



**CHINA-RUSSIA COOPERATION:
THREE IMPLICATIONS FOR
AMERICA'S CHINA POLICY DEBATE**

BY ROBERT SUTTER

*Robert Sutter (sutterr@gwu.edu) is professor of practice of international affairs at George Washington University. His most recent book, with Richard Ellings, is *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation* (Seattle WA: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018).*

Mainstream US media and government policymaking have slowly become aware of the sobering implications of the growing cooperation between Xi Jinping's China and Vladimir Putin's Russia. It's about time!

Until recently, media and policymakers tended to ignore cooperation against the West by the two authoritarian powers, often relying on flawed judgments that major Sino-Soviet differences in the distant past precluded serious challenges to the US today. A library shelf of recent authoritative academic books and lengthy policy reports laid out evidence of Putin's turn against the West prior to his resumption of the Russian presidency in 2012, his increasing accommodation and cooperation with China along anti-western lines, and Xi Jinping's reciprocating with priority attention to relations with Russia in countering US interests on assuming leadership in China in 2012-2013. But the evidence had little impact on policy or media perceptions of China-Russia cooperation.

Part of the problem was that policy attention and academic studies tended to focus on the dangers to US interests posed by China and Russia as separate problems, giving little attention to how Beijing and Moscow worked together against the US. For example, the Trump administration's *National Security*

Strategy less than two years ago warned against China and Russia but had little to say about their cooperation and coordination in targeting US interests. An authoritative and comprehensive multi-chapter critique of China's policies by a blue-ribbon group of experts and practitioners published by the Asia Society that year merely mentioned Russia in passing a few times without any systematic analysis.

Today, it's increasingly evident how the partnership between Beijing and Moscow has matured and broadened under Putin and Xi. The momentum is based on: 1) common objectives and values; 2) perceived Russian and Chinese vulnerabilities in the face of US and Western pressures; and 3) perceived opportunities for the two powers to expand their influence at the expense of US and allied powers seen in decline.

Russia and China pose increasingly serious challenges to the US-supported order in their respective priority spheres of concern – Russia in Europe and the Middle East, and China in Asia along China's continental and maritime peripheries. As Putin and Xi repeatedly meet and coordinate, Russia conducts military and paramilitary actions in Europe and the Middle East, along with cyber and political warfare undermining elections in the United States and Europe, European unity, and NATO solidarity. China undermines US and allied interests through covert and overt manipulation and influence operations, cyber theft of intellectual property to accelerate China's economic competitiveness to dominate key advanced technology at the expense of leading US and other international companies, and coercion and intimidation of neighbors backed by an impressive buildup of Chinese military and civilian security forces. The two powers work together repeatedly in controversial military operations (as they did in July with air force challenges of South Korea and Japan), diplomatic postures, and military, economic, and diplomatic coercion.

Three implications for the US China policy debate

First, although President Trump remains avowedly unpredictable, there is little debate in the United States that Putin's Russia is our enemy. In contrast, there is active debate on China, with prominent experts and

practitioners opposing US government hardening against China, arguing that “China is not our enemy.” This evidence-based US analyst – along with many of the seasoned specialists he has worked with over the past two years conducting in-depth studies of China’s approach to Russia – are not so sure. China’s record with Russia shows behavior regularly striving to damage, undermine, complicate, and weaken the US. In all these cases, Beijing “is out to get us.” Obviously, China’s behavior with Russia does not represent the totality of China’s approach to the US. But given what we have learned about other previously unknown nefarious and clandestine Chinese efforts to undermine and overtake the US economy, to influence opinion in the United States, and other key elements of China-US relations, prudence argues for reserving judgment until careful examination shows if China indeed is not our enemy.

Second, some claiming that China is not our enemy argue against US government hardening against China because it will drive China to cooperate more closely with Russia against US interests. The argument is logical and may have an element of truth. However, the pattern of Chinese behavior with Russia over the past decade gives pride of place to the third factor noted above in motivating China to cooperate more closely with Russia – Beijing sees opportunities to weaken a declining US and West by cooperating more closely with Moscow.

Third, the reality of China and Russia taking advantage of US weakness for almost a decade also argues against those like the *New York Times* editorial page breaking its long silence on China-Russia cooperation in July to call for US efforts to woo Russia away from China, deemed as the greater danger. Indeed, a likely reaction from Moscow would be to see such US efforts as further evidence of US weakness and decline, leading the Russians to work more closely with China in seeking to advance in the face of a declining United States.

I and many of the specialists I have worked with over the past two years see a grim outlook with no easy fixes for the US in dealing with the China-Russia challenges. While they have various disputes with the Trump administration’s policies, many of those specialists tend to agree with the call of the

administration’s national security strategy for a comprehensive effort to strengthen the United States at home and abroad, including strengthening relations with allies and like-minded countries, in order to alter the decline in the West and change the international balance of power in directions more favorable to US interests. The approach involves firmness and resolve in dealing with both Beijing and Moscow, not seeking advantage from a position of weakness.

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