Chinese economy has also become much more sophisticated, producing microchips, machine tools, and a variety of advanced materials. By contrast, Russia's economy has not only shrunk from the Soviet era, but remains heavily dependent on exports of natural resources (especially oil) and weapons. Where once Russia exported machine tools, consumer goods, and industrial equipment to China, the situation is now reversed, with Chinese goods dominating trade, while Russia primarily provides energy resources—and often only after hard bargaining.

Consequently, there is some evidence that the two states, in fact, are in a muted rivalry. The land-based Silk Road Economic Belt portion of the “One Belt, One Road” initiative, for example, includes the construction of a massive array of pipelines, railways, and other infrastructure through Central Asia—but then heads southward toward Iran, rather than westward through Russia. The Maritime Silk Road, meanwhile, envisions ports throughout the Indian Ocean, leading through the Red Sea to the Mediterranean.

The lack of a Russian focus in Chinese investments reinforces a larger reality that China and

Russia are competing with each other for influence in Central Asia. Russia has pushed for regional economic integration with several of the Central Asian states in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union (which includes Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, as well as Russia, Belarus, and Armenia), to complement its long-standing political ties. China, meanwhile, was already investing in various regional economies even before Xi Jinping came to power, including energy projects in Kazakhstan.

Both Russia and China are founding members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which also includes the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. While some have seen it as a potential military counterweight to NATO, the organization seems to be much more a forum for political competition among its various members than a cohesive military alliance against the United States and the West. In this region, Russian political influence (including extensive ties to all political factions and players) is matched against growing Chinese economic investment and interests.

Nor is Russo–Chinese competition limited to the Eurasian heartland. Over the past several years, Russia has undertaken several moves to expand its ties to North Korea. In 2014, Russia wrote off nearly 90 percent of North Korea's debts, amounting to some \$10 billion. While there was little prospect that Moscow would ever have been repaid this money, it was nonetheless a powerful gesture, considering that China appears not to have done the same. Subsequent news reports have suggested that Russia has sold oil to North Korea for much of the past decade and also expanded its food aid to Pyongyang. Russia–North Korea trade has reportedly increased 73 percent this year.⁴

Russian aid and trade with North Korea is arguably driven by not only a desire to complicate American security calculations, but also Chinese. North Korea was a major center of Sino–Soviet competition throughout the Cold War, as both Moscow and Beijing sought to draw Pyongyang to their own side. Even before the Cold War, Korea was a vital strategic crossroads, affecting Chinese, Russian, and Japanese security.

3. “China, Russia to Hold First Joint Mediterranean Naval Drills in May,” Reuters, April 30, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-russia-military-idUSKBN0NL16F20150430> (accessed August 7, 2017).

4. Oren Dorell, “As China Pulls Trade from North Korea, Russia Gets Cozy with Kim Jong Un,” *USA Today*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2017/06/05/russia-boosts-trade-north-korea-china-cuts/102389824/> (accessed August 7, 2017).

Today, Vladimir Putin's aid to North Korea provides Kim Jong Un with greater latitude to ignore Xi Jinping by limiting the ability of China to really pressure North Korea (if Beijing actually wanted to). Russian aid means that if China complies with Western pressure to reduce ties to North Korea, it is effectively ceding influence to Moscow. Conversely, if China competes with Russia by increasing its own support for the North Korean regime, it antagonizes the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. Xi Jinping is unlikely to view this unpalatable choice with equanimity.

Prospects for the United States

For the United States, this complex three-way relationship will require adroit handling of not only Moscow and Beijing, but also the various states targeted by the Eurasian powers. The U.S. should:

- **Recognize the limits of shared interests with both Russia and China—as well as between them.** Washington should not assume that these two states automatically agree with each other and should therefore seek to deal with them separately. Most of the time, it is essential to recognize that Russia and China are at best aligned—but not allied. Consequently, cooperation with either country should be on a case-by-case basis, recognizing the limits of their shared interests. In particular, there is little reason to believe that Russian and Chinese armed forces are engaging in joint military planning. Episodic high-profile joint exercises are not the same as the kind of joint planning that typifies U.S.–NATO, U.S.–Japan, or U.S.–South Korea military cooperation—although the U.S. should keep an eye on their interactions in case such closeness eventually evolves.
- **Pursue a policy of engagement with both Beijing and Moscow.** Efforts to isolate either country could actually push them closer together. However, Washington should not compromise its security and economic ties with its own allies to pursue relations with Beijing or Moscow. To this end, the United States should seek to exploit the Russian concerns that China is a long-term threat in the Far East and Central Asia. The U.S. can best achieve this by ensuring that the United States is publicly known to be consulting equally with Beijing and Moscow on issues that likely affect all of them, such as Afghanistan and Central Asian security. This approach may allow divergent interests and differing viewpoints to be highlighted.
- **Promote the rule of law, and encourage transparency and good governance in all of Central Asia, as well as in Russia and China.** The Central Asians are not fools and understand that cooperation with Russia and China comes at a price. They would like to have additional alternatives and not remain beholden to either Moscow or Beijing. Washington can provide that third option, so long as it recognizes that these states also do not wish to be dependent on the United States. To this end, promoting the rule of law, promoting civil society, and working with state and civil society counterparts in all of these countries can strengthen them without making the U.S. appear overbearing. By utilizing soft-power policy tools, including social media, public diplomacy, and international broadcasting, the United States can communicate key messages to the various audiences, both about the state of politics in their respective nations as well as alternative perspectives on the relative interests of the key players.
- **Develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation programs with Central Asian countries.** U.S. cooperation with Central Asian countries should include security-related efforts, such as programs that prevent al-Qaeda and the Taliban from projecting power into Central Asia. The U.S. should assist the armed forces and security services of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to develop institutional capabilities. In addition, the United States, in conjunction with India, Japan, and South Korea, can also offer assistance in developing infrastructure, education, health care, and free and open media in the Russian Far East as well as in the Central Asian republics. Offering these countries additional choices would allow them to thread an autonomous path between China and Russia—and perhaps even align with the United States.
- **Highlight the contradictions between Russia and China.** Russia sees China as a partner it has to deal with—but not necessarily happily or willingly. Moscow, for example, has long sold more advanced weapons to India than it has been willing to provide China, a point of irritation to Bei-

China, meanwhile, appears to be preparing to compete with Russia on the international arms market—often with weapons reverse-engineered from Russian designs! (Russian decision makers are as worried about Chinese disrespect for intellectual property rights as their Western counterparts.) American commentators should regularly highlight such contradictions and ensure that wherever such contradictions exist, they are kept in the public eye.

Conclusions: It's Complicated

It would be a mistake to believe that relations between China and Russia remain fixed in the hostility that marked so much of the Cold War. The resolution of the major border issues at the end of the Soviet Union removed many of the points of fric-

tion between Beijing and Moscow. At the same time, however, it would also be a mistake to think that the two states are engaged in an alliance to counter the United States. At the moment, both states clearly see it in their respective interests to coordinate some of their efforts to frustrate American policies. But at the same time, there remain significant differences in their respective goals that will limit the extent of their cooperation. It is ultimately to America's advantage to see the situation accurately, identifying those points of contention as well as convergence between Moscow and Beijing—and think about how to put them to use over the long term.

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