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Geopolitics

The Ever-Shifting 'Strategic Triangle' Between Russia, China and the U.S.

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The U.S. trade war with China and Washington's prolonged standoff with Russia " over matters from Iran to Venezuela to arms control " are increasingly driving Moscow and Beijing toward each other. Chinese President Xi Jinping is attending the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum June 6-7, but not before meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow earlier in the week. China and Russia have signed economic deals that span everything from 5G networks to hydropower plant construction to establishing a joint research and technology innovation fund.

The deals come in the wake of Moscow's recently indicated desire to collaborate with China in the Arctic's Northern Sea Route as part of Beijing's Maritime Silk Road initiative, while the massive Power of Siberia pipeline is completing the final phase of construction and is set to begin pumping ever-larger volumes of Russian natural gas to China by the end of this year. [\[1\]](#)

These developments are simply the latest in a broader trend of Russia and China strengthening political, economic and security ties. Such developments raise the question of how deep an alignment between Russia and China can go, and to what extent their relationship is forming in direct opposition to and competition with the United States. To begin to answer this question, it is important first to frame it in the appropriate strategic context, and then to look at how ties between Russia, China and the United States have evolved within this context. Doing so points to many more constraints than opportunities in a sustained elevation of the Russia-China relationship, one that will be shaped heavily by the United States.

The Postwar Evolution of the 'Strategic Triangle'

The end of World War II marked the emergence of the United States and the Soviet Union as the two primary global powers, while also marking the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. This development ushered in an inherent "strategic triangle" relationship among the three countries, meaning that relations between any two of these powers would necessarily shape and be shaped by the strategic interests of the third power. These strategic interests include neutralizing and dominating their respective peripheries while projecting outward and pushing their own respective vision of global order, producing inherent contradictions and driving the so-called great power competition between them. [\[2\]](#)

In the initial years of the postwar era, China was the weakest of the three powers from an economic and military standpoint. Nevertheless, under Mao Zedong, China was able to use its size and political and diplomatic heft to maintain independence and balance between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the early years of the People's Republic, Beijing aligned with the Soviet Union, partly because of their shared communist ideology but just as importantly because of their shared interest in rivaling U.S. power and influence. However, this alignment almost immediately became strained over issues such as the Korean War, border disputes and the succession from Josef Stalin to Nikita Khrushchev, with the latter pursuing policies like "peaceful coexistence" with the United States that Mao deemed as dangerous to China's interests.

These differences ultimately led to the Sino-Soviet split, which in turn paved the way for a strategic rapprochement between the United States and China beginning in the early 1970s, as both countries shared an interest in limiting the power and influence of the Soviet Union. But the U.S.-China rapprochement also proved to have its limits once

Soviet power was effectively constrained and began weakening by the 1980s.

The end of the Cold War fostered a new phase in the strategic triangle by effectively marginalizing the Soviet Union (now Russia) as a global player. The United States became the only global superpower, while China entered a period of economic and geopolitical ascension. Though Russia experienced internal turmoil and its global power projection weakened substantially, it was never fully removed as a regional power, as demonstrated by the emergence of the Commonwealth of Independent States and its continued engagement in former Soviet politics and security affairs. [3]

These developments recalibrated the power dynamics between the three countries, with the United States expanding its power projection globally, while China and Russia began to improve bilateral relations as the former ascended and the latter began to recover after the chaotic 1990s. China's rise as a global power has put it in greater competition with the United States over a wide range of issues, from trade disputes to the South China Sea to the Belt and Road Initiative. [4] Meanwhile, Russia's regional resurgence in the mid- to late 2000s on the back of high global energy prices and a domestic political consolidation by Vladimir Putin also put it in greater contention with the United States and the West, culminating in the 2008 Russia-Georgia War and the 2014 Euromaidan uprising in Ukraine and leading to the standoff between Moscow and the West currently in play. [5]

The Limits of a Russia-China Alignment

At this point, the United States remains the strongest global power, but one whose position — whether political, economic or military — is increasingly challenged by China and Russia in various ways. U.S. tensions with China and its standoff with Russia have pushed Moscow and Beijing closer together to recalibrate the strategic triangle once again. Russia and China have in recent years expanded economic ties and political coordination, and their level of military cooperation is at the highest level since the end of the Cold War. [6]

However, this rising cooperation between Russia and China has both challenges and limitations. While economic ties between Russia and China have indeed grown significantly in relative terms — witnessing double-digit growth every year since 2011 — they are still quite limited in absolute terms. And despite the recent trade dispute between the United States and China, overall U.S.-China trade (\$737 billion in 2018) is still much higher than overall Russia-China trade (\$108 billion).

The limitations of economic ties between Russia and China were also relayed to me on recent visits to both countries. For example, a financial journalist at a leading business paper in Moscow said that China is not seen as a major partner for Russia, adding that a lot of the large economic deals the two countries agree to don't pan out, with significant economic ties mostly limited to the energy sector. In the same vein, a businessman from St. Petersburg said there is not a lot of economic activity between Russia and China besides energy and raw materials, claiming that only 5-10 percent of deals previously signed between the two countries at the St Petersburg economic forum actually materialized — and that the same is true for the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok. Indeed, information from the Ministry for the Development of the Russian Far East shows that less than half of priority projects in the region enter the implementation phase, making the announced agreements at this week's St. Petersburg forum a much less important indicator of ties than the concrete results they will — or will not — produce.

The public view of China within Russia is positive, but when it comes to the specific issue of China's rise as a global power, a different picture emerges.

Similar skepticism was raised on security cooperation between Russia and China. A retired Russian diplomat in Moscow explicitly said that he doesn't trust the Chinese, claiming that they are after Russian land and noting that there are more Chinese spies operating in Russia than there are Western spies. In the meantime, a Chinese foreign

policy expert noted that while Beijing feels the need to cooperate with Moscow on certain issues like trade, China's support for Russia goes only so far on security matters, such as the conflict in Ukraine. For example, China hasn't supported Russia's claim to sovereignty over Crimea, and Beijing generally views Russia's military deployments abroad with skepticism. While security ties have indeed grown between Russia and China in recent years, such concerns could explain why their cooperation has largely been limited to joint military exercises and Russian weapons sales, the latter of which have been curtailed by China's own advancements in weapons technology and manufacturing.

In general, it is important to consider that the public view of China within Russia is positive, especially compared to that of the United States: A survey taken by the independent Levada Center at the end of 2018 found that 75 percent of those polled viewed China in a positive light, while 54 percent viewed the United States negatively. However, when it comes to the specific issue of China's rise as a power, a different picture emerges. Nearly 60 percent of Russians living in Eastern Siberia polled in another survey considered China's ascent as a threat to Russia's interests, and more than half opposed a visa-free regime with China.

This dichotomy is important when considering the general level of cooperative relations between Russia and China and a deeper sense of concern and mistrust that lurks beneath the surface. As one analyst with a government-affiliated think tank in Russia put it, China doesn't challenge Russia's political model in the manner that the West does in terms of promoting democracy and human rights, but China does challenge Russia's survival in a way the West does not. Another Russian working in the tech sector in Beijing (and who formerly had worked at the Huawei offices in Moscow) recounted a conversation with a former professor at a well-respected university in Moscow who said there is a secret agreement with Beijing in which China gets a small piece of Russian land every year. Such impressions are anecdotal, of course; nevertheless, these kinds of conspiratorial perceptions among educated Russians in the private and education sectors show that there are deep concerns about China's rise at the social level and signal the potential pushback that strengthening ties between Russia and China could face at the political level.

Looking Ahead

So, what does all this spell for Russia-China relations down the line? Relations between Moscow and Beijing have been on an upward trajectory in recent years, and Russia and China have until now been careful to downplay their differences while emphasizing the shared opportunities of their cooperation. However, from the standpoint of the strategic triangle, it can be deduced that as China continues to grow as an economic and military power, tensions will likely increase between Russia and China and undermine the trajectory of cooperation that the two countries are currently on. Thus, while increased Chinese economic involvement in areas such as the Arctic, Eastern Siberia and Central Asia can produce economic benefits for Russia for now, at a certain point this involvement can pose a more direct strategic threat to Moscow, whether in the form of increasing Chinese control over key infrastructure and shipping lanes, having greater access to Russia's remote regions or overwhelming Russia from an economic and demographic standpoint.

A map of Arctic sea routes, showing past minimum extents of Arctic sea ice and modeled future minimum extents by year.

China has been careful to downplay any notion that its rise presents a threat to Russia, and it was often emphasized to me in China that Beijing wants peaceful coexistence with its neighbors. However, as Henry Kissinger writes: "Strategists rely on the intentions of the presumed adversary only to a limited extent. For intentions are subject to change. And the essence of sovereignty is the right to make decisions not subject to another authority. A certain amount of threat based on capabilities is therefore inseparable from the relations of sovereign states." This means that China, like other powers, must be judged by its capabilities rather than its current intentions when it comes to

projecting power.

Such capabilities have clearly served as a concern for the United States, but they may be even more worrisome for Russia – which has a tenth of the population of China (147 million people vs. 1.4 billion) and an economy that is a tenth of its size (\$1.6 trillion vs. \$12.2 trillion) while sharing a long and direct border with China. This is where Russian fears over Chinese expansionism come from. While the two countries have been able to manage and mitigate tensions over such matters, for now at least, the underlying issues are likely to grow more contentious. China seems likely to increase its economic, political and (potentially) security involvement in areas that matter to Russia – with signs of this already taking place in the border areas near Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Because of this, there may be room down the line for Russia and the United States to find common ground on selective issues, which in turn could pave the way for the United States and Russia to pursue a rapprochement of their own to curb China's power. But like the U.S.-China outreach in the 1970s, such an effort would be limited even as their deeper competition endures. Thus, the growing alignment between Russia and China is part of a fluid global power competition dynamic, with further shifts in the strategic triangle inevitably to come in the years ahead.

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[1] <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/why-china-wants-expand-its-arctic-footprint> [
<https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russian-rivalries-tale-two-energy-firms>.

[2] <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/where-does-iran-fit-world-defined-great-power-competition>.

[3] <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/russias-path-another-resurgence>.

[4] <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/china-changes-gears-belt-and-road-initiative>.

[5] <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/softer-iron-curtain-falls-ukraine>.

[6] <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/rise-not-so-new-world-order>.