

UNDERSTANDING THE SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONSHIP AND ITS PLACE IN RUSSIAN GRAND STRATEGY

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Russia and China, two of the biggest threats to the United States-led international order, seem to be increasingly cooperating. Yet, neither policymakers nor academics seem to understand the nature of the relations, and with so much divergence in diagnosis, policy recommendations run the gamut, though most are vague if not un-useful.

Missing from much of the conversation in the United States about the Sino-Russian relationship is an understanding of the motives of each actor for pursuing such cooperation – and without such an understanding, Washington is unlikely to develop policy options that truly address the situation. While some analysts point to domestic fears, material geopolitics, Vladimir Putin, or ideational factors as the driver for Russian foreign policy, they have not sufficiently explained Russia's contradictory approach to China: why does it cooperate with China globally, when China presents a risk to Russia's traditional sphere of influence?

Russian grand strategy is driven not by any one factor, but by a combination of geopolitics and a search for great power status recognition. With its material capabilities limited, Russia must seek new ways to achieve what it believes is its rightful place in the hierarchy – and as it does so, it both seeks to reduce the United States' influence and protect its own. China plays a special role in this strategy, as Russia views the Sino-Russian relationship as a tool to challenge U.S. influence but also guards against China's potential threat to Russia's own power. Recognizing the role that status plays in the Sino-Russian relationship, the United States would do well to downplay the relationship and to limit the effects of Russia's attempts to weaken U.S. power.

SEARCH FOR RECOGNITION

Significant research suggests that Russia's worldview sees the international system as being determined by great powers – and Russia believes itself to be one. Yet, there is a tension inherent in the Russian position today: while Russia sees itself as a great power, it also feels vulnerable as Moscow perceives that the United States and China increasingly seem to treat Russia as a regional, not a global, power. Thus, while Russia sees itself as a great power, it also feels it needs to prove itself as one.

In so doing, it first looks to the United States as a point of reference. But while Russia wants to prove its status as a great power, it cannot directly challenge the U.S. Doing so, especially militarily, would be prohibitively costly.

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STRATEGIC OPTIONS

Russia, thus, is faced with a conundrum: How to reassert itself as a great power without directly challenging the United States?

Russia perceives a hierarchy in international relations, in which states are given power based not only on their material capabilities but also other states' recognition of the power that each holds. How do states seek recognition of status? If states see the world through a competitive lens, as Russia does, there appear to be two non-mutual strategies: They must either increase their own status or decrease the status of their competitors.

For Russia, increasing its power is difficult: Its economic strength is not projected to grow, and its diplomatic might is weak. Furthermore, using its military and other coercive means (such as energy bullying) to try to force allegiance will likely lead to negative reactions from target states, who may then actually search for other options and move away from Russia.

Russia has sought instead to primarily decrease the United States' status. It does so by targeting American strengths through indirect means. For each of the Washington's most valuable strengths, Moscow has taken advantage of existing discord to sew its own seeds:

- *Military Strength* – Russia can effectively neutralize this capability by ensuring Russia's military capabilities serve as a deterrent from the United States attacking Russia.
- *Political Stability* – Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential elections encouraged domestic divides, rendering politics increasingly contested.
- *Global Economic Might* – Russia has been encouraging doubt in the narrative about the success of globalization, both through social media campaigns as well as supporting alternative economic structures.
- *Alliance Structure* – Russia has been creating and encouraging new narratives among U.S. allies about the strength of the U.S. commitment, and has also been encouraging divides within the U.S. about the value of its alliance system.

This tactic attacks both the material sources of American strength – like its economy and political stability – but also perceptions of its strengths as other countries watch the domestic turmoil and question alliance commitments.

At the same time as Russia works to decrease the United States' status, it must also ensure that it does not lose any of the global and regional influence it currently possesses. This is particularly important within the Russian sphere of influence, which Russia has a history of using both as extended defense and also as a justification as its great power status. Thus, Russia is also intensely sensitive to loss aversion. It will defend from any perceived loss of status forcefully, such as in Georgia and Ukraine.

Thus, one could phrase Russia's grand strategy as reassertion of great power status through the degrading of others' status and the defense of Russia's own.

CHINA

Understanding how China fits into this grand strategy is of vital importance for the United States as it seeks to understand the limitations and promises of Sino-Russian cooperation.

Theoretically, partnering with China could both limit relative U.S. power and increase Russian. Cooperating with China raises costs to the United States, serving as a deterrent from aggressive action, as even just the idea of Beijing and Moscow cooperating frightens Washington. Working with China could also theoretically increase Russia's material capabilities, both in terms of receiving economic benefits from investment and loans, and also from potential alliance network benefits.

The problem is that the potential material benefits of partnering with China have yet to materialize for Russia – in fact it appears to be reserving effort in pursuing these benefits: The Russian and Chinese militaries are more inter-operable – but they are not fully, and it is unlikely that they will fight for each other. Sino-Russian trade is increasing – but it is asymmetric and has not made a significant difference in the trajectory of the Russian economy. Chinese investment in Russia has increased – but many of the projects are not being realized and much of the Chinese private sector is hesitant about entering the Russian market. China and Russia do not publicly criticize each other on sensitive territorial issues like Crimea and the South China Seas – but they also do not openly support each other.

This begs the question: If partnering with China is not accruing significant material benefits, why do it? The answer, it appears, is to impact perceptions about Russian power and to reassert Russian great power status. By partnering with China, Russia is sending a signal to both the United States and its partners and to audiences within Russia's sphere of influence that it is an equal with China, not a junior partner. This language is emphasized in Russian rhetoric, but also in practice: Russia argued for linking the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), not to subordinate the EAEU as a BRI project.

But we must also ask why Russia is not more fully pursuing the material gains that could come from cooperating with China. Of course, China also has a say in the degree to which gains are realized. Yet still, it appears that Russia in particular is holding back.

Why? Fear of losing comparative rank in the hierarchy, or fear of losing status.

China is a growing power and has in particular great economic strength. Even if Beijing is not pursuing geopolitical gains through its economic might and international investment projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, Moscow appears to believe that China is achieving these gains, and this perception makes China a threat to Russia's power regardless of intentions.

As Chinese international engagement grows, it is entering precisely into areas that Russia sees as its traditional spheres of influence – in particular, Central Asia and the Arctic. With an eye towards Moscow's goal of not losing status, this should be seen as a threat. However, this risk conflicts with the fact that partnering with China also helps against the United States.

This tension is at the heart of the Russian approach to China: How does Russia harness Chinese power against the United States, but at the same time protect its authority in its spheres of influence? *By working with China against the United States, but simultaneously defending against China taking away Russian influence – on purpose or as an unintended consequence of other policies.* Examples of this strategy in Central Asia including linking BRI and EAEU but not putting in the work to ensure they are truly connected, as well as partnering with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization but also ensuring that Chinese attempts to create a free trade zone within the SCO do not come to fruition.

U.S. POLICY

By taking Russia's status concerns both towards the United States and China into consideration, Washington can better develop policies towards Russia and the Sino-Russian relationship. The goal of the United States vis-à-vis Russia should be to limit the success of Russian attempts at revisionism, especially within U.S. politics, and to keep the Sino-Russian relationship from blooming into a full-blown alliance.

The U.S. should first and foremost focus on dispelling Russian attempts to decrease American global influence. There are several steps that the U.S. can take to weaken Russian tactics:

- *Buttress domestic institutions*
- *Strengthen the American people against susceptibility to foreign narratives, primarily through education*
- *Continue to exceed Russian military capabilities*
- *Reinforce alliances*
- *Avoid direct confrontation*

U.S. policy towards the Sino-Russian relationship needs to recognize Russia's status-driven motivations of pursuing cooperation. If the United States recognizes and gives validation to the relationship, it only reinforces Russian thinking that partnership with China brings status benefits. Thus, recognition of the relationship and treatment of it as an alliance feeds Russia's motivation and strengthens its efforts. Grouping Russia and China together gives them the deterrent benefit of an alliance without paying the price of a true alliance, and only treats Russia as an equal to China.

Instead, ***the United States needs to work to treat Russia and China as separate, though related, issues and limit rhetoric about the Sino-Russian relationship.***

First, the U.S. would do well to *not panic about the relationship*: The partnership is not as strong as some make it out to be, and there is no requirement that it turn into a more solid alliance. The stronger the reaction from the U.S., the more Russia may pursue it. *At the same time, take it seriously*: Since the U.S. is Russia's first point of comparison, Moscow may be willing to absorb some status risk from China in order to decrease U.S. influence.

Furthermore, the U.S. should adhere to the following policies:

- *Do not let relative Russian influence grow* – The United States needs to remain active and present in Russia's spheres of influence, while not threatening to diminish Russian influence and prompt a response. This is particularly true in the Arctic, where rapidly changing climate conditions make the region of growing geopolitical importance.
- *Do not be surprised by Russian intervention* – If Russian influence begins to wane significantly in a country, its loss aversion will likely kick in and Russia may intervene, perhaps militarily. The United States needs to be prepared for these situations.
- *Do not directly threaten Russian influence* – If the United States wishes to be able to focus on other threats, keeping Russian interference at a low is premium.

By considering Moscow's motivations for its foreign policy vis-à-vis Washington and Beijing, Washington can accomplish its goals of limiting instability-enhancing actions from Russia and of limiting the possibilities of a Sino-Russian alliance. Understanding how status drives Russia will help us better manage its decline – and continue to strengthen the position of the United States on the world stage.