

The New China-Russia-U.S. Triangle

BY *Elizabeth Wishnick*

In September 2015, President Xi Jinping first welcomed Russian president Vladimir Putin to Beijing and then traveled to the United States for a summit meeting with President Barack Obama. These visits occurred while the U.S.-Russian relationship remains at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. In the 1970s, it was the United States that occupied the desirable pivot point in China-Russia-U.S. relations in what was termed at the time the “romantic triangle.” During this period, the United States had better relations with both China and the Soviet Union than they had with each other, and Sino-Soviet differences reduced the leverage of both countries over Washington. Now China seems to play the pivotal role in this strategic triangle.

Russia-China relations are once again a hot topic, as observers argue whether a Sino-Russian alliance is in the making or whether the partnership is mostly smoke and mirrors. This debate, however, misses the point—both perspectives are correct in some respects. On the one hand, an alliance is improbable, despite substantial areas of agreement. On the other hand, the differences between the two countries, though important, are unlikely to undermine their partnership.

This new state of Sino-Russian affairs means that the logic of yesteryear’s strategic triangle no longer applies. The United States will not be able to gain leverage by exploiting Sino-Russian differences, as these differences, focused largely on regional policy issues, do not erode the strength of the partnership, which is based on shared norms.

A NEW TRIANGLE

In its current configuration, the China-Russia-U.S. triangle operates according to a new logic. The main implications of this logic can be summarized as follows:

Sino-Russian differences are real but unlikely to undermine their overall unity. One of the more puzzling aspects of Sino-Russian relations today is how the partnership is deepening despite important differences between the two countries. On a host of issues (e.g., China’s territorial claims in the South and East China Seas, Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine, and Russia’s influence over Arctic development and Central Asia), China and Russia avoid direct criticism of (or overt support for) one another. Sino-Russian economic relations remain anemic, negotiations over energy deals remain fraught, and regional economic cooperation between the Russian Far East and northeast China has yet to live up to its potential.

Yet none of the above issues has stalled the development of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. This is because the bilateral relationship draws its strength from shared normative understandings of global and domestic politics. Both countries oppose Western interference in the domestic politics of other states in the name of a responsibility to protect civilians in harm’s way. They both seek to erode Western dominance over global economic rules and information policy and view a “democratic” global order as one where authoritarian states have more of a voice and critical citizens have less of one.

Russia and China oppose what the United States stands for, though each may cooperate with Washington on particular issues. China and Russia oppose who we are, not what we do. The Sino-Russian partnership is not the result of failed U.S. policies toward Russia or China; indeed, their unity reflects a convergence on issues they view as existentially important for regime survival. This leaves room for the United States to

cooperate with the two countries on specific matters—the Sino-U.S. relationship, in particular, has continued to develop in a multifaceted way and is not adversely affected by the Sino-Russian partnership.

Sino-U.S. cooperation will not create leverage for the United States over Russia. Robust Sino-U.S. relations in areas of mutual interest are unlikely to have an impact on the Sino-Russian partnership because each is driven by a distinct set of factors. The days of using triangular patterns of relations for leverage are long gone. Today's triangle involves sets of parallel interactions in separate spheres of activity.

POLICY OPTIONS

Old strategies such as exploiting Sino-Russian differences may no longer work, but the United States has a bigger diplomatic toolbox. Although China and Russia oppose U.S. policies because of the norms the United States espouses, the three countries can still work together on some issues to achieve shared goals and pursue a broader-based foreign policy that is more attuned to U.S. values. How should the United States respond to the new triangular dynamic?

Promote U.S. interests in areas where Chinese and Russian policies diverge. There are real differences between Russia and China in Central Asia, the Arctic, and the Russian Far East, as well as on Ukraine and the South and East China Seas. The United States would do well to focus on more actively furthering its own interests in these areas. Ratifying the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, for instance—which both China and Russia have ratified but have divided policies on—would enable the United States to assert its maritime rights in areas where Russia and China differ.

Avoid actions that precipitate further partnership. For the most part, the Sino-Russian partnership proceeds from norms shared by China and Russia but not by the United States. On the issue of economic governance, however, the United States could do more

to acknowledge the interests of countries outside the Western consensus. Declining to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, for example, excluded the United States from the conversation. Joining this bank would give Washington an important voice in new infrastructure projects in Asia.

Engage in areas of common interest. Despite the Sino-Russian partnership, the United States can pursue shared goals with China and even with Russia on specific issues. In Afghanistan, the United States should continue its joint U.S.-China dialogue and training program for Afghan diplomats and, in time, renew antidrug cooperation with Russia. In the Arctic, as Arctic Council chair through 2017, the United States has the opportunity to engage with both Russia and China on environmental protection and shipping issues.

Broaden the U.S. rebalancing strategy. The new Sino-Russian partnership has global scope, with the two countries seeking opportunities to advance their cooperation well beyond Eurasia and East Asia. The United States needs to think more broadly about engaging a wider range of partners globally, rather than simply rebalancing from the Middle East to Asia. Within Asia, instead of reacting to Chinese (or Russian) moves, the United States needs to better articulate its positive vision for the region and devote the military and political resources necessary for consistent engagement with traditional allies and new partners. ♦

ELIZABETH WISHNICK is Associate Professor of Political Science at Montclair State University and Senior Research Scholar in the Weatherhead East Asian Institute at Columbia University. She can be reached at <wishnicke@mail.montclair.edu>.

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