



THREE SCHOOLS OF RUSSIAN THOUGHT AMID GROWING ASYMMETRY WITH CHINA: PART 2

BY GILBERT ROZMAN

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When Donald Trump visited China in May, the unstated hope was to get help out of his Iran war impasse. On this and other matters, Xi Jinping's response is to keep Trump waiting. When Vladimir Putin followed a week later, his unstated hope was to find help out of his Ukraine war impasse. Xi's response on that and on the pipeline through Manchuria is to keep Putin close but also waiting. As Russians again recognize China's failure to deliver with no other savior in sight, they are reminded of the three vulnerabilities from asymmetrical relations.

Putin and Trump had hoped to use their war of choice for a triumphant arrival in Beijing with impact on the Grand Strategic Triangle. Instead, they were supplicants in the May summits, confirming China's pivotal position. As both await a summit with Xi Jinping in the fall, they need him more than he needs them. The imbalance is far greater for Russia, which feigns an idealized bilateral relationship but strains under asymmetries well known in Moscow.

A spike in asymmetry became unmistakable by the end of the 2010s. Russian wariness was expressed by three schools of thought: power aggrandizement, economic domination, and Sinocentric revanchism. Despite censorship, talk of ever-closer bilateral relations aroused increased wariness of ever-greater vulnerabilities. We can follow signs of alarm, link them to motives for the Ukraine war, and reflect on the impact of the war on even higher anxiety.

The power aggrandizement school

Pursuing bipolarity with Washington, Beijing left Moscow marginal in the Grand Strategic Triangle. Edging toward unipolarity in Eurasia, it also [cast doubt on multipolarity](#) deemed essential by Moscow. Yet, as real as such power aggrandizement concerns were, they did not come as a big surprise. This is how great powers behave, many Russians assumed. If Moscow wanted to impress Beijing, it would need to find a pathway to showcase its power. The Ukraine war had that potential; stalemate there has exacerbated the power imbalance.

In the period 2022-2026, Moscow has sought to take control of Ukraine, to stand up to the United States, to flex its nuclear might, and to put military power at the forefront of global power comparisons. The war has backfired, but China has reaffirmed multipolarity and not doubted Russia's credibility. If such verbal acrobatics mislead some, they fail to obscure contradictory realities. Concern about power aggrandizement remains palpable but given that it is mostly focused on the West, Russians seem to accept that they can live with it.

The economic domination school

Why was economic domination more worrisome than political aggrandizement? Russians lost hope of resisting China's economic encroachments. Four projects came to symbolize Russia's quandary: [the Northern Sea Route](#) (Polar Silk Road); access to the sea through the Vladivostok area (earlier the Tumen River Development Program); transport across Russia to Europe (notably through railroad upgrades via Kazan); and control over exports of Central Asian energy. [In the late 2010s Russian nervousness was growing](#), but it had no answers, apart from keeping its distance from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), seen as favoring China. In the shadow of the Ukraine war and Western sanctions, [resistance proved harder](#).

In 2022-26 China has filled some of the gap from reduced Russian exports to Europe, sold dual-use items vital to the Russian military build-up, replaced industrial exports of Europe with its own products, and found workarounds for currency transactions. Yet it is seen as taking advantage of its strategic partner while driving hard bargains and holding back on a number of Russia's urgent wishes.

It is faulted for new, go-it-alone efforts in Central Asia, undercutting Russia's role, for a division of labor still deemed unequal, for actions in the Russian Far East and Siberia taking advantage of local vulnerabilities, and for seeking a kind of joint leadership at odds with Russia's full control of the Northern Sea Route. Unable to push back vocally, Russians are suspicious of China's long-term asymmetrical leverage. In 2025 they showed resistance to the dramatic, recent [surge in Russian vehicle exports](#).

As Moscow aggressively challenges the US-led world order, many Russians are chagrined by China's hesitation, including in the 2026 Iran war. They concede that economic interests differ, reducing consensus on forging a new order due to: (1) differences over economic globalization; (2) different timetables over when to proceed; and (3) differences over the bilateral division of labor. Given dimming economic prospects, Russians see no escape. [As Timofei Bordachev wrote](#) in April, "some concerned observers have even questioned whether China is failing to meet the expectations placed upon it and...undermining its position on the broader international stage...China may be too deeply embedded in the global economy to confine itself entirely to its immediate sphere of interests."

The Sinocentric revanchist school

Tensions over history and territorial claims rose to the surface as Hu Xijin castigated Russia for its celebration in 2020 of the 160th anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok, a name translated in Chinese as "rule of the East." Hu wrote that this offense to the Chinese public's emotions has "[aroused the disgust of many Chinese netizens](#)." He added that Chinese refuse to use that name for the city, calling it Haishenwei, and reject calls by Russia to remove that earlier name. Russians took notice of this, reinforcing awareness of unresolved disputes over national identity. No issue is more explosive than the lingering gap on the history dimension.

[As I wrote in 2020](#), "In mid-July, Ivan Zuenko assessed the situation, arguing that bilateral relations over the past two years have been on the razor's edge due to anniversaries, convenient and inconvenient. In 2019 occurred the 50th of the border clash and the 120th of the forcible resettlement of Chinese from Russia, resulting in the death of thousands. The message on Vladivostok's anniversary in 2020 drew more than 7 million Chinese followers within one day to ill effect. The Russian embassy's post is seen as thoughtless, not mentioning the presence of a 'Chinese city' on the site and forcing recollections of a sensitive event, although the land was neither inherently Russian nor Chinese. Despite the final territorial agreement reached in the 2000s, Chinese visitors consider Vladivostok a 'former Chinese city.' Historical facts will not persuade the Chinese, but there is reason not to rub the reality in their faces and arouse the 'wolf warriors' who have been silent toward Russia."

Developments since 2020 have not assuaged nerves about the national identity divide. The pandemic raised tensions. The Ukraine war exposed deeper asymmetry. Hopes for [joint leadership](#) of the SCO and BRICS have been dashed after Russia oversold their value. No number of Putin-Xi summits extolling better relations than ever can hide a dearth in trust. The legacy of the Sino-Soviet national identity split has been concealed, rather than wiped away.

Conclusion

Although censorship keeps intensifying, we can presume that the alarms peaking around 2020 have not subsided. Power aggrandizement has been a concern in Central Asia, the Northern Sea Route, and shifting thinking on multipolarity. Since 2022 such wariness has had no reason to diminish. Economic domination is a longstanding and growing concern. Russia's increased vulnerability does not alleviate this concern. Finally, the possibility of Sinocentric revanchism, pressuring Russia over history, cannot be dismissed because of protestations at war commemorations of how similar the historical outlooks of the two are. Indeed, all three balancing perspectives are likely to intensify as serious irritants to trust.

The optics of back-to-back May 2026 summits put Russia on the same level as the United States with the edge to Putin as closer to Xi. This obscures new signs of G2 bipolarity. If such symbolism can assuage Russian wariness, awakening to multipolarity's hollowness may come too late for Russia to act on the three balancing concerns that it is censoring.

Putin's options have narrowed. Feel-good summits with Xi Jinping have diminishing payoffs.

China seeks to lock Russia in a tight embrace, filling the void left from its pariah status in the West. Step-by-step, Putin has drawn closer, agreeing in this summit to cultural linkages earlier deemed risky. Such integration makes subsequent distancing difficult, while it also arouses further anxiety about balancing concerns. This is not support for an autonomous pole but a quickening transition toward a Sinocentric outcome despite suppressed Russian wariness.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.