

The Role of the USA, China, And Russia In the Formation of a New World Order

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution and current state of Russia-China relations over the past two decades. Despite repeated attempts to accelerate cooperation, both countries have experienced steady, incremental progress in economic, military, and political spheres. Initially underestimated or dismissed by Western analysts, the partnership has grown into a significant strategic alliance, characterized by mutual economic dependence and coordinated international positions. The analysis highlights the asymmetries in their relationship, emphasizing that Russia's influence over China remains limited, especially in economic and political terms. The article concludes that Russian-Chinese relations are complex, resilient, and cannot be reduced to simplistic narratives of dominance or subordination.

Keywords: Russia-China relations, strategic partnership, economic dependence, military cooperation, international politics, asymmetry, mutual influence.

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1. Introduction

The relationship between Russia and China over the last two decades has been characterized by gradual, yet unwavering, advancement. Attempts to radically accelerate this progress have been made repeatedly by both Moscow and Beijing, but overall, these efforts have invariably ended in failure. On the other hand, it has been impossible to halt the development of these relations – neither individual project setbacks nor Russia's brief rapprochement with the United States following September 11, nor the economic crises of 2009 and 2014

could stop the trajectory of cooperation. Every year, China has assumed an increasingly significant role in Russia's foreign trade. Both countries have made incremental progress in military and political cooperation year after year. Today, China is Russia's second-largest trading partner after the European Union. It is also the most trusted partner of Russia among major powers in defense and security sectors (Van Zjun Tao et al., 2011; Kossichenko, 2022).

2. Method

Western approaches to Russia–China cooperation since the late 1990s initially involved ignoring the importance of this partnership altogether. Relations were viewed as naive tactical moves by Moscow and Beijing, aimed at strengthening their positions in dialogue with the United States. It was noted that the partnership lacked a solid foundation, primarily in economic terms. It should be acknowledged that the U.S. ignoring the emerging Russian–Chinese partnership was not an optimal strategy even in the mid-to-late 1990s (Yakovlev, 2017). At that time, trade between the two sides was insignificant, yet Russia helped China achieve an unprecedented military-industrial leap—an advancement across one or two generations of military hardware. As a result, by the early 2010s, China had re-emerged as a major military power. Recognizing this fact, U.S. military and strategic planning shifted predominantly toward an “anti-Chinese” focus. The Russian–Chinese military-technical cooperation played a crucial role in rebalancing power in Asia and globally, becoming a significant contribution by Moscow to the establishment of a multipolar world (Kossichenko, 2011). By the 2010s, ignoring the importance of Russia–China relations had become impossible. The narrative shifted from denial to acknowledgment that Moscow and Beijing’s partnership indeed exists. However, many argued that it should not be a cause for concern, as it was inherently short-lived. As U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis once said: “I see little that can bring Russia and China closer in the long term” (Kossichenko, 2022).

The emergence of contradictions and potential breakdowns in relations was expected to be driven by factors such as China’s economic and demographic expansion into Siberia and the Russian Far East, conflicts of interest in Central Asia, and the fact that the two countries are geographically close and thus likely to perceive each other as threats—particularly considering their heavy historical legacy.

However, the reality is that Chinese demographic expansion has never materialized—in the contrary, Chinese populations are migrating from the northeastern provinces to prosperous megacities in southern China. Following the devaluations of the ruble in 2009 and 2014 against the dollar and yuan, mass Chinese migration to Russia became an economic absurdity. The presence of Chinese businesses in some Russian regions is noticeable but not dominant. Instead, the problem is perceived as Russia’s inability to attract Chinese investments. Economic competition in Central Asia exists but remains

limited, as Russia and China operate in different sectors of the local economies. China mainly exports raw materials to regional states, while Russia primarily exports labor force and acts as a source of imports. Countries in the region are keen on balancing their relations with major powers, and both Russia and China seek to keep their rivalry under control. Historical baggage in Russia–China relations is relatively light.

Since establishing diplomatic relations in the 17th century, Russia and China have rarely and minimally engaged in warfare. Their conflicts are insignificant compared to Russia’s wars with most European countries and China’s conflicts with Japan, the U.S., or the U.K. The Communist Party conflicts between the USSR and China in the 1960s–80s were unpleasant but relatively short episodes in the evolution of their relations. Finally, the most recent phase of denying the significance of Russia–China cooperation is the idea of Russia becoming a “junior partner” to China—forced to follow Beijing’s lead and “play second fiddle.” Such a stance suggests that Russia, a historic great power, will eventually find this intolerable, leading to the rupture of the partnership. It is often reminded that Russia has become a “junior partner.” However, this approach faces a fundamental problem: it cannot be justified. The arguments put forward are naive and childish, bearing little relation to the core issues.

Typically, the arguments include comparisons of “China’s GDP being seven times larger than Russia’s” or China accounting for approximately 15% of Russia’s foreign trade, while Russia accounts for less than 2% of China’s. But when discussing alliances—whether equal or unequal—the focus is on political rather than economic categories. It concerns the asymmetric influence one partner wields over the other’s policy. Such influence can stem from economic, political, military, or technological dependence. A large GDP is not synonymous with political weight or influence. You cannot simply proclaim, “Look at my enormous GDP! Bow before me, villains!”—this will not produce the desired effect. So, what asymmetric levers of pressure does China have over Russia? In terms of economics, the usual example is debt. For example, debt leverage enabled the U.S. to become influential in Europe after World War I and to maintain dominance after World War II. By leveraging debt, the U.S. compelled its real or perceived lesser partners in Europe to abandon their struggles for colonial empires (Van Zjun Tao et al., 2011; Aikenberry, 2016). China, of course, does not possess

effective debt instruments to pressure Russia, and the Russian government carefully monitors to prevent such instruments from arising.

Russia ranks among the last among large economies in terms of debt-to-GDP ratio. Russia's total external debt (including corporate debt) was modest—around \$51 billion as of April 2019, including \$11 billion in government guarantees on foreign currency loans and \$38 billion in Eurobond debt. Consequently, there is little room for debt-based dependence on China. Russian banks' obligations to China in early 2019 amounted to only about \$4.5 billion. China was a significant source of loans to Russian state companies during the 2014–2015 crisis, but afterward, the net flow of Chinese credits into Russia sharply declined, with Russian businesses paying off loans faster than they attracted new ones. During the ruble's sharp fall in December 2014, China offered financial assistance, but the Russian government declined this offer.

Russian authorities are cautious about joint projects with China if these could lead to additional budget burdens or debt obligations, which is reflected in Russia's participation in China's "Belt and Road" initiative. Despite political support for the initiative, Russia has postponed the high-speed rail project Moscow–Kazan—despite its political significance—indefinitely. When analyzing Russia and China's positions in bilateral trade, a clear imbalance emerges due to the differences in their economic sizes. However, it is difficult to imagine how China could use this imbalance to blackmail or pressure Russia. Russia's exports to China are dominated by energy resources—about 73% of supplies in 2018 were mineral fuels. Russia remains one of China's leading oil suppliers, competing primarily with Saudi Arabia for the top spot. This structure reflects Russia's somewhat outdated economy.

Nonetheless, from a political perspective, energy exports create strong mutual dependence. Unlike other commodities, exerting pressure on energy-exporting countries involves immediate and significant losses for the importing country. Such leverage is rarely used, as exemplified by Russia–EU relations during the Ukrainian crisis. In technological terms, Russia remains a notable supplier of military and dual-use products and technologies to China, which are crucial for national security. Despite China's increasing exports of civilian machinery and equipment to Russia, this mutual dependence is evident: Russia imports components for

military equipment from China, but this trade is limited and not comparable to Russian military exports to China. Finally, in international politics, Russia overall remains a more active and influential actor than China. Despite the declared shift toward "great power diplomacy," China's foreign policy apparatus remains slow and less capable of acting swiftly in risky situations. Russia and China often coordinate their positions internationally, but China plays the leading role mainly on issues near its borders, such as the North Korea situation. In other parts of the world, Russia generally plays a more active and influential role. A notable example is the current situation around Venezuela, where Russia—with far fewer economic interests—plays a more significant political role in diplomatic struggles. Thus, we can speak more about China's dependence on cooperation with Russia in international issues than vice versa.

3. Conclusion

Russian-Chinese relations should not be seen as perfect or flawless. Both countries have their internal contradictions, disagreements, and challenges, and their cooperation does not always proceed smoothly — it can experience periods of growth as well as moments of tension or crisis. However, despite these difficulties, such relations cannot be reduced to simple or one-sided schemes based on exaggerated or stereotypical notions about Russian politics and economy. In reality, it is a complex and multilayered partnership that develops considering the interests of both sides and their internal dynamics, and its significance goes beyond straightforward and oversimplified assessments.

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