Is the Russia-China Rapprochement a Sign of Strength or an Act of Desperation?


Russia’s on again, off again flirtation with China is on again. The two countries collaborated in the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001 but until recently little came of it. In the early 2000s Vladimir Putin seemed much more interested in maintaining his seat at the G-8 high table than in leading the Eurasian club for authoritarian regimes.

The events of 2014 changed all that. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis and Russia’s annexation of Crimea there was no possibility that the G-8 would continue to include Russia, never mind meet in Sochi, Putin’s much-favored Black Sea resort. Snubbed by the West, Putin turned to the East for diplomatic support. The SCO suddenly became relevant.

The SCO may be Eurasia’s G-7, but it is no NATO. The SCO did not endorse the Russian annexation of Crimea and has provided no explicit support for Russia in its sanctions war with the West. Wary of its own separatist agitators in Tibet and Xinjiang, China in particular has no appetite for territorial revanchism. The pending accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO further dilutes any possibility that it may turn into a Eurasian military bloc.

If the SCO itself is unlikely ever to amount to much, what of the bilateral relationship between Russia and China? Clearly, Russia needs China much more than China needs Russia. Sensitivities to western analysts pointing this out do not make it less true. The hard facts are that Russia has less than one-fifth the economy and one-ninth the population of China.

Nor is Chinese money a panacea for Russia’s economic woes. China’s economic support for Russia is more than symbolic but less than a lifeline: burgeoning Russia-China energy trade will be settled in renminbi, not roubles. Considering that the renminbi is roughly pegged to the US dollar, shifting settlement out of dollars offers little relief to Russia. Worse, recent declines in the value of the renminbi have called into question its viability as a currency of settlement.

Russia’s extravagant geographical spread also makes it much more vulnerable to internal disruption than China. One prominent China scholar may believe that China is on the verge of collapse, but broader panels of experts polled by Foreign Affairs and Foreign Policy magazines largely disagree. Though it is tempting to believe that repressive regimes are inherently unstable, the history of repressive regimes suggests otherwise. The Soviet Union collapsed when Gorbachev let up on repression, not when Brezhnev turned the screws.

The Chinese Communist Party survived the Great Famine and Cultural Revolution under Mao, the transition to a market economy under Deng, and even the 1989 Tiananmen Square Massacre and ensuing nationwide crackdown on dissent. China faces no external enemies with designs on its territory. Traditions of regionalism in China are literally ancient history. China’s territorial integrity dates back to the days of Kublai Khan.

Russia is another matter. Today’s Russia is a powerful unitary state. No one questions President Putin’s grip on power or his ability to hold the country together. But Putin is mortal, and Russia (in its current form) is much newer than China. There were centrifugal pressures within Russia itself during the 1991 breakup of the Soviet Union, and much of Russia’s landmass has been Russian for less than two centuries. It is not difficult to imagine near-future scenarios under which Russia could begin to disintegrate.
For example, imagine that the President of the Russian Federation were to suffer an accident or stroke that incapacitated but did not kill him. This is not a fantastical scenario: Israel’s Prime Minister Ariel Sharon was in a coma for eight years following a stroke in 2006. Or suppose that the president were to develop clear signs of mental illness. The United States President Ronal Reagan was admitted to have Alzheimer’s disease soon after leaving office. What then?

If such a crisis were to occur in Russia, would Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev or a future prime minister have sufficient political strength to enforce a constitutional transfer of power despite the fact that the president was still alive? And what if the president died? Russia might indeed ride out such a crisis, but its ability to do so is not beyond question.

The Presidency of the Russian Federation confers extraordinary power on its holder. Competing candidates might seek support from various regional governors, regional military commanders might receive conflicting orders, and other signs of general confusion might emerge. It is not hard to imagine an enterprising regional governor, commander, or oligarch seizing the opportunity to make a bid for local power.

In such a scenario, might a future Chinese government send in troops to protect strategic oil and gas installations that were crucial to keeping the lights on in China, or to protect Chinese citizens working in those installations? Given China’s record of cautious foreign relations this may seem unlikely, but if the South China Sea imbroglio is a sign of things to come a future Chinese administration may not be so cautious as the last few.

The fact is that a resource-poor nation of 1.3 billion people is bound to be tempted by the opportunity to expand into a depopulated, underexploited, resource-rich territory on its border. That opportunity may never arise, but it will always be a latent potentiality in the relationship between Russia and China. Russia may seek China’s support in its struggles with the West, but it is unlikely to allow itself to become wholly dependent on China.

Russian leaders are often perceived as being “paranoid” for seeing potential enemies on all sides. More appropriate words to describe this state of mind are “sensible” and “realistic.” China has no need for a Russian alliance and Russia can never be comfortable with a Chinese alliance. Russia and China might evolve a mutually beneficial entente cordiale, but they will never combine to threaten western hegemony. Shared frustration with the United States and the European Union is not sufficient to generate true friendship between otherwise wary neighbors.

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