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Is Putin Really Considering a Military Alliance With China?

In recent years, Moscow has tried to exploit the issue of its rapprochement with Beijing to scare the West with the prospect of a Sino-Russian bloc.

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Patel Bednyakov / DPA / TASS

At a meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club several weeks before the U.S. presidential election, Russian President Vladimir Putin made an interesting comment. Asked whether it was possible to conceive of a military alliance between China and Russia, Putin replied, "It is possible to imagine anything.... We have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either."

For many years, Putin and senior Russian officials — and the Chinese leadership, too — have always stated clearly that no alliance with China was on the agenda. Moscow and Beijing are

well aware that their interests don't always coincide. China, for example, does not recognize Abkhazia or South Ossetia as independent nations, and officially considers Crimea to be part of Ukraine. Russia, for its part, doesn't recognize Chinese claims to the South China Sea, and stays out of China's territorial disputes. Neither side wishes to risk getting drawn into a major conflict over the interests of its partner.

The logical explanation for Putin's refusal this time to rule out a military alliance with China may lie not in Russia's relationship with China, but with the West.

Since Russia's much-publicized pivot to the East following the collapse of its relations with the United States and EU back in 2014, Russia has taken important steps to strengthen its partnership with China, primarily focusing on economics and security. Major projects such as the construction of the Power of Siberia pipeline and other energy ventures have nearly doubled the share of Chinese trade in Russia's overall trade turnover in less than a decade: from 10 percent in 2013 to nearly 18 percent in 2019. Military cooperation has also reached a new level, with Russia selling the latest hardware to China, such as Su-35 fighter aircraft and S-400 missile systems, and the two countries holding joint military exercises on an increasingly large scale and over an ever-expanding geographical area, from the Baltic to the South China Sea.

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But if for Russia, under sanctions from the West, China is becoming an increasingly important partner that would be hard to replace, for Beijing, Moscow could easily be supplanted, since most of what it supplies China with could be bought elsewhere. Even the role of Russian arms will dwindle as Chinese defense technology inevitably progresses. In addition, U.S. and EU sanctions are gradually making Russia depend on China for strategic civilian technology, such as 5G systems: although both European (such as Ericsson and Nokia) and Chinese (Huawei and ZTE) solutions are present on the Russian market, the prospect of new sanctions and national security considerations make Chinese companies the favorites.

Russia's dependence on China has not yet reached a critical level. After all, the thinking in Moscow goes, if during the Ukraine crisis in 2014 Russia could defy its main partner — the EU — while heavily dependent on European markets, technology, and finance, then the Kremlin can defend its interests just as fiercely in the event of a quarrel with China. And while China accounts for less than 20 percent of Russia's trade turnover and its debt to Chinese financial institutes is still insignificant, that assessment appears to be justified.

But if relations with the EU and United States continue to deteriorate during the next ten to fifteen years, and the role of China as a trade partner and source of technology continues to grow, then Beijing could end up with the means to put pressure on Moscow. And if in 2014 the Kremlin at least had some alternative to the West in China, in the mid-2030s there might be no alternative to China, and Russia may find itself bound by pipelines to its sole customer amid a buyer's market.

In addition, Moscow cannot fail to notice that in recent years, Beijing has acquired a taste for using economic weapons such as sanctions, embargoes, and tariffs to apply pressure to other countries, as illustrated by the trade war currently raging between China and Australia

(despite the latter being seen until recently as a successful example of another country's symbiosis with the Chinese economy).

The Kremlin no doubt recalls how in 2011, China National Petroleum Corporation secured a discount from Rosneft and Transneft on a previously agreed contract by leveraging the Russian state oil companies' enormous debts to Chinese banks and their precarious situation. If China could successfully put pressure on Russia back in 2010, when the gap between the two countries' economies was smaller, what's to stop it doing the same in 2036?

In recent years, Moscow has tried to exploit the issue of its rapprochement with Beijing to scare the West with the prospect of a Sino-Russian bloc taking shape, with the aim of forcing it to soften its policy toward Russia. This approach is starting to bear fruit with the EU, as evidenced by French President Emmanuel Macron's interview with the Economist last year, and by the keen interest in Sino-Russian ties in Berlin and many other European capitals. But neither the EU nor individual European countries, even ones as powerful as Germany and France, can limit the Russian-Chinese rapprochement without coordinating their efforts with the United States.

U.S. attitudes toward the emerging entente between Moscow and Beijing are mixed. Under U.S. President Barack Obama, many senior officials believed that there wasn't much to it and that the rapprochement was insincere, since the two countries don't trust each other and there are fears in Russia of a Chinese demographic expansion in its Far East. The Donald Trump administration took the challenge more seriously, and even entertained former secretary of state Henry Kissinger's idea of a great power triangle. But U.S. attempts to position itself at the top of the triangle came to nothing, and the actions of the Trump administration only strengthened the Russia-China axis.

Responding to China and Russia's growing closeness is unlikely to be a priority for Joe Biden's foreign policy team, but the issue will inevitably come up in discussions among his national security team.

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The president-elect considers China to be a "serious competitor" to the United States in the battle for global leadership, and Russia as an "opponent" and the most hostile of the major powers, so Washington cannot ignore the relationship between Beijing and Moscow. In any case, the issue will be on the White House's radar since the new team plans to make restoring relationships with U.S. allies a priority, and the Sino-Russian relationship is the subject of growing attention in Berlin, Paris, London, Tokyo, and Seoul.

The key task will be to understand what precisely about the Moscow-Beijing rapprochement is undesirable for the United States and its allies, which aspects of it the West can influence to its own ends, and what methods it can use to do so.

Moscow knows full well that the United States' main concern is the military rapprochement of Moscow and Beijing, specifically, the use of Russian technology and adaptation of Russian experience in recent military campaigns to boost the potential of China's People's Liberation Army.

An even more alarming prospect is the transition from a non-aggression pact between Russia and China, which already constricts the United States and its allies, to joint military operations such as last year's strategic bomber patrol in Northeast Asia. The next step could be the formation of a more profound security partnership that would increasingly resemble a military alliance. It's likely no coincidence that Putin touched on this sore point in particular in his recent comments at the Valdai event.

The main problem for the United States and its European allies is sketching out a realistic strategy that would take into account the importance for any Russian government of good relations with China, the immovability of current Western sanctions, key Western interests like support for Ukrainian territorial integrity, and Moscow's red lines. For the Kremlin, the key challenge is not to put too much stock in Western fears of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, and to be capable of changing policy in order to stabilize ties with the United States and Europe, while at the same time preserving good relations with Beijing.

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