

The Future of Sino-Russian Cooperation:



A Rough

Much has been made of a possible Sino-Russian alliance across military and economic aspects crowding out US influence in Asia. Politicians and academics afraid of such an alliance cite recent UN voting records, where their interests seem to converge against US desires such as in Iran or Syria, or the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) formation to foster military and economic cooperation looking to push out US interests, or cooperation in Central Asia. However, these fears are overblown. China is holding Russia close in order to provide itself with more room to grow. Sino-Russo cooperation is merely a smoke-screen masking underlying tensions that will emerge over the next 5-10 years.

History of Cooperation

China and Russia's shared history begins back in the late 16th century, but was only solidified in the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. The Treaty of Nerchinsk was the first treaty in which China recognized the other signatory as their equal. Up until very recently, "the great distance between the main population and manufacturing areas of the two countries [kept] the trade potential between them lower than such a long common border might otherwise imply." The relationship has always been rocky. However, it was exacerbated by Russia's participation in the "unequal treaties" during the Qing dynasty as well as difficulties during the Soviet era. China resented Russia's posture as the 'know all,' as well as their refusal to share technology

with the other communist states. Russia shipped technology and arms but not the instructions on how to use those items. In addition, China felt the Soviet Union under Khrushchev was revisionist and going away from the communist perfection of the Stalin years. Currently China and Russia have a "Strategic Partnership" through their Treaty of Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation that contains many elements of an alliance, but which both sides carefully point out is not an alliance. Examples include their agreement that they shall not enter any alliance without the others knowledge or undermine each other interests.

When thinking of the UN Security Council, a common refrain is the US-Russia split, where Russia and China often veto or abstain from votes the US deems crucial. Some view the voting behavior as symptomatic of a larger Sino-Russo rejection of international norms and behaviors showcasing a deeper revisionist desire. It is more likely representative of a desire to thwart American ambitions than a nefarious dismissal of the current global system. Russia's elites see recent Western expansionist moves as detrimental to Russia's national interests. However, the abstaining votes are more indicative of China's "wait and see" diplomacy, which advocates for quietly learning about multi-lateral diplomacy and only being active if China's interests are affected. As Shambaugh (2013) points out "Both [countries] share strong opposition to coercion and

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the use of force in international affairs, and both cherish state sovereignty as the most basic principle of diplomacy.” These interests have coincided with a more active American foreign policy, including two wars in their backyard, which increased their worries and anti-American rhetoric.

Comparing the two countries provides interesting results, especially when contrasted with the United States. Table one presents a few economic statistics. While Russia’s economy is only 24.5% the size of China’s, their GDP per capita is more than double. In 2013, Brenton, an area specialist, predicted that by 2030, Russia’s GDP will be less than 14% of China’s. Both countries are high savers, but Russia has been recently declining while China is still increasing its savings rate. For both China and Russia their relationship with the West is more important than their relationship with each other.

The last two decades were an important aspect of bilateral Russia-Chinese cooperation; between 2000 and 2010, Russia’s annual exports to China quadrupled and China’s to Russia rose by 20 times. According to Ferdinand, another economist, the importance of bilateral trade is actually declining between the two. Yet, Brenton disagrees, arguing that China is now a key trading partner for Russia, but Russia is a marginal trading partner for China (having less than 2% of both exports and imports).

Significance of Cooperation

China’s and Russia’s interpretation of their cooperation is vastly different. Brenton argues that China sees Russia as an unreliable partner due to its unpredictability and poor quality of internal governance. For China, the relationship with Russia provides them with a stable neighborhood as well as a convenient source for raw materials. For Russia, they increasingly see Chinese workers as a threat. In addition, Russia sees opportunity in China to diversify supply away from Europe for gas and raw materials. Russia is less concerned about the internal governance of China.

Both Russia and China are dedicated to Central Asian stability. Both promote a form of state dominance in what has been called an Axis of Authoritarianism. In addition, they created the SCO to enhance their mutual influence in Central Asia at the expense of the U.S. Yet the SCO is not all cooperation. It is Central Asia where China and Russia have the best opportunity to work together to keep the Central Asian economies focused mostly on raw material supply rather than industrialize to compete with China or Russia. However, while Russia wants to follow this path by working to keep the Central Asian economies reliant on Russia, China has invested heavily in the region’s infrastructure in order to benefit their adjoining provinces.

For the US, the possibility of a Sino-Russo alliance is ex-

tremely worrying. The first threat emanates from Russian and Chinese support for regimes in Syria and Iran, and other authoritarian regimes like North Korea. These regimes are dangerous to the region and the world through state sponsored terrorism, nuclear weapons, chemical weapons, and non-military threats such as disease spreading. China's and Russia's belief in non-intervention, have let these conflicts to grow faster than the US can respond.

In addition, through the P5+1, the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany, they have both been influential in Iran; even while China continues to thwart international sanctions against Iran. If the two countries cooperate and become even more revisionist, they would be in a better position than ever before to cause problems for the U.S. Yet the opposite is also true; if they are more conforming than expected it will be a boost for the international order. There are signs this is beginning to occur. Ikenberry, a world renowned economist, argues that China and Russia are "part time spoilers" rather than full scale revisionist powers.



Map of Central Asia

Outlook of Cooperation

Russia and China's version of state sponsored economic growth is attractive to aging pseudo-dictators in the Eurasian region, or for those who want to stay in power and keep gathering corrupt rents. In addition, for many in Eurasia, exports or remittances from Russia and China represent a large portion of their income. As Jeffery Reaves, a professor at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies, shows, the states have adopted very different ways of coping with the rise of China: institutionalizing dissent and making laws against Chinese investment or rhetoric. However, many states are turning from rhetoric to enacting policy changes against China. Towards Russia, Central Asian states have had three reactions to coercive Russian energy diplomacy: compliance, defiance, or mutual accommodation. The majority of states in the region welcome Chinese investment in their infrastructure. Russia is attractive for the subsidized gas prices it offers to many countries. If China and Russia

were able to cooperate they could co-opt what influence the US has in Central Asia. Even with the drawdown in Afghanistan, the region remains important to US interests. According to Jeffery Mankoff, Deputy Director and Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, "The region's principal threats emanate from domestic governance problems and weak state institutions that heighten the possibility of political instability, and the region's two largest states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, face uncertain succession challenges for leadership that date back to the Soviet period."

In the short term the US can expect an increase in cooperation between China and Russia due to raw materials supply and China's risk adverse diplomacy. However, subterfuge is also expected. China will slowly be increasing its stake in Central Asia at Russia's expense. So far, Russia has accepted Chinese investment as a good thing, but its anxiety is growing. In the long term, there will be a diplomatic split. Russia will become increasingly uncomfortable with China's presence in Central Asia. China will become increasing bothered by Russia's incursions to its neighbors sovereign space. China disagreed with Russia's invasion of both Georgia and Ukraine. If Russia does not formulate an effective policy against China's economic growth, and deal with its own internal corruption problems, it risks losing market share globally. Russia also risks simply becoming a supplier of raw materials. China would emerge as a "winner" who is able to directly challenge US influence not only in Central Asia, but in the world at large.

Conclusion

The fears of a Sino-Russo world order sensationalized in news reports are not based in fact. While both countries are increasing their bilateral trade, as well as coordinating trade in Central Asia, it is more indicative of narrow self-interest rather than a desire to overthrow the liberal world order. China and Russia have a turbulent, but shared, history that positions them as counterweight to U.S. global hegemony. However, they still cannot compete with the US's economic or military might. Their 'Axis of Authoritarianism' is attractive to leaders who want a stronger role for the state, but it is unlikely to change the current world order.

Still, the possibility of a deeper alliance is problematic for the US, as Russia and China are uniquely positioned to counter US activity in their regions of the world. While cooperation may increase over the short run, it most likely fall apart. The US will not have to fear an extensive Sino-Russo cooperation for long.

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