**The American Interest**

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**Europe yesterday, Beijing today: Russia's bad romance**

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Looking at the global chessboard, one can’t help but be puzzled. Only yesterday, Russia was dating Europe; today, the Kremlin is trying to persuade the world (and itself?) that it has fallen in love with Beijing. Witness Russia’s hosting last week of the dual summit of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—a clear signal of Moscow’s own “pivot to Asia”, as well as its agenda to present the non-Western world as an alternative civilizational model to the West. The same experts, both Russian and Western, who recently viewed Russia as part of Greater Europe, today with the same gusto sing of Russia as a part of Greater Asia. To be sure, states do change course and build new alliances to pursue their interests. However, the Kremlin and its propaganda team have been arguing that the Russian pivot to Asia is about something deeper: about changing Russia’s civilizational identity into a “Eurasian” one. In practice this means erasing the European cultural aspects of the Russian psyche and returning society to its pre-modern state.

The whole argumentation in support of Russia turning to Asia—and of its tango with China—strikes me as either naive or intentionally misleading. One can’t avoid the impression that this is a new game of “Let’s Pretend!” in which the two dancers understand perfectly well what they are involved in. But do the members of the new “axis of convenience” (convenient for whom?) know where their tango will bring them?

The new partnership is marked by frenetic activity: the signing of dozens of treaties; the mutual bonhomie of Xi Jinping and Putin at the seventieth anniversary of the Nazi surrender in World War II (while Western leaders stayed home); the joint military drills of Russian and Chinese vessels in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea; the pledge to connect the Eurasian Union with China’s New Silk Road; and even the flabbergasting $400 billion gas deal. All this looks like confirmation of an emerging Grand Alliance that could change the global order. But appearances can be deceiving.

The very first cause of the new relationship—mutual desire to deter the U.S.—is not convincing. To be sure, Russia and China are known for their dislike of America. But why unite to contain the U.S. now, when Americans are retrenching and are bogged down in unresolved conflicts, and when the U.S. President has no real appetite for foreign policy, much less grand geopolitical ambitions? Besides, Beijing hardly intends to undermine its relations with America and threaten its profitable access to its markets. If the Chinese are ready to join the Kremlin in its anti-American crusade, why would they sign far-reaching agreements on military cooperation with the U.S.? “Even though Xi and Putin might be in the same bed against the West, their dreams are clearly different”, [warns Huiyun Feng](http://webfeeds.brookings.edu/~/t/0/0/brookingsrss/topics/brics/~www.realclearworld.com/2015/03/02/is_a_china-russia_anti-us_axis_realistic_165272.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). Anyway, we have to remember one truth: anti-American posturing provides convenient justification for actions that have various goals not directly connected to America.

I will let the China experts ponder the question of why Beijing is taking part in the game. The impression so far is that China is a reticent partner that has merely allowed itself to be courted by the Kremlin. For me, the more interesting question is why does Moscow, the active partner, need this tango? All political, historical, and psychological considerations should caution Moscow against getting involved in this weird, unnatural partnership that could easily become a noose around Moscow’s neck. On the list of pros and cons, the cons win by a mile.

For starters, China still nurses historical grievances toward China. Why should China stoop to buy commodities from its own Outer Manchuria, which was only ceded to Russia in the 19th century as a result of a series of humiliating treaties that Russia imposed on China? Are the Chinese really that forgiving? Henry Kissinger doesn’t think so: “Chinese leaders had not forgotten the series of ‘unequal treaties’ extorted for a century to establish the Russian possession of its Far East maritime provinces. . . ”(*On China*, Penguin Books, 2011, pp. 98–9).

Even more important is the fact that Russia and China are at different stages of development. Russia is in decline, and its current regime appears to have entered an agony that threatens to pull the country down into confusion and turmoil. China, on the other hand, is still on the rise (even if the Chinese stock market tumble over the past couple of weeks has revealed several potentially large cracks in the system). This very asymmetry makes the relationship fragile, creating impetus for the stronger partner to use the weaker one to serve its interests. But if the recent Chinese financial crash is a sign of China’s looming economic plunge, the symmetry of the two authoritarian giants falling down (albeit at different speeds) could propel them into a most disastrous struggle with one another for survival. Let’s add to this the fact that authoritarian powers have no capacity or willingness to be gracious or sensitive when it comes to moral norms. Why should Beijing act altruistically toward a state that has shown no compunction about bullying its weaker neighbors?

As the Crimea annexation and the Russian war against Ukraine have demonstrated, Moscow has embarked on the path of undermining the international legal system and stressing its right to maintain spheres of influence. China’s land-reclamation projects in the South China Sea and its nautical forays into the waters of Vietnam prove that Beijing and Moscow might as well be reading from the same playbook. Isn’t it only natural and expected that Beijing’s revisionist tendencies would also extend to the Russian Far East?

The economic foundation underlying the Russo-Chinese tandem would seem to soften these geopolitical stumbling blocks, except for the fact that it isn’t very stable, at least when it comes to Russian interests. Russia bases its economic relationship with Beijing on three pillars—Russian gas, oil, and arms—and one hope: massive Chinese investment. According to data provided by the Oxford Institute of Energy Research and CNPC (quoted by the Russian expert Mikhail Krutichin), China needs 180 cubic meters of gas, which is already supplied by Central Asia (40 percent) and from other sources. “There is no place on the Chinese gas market for other suppliers”, [says Krutichin](http://webfeeds.brookings.edu/~/t/0/0/brookingsrss/topics/brics/~carnegie.ru/2015/06/24/ru-60480/iaz0%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank). China, of course, could purchase the Russian gas if Moscow reduced its price substantially, but this would make the whole project unprofitable for Russia.

Moreover, Beijing refused to finance the Russian pipeline “Sila Sibiri” that was to be the jewel of the Russo-Chinese friendship. The Chinese even suggested that Russians should cover the costs of constructing and maintaining the pipeline on Chinese territory. What arrogance! This was no doubt a real slap in the face for Moscow: to pay for its own pivot! Moscow has presented this gas deal as the key proof of the success of the Russo-Chinese tandem; if this one turned out so badly for the Russians, what can we say about the nature of its other deals? As for oil, China has been diversifying its supply through cooperation with Central Asia, and there are no signs that Beijing would like to depend on Russian supply. Last but not least, Russia is China’s biggest source for arms and military technology imports. But Moscow’s reluctance to arm China is known, and Beijing could easily view Russia’s arms trade with India and Vietnam not only as a commercial deal but as deterrent toward China.

And finally, Russia’s hopes that the Chinese will help them relieve the pressure of Western sanctions with loans have already proved unfounded. The representatives of VTB, Russia’s leading bank when it comes to dealing with China, issued a [statement](http://webfeeds.brookings.edu/~/t/0/0/brookingsrss/topics/brics/~www.vestifinance.ru/articles/58732%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) complaining that “the key hindrance in bilateral relations is the controversial position of China regarding Russian banks. . . . The majority of Chinese banks refuse to have an interbank exchange with Russian banks. Chinese banks have also significantly cut their participation in the trade exchange with Russia.

The shrill hurrahs in Moscow for “the intertwining” of Putin’s pet project (the Eurasian Union) with China’s ambitious “New Silk Road Economic Belt” (now the “One Belt, One Road” project) could be perceived as another attempt at concealing the fakery. The Eurasian Union has only been able to swim with subsidies from Moscow, which now has to plug holes in its leaking budget. Meanwhile, Central Asia—including Kazakhstan, Moscow’s leading partner in the Eurasian Union—has been integrating rapidly with China. “Intertwining” may take place, but only as a means for China to develop the infrastructure that will connect it with Europe. Is Russia ready to serve as China’s “bridge”? The irony is that, at a time when China wants to “bridge” itself to Europe, Putin’s Kremlin wants to push Russia in the opposite direction, which makes the whole “intertwining” a mess. I would agree with [Bjorn Duben](http://webfeeds.brookings.edu/~/t/0/0/brookingsrss/topics/brics/~www.realclearworld.com/2015/05/12/can_the_china-russia_warmth_last_167000.html%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank): “Although China has since tried to dispel Moscow’s concerns, insisting that the plan is not directed against Russia, there can be little doubt that Putin’s Eurasian Economic Union and China’s wide-ranging plans to further expand its economic reach in Central Asia are mutually incompatible projects.”

The very impetus that is pushing the Kremlin toward China will soon start to ignite Russian suspicions, and even hostility, toward the Chinese. I have in mind here the “Besieged Fortress” model, whose drive to search for an enemy is the foundation of the Kremlin’s current military-patriotic legitimacy. At the moment this model works effectively by making the West, and mainly America, Russia’s arch-enemy. However, the U.S.—a distant enemy that has no common borders with Russia and few direct links—could soon lose the role of Russian allergen-in-chief. There are hundreds of thousands of ethnic Chinese in Russia (and Russians often perceive Vietnamese and other Asians as “Chinese” as well), and Chinese culture is often very strange and difficult to understand for ordinary Russians. Thus mistrust of China could become an even more effective way of reproducing the Besieged Fortress mentality in Russia. The potential for anti-Chinese feelings in Russia has lain dormant for a long time, only sporadically surfacing in worries about China grabbing Siberia and the Russian Far East. Deep mistrust of China on the level of the political class and intellectual environment could easily become fertile ground for a search for new enemies. The inevitable failure of the Kremlin’s attempts to build a partnership with Beijing that can help solve its mounting problems, coupled with misunderstanding the agenda and psyche of the great nation on Russia’s borders, could easily turn China into a new object of hatred.

Meanwhile, there are a lot of signs pointing to the fragility of the Kremlin’s “we are friends with China” construct. In June 2015 news spread that Russia’s Zabaikalski region (part of the old Chinese Outer Manchuria) promised to grant about 300,000 hectares of land to the Chinese company Huae Xinban under a 49-year lease for mere peanuts—less than $5 a hectare. Simultaneously, a draft law has been submitted to the Russian State Duma to guarantee the Chinese sovereignty over the rented territory; the same Kremlin that is so desperately defending Russian sovereignty from the malicious West is selling it for peanuts to China. This has stirred an angry reaction throughout Russia, and local authorities have been forced to backtrack. This case proves that Chinese penetration into Russia has not received a warm welcome. At best it raises suspicions; at worst, open hostility.

The relationship with China has already made for a hot topic in Russian media and internet. One of the causes for worry is the apparent lack of logic or foresight in the Kremlin’s attempts to secure secret deals with China. The same Russian authorities who declare readiness to fight for Russia’s sacred territory in the European part of the country express a willingness to acquiesce to Chinese territorial demands, or to look the other way as the Chinese seize Russian territory. Russia has already given China 1,844,407 hectares of land along the Russian-Chinese border for timber cutting, and Chinese rent large swaths of Russian territory for agricultural purposes. The governor of the Jewish autonomous region in the Far East told one such story at the last Petersburg Economic Forum, “Investors came to me and suggested agricultural projects. I agreed. But then I found that we don’t have land—around 80 per cent of our land is controlled by Chinese, officially or unofficially. They grow soy that kills the soil.” The researchers of the Zabaikal University [wrote in their analytical memo](http://webfeeds.brookings.edu/~/t/0/0/brookingsrss/topics/brics/~www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/69085.html?print=1" \t "_blank), that “Chinese use harmful fertilizers and ruin the ecosystems not only on the rented territories, but on the neighboring territories as well.”

The problem here is the Russian state and corrupt authorities who create rules that incentivize predatory business models. There’s not a chance Chinese investors would behave this way in Finland or Poland, for example. In Russia, the end result is clear: Chinese activity is provoking hostile reactions from the local population.

For the moment, the pro-Kremlin Russian experts have persuaded themselves (and the leadership) that the friendship with China is a wonderful opportunity—and even an alliance that will change the world order! True, they have to figure out how to apply their favorite *realpolitik* approach to the new tandem. Considered on balance of powers terms, the asymmetry of this tandem raises significant doubts about its sustainability. Thus all the rhetorical juggling coming out of the Kremlin has one purpose: to prove that Russia’s pivot to Asia makes sense, and that the new entente will serve the Kremlin’s purposes. The key task is to convince the Russian audience that China will not become into an arrogant hegemon. But thus far all the analysis in the service of Russia’s “pivot propaganda” has only raised more doubts. Respected experts all admit that China is the more powerful partner, but say that nevertheless “Moscow most certainly will find a way to create a ‘special relationship’ with its partner.”

Some experts admit that they are not sure how Moscow can preserve its sovereignty and independence from Beijing. Other experts are more upbeat, believing that Russia will remain “a great power,” and Beijing will concede Russia’s status as such. But one can plainly see their difficulties in their attempts to define the roles within the Russo-Chinese tandem: China is a leader, not a hegemon, the experts suggest. But how feasible is leadership without hegemony? And why would a state operating on the international scene on the basis of the Hobbesian rules have any reason to believe that its competitors will all play by Kantian rules? It seems pathetic for Russia to hope that Chinese will accommodate the Kremlin’s longing for great power status (an accommodation, incidentally, that the West has already been making for a long time). As Kissinger has observed, “China was never engaged in sustained contact with another country on the basis of equality for the simple reason that it never encountered cities of compatible culture or magnitude” (*On China*, p. 16–7). Has there been some sign that the Chinese political mentality has changed that everyone else missed?

The simpler and likelier explanation is that the new entente is a mirage. This is not to say that Russia hasn’t been able to squeeze advantage out of false friendship in the past. Russia’s rent-seeking elite managed to use fake friendship with the West in order to secure personal integration and to build its Western-based money laundering machines. But China is a different case entirely—much less prone to altruism and accommodation, proud, self-reliant, ambitious, and patient. Why should China help cure Russia’s complexes, or give its elite the means to secure their vanity or personal wealth? In this new entente, the Kremlin has but two choices: play the role of lap dog, or get ready to whine about how it is being humiliated all over again. The West, in treating the Russian elite with kid gloves, failed to teach it a lesson; China is much less likely to err on the side of lenience.

Some Western experts have been sounding the alarm about the anti-Western potential of the Russo-Chinese love affair. I would worry more about the implications of their relationship going down in flames. How might Moscow react to the dashing of its hopes for Chinese partnership? How might Beijing react to the decay of the Russian system and the ill will toward China that it might prompt? Does China understand what a mess it has walked into?

Loneliness and uncertainty have forced the Russian ruling elite to make a move that they either know or suspect won’t pay off. Perhaps its time for the Kremlin to look for a new pivot? How about Myanmar? Wouldn’t it be a safer bet?

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