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Can Trump Channel Nixon to Turn Russia Against China?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. **Ramil Sitdikov / brics-russia2024.ru**

The Trump administration has been quite open about why exactly it wants to get into bed with Moscow: it believes closer ties will prize Russia away from China, which it sees as the real existential threat to the United States. A previous U.S. president — Richard Nixon — came up with a similar plan at the beginning of the 1970s. The only difference is that Nixon's plan was supposed to work the other way around: improving relations with China to isolate the Soviet Union. Back then, the U.S. strategy worked — more or less. Donald Trump's modern-day imitation of Nixon, however, is unlikely to succeed.

"The greatest honor history can bestow is the title of peacemaker. This honor now beckons America," Nixon said in his 1969 inaugural address. Trump has hidden neither his admiration for Nixon, nor his desire to go down in history as a peacemaker.

This aping of Nixon has not been limited to rhetoric. Nixon sent a clandestine mission to Beijing led by his National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger; Trump secretly sent his special envoy Steve Witkoff to Moscow to negotiate a prisoner exchange. Nixon allowed China to return to full membership of the United Nations despite ideological differences; Trump has begun reestablishing diplomatic ties with Russia. Just as Nixon sought to cooperate with Beijing, so Trump wants to work with Moscow.

Admittedly, the prognosis for Trump is worse than it was for Nixon in the 1970s. The architect of the U.S.-China rapprochement, Kissinger, said at the time that both Washington and Beijing were interested in containing the Soviet Union. The same is not true today. Russia is extremely unlikely to want to contain China — they have too much in common.

Unlike the situation in the early 1970s, when warming ties between Beijing and Washington were preceded by a decade and a half of rising tensions between Moscow and Beijing, the current relationship between Moscow and Beijing is built on the solid foundations of a long shared border, complementary economies, and similar political regimes. These foundations are reinforced by the good personal relationship between Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping. While it is true that Russia and China do not call themselves "allies," they certainly would not pick a fight with one another.

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Indeed, the good relations between Moscow and Beijing right now are, in large part, the result of a shared hostility toward Washington. U.S. sanctions against Russia and trade restrictions on China have pushed the two countries closer together, both ideologically and economically. Their trade turnover is approaching a record $250 billion per year; Russia shares advanced military technology with China; and China sells Russia dual-use goods essential for its war in Ukraine. Even in Central Asia, where the interests of the two countries overlap, Moscow and Beijing have been cooperating closely.

In addition, Trump cannot offer Russia anything like what Nixon gave China. At the end of the 1960s, Beijing was experiencing serious economic problems as a result of a falling out with Moscow, and the warming ties with the United States opened up a whole new range of opportunities (marking the beginning of what would become known as the Chinese economic miracle).

The Russian economy today is very different: it was and largely remains an integral part of the global system. This is why Western sanctions have not been as effective as their architects had hoped.

Nor do the Russian and U.S. economies have much to offer one another (there was little overlap even before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine), in contrast to the U.S. and Chinese economies in the 1970s, which complemented each other.

There is not much of a political foundation for Trump to build better relations with Russia either. Before Nixon came to power, Beijing was isolated, and was only able to return to the international fold thanks to Washington. Today, Russia is deeply disillusioned with the very concept of global integration under what it sees as "Western rules." Trump's idea of allowing Russia to rejoin the G7 group of advanced economies was seen by Russian officials as all but meaningless. The truth is that Moscow is happy not to participate in Western institutions, preferring instead to take a leading role in groups such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS.

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Any attempt to set China and Russia against one another will most likely end up having the opposite effect. In Moscow, Trump is seen as an anomaly for the U.S. establishment from whom it might be possible to extract some short-term gains, but around whom it would be foolish to plan a long-term foreign policy shift. In both Moscow and Beijing, Trump's actions are seen as proof that it's impossible to come to any agreement with Western leaders who are fixated on their own short-term electoral cycles: in four years, when his term expires, Trump will no longer be president. But Putin and Xi still intend to be in office.

The only reason Trump appears to have enjoyed some success in his bid to build ties with Moscow in recent weeks is because he started from such a low point. One phone call with Putin is seen as a breakthrough. However, with time, the contrast with his predecessor, Joe Biden, will become less obvious — and there will be fewer easy wins.

Trump is driven by his business instincts, not the search for geopolitical advantage. These instincts suggest Russia would agree to make strategic concessions (like giving up its relationship with China) for significant economic gains. If that is what U.S. officials are expecting, though, they are deeply misguided. It would seem they have forgotten that Putin was prepared to sacrifice Russia's economic development upon the altar of its geopolitical ambitions when he launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

The Kremlin will likely play along with Trump: at a minimum, increased interest from Washington strengthens Moscow's position vis-à-vis Beijing. But it's extremely unlikely Moscow will make any serious concessions. However hard he may try, Trump will not be able to pull off the same strategy with Russia that Nixon managed with China.

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