

# Russia-China Tandem Changes the World

The West's persistent demonization of Russia over the past decade has pushed Moscow into a de facto alliance with China, changing the geopolitical landscape in ways that U.S. pundits still won't admit, writes Gilbert Doctorow.

By Gilbert Doctorow

Much of what Western "experts" assert about Russia – especially its supposed economic and political fragility and its allegedly unsustainable partnership with China – is wrong, resulting not only from the limited knowledge of the real situation on the ground but from a prejudicial mindset that does not want to get at the facts, i.e. from wishful thinking.

Russia may not be experiencing dynamic growth, but over the past two years it has survived a crisis of circumstance in depressed oil prices and economic warfare against it by the West that would have felled less competently managed governments enjoying less robust popularity than is the case in Vladimir Putin's Russia. Moreover, as stagnant of Russia's GNP has been, the numbers have been on a par with Western Europe's very slow growth.

Meanwhile, Russian agriculture is booming, with the 2017 grain harvest the best in 100 years despite very adverse climatic conditions from early spring. In parallel, domestically produced farm machinery has been going from strength to strength. Other major Industrial sectors like civil aircraft production have revived with the launch of new and credible models for both domestic and export markets.

Major infrastructure projects representing phenomenal engineering feats like the bridge across the Kerch straits to Crimea are proceeding on schedule to successful termination in the full glare of regular television broadcasts. So where is this decrepit Russia that our Western commentators describe daily?

The chief reason for the many wrongheaded observations is not so hard to discover. The ongoing rampant conformism in American and Western thinking about Russia has taken control not only of our journalists and commentators but also of our academic specialists who serve up to their students and to the general public what is expected and demanded: proof of the viciousness of the "Putin regime" and celebration of the brave souls in Russia who go up against this regime, such as the blogger-turned-politician Alexander Navalny or Russia's own Paris Hilton, the socialite-turned-political-activist Ksenia Sochak.

Although vast amounts of information are available about Russia in open sources,

meaning the Russian press and commercial as well as state television, these are largely ignored. The sour grapes Russian opposition personalities who have settled in the United States are instead given the microphone to sound off about their former homeland. Meanwhile, anyone taking care to read, hear and analyze the words of Vladimir Putin becomes in these circles a "stooge." All of this limits greatly the accuracy and usefulness of what passes for expertise about Russia.

In short, the field of Russia studies suffers, as it also did during the heyday of the Cold War, from a narrow ideological perspective and from the failure to put information about Russia in some factually anchored framework of how Russia fits in a comparative international setting.

Just what this means was brought into perspective last week by a rare moment of erudition regarding Russia when professor emeritus of the London School of Economics Dominic Lieven delivered a lecture in Sochi at the latest Valdai Club annual meeting summarizing his take on the Russian Revolution of 1917.

Lieven, arguably the greatest living historian of imperial Russia, is one of the very rare birds who brought to his Russian studies a profound knowledge of the rest of the world and in particular of the other imperial powers of the Nineteenth Century with which Russia was competing. This knowledge takes in both hard and soft power, meaning on the one hand, military and diplomatic prowess and, on the other, the intellectual processes which are used to justify imperial domination and constitute a world view if not a full-fledged ideology.

### **Self-blinded 'Experts'**

By contrast, today's international relations "experts" lack the in-depth knowledge of Russia to say something serious and valuable for policy formulation. The whole field of area studies has atrophied in the United States over the past 20 years, with actual knowledge of history, languages, cultures being largely scuttled in favor of numerical skills that will provide sure employment in banks and NGOs upon graduation. The diplomas have been systematically depreciated.

The result of the foregoing is that there are very few academics who can put the emerging Russian-Chinese alliance into a comparative context. And those who do exist are systematically excluded from establishment publications and roundtable public discussions in the United States for not being sufficiently hostile to Russia.

If that were not the case, one could look at the Russian-Chinese partnership as it compares firstly with the American-Chinese partnership created by Richard

Nixon and Henry Kissinger, which is now being replaced by the emerging Russian-Chinese relationship. Kissinger was fully capable of doing this when he wrote his book *On China* in 2011, but Kissinger chose to ignore the Russian-Chinese partnership though its existence was perfectly clear when he was writing his text. Perhaps he did not want to face the reality of how his legacy from the 1970s had been squandered.

What we find in Kissinger's description of his accomplishments in the 1970s is that the American-Chinese partnership was all done at arm's length. There was no alliance properly speaking, no treaty, in keeping with China's firm commitment not to accept entanglement in mutual obligations with other powers. The relationship was two sovereign states conferring regularly on international developments of mutual interest and pursuing policies that in practice proceeded in parallel to influence global affairs in a coherent manner.

This bare minimum of a relationship was overtaken and surpassed by Russia and China some time ago. The relationship has moved on to ever larger joint investments in major infrastructure projects having great importance to both parties, none more so than the gas pipelines that will bring very large volumes of Siberian gas to Chinese markets in a deal valued at \$400 billion.

Meanwhile, in parallel, Russia has displaced Saudi Arabia as China's biggest supplier of crude oil, and trading is now being done in yuan rather than petrodollars. There is also a good deal of joint investment in high technology civilian and military projects. And there are joint military exercises in areas ever farther from the home bases of both countries.

I think it is helpful to look at this partnership as resembling the French-German partnership that steered the creation and development of what is now the European Union. From the very beginning, Germany was the stronger partner economically with France's economy experiencing relative stagnation. Indeed, one might well have wondered why the two countries remained in this partnership as nominal equals.

The answer was never hard to find: with its historical burden from the Nazi epoch, Germany was, and to this day remains, incapable of taking responsibility in its own name for the European Union. The French served as the smokescreen for German power. Since the 1990s, that role has largely been transferred to the E.U. central bodies in Brussels, where key decision-making positions are in fact appointed by Berlin. Yet, France remains an important junior partner in the German-driven process.

## **The Russian-Chinese Tandem**

One may say much the same about the Russian-Chinese tandem. Russia is essential to China because of Moscow's long experience managing global relations going back to the period of the Cold War and because of its willingness and ability today to stand up directly to the American hegemon, whereas China, with its heavy dependence on its vast exports to the U.S., cannot do so without endangering vital interests. Moreover, since the Western establishment sees China as the long-term challenge to its supremacy, it is best for Beijing to exercise its influence through another power, which today is Russia.

Of course, in light of the E.U.'s Brexit troubles and Trump's abandonment of world leadership, it is undeniably possible that China will step out of the shadows and seek to assume direction of global governance. But that would be problematic. China faces major domestic challenges including the transition of its economy from being led by exports to relying more on domestic consumption. That will absorb the attention of its political leadership for some time.

Kissinger, who has been an adviser to Trump, whispers in Trump's ear about the importance of separating Russia from China, but Kissinger's limited and outdated knowledge of Russia has caused him to underestimate the powerful motives behind the Russian-Chinese relationship. America's less gifted and informed pundits are even more clueless.

For one thing, given the sustained hostility directed at Russia from the West in general and from Washington in particular, it is inconceivable that Putin would be wooed away from Beijing by some flirtatious "come hither" gestures from the Trump administration even if that were politically possible for Trump to do. One of Putin's outstanding features is his loyalty to his friends and his principles as well as to his nation's interests.

As Putin revealed during his address and Q&A at the Valdai Club gathering this past week, he now bears a deep distrust of the West in light of its having taken crude advantage of Russia's weakness in the 1990s and by its expansion of NATO to Russian borders and other threatening actions. Whatever hopes Putin once may have held for warmer relations with the West, those hopes have been dashed over the past several years.

Putting personalities aside, Russian foreign policy has a commonality that is rare to see on the world stage: actions first, diplomatic charters later. Russia's political relations with China come on top of massive mutual investments that have taken many years to agree on and execute.

In the same way, Russia is proceeding with Japan to work towards a formal peace treaty by first putting in place massive trade and investment projects. It is entirely foreseeable that the first step to the treaty will be the start of

construction in 2018 of a railway bridge in the Far East linking the Russian island of Sakhalin with the mainland. The general contractor and engineering team is also in place: Arkady Rotenberg and his SGM Group. That bridge is the prerequisite for Japan and Russia signing a \$50 billion deal to build a railway bridge linking Sakhalin and Hokkaido. This bridge will draw the attention of the whole region to Russian-Japanese cooperation. It could be the foundation for a durable and not merely paper peace treaty resolving the territorial dispute over the Kurile Islands.

### **Lost Opportunities**

In light of these realities, it is puerile to speak of detaching Russia from China with the promise of normalized relations with the West. The opportunity to do that existed in the 1990s, when President Boris Yeltsin and his "Mr. Yes" Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev did everything possible to win U.S. agreement to Russian accession to NATO immediately following accession by Poland. To no avail.

Then again early in Putin's presidency, the Russians made a determined effort to win admission to the Western alliance. Again to no avail. Russia was excluded, and measures were taken to contain it, to place it in a small box as just another European regional power.

Finally, following the confrontation with the United States and Europe over their backing of the 2014 coup in Ukraine, followed by the Russian annexation/merger with Crimea, and Russian support for the insurgency in Ukraine's Donbas region, Russia openly was cast as the enemy. It was compelled to mobilize all of its friendships internationally to stay afloat. No state was more helpful in this regard than China. Such moments are not forgotten or betrayed.

The Kremlin understands full well that the West has nothing substantial to offer Russia as long as the U.S. elites insist on maintaining global hegemony at all costs. The only thing that could get the Kremlin's attention would be consultations to revise the security architecture of Europe with a view to bringing Russia in from the cold. This was the proposal of then President Dmitry Medvedev in 2010, but his initiative was met by stony silence from the West. Bringing in Russia would mean according it influence proportionate to its military weight, and that is something NATO has opposed tooth and nail to this day.

It is for this reason, the failure to seek solutions to the big issue of Russia's place in overall security, that the re-set initiative under Barack Obama failed. It is for this reason that Henry Kissinger's advice to Donald

Trump at the start of his presidency to offer relief from sanctions in return for progress on disarmament rather than implementation of the Minsk accords regarding the Ukraine crisis also failed, with Vladimir Putin giving a firm “nyet.”

Implicit in the few American “carrots” being extended to Russia these days is its acceptance of the anti-Russian regime in Ukraine and its authority over the heavily ethnic Russian areas of the Donbas and Crimea, concessions that would be politically devastating to Putin inside Russia. Yet, that “normalization” would still leave the much milder but still nasty “human rights” sanctions that the U.S. imposed in 2012 through the Magnitsky Act, driven by what the Kremlin regards as false propaganda surrounding the criminal case and death of accountant Sergei Magnitsky.

The sting of the Magnitsky Act was to discredit Russia and prepare the way for it being designated a pariah state. It came amidst an already longstanding campaign of demonization of the Russian president in the U.S. media. In fact, to begin to find a halfway normal period of bilateral relations, you would have to go back to before George W. Bush’s invasion of Iraq, which Russia denounced along with Germany and France. The latter two powers got a tap on the wrist from Washington. For Russia, it was the start of a period of reckoning for its uncooperativeness with American global domination.

### **Demonizing Russia**

As for Europe and Russia, the question is very similar. To find mention of a strategic relationship, firstly from the German Foreign Ministry, you have to go back to before 2012. And what constituted normality then? At the time, renewal of the E.U.-Russia cooperation agreement was already being held up for years, nominally over a difference of views on the provisions of E.U. law governing gas deliveries through Russian-owned pipelines. Behind this difference was the total opposition of the Baltic States and Poland to anything resembling normal relations with Russia, for which they received full encouragement from the U.S.

The rallying cry was to put a stop to Russia’s status as “monopoly supplier” to Europe as regards gas, but also oil. Of course, no monopoly ever existed, nor does it exist today, but determined geopolitical actors never let such details stand in the way of policy formulation.

This hostility also played out in the contest of wills between the E.U. and Russia over introduction of a visa-free regime for travel by their respective citizens. Here the opposition of Germany’s Angela Merkel, justified by her vicious characterization of Russia as a mafia state, doomed the visa-free regime and by the same token doomed normal relations.

All of this unfinished business has to be addressed and put right for there to be any possibility of the U.S. and the E.U. ending their hostility toward Russia and for the Kremlin to regain any trust toward the West. Even then, however, Russia would not surrender its valued relationship with China.

In my view, the de facto Russian-Chinese alliance matches the de jure US-West European alliance. The net result of both is the partition of the world into two camps. We now have, in effect, a bipolar world that broadly resembles that of the Cold War, though still in a formative stage since many countries have not signed on definitively to one side or another.

Of course, more-or-less neutral states were also a feature of the Cold War, creating what was called the group of Nonaligned Nations, led back then by India and Yugoslavia. Yugoslavia no longer exists, but India has continued its tradition of let both poles court it, trying to eke out the greatest benefit to itself.

To be sure, a great many political scientists in the U.S., in Europe and in Russia as well, insist that we already have a multipolar world, saying that power is too diffuse in the world today, especially considering the rise of non-state actors after 1991. But the reality is that very few states or non-states can project power outside their own region. Only the two big blocs can do that.

The theoreticians defending multipolarity speak of a return to the balance of power of the Nineteenth Century, invoking the Congress of Vienna as a possible model for today's world governance. This is an approach that Henry Kissinger laid out in 1994 in his book *Diplomacy*.

Within Russia, this concept has found support in some influential think tanks and is most notably associated with Sergei Karaganov, head of the Council of Foreign and Defense Policy. Nonetheless, I maintain that everyday realities of power will decide this question. And is there anything inherently wrong with this de facto bipolar world, assuming the tensions can be managed and a major war averted?

In my view, two large blocs are more likely to keep global order because the scope of activities by proxies can be reined in – as often happened during the Cold War – by big powers not wanting their various clients to disrupt a functioning world order. The tails are less likely to wag the dog.

Moreover, as regards the Russia-China strategic partnership or alliance, Western observers should take comfort and not take alarm. The rise of China is a given whatever the constellation of great powers may wish. The close embrace of Russia and China also can serve as a moderating influence on China, given Russia's

greater experience in world leadership.

For all of the above positive and negative reasons, the Russia-China relationship should be viewed with equanimity in Western capitals

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