

CHINA, RUSSIA, AND ATTEMPTS TO BUILD THE 'EURASIAN' ORDER

Elasticity of the order is already evident in avoidance by Beijing and Moscow to base their ties on official military and political alliances. Many in the West consider this as a sign of ultimately diverging visions that Beijing and Moscow have, but in the emerging global order where the liberal internationalism retrenches and will likely be limited to only certain regions of the world, thereby avoiding formal alliances might actually prove more beneficial.

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The world has entered a new period of instability. The existing liberal order is experiencing fundamental problems. Those opposed to the collective West are increasingly united seeking radical changes to the present system. Among those states most prominent are China and Russia, which are hoping to build a new hierarchical or what I would call 'Eurasian' order where political prestige coupled with economic and military power will serve as a major disincentive for smaller states neighboring large Eurasian powers to engage far-flung actors, mainly the West. Hierarchical order is essentially a myriad of small orders of exclusions where small regions will be closed off from the Western influence. Central Asia,¹ South Caucasus,² or South and South-East Asia³ – all these geographically diverse and distant from each other places have one development in common, namely larger neighboring states' push for sidelining of non-regional powers, namely the collective West.

Though, in the end what China and Russia pursue will still be an order for controlling Eurasia's vital resources and infrastructure, the proposed hierarchical system is nevertheless a more elastic way of promoting its influence and excluding the collective West. This order is far more agile than a geopolitical control the Soviets built over South Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Hierarchy will involve a certain level of cooperation with smaller states as bigger powers are unable to

dominate small regions unilaterally. Hierarchy will be also about re-invigorating balance of power tactics and creation of loose economic and military organizations engulfing the regions, which border on Russia and China. Elasticity of the order is already evident in avoidance by Beijing and Moscow to base their ties on official military and political alliances. Many in the West consider this as a sign of ultimately diverging visions that Beijing and Moscow have, but in the emerging global order where the liberal internationalism retrenches and will likely be limited to only certain regions of the world, thereby avoiding formal alliances might actually prove more beneficial. It increases maneuverability of the Eurasian powers and limits the potential for tensions. It leaves a space for competition too, but since the US will remain a powerful player intent on limiting China's and Russia's projection of power, these two powers' shared interests will gloss over potential conflicts.

The hierarchical order is also inherently close to Chinese and Russian historical visions as civilization states, which claim that they represent not a particular territory, but a distinct civilization reflecting its unique institutions and geopolitical aspirations. For these two Eurasian powers the hierarchical order will be a long-sought correction: Return to normality from nearly two century-long domination by the West back to the times when Eurasia was dominant economically; balance of power rule supreme in international relations; and the



so-called Westphalian principles constituting core elements in bilateral relations.⁴ In other words, Beijing and Moscow regard the present troubles in the West together with the rise of Asia as a return to historical normalcy.

As mostly land powers, Russia and China are expected to be more successful in the heart of Eurasia. The space where Western influence has been historically marginal and being far from the major sea lines, it is far more susceptible to the new order. Multiple examples such as ongoing changes in the Black Sea, South Caucasus and Central Asia show how this emerging order is played out.

Surely, there are also significant limits to what China and Russia can achieve. The collective West will remain a powerful player, though with a significantly reduced willingness to engage in the depths of the Eurasian landmass. Occasional disagreements between Beijing and Moscow as well as resistance from India and other Asia powers could be diminishing the prospects for a successful hierarchical order. The US' increasingly evident policy of relying on allies and partners across Eurasia and the Indo-Pacific realm will also serve as a major obstacle to successful construction of the hierarchical order.

Looking Beyond the Partnership of Convenience

The increasingly close military and economic relations between China and Russia could be viewed from a different perspective. Instead of describing their relations as a partnership of convenience, their ties are in fact rooted in a much longer historical process of common enmity with the West. Russia's evolving geopolitical position is critical here as its role in the widening China-US competition has somewhat been overlooked in the scholarly literature. How Russia will be behaving or what Russian political elites and the analytical community think of the country's changing position in the fluid global balance of power – these questions remain largely unaddressed. Knowing what Russia wants and how it intends to behave will provide critical answers to how China-US competition will unfold across Eurasia and will ultimately elucidate missing parts in understanding of the emerging new global order. Ultimately, this section will argue that Russia's increasingly strategic ties with China are driven less by the rivalry with the West and based more in the history of Russian political thought. This also means that the partnership with China is more long-term than often portrayed.

Unlike any other power on the Eurasian map, Russia's position supersedes any other single player's influence on the US-China rivalry. The Russian political elite sees the nascent US-China confrontation as an optimal possibility for enhancing the country's weakening geopolitical stance throughout what once constituted the Soviet space. Moscow believes that both Washington and Beijing would dearly need Russian support and this logic would drive the Kremlin's preferably non-committal approach toward the US and China. Ideally, Russia would try to put itself in a position where the US and China would strongly compete with each other to win Russia's favor. This thinking is based on what the West fears if Russia becomes exclusively pro-Chinese, and what Beijing fears if Russia is allured into the Western camp. This thinking is also based on what Russia genuinely thinks of the post-liberal world order – multipolar system is expected to allow Russia to avoid fixation on either China or the West.

Choosing a side is also always a possibility, but significant benefits should be accompanying such a radical foreign policy shift. In partnering with China, Russia would expect further solidifying its influence in Central Asia where Beijing's economic and security interests have grown exponentially since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Although the Russians have refrained from voicing their concerns officially, this is not to deny that such attitudes exist in the Russian political elite. China, however, would not be able to help Russia strengthen its weakening position in Ukraine. Even in the South Caucasus where Russia's growing dependence on military components in formulating foreign policy jeopardizes its prestige and questions long-term peace in the region, China would be of little help. Comfort in working with Beijing is about the latter's disinterest in interfering into internal affairs of other countries. China is also against forming official alliances. In Beijing's view formal alliances rather hinder countries' maneuverability. This stands close to Russia's ideas on enhanced state sovereignty and the balancing between various geopolitical poles without making specific alliance pledges.

Russia has been increasingly reliant on China since 2014 when Moscow's ties with the collective West

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dipped to the lowest level since the end of the Cold War.⁵ This led many to believe that Russia could turn into China's appendage. As will be argued below a more nuanced development might be at work.

How fundamental is Russia's Asian pivot depends on China's evolving foreign policy and that of the collective West. For many simply a short-lived development, Russia's shift to Asia (including Middle East) is much more than just a result of disenchantment with the West, or an attempt of building a strong negotiating position. Rather the process is rooted deep in the Russian historical tradition – search for what I call “de-Westernization” of foreign policy when the fixation on the West ends and instead a multipolar foreign policy is pursued with ‘Global Russia’s policies evenly directed at all the regions across the globe allowing greater space for balancing and maneuvering. One can trace this resentment and various attempts to ‘de-Westernize’ Russian foreign policy to previous centuries, which shows how innate this search for foreign policy alternatives has always been in Russia. When Peter the Great reformed Russia and heavily Europeanized the ruling elite in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, many praised him ever since, but there were also those who were deeply disenchanted. They believed Peter broke the bridge between the common folk and the Russian political elite. Many also believed that the country's Europe-centrism actually limited Russia's ability to position itself as a true global power. The Romanovs tried to do the same, particularly after the

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Crimean War of 1853-1856. The Soviets, too, with all the idiosyncratic approaches to the world pursued the balancing game. Both attempts failed because of the lack of resources and strong Asian partners to rely on. In contrast, China's power nowadays offers a historic opportunity for Moscow. Thence comes the Russian president Vladimir Putin's 'de-Westernization' attempts which should be seen as a recurrence of the above-discussed grand historical cycle of the Russian political thought.

All point to a well-established trend, which means that Russia's distancing from Europe is not a temporary affair and breaking up the China-Russia partnership, as it happened in 1970s, is unlikely to happen.⁶ Even if the West moves to engage into a grand geopolitical bargain over Ukraine and other states neighboring Russia, Moscow's pursuit of 'de-Westernization' of its foreign policy is likely to continue. Though often considered as a relatively later phenomenon developed in 2010s under Putin and as a result of the fallout with the West over Ukraine, the present trend of separation has been at work at least since the 1990s when signs of resentment toward the West's unipolar moment emerged well

reflected in the “Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order” submitted to the UN in 1997.⁷ This suggests that even without the troubles over Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea, which prompted separation with the West, Russia was still likely to pursue the balancing and distancing from Europe, albeit in a less traumatic way.

This also means that we should be looking beyond the perspective of ‘partnership of convenience’ when explaining the Russia-China cooperation. The growing cooperation and Russia’s Asian pivot overall are just two interrelated pieces in Russia’s evolving understanding of the world order and its place in it. The pivot is inextricably woven into Moscow’s attempts to shake off the fixation on the West.

It is often ignored that for Russia both China and the US are equally long-term geopolitical rivals of pretty much the same caliber. In Moscow trust toward both powers is low. The Russian inherent geopolitical worldview is about abstention from engaging the US-China competition; leveraging its geographic and military position by making the US and China approach Russia for geopolitical support. The longer the compe-

tion between the two economic and military powers lasts, the more beneficial it will be for Moscow’s geopolitical aims in the South Caucasus, Ukraine and the Middle East. The rivalry could also give some time to Russia to establish itself as a separate pole of geopolitical gravitation, albeit of a much smaller scale.

Thus as against the proposition that Russia will be increasingly attached to China thus losing its ability to maneuver, it could be quite the opposite. Russia sandwiched between two great geopolitical centers, China and the West, will have far more agility to play one against the other. Its pivot to Asia was dictated not only by complication of ties with the West over Ukraine, but was also a continuation of long-pursued policy of ‘de-Westernization’ of Russia’s foreign outlook. Getting rid of geopolitical fixation on the West was a paramount aim of Russian diplomacy in the Imperial and Soviet eras. Powerful alternatives or rather balancers to the West did not exist back then. With the rise of China, however, the pattern changed. Pursuit of ‘de-Westernization’ gathers steam. From Moscow’s perspective, this creates promising circumstances for balancing its ties with the West and for a growing partnership with China.

Endnotes

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