

Is Russia Having Second Thoughts About Integration With China?

President Xi Jinping's meeting with Vladimir Putin in St. Petersburg happens at a critical moment in the relations between the two countries.

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The last few years made possible a significant rapprochement, but the potential for sudden shifts cannot be excluded.

Everything seems in flux at the moment. Will the two countries move even closer together — is an Eastern Alliance possible? — or will China's rise face new resistance in this area as well — problems it is now facing almost everywhere?

Beijing has been extraordinarily successful in managing Russia, perhaps the most brilliant

success of Chinese foreign policy in recent years. But in the recent Belt and Road Forum in Beijing, president Putin poured some cold water on the Eastern Alliance.

He did not do so explicitly, but the main message was that China's Maritime Silk Road — one of its routes goes through the Arctic, connecting Europe and Asia — would have to link with Russia's Northern Sea Route.

Now, on paper the Maritime Silk Road would need no such extension as it is already designed to reach Europe in Norway or Greenland or even Finland. So Putin was essentially saying: not so fast.

Is that an obvious and natural position? Perhaps, but significantly it is not a position the European Union has taken. EU countries have been joining the Belt and Road wholesale.

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Even when conditions are demanded, these are conditions to join China's initiative. It seems far away from European ideas that the EU could develop its own Eurasian strategy and then — only then — discuss with China how the two strategies could be linked at a higher level.

That Putin has on this occasion gone where the EU fears to tread might show that fears of an Eastern Alliance have been overblown.

The fact remains that Russia sees itself as one of the four or five major global players and will be zealous of its sovereignty and independence.

The last two years cast a shadow on this self-image. Amity with China is starting to appear as a greater threat to Russia's global status than enmity with the West ever could.

In some sense Beijing's strategy is wearing off. While the Belt and Road was a mere project it was easier to bring Russia on board. There were discussions and expectations and not much more.

As long as consultations between the two parties continued to be regularly held, things would run smoothly. But now that the initiative begins to acquire a more practical bent, Russia has become more pensive.

If the recent [incidents](#) at Lake Baikal can serve as an example, then friction is to be expected.

China moves in with its usual modus operandi: fast, inattentive to local perceptions, and en masse. Russians are not used to this and will no doubt resent the freedom with which Beijing has interpreted the purely formal matter that Russia has in fact signed one of those famous memoranda that make a country a proud member of the Belt and Road club.

In principle, the main premise should hold: Russia wants to be an independent pole in the new global order. But being an independent pole in close association with China is simply not possible, given the asymmetry in economic power and size.

Ergo Russia will be forced to keep some distance from its eastern neighbor.

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There is one last element, however.

While Russia may be determined to remain an independent pole, it is also aware that it is no such thing at present.

In the American-led order there is only one pole. This creates an obvious opening for an alliance between the two countries. It would be a temporary alliance. Both sides know it would be temporary. And it would be an alliance with a limited and well-defined goal, to overturn the American-led order as it has existed since the end of the Second World War.

In fairness, the United States has very few options. Were it to reach out to Russia in hopes of driving a wedge between Moscow and Beijing, this could well be used by Russia to push harder against American power. Lifting the existing sanctions would not change the psychological disposition reigning in the Kremlin and among Russian elites. *America delenda est.*

But if America assumes that Russia and China are a threat and decides to confront the two countries at the same time, then a temporary alliance between them becomes inevitable. It is not substance and strategy that dictates the outcome, but tactics and operations.

In one of those paradoxes so common in world politics, we may end up with the very outcome all three countries would like to avoid: an effective Eastern Alliance between China and Russia.

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