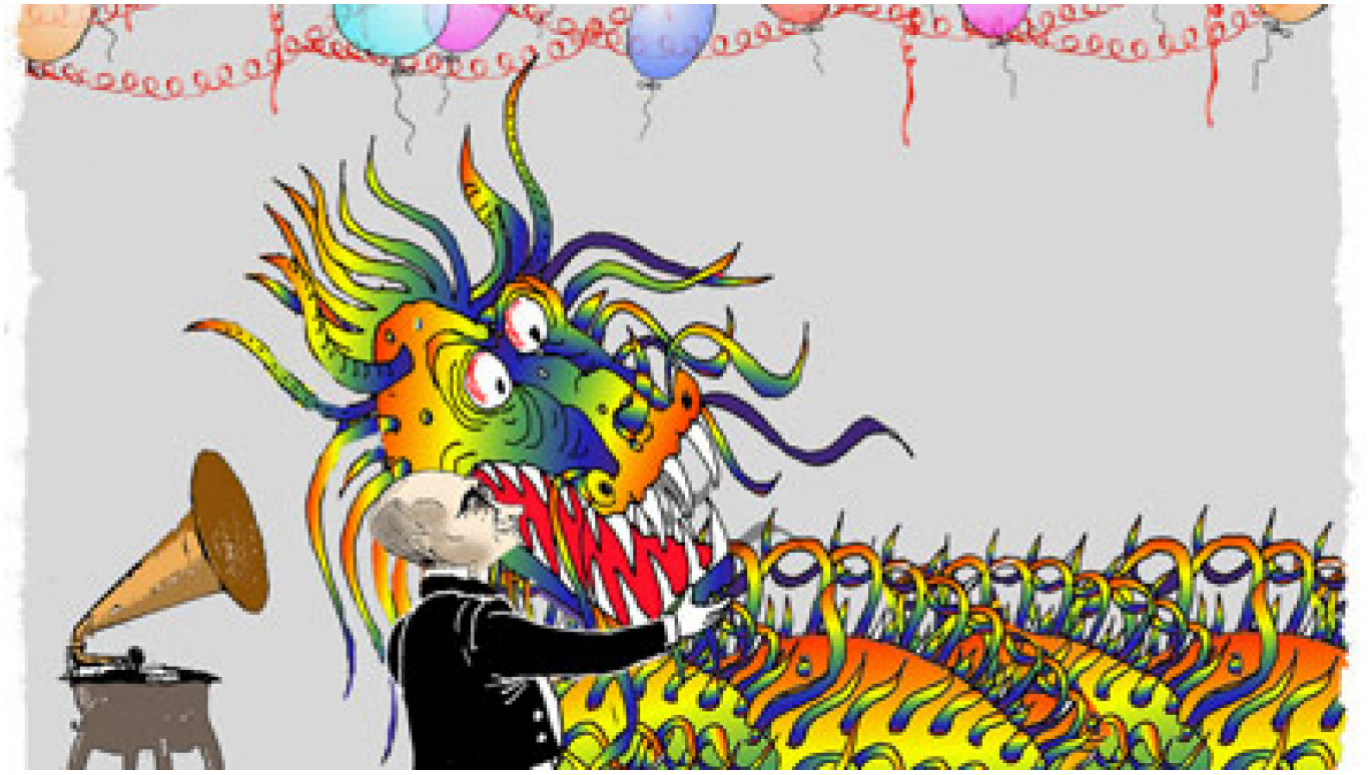
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Russia Can't Replace the West With China

By Christopher Miller

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The Ukraine crisis and the following political fallout have sharpened Moscow's interest in fostering an international political system that is less centered on the European Union and United States. Western sanctions have also demonstrated Moscow's economic dependence on the West — above all, its dependence on access to the U.S. dollar and the euro.

In response, many strategists have called for Russia to strengthen its political and economic ties with China. But is China interested in a deeper alliance? If so, what would Russia stand to gain and lose?

There are four main reasons that some analysts predict continued improvements in Russian-Chinese relations. The first is energy.

In the short term, the gas-price dispute between Ukraine and Russia may disrupt Russia's ability to supply its large market in Europe, as one important transit route for Russian gas runs through Ukraine.

In the long run, too, Russia's privileged role in European energy markets looks less secure because Europe may seek to reduce Russia's pricing power and expand imports from other suppliers.

China's demand for energy, though, continues to grow rapidly, and energy security is one of Beijing's top policy goals. China favors Russia because it less susceptible to the geopolitical upheavals seen in Persian Gulf nations and, therefore, will be a more reliable supplier of gas and oil. Gazprom's recent agreement to build a pipeline to China is likely just the first step in a strengthening energy relationship.

The second sign of improving ties is military relations. China has long been an important arms export market for Russia, but the Kremlin's recent decision to sell S-400 surface-to-air missiles to China marks an important shift.

In the past, Russia's arms exports to China were limited by the geopolitical rivalry between Moscow and Beijing. To this end, the Kremlin ensured that Russian forces maintained a technological edge.

But the sale of S-400 missiles not only reduces Russia's technological superiority over China, it also shifts the military balance between China and its neighbors, especially Japan, Taiwan and India. If sales of high-tech kits to China continue, it may be evidence that Moscow sees less need to fear military competition on its Eastern border, and more room for cooperation.

Third, advocates of stronger Chinese-Russian ties have been cheered by Beijing's refusal to condemn the annexation of Crimea. China is usually wary of border changes — it opposed Kosovo's independence, for example — because it has a handful of sticky border disputes of its own. Nonetheless, Beijing did not openly criticize Russia's seizure of Crimea, which some have interpreted as evidence that Beijing is prioritizing its relationship with Moscow.

The fourth reason to expect closer coordination between Moscow and Beijing is that both countries share ideological goals that are crucial to the maintenance of their domestic political systems.

Both believe that autocracy is a legitimate form of governance and that talk of human rights threatens stability. Both insist that democracy — or "Western-style democracy," as they often put it — is only fit for some societies and is not a universal aspiration. And both governments are deeply committed to countering attempts by the U.S., European countries and NGOs to promote political liberalization in other countries.

But do these four factors — energy, military, diplomacy and ideology — provide a foundation for a strong Moscow-Beijing alliance? Probably not.

One reason is that the two countries' interests clash in as many areas as they are aligned. This is most sharply evident in Central Asia. China's new gas pipeline deal with Russia was preceded by an even larger gas deal with Turkmenistan. In addition, Chinese traders do a brisk business in Central Asia, especially Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Beyond energy, Beijing has not yet articulated any specific geopolitical aims in Central Asia. But Russia has extensive security interests and economic ties there, and few policymakers

in Russia or China have illusions that their countries' goals in the region will always align.

A second reason for skepticism is the two countries' economic imbalance. Russian commodity firms will benefit a great deal from China's economic ascent, but China is unlikely to buy much from Russia besides raw materials. Russia's industrial and service sectors will see little benefit from any expansion in trade with China, and they will be threatened by low-cost Chinese goods of increasingly higher quality.

The profile of China's trade with Russia will look like China's trade relationships with Middle Eastern countries, Venezuela, Angola and other states that sell energy to China and receive manufactured goods in return. This will be good for Russian energy firms, but many others in Russian society will not find such a relationship appealing.

The most important cause for skepticism about a stronger Chinese-Russian entente is that neither country is in a position to play a primary role in helping the other accomplish its core goals.

China's main aims are to safeguard economic growth at home and expand its influence in the Asia-Pacific region. In both areas, Russia can play a role, but only a minor one. The U.S., Europe and Asian countries will be far more important to China's economic development than Russia will. Moscow, meanwhile, is currently focused on its western frontier. Yet China has little interest in Ukraine, Georgia or Moldova, and is unlikely to get seriously involved.

The main reason the Kremlin has been trumpeting ties with the Chinese during the Ukraine crisis is not because officials believe that China will help directly, but because the appearance of closer ties gives Moscow greater leverage in negotiations with the West.

From Russia's perspective, the best-case scenario is a relationship that, with the exception of energy ties, is broad and visible, but not very deep. A full alliance with Beijing holds little appeal in Moscow because Russia would be the junior partner. Don't expect the Kremlin to agree to that.

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