

IT'S COMPLICATED: RUSSIA'S TRICKY RELATIONSHIP WITH CHINA

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SUMMARY

- Western policymakers are now asking whether Russia and China will join forces in an alliance of autocracies, and whether they have a chance to manage this challenge by drawing Moscow away from Beijing.
- Neither of these outcomes is likely in the short term: Russia has many reasons to maintain a cordial relationship with China, while policymakers in Moscow view rapprochement with the West as impossible or too politically costly.
- The Kremlin's thinking on China is an amalgam of quickly developing trends that will determine Russia's position in a world shaped by the US-China rivalry.
- While the West does not have an opportunity to prompt a policy U-turn in Moscow that divides Russia and China, it could give Russia space to hedge against China in key areas such as advanced technology.

Western politicians sometimes talk of China and Russia as if they were pieces in a Lego set: fixed in shape, and easy to handle. They often view the two countries as either a de facto alliance that the West needs to contain or as a target for a ‘reverse Kissinger’ – an effort to draw Russia away from China. Some analysts see them as forming an “alliance of autocracies”; others as a “bad marriage” that Russia is desperate to escape. But both these narratives ignore much of the thinking of Russian and Chinese policymakers, as well as many of the forces that shape the Russia-China relationship.

Russia’s view of China, in particular, has undergone remarkable shifts in a short time – and continues to do so. The causes of these shifts are multifaceted: they include the changing nature of China’s behaviour, the West’s relations with Russia and China, economic concerns, leaders’ personalities, fundamental security interests, covid-19, the global drive towards green energy, generational change, and Russia’s growing interest in its big neighbour (which, for a long time, barely appeared on the mental map of Russian policymaking elites). For now, Russia’s thinking about China is best described as an amalgam of many different trends – which vary in their significance, longevity, and vitality.

Russia’s policymakers and society do not fear China in the way that many countries in the West and China’s neighbourhood do. This might be thanks to Russia’s still-significant military superiority, or the presence of some residual beliefs from Soviet times, when the state media routinely portrayed China as a ‘younger brother’ and a less developed country. At the same time, Moscow’s trust in Beijing is measured. Russia is careful to keep China at arm’s length on sensitive policy issues. And it is no accident that Russia’s security services employ very little Chinese technology. Russian policymakers’ generally relaxed attitude might now be slowly changing, as China flexes its muscles and they learn more about their neighbour. One can already observe how Russia’s younger China experts are much more vigilant about Beijing’s policies than some of their older colleagues.

This paper describes the forces that shape Russia’s long-term view of China. It seeks to identify which trends are fading or deepening – which are fleeting or longer-term. And it explores their implications for Western, particularly European, policy.

The West only has a limited ability to change the trajectory of the Russia-China relationship – but it does have some influence on it. Indeed, Russia and China intensified their cooperation in the years following the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 – which led to a sharp decline in Moscow’s relationship with Western capitals – but it would be wrong to assume that the two countries were pushed together by the West. Russia and China started their slow rapprochement in the 1980s; they maintain cordial relations with each other out of a mutual strategic need to do so. And the complementarity of their economies only reinforces this – regardless of what the West says or does.

As the West did not bring Russia and China together, their relationship is not there for the West to

split. Western leaders are unlikely to succeed with a policy that has the explicit aim of dividing Russia and China: big, long-term trends shape that relationship. The dynamic and interplay of these trends will determine Moscow's future position in a world shaped by US-China rivalry. That said, the West is in a position to influence some of these long-term trends: it can try to reinforce some and weaken others. The West could, if it chooses, allow Russia some space to hedge against China – if and when Moscow sees the need for that – and hope that, in time, the distance between the two troublesome powers will grow.

Dynamic decade

Just a decade ago, a visitor to Moscow would have found Russia turning away from the West, amid the protests and crackdowns that accompanied President Vladimir Putin's return to the Kremlin. But this Russia was still largely wary of China. Back then, elites' concerns about China's demographic expansion to the Russian Far East and its potential to outcompete Russia in their neighbourhood still informed Russian policymaking. These considerations help explain why Russia refrained from selling China its newest military gadgets – such as the S-400 missile-defence system and the SU-35 fighter jet.

Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 changed everything. The severe deterioration in the country's relationship with the West made it look at China in new ways – as an ally and an investor rather than just a regional competitor and a buyer of military equipment with an annoying tendency to copy Russian technology. The Kremlin reviewed and reversed many of its policies on China: it decided that the arms trade with China helped Russia maintain a foothold in an expanding market – the longer-term benefits of which outweighed the nuisance of China copying some technology. Elites concluded that a Chinese takeover of Russia's Far East was either unrealistic or at least not imminent. And the question of regional competition was settled in May 2015, when President Xi Jinping visited Moscow. There, he signed an agreement with Putin that established cooperation between their countries' transnational political-economic projects – China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union, declaring the two initiatives to be complementary. Any fears that remained were pushed aside and not expressed publicly.

Hopes ran high. Decision-makers in Moscow expected China to take over the financing of some of the mega-projects that lost access to EU investment due to sanctions, such as the Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway. Major Russian companies were eyeing the Chinese market. And even some of the smaller ones were convinced that “the Chinese will buy everything”, as one executive put it.^[1] The somewhat touching Russian tendency to overdo official friendships also reached into the spheres of culture and religion, resulting in curiosities such as a 2015 Russian-Chinese choir festival in an

Orthodox monastery in northern Russia.

However, Russia's leaders and business community were in for a measure of disappointment. China did not rush to break Western sanctions on Russia. And, where it sought to invest, it proved to be a tough negotiator. Smaller Russian companies found the Chinese market harder to enter than they had hoped: owners of bakeries learned that Chinese shoppers considered their products too sweet; managers of candy factories were astonished to find out that, in the Chinese market, each sweet in a box needed to have its own cellophane wrapper.^[2] And even big state companies had unpleasant experiences: one energy firm expected an investment from China that failed to materialise because the Chinese authorities arrested the director of the firm's partner company. "The Russian partner felt let down – while actually they clearly just failed to do due diligence," comments with a shrug one businessperson based in Moscow.^[3]

Along the way, Russian firms had a taste of China's tough negotiating culture. "China does not know what compromise is," says another businessperson in Moscow. "There is China's position – and that's it."^[4] And China's interests and influence can extend beyond its borders, to the detriment of Russian firms: in August 2020, Beijing's demands forced Rosneft to cancel a contract to drill in waters off the coast of Vietnam.

The euphoria dissipated. But, thanks to the near-perfect complementarity of the two countries' economies, trade between them continued to grow – if perhaps more on China's terms than Russian leaders ideally would have liked. These days, energy and agriculture account for the bulk of this trade. China consumes Russia's coal and oil; the newly built Power of Siberia pipeline carries Russian gas to Chinese companies. And, once complete, Power of Siberia 2 will provide gas to China from fields in western Siberia – the same ones that supply Europe. But agriculture might be an even bigger story. "Agriculture is the new IT," says one Sinologist in Moscow:^[5] the Chinese market has given an unprecedented boost to agricultural development in Russia's Far East, while Russian companies are now investing in agricultural production in China.

Contrary to any fears Russian leaders may once have had, this is not leading to a demographic takeover of Russia's Far East. Chinese workers would come with temporary arrangements, as opposed to resettling – until covid-19 forced the closure of the Russia-China border to the movement of people, even as the trade in goods continued. This has dealt a blow to towns such as Blagoveshchensk, for which cross-border weekend trips were an important source of income. Near the city, a newly constructed bridge over the Amur River stands unused – its opening repeatedly postponed. Chinese workers in Russia's Far East have gone home. They have been replaced by Russian workers who are less skilled and more demanding, but also somewhat cheaper to employ.

It is hard to guess the extent to which the movement of people will resume after the pandemic. For instance, Chinese seasonal agricultural workers are unlikely to return to Russia: China's economy offers them lucrative jobs further south, and – as mentioned – Russians have already taken their places. But some of Russia's China experts (and it appears to be the younger ones) suggest that covid-19 has triggered or accelerated a much more fundamental isolationist trend in China. They argue that China, aspiring to economic and technological self-sufficiency, feels ever less need to admit foreigners or allow its own people to wander the world. "I think they used covid as a good excuse to go home and close the doors – as that is the way they like it," suggested one Moscow Sinologist,[6] who sees China's decarbonisation drive as part of a push towards import substitution and self-reliance. "In five to seven years, they will not need us any more," was his prediction – which is somewhat at odds with Gazprom's and McKinsey's expectations that China will be a prominent consumer of Russian gas until at least 2035.

This rollercoaster of a relationship has affected Russian politicians' thinking – although, to spot the changes in their rhetoric, one needs to pay close attention and read between the lines, as none of their relevant comments feed into the mainstream media. Looking closely, one can see that some former proponents of Russia-China rapprochement now adopt a more cautious approach. For instance, Sergei Karaganov – formerly an unreserved cheerleader for 'greater Eurasia' – was by 2020 claiming that "China needs to dissolve itself in Eurasia the way Germany dissolved itself in the EU – otherwise, we'll have problems."[7]

Interestingly, Russia's security services have started to complain more publicly about Chinese spying in Russia, which may be a signal to China – a not-so-subtle call for it to be more restrained. Similarly, in recent times, the Russian government seems to have downgraded its diplomatic presence at some events that involve China. For example, Russia was represented by an ambassador rather than a minister at a June 2020 meeting of Belt and Road Initiative foreign ministers – which some analysts interpreted as a signal. Putin – who has travelled very little during the pandemic – visited India for

his first big bilateral trip since the crisis began, while the summit with Xi was conducted online.

Some experts have started to ask if Russia's rapprochement with China has not peaked. In a recent article, two prominent Russian Sinologists note that China has become more assertive as its power has grown – and Russia, its nominal ally, is feeling the heat. They set out a list of grievances about the asymmetric arrangements in the relationship: the Russian media cannot work in China the same way the Chinese media work in Russia; and China sometimes even tries to censor Russian media outlets in Russia; academic cooperation is hampered by ideology; China is far quicker to remove Soviet war monuments than any country in central Europe; and, occasionally, Russia finds itself on the receiving end of China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy. Accordingly, the authors of the article call on Russia to start quietly hedging against China: "on a macro level, Russia and China declare common views on the evolution of the international system" but, in practice, "the growth of China's global clout may make it harder for Russia to build its relationship with China on the principles foreseen in the foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation: independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, multi-vector policy, predictability, and a non-confrontational defence of national priorities".

This article is probably not a Kremlin-sanctioned signal to China. But it shows that there is a sharp contrast between the carefree official tone on China and these hidden undercurrents: two long-term observers of China see so many signs of trouble in the relationship that they have responded with a set of fairly radical policy recommendations.

Strategic non-choice

All this may seem to create an opportunity for a reverse Kissinger. But, alas, it would be premature to believe this. Beneath the twists and turns of the dynamic decade in Sino-Russian relations lies a simpler truth: China's power will only grow, and China is Russia's neighbour. This means that cordial relations with the Chinese government are of paramount importance to the Kremlin, which simply cannot afford any other scenario.

Historically, this is an unprecedented situation. Administering a huge but sparsely populated and loosely connected country, the government in Moscow has always been sensitive to threats to Russia's territorial integrity. This is why it has often sought to protect its borders by gaining control over neighbouring states, to use them as a buffer zone. Yet Russia cannot do this with China. They share one of the world's longest land borders. The Kremlin quietly congratulates itself for resolving its border disputes with Beijing in the early 2000s – a time when China was far less powerful and assertive than it is today, and when Russia, as the stronger military power, still had the upper hand.

It is striking that some members of Russia's foreign policy establishment now talk about China's power in the way they spoke about the US hegemony in the 1990s: as a geopolitical fact of life that, like it or not, Russia needs to accept and cope with. True, the parallel has its limits: US ascendancy raised lots of passions (both positive and negative) and painful questions about Russia's status. Moscow wanted to position itself as a victorious power, having conquered communism, but could not help feeling it had lost the cold war. None of this applies to China. Yet Russian experts' discussions of China boil down to a strikingly similar conclusion: there is a power to reckon with. This is why, in the 1990s, Russia simply had to fit into the Western-led world – the way in which Western values became blended with global power left it with no other option. Three decades later, Russia is in a similar position: it simply needs to maintain cordial relations with China. The alternative – a border conflict with China or simply the securitisation of their relationship – is too nightmarish to imagine, regardless of the form it might take.

This is one reason why Russian leaders acquiesce to behaviour by Beijing that they would object to elsewhere. “The strategic benefit of maintaining constructive relations outweighs the benefits of imposing one's own interests upon separate issues,” write three Russian academics in a recent article about Russia-China relations. “In Russia-China relations, [the two sides] desire to acquire benefits not in each concrete case, but from the relationship as a whole.” Again, this is reminiscent of how Russia put up with many Western actions it did not like, starting with NATO enlargement – because it either felt it had a stake in the overall relationship or, at least, could not afford open enmity.

But there are also other reasons for Russia to tolerate China's growing assertiveness – and these factors have to do with the West. Western leaders sometimes underappreciate the extent to which many in Russia – especially those in the security establishment – view the West as a threat. “Many here believe that the US wants to liquidate Russia as a state,” says Vasily Kashin, a leading Russian expert on China and military affairs. “And, if the US wants regime change and to break up the country now but China might become a problem in ten years' time, then there is little to think about.”^[8]

This reasoning is echoed by many Russian policy experts, with varying degrees of alarmism. Even those who do not see the West as an existential threat to Russia's heartland still regard a reverse Kissinger as an unappealing or impossible option. This is partly because, they believe, this would involve capitulation on matters they consider non-negotiable – such as Russia's control of Crimea, its ambitions in its neighbourhood, and its right to implement domestic policy as the Kremlin sees fit (with little regard to Western rules and norms). Equally, the Russian government simply sees little to gain from such a move. “It is incomprehensible why Moscow should want to aggravate relations with its main neighbour, whose growing might no one denies, and turn to a country that is located far away

and [tries to mobilise others] for its very specific agenda,” writes Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of *Russia in Global Affairs*, in his [response](#) to a recent US article suggesting a reverse Kissinger.

Pragmatic non-ideology

Western leaders might also underappreciate the extent to which their Russian counterparts regard the West as an ideological power and communist China a pragmatic one – and the extent to which they value pragmatism over ideology. This perception may have originated in the Kremlin’s rejection of Western attempts to mould Russia into a liberal democracy. But, today, it goes far deeper than that. The government in Moscow views any foreign policy principally organised around the spread of values or an ideology as counterproductive and even dangerous. And it has re-evaluated Russia’s history in the same light.

A good example of this can be [found](#) in Putin’s speech at the October 2021 meeting of the Valdai Discussion Club, in which he condemned Western ‘wokeness’ and Soviet Bolshevism in the same stroke: “some people in the West believe that an aggressive elimination of entire pages from their own history, ‘reverse discrimination’ against the majority in the interests of a minority, and the demand to give up the traditional notions of mother, father, family and even gender, they believe that all of these are the mileposts on the path towards social renewal ... It may come as a surprise to some people, but Russia has been there already. After the 1917 revolution, the Bolsheviks, relying on the dogmas of Marx and Engels, also said that they would change existing ways and customs and not just political and economic ones, but the very notion of human morality and the foundations of a healthy society.”

In contrast, Russian leaders believe that China does not commit the sin of telling others how to live. Igor Istomin, a lecturer at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, compares China to the United States at the height of the cold war: “back then, the US was ideological internally, proclaiming liberalism and watching out for communists. But, externally, it was a pragmatic power cooperating with everyone it had to – from Josif Broz Tito to Augusto Pinochet.” For the modern-day Kremlin, this seems to contrast favourably with the behaviour of the Soviet Union – which, at the time, advocated ideological purity and pursued ideological goals in a way that rejected or alienated many prospective allies.

The Russian government has learned that lesson: in its foreign policy, Russia draws massive benefits from being a “non-ideological”, “pragmatic” power. This is what allows it to play a leading role in the Middle East: unlike the Soviet Union, it is not constrained by ideological preferences; unlike the US, it is not tied to formal or informal alliance agreements; accordingly, it remains on speaking terms with

everyone. Similarly, Russia is making new inroads in Africa by presenting itself as a pragmatic outsider that African countries – some of which view Europe as a former coloniser and China as a future coloniser – could safely rely on.

In this context, Russia's relationship with China is reminiscent of that with Turkey: the sides tolerate their differences of opinion or clashes of interest because they see these disputes as originating in 'pragmatic' geopolitical interests, not in ideology – and especially not in an ideology that threatens their systems of governance. This comes across in almost all China-related interviews with Russian experts and policymakers – who view China as a fellow pragmatic power that is both more understandable and less dangerous than the West. "China's thinking is known to us," says one business insider in Moscow. "Europe is unpredictable." Kashin argues that "China might steal technology, but they are not trying to arrange a fall of government ... In the 1990s, China did not give money to communists, while the West keeps funding liberal opposition".^[9]

This world view explains why no Russian official has publicly lamented Rosneft's retreat from Vietnam under Chinese pressure: the government in Moscow understands the Chinese view of contested waters, and accepts that the incident was essentially all about China, not Russia. For the same reason, Russia's 1.5 million Buddhists need to travel to India or Latvia to listen to the teachings of the Dalai Lama – the Kremlin will not allow him to visit Elista or Ulan-Ude, let alone Moscow. And this is why Russian officials overreact to many harmless – or even toothless – statements by Western leaders but interpret much harsher comments from the Chinese authorities as "non-systemic occurrences", symptoms of "vertigo of sudden rise",^[10] or even a sign that "they simply do not know how to behave," as a prominent Russian expert put it when asked about 'wolf-warrior' diplomacy.

A flexible non-alliance

Today, Russia and China are joined not by ideology, but rather by the avoidance of it – and their joint resistance to Western liberalism. The ideological characteristics they share originate not so much in a joint ideological world view as circumstances that have brought them to the same place – for now. For instance, many policy experts in Moscow admit (not necessarily with satisfaction) that, in recent times, Russia's social order has moved closer to China's through crackdowns on dissent, increasing state control over most areas of life, and vertical and personalised power structures that delegate management but not decision-making to lower levels.

While China under Xi may see an authoritarian social model as the destination of choice, this is not the case for Russia – even with Putin in the Kremlin. Rather, Russia's current level of authoritarianism is a diversion, a measure of last resort by a political system that is tired and in which

a transition is overdue. True, Russia has traditionally been a centralised and authoritarian country. But, most of the time, its brand of authoritarianism has included pockets of freedom; it has combined servility with a dissident, maverick spirit even in high-ranking positions of power. And, as concerns Putin's Russia, the heyday of its political model was surely more than a decade ago, when it could control the political discourse so that relatively free elections always produced the result it wanted, and when the political landscape was manageable without an excessive reliance on arrests, bans, and crackdowns.

All this means that it would be wrong to assume Russia and China are destined to become 'an alliance of autocracies' or really any kind of a political alliance. And when Putin refused in October 2020 to rule out a Russia-China military alliance, he was likely warning the West and gently trolling it by playing on its fears – probably more of the latter.

After all, Moscow and Beijing once had an alliance, and it did not end well. The obligations of this alliance, between the Soviet Union and China, called for more joint action and mutual support than either side could accept. This quickly created problems. For instance, Russia's approach to India – which it hoped to win over for socialism – differed from that of Beijing, which saw New Delhi as a strategic adversary and was disappointed that it received no support from the Soviets in the 1959 Sino-Indian border dispute. Likewise, Beijing's interest in regaining control over Taiwan clashed head on with Moscow's fear of being dragged into a nuclear conflict with the US.

Today, Russia and China have reached the conclusion that their partnership works best as an informal arrangement. This leaves both sides with the option not to commit to supporting the other partner in its conflicts: China does not recognise the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, nor the Russian annexation of Crimea, while Russia does not support China's territorial claims in the South China Sea.

Indeed, military cooperation between the two countries has reached a level of interoperability that some analysts characterise as “on the verge of alliance”. But Moscow and Beijing will hardly rush to formalise the arrangement. While Russia has never wanted to share sensitive military secrets with China, this would not be an obstacle to an alliance – as shown by NATO, in which the US is selective in sharing intelligence and technology. The main reason why Russia and China are content to remain on the threshold of a military alliance is that this is the most convenient arrangement for them: military interoperability helps them build mutual trust and thereby reduces the risk that their relationship will become securitised; signals to adversaries such as the US that they can join forces, if needed; and, thanks to the absence of formal alliance commitments, allays the fears of other partners – such as Ukraine in its relations with China, and India and Vietnam in their dealings with Russia.

Against this background, leaders in Moscow watch the growth of the US-China rivalry with some trepidation, given that it could wreck the convenient, flexible arrangement between Russia and China. They fear that, if there is a military confrontation between the US and China over Taiwan, Beijing will demand full loyalty from Moscow. And they accept (unhappily) that, in this scenario, Russia would end up in China’s camp – accepting its terms to a much larger extent than it currently does.

However, in its current form, the US-China rivalry helps Moscow. As US President Joe Biden views China as his country’s main rival, Beijing needs Moscow more than it otherwise would. For Beijing, Biden’s China-inspired push to talk with Putin about strategic stability shows that the Russians have other potential partners.^[11] Russian leaders hope that this realisation will prompt Beijing to reconsider what they see as the growing arrogance of its statements and behaviour.

For its part, Moscow is likely to do everything it can to prevent the US-China rivalry from creating a bipolar, cold war-style world in which countries must choose a side. “No one wants bipolarity,” says Dmitry Suslov, an academic at the Higher School of Economics. He points out that a long list of countries ranging from India to states in Africa seek to avoid this. Drawing on its image as a pragmatic actor, the Russian government wants to cultivate relations with such countries, de facto positioning itself as an informal leader of a new non-aligned movement.

Terra incognita: China’s place in Russian foreign policy

Despite all the hype about China in Moscow and the anxiety about the Sino-Russian relationship in the West, China is still only surfacing – like a huge continent, submerged for decades – as an important factor in Russia’s foreign policy. In its dealings with China, Russia is yet to establish the

recognisable patterns and modes of policymaking that are evident in its approach to many other countries.

The Kremlin's policy on various regions of the world is guided by different philosophies, and it changes markedly with its level of internal expertise. This expertise is probably clearest when it comes to the Middle East: Russia has a rich tradition of scholarship and a large pool of experts on the region, and these experts have been spread across the political landscape – including everyone from Yevgeny Primakov, a former foreign and prime minister who was an Arabist by education, to maverick former defence minister Dmitry Rogozin, who has the same background. Importantly, the Kremlin also seeks and values such expertise, as it does not assume that it knows everything about, for instance, Sunni-Shia conflicts or marginalised ethnic groups in complex Middle Eastern countries.

The Kremlin also has a wealth of knowledge on the West, but views much of it through the prism of ideology. This often causes Russian leaders to leap to the wrong conclusions, even if their reasoning is based on accurate information: for example, they often see the European Union as a lapdog of the US, and assume that a more independent union would be much friendlier towards Russia. Things are at their worst when it comes to post-Soviet states: Russian policymakers have many passions about, but little expertise on, these countries. This is partly because, until the 1990s (or later, in some cases), Russian universities did not deal with them as foreign nations.

On China, Russian policymakers have neither deep expertise nor any overwhelming passions or prejudices. In 2015, when Russia and China began their rapprochement, this gap in Russian expertise became clear. The few China experts that Russia did have sat in their institutes rather than socialising with political elites. Equally, Russian expertise on China was often academic rather than policy-orientated. When there were major events in China, Russian policymakers rarely knew what to make of them. As one Russian expert on China observed of these policymakers in 2016: “they were blank slates; they would turn up and ask: ‘what does this mean?’”.[12]

Furthermore, many of Russia's China experts were educated at Soviet institutions – which sometimes meant that they still looked down on China as a kind of younger brother, thereby underestimating its might. Others, accustomed to thinking of China in terms of friendship, seemed blind to the threat the country could pose. “Russia's Sinologists can be somewhat similar to German Atlanticists – brought up believing in the inevitability of a close relationship, they lack an eye for dangers and the country's interests as a whole,” commented one Moscow-based foreign policy expert with a smile.[13]

Nonetheless, the situation is changing. Russia's universities have doubled the number of their students of China and Mandarin – around 40 of whom reportedly graduate each year. Not all these people go on to work in academia or think-tanks; many of them move between different types of jobs

and employers in the public and private sectors. This gives them more varied experience than most older Sinologists, who have spent their careers in academia. In a decade or so, when these graduates reach prime working age, Russia will likely have significantly greater expertise on China – expertise that the West might come to envy.

An unclear relationship model

However, it is unclear whether the Russian state will make use of its growing access to expertise on China the way it does that on the Middle East, or how it will model its overall approach to handling the relationship with Beijing. For now, it seems that, while Russian experts may view China the way they saw the US in the 1990s, the Kremlin's model for the relationship is akin to the top-down one it adopted in the 1990s to build up its relations with the EU. As analyst Andrei Kortunov perceptively observes, “the Kremlin focused its attention on ‘big things’ – like summit meetings, official visits, high-level consultations between bureaucracies in Moscow and in Brussels and on general political declarations”. According to him, “the assumption evidently was that the political momentum generated at high official levels would naturally transform itself into specific accomplishments at lower levels.”

Similarly, the Russia-China relationship revolves around summits and formal meetings. It also lacks a coherent strategy – what passes for one is, in fact, merely a collection of disparate interests. At times, various business groups and other lobbies even seem to shape the relationship in ways that are somewhat reminiscent of the Yeltsin-era oligarchs' dominance of Russian foreign policy. As one disappointed Russian foreign policy expert puts it, “there are different lobby group interests – but you cannot use them to build a strategy for Russia ... Everyone has their own agenda, and Putin is failing to bring them together into a coherent whole.”^[14]

Paradoxically, the way in which China has become an official priority contributes to the hollowness of the relationship. The turn to China has “ended demand for expertise by virtue of its uncompromising nature,” says expert Leonid Kovachich. “We have been given a command: the pivot [to China] needs to happen regardless of the circumstances.” Because the Kremlin believes there is no alternative to reliance on China, it is not interested in learning about the details, undercurrents, and potential dangers of the relationship. Nor does it seem to aspire to make the relationship more sophisticated. “You do not need expertise to increase the export of five or six key commodities,” argues Sinologist Mikhail Korostikov. “To expand the relationship beyond that does not look possible.”

One can only wonder whether this could lead to disappointment of the kind Moscow elites experienced in 2014, when they realised that economic links with the EU had not insured Russia

against the political fallout from the annexation of Crimea. Despite intensive summitry between the sides, these elites failed to understand the dynamics and nuances of the EU's position.

True, there are horizontal and informal interpersonal links too. According to Kashin, some Russian and Chinese officials have developed informal ties and now socialise with one another (communicating in English) “rather like the German and Russian companies or municipalities in the early 2000s”. But it is unclear whether this will be enough to influence the workings of the two political systems and insulate the bilateral relationship from any shocks. Those Russian-German links certainly did not.

Conclusion: What the West can do

Thanks to this amalgam of short- and long-term trends, the Kremlin's view of China is in flux. The two countries are not destined to become closer – partially because, in many areas, both sides see their current level of cooperation as optimal. On military matters, for instance, remaining on the threshold of an alliance seems more advantageous than forming one. Trade links between Russia and China follow their own, commercial, logic – guided primarily by China's consumption needs (balanced against its pandemic-related fears, which have limited imports of some Russian goods). Cross-border movement between the countries is unlikely to increase significantly in the near future due to covid-19, but they will continue their high-level political meetings – with much fanfare, but also little personal contact between officials.

In this context, it would be unwise for Western policymakers to either view Russia and China as two parts of a single problem or opt for the “double containment” that several analysts have recommended. The two countries engage in some of the same authoritarian practices, share aspects of their world views, and have similar motivations to maintain a cordial bilateral relationship. But, fundamentally, they have very different political trajectories and guiding philosophies of foreign policy. Western leaders should keep these differences in mind – and make use of them.

However, this does not mean separating the two with a grand bargain that inspires a policy U-turn in Moscow. That is not possible. But Western countries could give Russia space to hedge against China in certain areas – such as technologies including 5G (once Moscow sorts out conflicts around frequencies and decides to move on this issue). If Russia had things to gain and lose in its relationship with the West, this would increase Western capitals' leverage over Moscow and their global room for manoeuvre – although it would also increase Moscow's leverage over them, meaning that there are trade-offs to consider.

For now, the Kremlin seems to believe that it would be too politically costly to engage in substantive cooperation with the West. Yet this could change – for several reasons.

Firstly, there is no guarantee that Russian leaders will continue to view China as a pragmatic global actor. China's 'wolf warrior' diplomacy seems to reflect a growing desire to dictate terms to other states on an ever-wider variety of matters. If this remains the case, China's approach is bound to sting Russia eventually. Some analysts in Moscow already see that as a likely, if not inevitable, development in the next decade. "The empire long united must divide, long divided must unite – this is how it has always been," says one Russian political scientist, quoting *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a fourteenth-century Chinese novel, to illustrate the cyclical nature of power. If China succumbs to temptation to dictate terms to others more forcefully, this will not go down well with Moscow. Russian leaders are generally proud that they do not 'take orders' from Washington – they are no more eager to take them from Beijing.

Secondly, by the same logic, the West is bound to become less overtly ideological than it once was. The unipolar moment is gone. And this will limit Western democracies' ability to spread their rules, norms, and values across the world. The US has already indicated that, instead of being driven by a universal normative agenda, it is now picking its battles and refusing to be 'the world's policeman'.

The EU will find it harder to adapt. Though it has always been less keen than the US to promote democracy through military intervention, the EU is by nature more of a normative power than the US: the union is organised around shared rules, norms, and values. And efforts to spread these rules, norms, and values have long been not just its main foreign policy aim but also, more importantly, its main foreign policy tool. Therefore, if the EU wants to become a more influential force in a world that is resistant to its values, it will need to learn how to deal with other powers in a more pragmatic fashion – and to find other tools of the trade.

This would require major adaptation. But, if it was successful, this might allow the bloc to finally address some of the dysfunction in its relationship with Russia – which is still hostage to the failed expectations of the 1990s – and set new, more limited goals in line with today’s realities. For instance, the EU could give Russia some space to hedge against China in technological development – although, to do that, it would have to decide which technologies it would allow Russian companies to access, given its sanctions on Russia and its growing sense that the country is more of a competitor, if not an adversary, than a friend. These decisions will not be easy, and will involve trade-offs between different priorities. This is because the EU’s sanctions policy, which many member states see as essential, is at likely to clash with other aims – such as saving the planet from climate change or preventing Russia from joining forces with China.

Finally, Russia itself might reconsider some of its foreign policy priorities once Putin leaves office. This is not to suggest that he is the source of all evil in Russian policy, or that his departure would prompt a return to the pro-Western posture of the 1990s. That is not the case: Russian leaders are unlikely to reverse the 2012 rebrand of their country as a non-Western power, because this was inspired by both disillusionment with the West and the rise of the rest.

However, there are still some reasons to believe that Putin’s departure would improve Russia’s relationship with Europe. For one, Moscow’s obsession with Ukraine – a source of so much tension between Russia and the EU – seems to emanate from Putin personally. He holds fiercely to the view that Russians and Ukrainians “are the same people” and have been artificially separated. There is little evidence that other elites or the broader population share this passion, at least to the same degree.

Equally, Putin tends to underestimate the power of societies and to overestimate that of the security services. This damages Russia’s relations with Europe, as it complicates all discussions – about Ukraine first and foremost, but also more widely.

And, fairly or otherwise, Putin has become anathema to many in the West. This suggests that – as one Russian expert put it – some forms of cooperation that would be available to Russia might not be available to Putin.[15]

Finally, Putin’s own intellectual trajectory matters too. After coming to power in 2000, he tried to bring Russia closer to the West – albeit in his own way (which did not involve, for instance, democratic reforms at home). He had transformed into a critic of the West by 2007, a consciously non-Western leader by 2012, and a president who viewed the world as a dangerously chaotic battleground by 2021. Rapprochement with Europe, however limited, would require a new twist in

this journey. While Putin is undoubtedly more mentally agile than most leaders, how many of these strategic turns can one person make in a lifetime?

In short, while it might be a good idea for Europe to help Russia hedge against China, this would be far easier with a change in Russia's approach to the West. One should not rule this out entirely, but there seems little prospect of it until there is a new leader in the Kremlin.

About the author

Kadri Liik is a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. Her research focuses on Russia, eastern Europe, and the Baltic region.

[1] Interview with a businessperson, Moscow, May 2021.

[2] Interview with a businessperson, Moscow, May 2021.

[3] Interview with a businessperson, Moscow, May 2021.

[4] Interview with a businessperson, Moscow, May 2021.

[5] Interview with a Sinologist, Moscow, May 2021.

[6] Interview with a Sinologist, Moscow, May 2021.

[7] Seminar in Moscow, March 2020.

[8] Interview with Vasily Kashin, Moscow, May 2021.

[9] Interview with Vasily Kashin, Moscow, May 2021.

[10] Interviews with Russian experts and policymakers, Sochi, October 2021.

[11] Conversations at the Valdai Discussion Club, October 2021.

[12] Interview with a Sinologist, November 2016.

[13] Interview with a foreign policy expert, Moscow, October 2021.

[14] Zoom interview with a foreign policy expert, July 2020.

[15] Meeting under the Chatham House Rule, Moscow, December 2018.

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