

THE LIMITS OF AUTHORITARIAN COMPATIBILITY: XI'S CHINA AND PUTIN'S RUSSIA

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China and Russia are two key revisionist challengers for U.S. positions in the world, but maturing authoritarian tendencies in their regimes do not make them natural allies. Many parochial features determine profound differences in China's and Russia's strategic agendas, and the heavy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated hidden tensions and accentuated mutual mistrust. U.S. policymakers should not therefore assume the need to counter their emerging military alliance, but could rather aim at exploiting their disagreements.

China is a rising power and focuses on a return to the growth trajectory after the sharp spasm caused by the pandemic, while Russia may sink into another deep crisis, so its leadership is compelled to engage in revisionism from the position of weakness. The deep cultural differences between the most influential elite groups in China and Russia impede cooperative initiatives, and structural corruption inherent to both regimes does not provide for better connectivity. China is emerging as a cyber superpower and shows reasonable restraint in deploying this strength, while Russia experiments with using its limited cyber capabilities recklessly. The particular "friendship" between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin cannot provide a reliable foundation for further upgrades in the partnership. China is much more interested in sorting out its trade and economic issues with the United States than in backing Russia, which is stuck in an essentially unwinnable confrontation with the West. Russia is not able to provide any support to China in the trade wars and expects a steady aggravation of U.S.-

China relations, seeing in this global conflict its only chance for escaping from the tight corner of unequal face-off with NATO. Both regimes performed poorly in dealing with the COVID-19 threat, but Russia, facing a deepening domestic crisis, may decide to challenge the West yet further in order to stimulate a mobilization of "patriotic" support for Putin's leadership. China, instead of helping its overstretched and troubled neighbor, may opt to take advantage of this calamity.

INTRODUCTION

China is by every account the main and steadily rising geopolitical competitor for the United States, but Russia is recognized in the 2018 National Defense Strategy as another key adversary. Together these revisionist powers, as a recent State Department risk assessment argues, generate "myriad competitive challenges" to U.S. positions.¹ The question about how to deal with Beijing and Moscow's "strategic partnership" is therefore of crucial importance for U.S. policymakers. If this apparent rapprochement progresses to an effective military alliance, the demand for allocating resources in order to counter their joint pressure on U.S. security interests as well as on sovereignty of many Eurasian states would increase greatly.² This disturbing prospect is aggravated by the analytical perspective identifying China and Russia as champions in the global authoritarian offensive against the U.S.-led rules-based world order, which could be badly damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic.³

This analysis argues, nevertheless, that the maturing of authoritarian regimes in China and Russia does not make them "natural" allies. Many parochial features

of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin's regimes determine profound differences in their agendas, which reinforce the fundamental geopolitical divergence of these two world powers.⁴ The examination starts with the obvious divergence between a rising China and a declining Russia, proceeds to the differences in the political structures of the two regimes, looks into dissimilarities in the organization of corruption inherent to both autocracies, proceeds further to the poor compatibility of their cyber policies, and comes finally to issues in personal relations between two ambitious leaders. Xi and Putin find it convenient to advertise the strength of their partnership, but in fact, mutual suspicions and disapproval run deep and have been reinforced by coronavirus-generated tensions. China-Russia rapprochement may have already reached its peak.

DIVERGING AUTHORITARIAN TRAJECTORIES

The unique influence in global affairs that China now claims is underpinned by its phenomenal economic growth over the last 40 years. While China's economy had been definitely slowing down prior to the severe spasm in the first quarter of 2020, and Chinese macroeconomic data could be seriously distorted, the past impression of going from strength to strength is now modified with the demonstrated determination to mobilize all necessary resources for a strong recovery. Such impressions matter in international and domestic affairs.⁵ Russia, on the contrary, had been stuck in a protracted economic stagnation even before the arrival of the new crisis, which — if previous experiences apply — could hit it harder than most other major world economies.⁶ No amount of Putin's orders, which had been irrelevant before the present day turmoil and are of little use for overcoming it, can deliver confidence in his leadership.⁷ He sticks to the old-fashioned beliefs in a resurgence of the oil and gas sectors — which would return Russia to the trajectory of growth resembling the first half of 2000s, when prosperity was crucial for consolidating his authority — and has few ideas about a transition to a diversified and “greener” economy.⁸ This divergence of dynamics between a fast-growing and a steadily-declining power translates into significant differences in the international behavior of a successful and an

ineffectual authoritarian regime — and indeed in their perceptions of and attitudes to one another.

China positions itself as a key pillar of the global order, which worked just fine for ensuring its growth and will probably continue to work for recovery, while Russia maintains that international relations are in disarray caused by the transition to a “multipolar world,” in which old norms cannot regulate fierce competition.⁹ Beijing is in fact content with Moscow's rejection of established rules of behavior, which makes its own position appear moderate and responsible in comparison. Both states are eager to criticize the U.S. “hegemonism” but exhibit remarkable differences in their revisionist policies. China has not entirely abandoned the plan for establishing a “new type of Great Power relations” with the United States and works on moderating the impact of the trade war (while executing a propaganda counteroffensive regarding the responsibility for the COVID-19 pandemic).¹⁰ Russia has engaged in a direct confrontation with the West, which perhaps shouldn't be labelled as a “New Cold War” but cannot be underestimated in the risk intensity either. Basically, China (according to the guidelines set by the Chinese Communist Party's 19th Party Congress) aims at winning more time for making a stronger claim for global dominance, while for Russia the time to push and split the West is now, and in the near future its capacity for revisionism can only diminish.¹¹



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The weakness of economic foundation reinforces the propensity of Russian leadership to rely on military force as the most reliable and effective instrument of policy.¹² This old-fashioned strategic culture, enriched with new “hybrid” means and methods, requires channeling of increasingly scarce resources to the modernization of the armed forces, which inevitably exacerbates economic problems. China

is careful not to overburden its economy with heavy military expenditures, but the sheer volume of available resources allows it to proceed with a steady build-up of its military might, which is undiminished by unexpected contraction.¹³ Russia tries to connect with this fast rise by promoting security cooperation with China, but finds it hard to adapt to new strategic realities in the Indo-Pacific theater, particularly as the degradation of its Pacific Fleet stands in sharp contrast with the increase of Chinese naval capabilities.¹⁴ There are few signs that the arrival of the unexpected crisis has prompted the Chinese leadership to change its habitual risk aversion in overseas conflicts, even if its economic assets are imperiled, while the Russian high command perceives its readiness to play with risks in such messy conflicts as Libyan civil war, which remains highly sensitive for many European states, as an important strategic advantage.¹⁵



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China has reasons to expect that the geopolitical consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic would work to its favor, so Beijing finds no need in engaging in premature revisionist policies and emphasizes the desire to avoid the proverbial “Thucydides trap.” The Russian leadership, on the contrary, is compelled to engage in a peculiar revisionism from the position of weakness.

CADRES DECIDE EVERYTHING

China's sustained political priority on ensuring (and now on resuming) economic growth and Russia's pronounced emphasis on the use of military force as the political instrument of choice translate into stark differences in the composition of ruling elites and personalities among the key stakeholders in the evolution of their respective authoritarian regimes. China may have long abandoned all Communist ideals and developed a particular model of state capitalism, but it is still ruled by single party which functions as a strictly disciplined hierarchy of power.¹⁶ Russia has emerged from the collapse

of the Soviet Union, which used to portray itself as a model of “mature socialism,” and is unable to produce anything resembling a coherent ideology except for a rather uninspired “cult” of the leader, and the attempt to organize a regime-supporting party has been far from successful.¹⁷ The dissimilar mindsets, career patterns, and operational codes in the top echelons of the Chinese and Russian bureaucracies and in the autocratic “courts” translate into mutual mistrust and disinclination to foster cooperation.

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is certainly far from monolithic and the clandestine struggle between various factions provide an inexhaustible theme for speculations by outside observers — and remains impenetrable for Moscow.¹⁸ The main principle in its cadre policy is supposed to be the promotion of administrators with proven record of success in ensuring economic growth, but this prescribed meritocracy inevitably clashes with the intrinsic urge to ensure loyalty on every level of the huge bureaucratic pyramid.¹⁹ The 19th Party Congress in October 2017, in this regard, signified the victory of proponents of firm state/party control over the economy and a setback for the advocates of further economic reforms along the course set by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s.²⁰ The reshuffle of regional cadres in the aftermath of the party congress was executed primarily on the loyalty principle.²¹ For that matter, after sacking the top party officials in Wuhan and Hubei province in February 2020 because of their failure to contain the coronavirus outbreak, Xi replaced them with firm loyalists.²² Of crucial importance in this system of tight central management over every aspect of state and society life is ensuring effective CCP control over the army, first of all by regulating promotions in the professional military hierarchy, something entirely foreign to the Russian top brass.²³ While the army is seen as a hugely important component of state power, every necessary measure is taken by the party leadership to ensure the subordinate position of the top brass in key strategic decisionmaking.

The composition of the elite and manner of reshuffling positions in Putin's Russia are strikingly different. The workings of the presidential administration and the performance of the circle of loyal lieutenants surrounding the supreme leader are shrouded in such secrecy that observers are reduced to speculations

about decisionmaking in this “Politburo.”²⁴ Much attention is focused on the role of “oligarchs,” who emerged from the ruins of Soviet economy and were supposed to be tamed by Putin, but in fact have been allowed to amass outrageous fortunes, turning Russia into a society with extreme social inequality.²⁵ Their influence on policymaking remains uncertain, but in such cases as, for instance, support for the Maduro regime in Venezuela, the role of Igor Sechin, the CEO of the major oil company Rosneft, is presumed to be central.²⁶ What is definitely a distinct and defining feature of Russian politics is the pivotal role of the “special services,” law enforcement structures, and the military, often considered together as the *siloviki*.²⁷ As Russia engaged in the new confrontation with the West over Ukraine and launched its military intervention in Syria, the position of the top brass strengthened accordingly; still, military leaders had to accept the limits of funding for modernization in the 2027 State Armament Program approved in early 2018.²⁸ The bosses of special services, first of all the Federal Security Service (FSB), are not that keen about militarization, which reduces their access to financial flows, and seek to curtail the political profile of Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu. The internecine struggles between various security services tend to escalate, and their attempts to take indirect control over key sources of revenue have much aggravated the investment climate in Russia, making it difficult for Putin to play his habitual role of arbiter.²⁹



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The cadre policy in China may be a cause for the economic slowdown, but in Russia, the profound incompetence of the *siloviki* in economic matters and the predatory behavior of law enforcers are major

factors in the plunge from stagnation into a recession. The deep cultural differences between the most influential elite groups in China and Russia impede cooperative initiatives and their disinclination to respect or at least understand each other’s motivations undercut the officially declared intentions for further upgrades in the strategic partnership.

CORRUPTION DOESN'T CONNECT

Authoritarian regimes are corrupt in a more fundamental way than liberal democracies because the access to power on every level of state bureaucracy in the former effectively signifies access to wealth accumulation as well. This structural corruption doesn't necessarily make such regimes more compatible with one another, and China and Russia provide a perfect example of such incongruity. Both political systems are deeply corrupt (Russia sank to a new low of 137th place in Transparency International's 2019 Corruption Perception Index, while China shares 80th place with India), but the stark differences in the backgrounds, motivations, and operational codes of their key elite groups prevent the development of cross-border networks of corruption.³⁰ The lack of such connection amounts to a serious hindrance to cooperation, since bureaucratic profiteering is not just an incentive for executing politically desirable joint projects, it is a key condition for their execution, and in the absence of trust-based deals on profit sharing, nothing goes.

In China, the struggle against corruption has become Xi's trademark policy and an instrument of choice in eliminating his political opponents.³¹ The scope of this sustained campaign can only be compared with the purges during the Cultural Revolution: the officially released numbers were as high as 527,000 investigations in 2017 and 302,000 in the first half of 2018, targeting both high-ranking and low-level officials (“tigers and flies”).³² No comparable data has been published since, which means that publicity is seen as an instrument to be applied selectively. This “new normal” in cadre policy has made some difference in the everyday behavior of party and state officials, who take greater care in concealing their wealth, but has not improved business climate and has jeopardized blatantly corrupt business ties with Russia.³³ The political guideline on a

robust recovery from the economic contraction caused by the COVID-19 epidemic necessitates pumping more money into infrastructure development and other dubious domestic projects, so that for all intents and purposes corruption acts as one of the key drivers of growth. In foreign policy, Xi's trademark Belt and Road Initiative involves unscrupulous distribution of money among local officials and has become a major source of corruption in the recipient countries, putting Russia at disadvantage, particularly in Central Asia.³⁴

In Russia, the struggle against corruption is merely a figure of political speech — and also a major cause for the opposition campaign championed by Alexei Navalny, whom Putin has persecuted and ostracized but never mentioned by name.³⁵ Investigations against insufficiently loyal entrepreneurs and foreign investors are the favorite method of predatory *siloviki* for appropriating profitable assets, while a recent series of high-profile arrests inside the almighty FSB reflects the intensity of squabbles for shrinking money flows.³⁶ Putin tries to turn this infighting into a means of disciplining the predatory elites but is increasingly unable to exercise efficient control over the self-destructive struggle of bureaucratic clans. Where he always feels obliged to stand by his oligarchs and spies is in the international arena, as U.S. sanctions and investigations are increasingly personalized and target the connection between Russian money laundering and interference into key political campaigns in the United States and European Union.³⁷ China has provided no support to its “strategic partner” in deflecting the anti-corruption emphasis of the U.S. sanctions regime and shuns black-listed officials. Putin’s “oligarchs” find it difficult to transfer their accounts from the former money-laundering “heavens” in Cyprus or Liechtenstein to China or to buy lucrative real estate there.

For the Chinese leadership, the demonstrative invincibility of Russian corruption is an affront to its political culture, but Beijing is not above exploiting opportunities for deepening Russia's dependency by implicating some key figures in the Kremlin court in dubious transactions.³⁸ For Moscow, Xi's anti-corruption crusade is an awkward contrast to own indulgence, and Putin, who excels at “purchasing” European politicians, has found no reliable means for penetrating the business-political networks in China, where none of his lieutenants have reliable contacts.

CYBER MEANS OF AUTHORITARIAN CONTROL

Spectacular growth of social networks and other cyber domains constitutes both a challenge and a new source of strength for authoritarian regimes. The great volume of new information flows is next to impossible to censor, non-state actors gain unprecedented power, and the official discourse is constantly questioned by a wide variety of alternative views and interpretations. The dark side of big data is the state capacity to monitor activities and connections of dissidents and to introduce “social credit scores” for the general population, and the experiences gained in the struggle against the coronavirus pandemic have given a boost to the concept of the high-tech surveillance state.³⁹ China and Russia often speak in unison about the need to regulate the internet and rid it of alleged U.S. control, but in fact their cyber prowess is quite dissimilar, as illustrated by Russia's limited success in applying Chinese methods of electronic enforcement of quarantine in Moscow.⁴⁰



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China has invested massive effort and resources into blocking the access to many top international internet resources and search engines and into building reasonably efficient domestic alternatives, which ensure sufficient connectivity for the high-tech industry and some space for the growth of monitored social networks. This censorship guarantees, for instance, that the explosion of street protests in Hong Kong in 2019 was barely noticed in mainland China.⁴¹ The combination of censorship and electronic

monitoring was a major factor of success in enforcing the extra-tough quarantine that ensured containment of the COVID-19 pandemic, even if it was also a factor empowering its initial escalation.⁴² Having at its disposal powerful cyber capabilities, the Chinese leadership still prefers to show certain restraint on the international arena and generally sticks to the terms of the agreement with the United States on cybersecurity reached during Xi's visit to the U.S. in September 2015, perhaps with some infringements related to the urgent research on the coronavirus.⁴³ This relatively prudent behavior makes it possible for the Chinese authorities to provide political backing for the tech giant Huawei, rejecting U.S. pressure and successfully persuading European states to refrain from sanctions.⁴⁴



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The Russian leadership would love to imitate China's success in controlling the domestic internet but cannot channel sufficient resources into this hugely complicated task. Various pieces of legislation aimed at punishing “subversive activities” in the social networks are approved, but the implementation is haphazard and limited to a few odd cases, while the negative impact on the development of the high-tech sector is considerable.⁴⁵ For that matter, the attempts by the FSB to get access to the encryption codes of the Telegram messenger failed embarrassingly, and the ensuing move to ban its activities in Russia only increased its popularity.⁴⁶ Some pockets of expertise, like the Kaspersky Lab, exist and struggle to safeguard their reputation, but the infamous “troll factories” are in fact remarkably low-tech enterprises.⁴⁷ Despite its limited capacity for cyberwarfare, Moscow opted to play fast and loose with “hybrid” means on the international arena, executing a series of virtual attacks (which were by no means great feats of cyberwarfare) on

various targets in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and against other vulnerable political institutions.⁴⁸ Heavy negative resonance from these often awkward operations convinced the Russian security services of the need to cover its activities more carefully, so that Moscow's interference in the 2019 European elections was significantly more sophisticated.⁴⁹ Protestations against breaches the norms of acceptable international behavior have been of little impact, and Moscow has found it opportune to engage in a disinformation campaign aimed at exacerbating the discord in the EU caused by the COVID-19 pandemic — and has provided what limited support it could for the Chinese propaganda counteroffensive aimed at shifting responsibility for the outbreak.⁵⁰

China is emerging as a cyber superpower, while Russia is lagging far behind in the development of high-tech capabilities — but tries to claim an oversized role in the cyber domain by deploying them brashly and recklessly.⁵¹ This hardly makes a useful foundation for building a cyber alliance, as many experts are inclined to predict.⁵² China benefits from the irresponsible behavior of its strategic partner but shows little inclination for sharing with Moscow its experiences and technologies, which are in any case barely compatible with underdeveloped Russian cyber systems. For the Russian leadership, the working — but in fact, very far-fetched — proposition is the construction of a “sovereign” internet, which implies the building of its own capabilities and limited interest in borrowing know-how from China.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF “BEAUTIFUL FRIENDSHIP”

Personal attitudes are of great import in authoritarian policymaking, particularly as pseudo-democratic regimes mature in the natural way to old-fashioned and resolutely illiberal autocracies. Presidents Xi and Putin have gone to great length to demonstrate the depth of their mutual affection, so that these shows of friendship tend to become rather tedious. Even Chinese commentators, however, dare to question the sincerity of these feelings, given the difference in background, upbringing, cultural sophistication, and leadership styles of the two egocentric, petulant, and vain rulers.⁵³ They had over 35 meetings (though not

since a BRICS summit in Brazil in November 2019, and only three phone conversations in the first six months of 2020) in various formats since 2013, when Xi assumed the top positions in the Chinese state and party hierarchies (which makes Xi's reign a third of the length of Putin's, though Putin is the older man by less than a year).⁵⁴

After the painful shock of the Cultural Revolution, Xi resolutely climbed up the party-political ladder in Fujian and Zhejiang provinces, and was designated as the successor to President and General Secretary Hu Jintao in October 2007.⁵⁵ The key qualities that ensured his advancement were his commitment to the high economic performance of his provinces and his determination in the struggle against corruption; he has duly continued this political-economic course after the scheduled arrival at the pinnacle of power in early 2013.⁵⁶ His chance to amass power was granted by the system of leadership rotation institutionalized by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s, but after serving his first presidential term, Xi executed a revision of this system that makes it possible for him to retain power indefinitely. This self-aggrandizement, accompanied by a downplaying of Deng's historic role, is not openly opposed but quite probably questioned by other factions in the CCP's complex and opaque hierarchy.⁵⁷ Xi therefore acutely feels the need to legitimize his "imperial presidency" by ensuring renewed economic success and also by preventing Taiwan from becoming an independent state, by suppressing the mass protests in Hong Kong, and by forcefully asserting maritime claims in the South China Sea.⁵⁸



Both leaders performed poorly in countering the threat of COVID-19, but Xi has good reasons to believe that he fared better — and probably new incentives to distance himself from the confused and hapless Putin.

Perhaps the most striking difference in the careers of the two leaders is Putin's total lack of leadership

experience before his sudden elevation to the summit of power at the end of 1999. Putin's work in the St. Petersburg city administration in the 1990s supplied useful engagements with criminal networks, and his previous employment with the KGB taught him the skills of a mid-level "operative."⁵⁹ Both these experiences helped him in fast learning in the flabbergasting job of the top boss, and after two presidential terms he felt confident enough to entrust the top job to his loyal underling Dmitry Medvedev, while controlling the levers of power from the position of prime minister. In mid-2011, however, Putin decided to claim the presidency back the following year, reducing the hapless caretaker Medvedev to the position of prime minister (recently, Medvedev was reduced even further).⁶⁰ That comeback was off to a bad start with recurrent street protests in Moscow, but Putin managed to organize a massive "patriotic mobilization" with the seizure and annexation of Crimea in March 2014. It was the confrontation with the West triggered by this aggression against Ukraine that made it necessary for Putin to pivot to China and cultivate a "friendship" with Xi, who found this connection useful but could hardly comprehend his new friend's calculated readiness to sacrifice modernization and economic growth for the sake of a territorial expansion. Both leaders performed poorly in countering the threat of COVID-19, but Xi has good reasons to believe that he fared better — and probably new incentives to distance himself from the confused and hapless Putin.⁶¹

Putin may excel at befriending valuable international "assets," but the quality of analysis in Beijing on the workings of the Kremlin court is far better than the expertise on Chinese party-political intrigues in Moscow, where the old generation of academic Sinologists has faded away and younger experts find scant demand for their knowledge. As the Tiananmen Square crisis recedes from political memory, the Chinese leadership grows confident in its ability to control domestic affairs,⁶² but Xi hardly evaluates Putin's management of deepening discontent as efficient and is perhaps puzzled by the awkward method of prolonging his reign by amending the constitution.⁶³ China has researched the causes of collapse of the Soviet Union with great attention, and while its leadership may have learned not exactly the right lessons,⁶⁴ Xi would be right to assume that his "dear friend" Putin is haunted by the specter of revolution — but has no efficient know-how on exorcising it.

CONCLUSION

Authoritarian regimes are by their very nature acutely preoccupied with matters pertaining to their stability and survivability, and China and Russia — two key strategic adversaries for the United States — are no exception. It is, therefore, essential for U.S. policymakers to acknowledge that geopolitical maneuvering by these revisionist powers is for them the means to the pivotal end of regime survival, which has rather different content in China and in Russia. While both regimes have in the last few years evolved toward more rigidly authoritarian patterns, they are in different phases of their respective life cycles and follow quite dissimilar trajectories.⁶⁵ The heavy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated hidden tensions and accentuated mutual mistrust.⁶⁶



Russia cannot imitate the Chinese “success story” and has to rely to a far greater degree on confrontation with the West as means of consolidating support for the ruling clique.

China is still, despite the apparent slowdown and the sharp spasm of crisis, a fast-rising power, which is able to channel great volume of resources to the modernization of all key components of its power — from cyber capabilities to naval power to external investments. This growth constitutes the main source of legitimacy for the consolidation of autocratic control in the hands of Xi and his loyal subordinates. Russia cannot imitate the Chinese “success story” and has to rely to a far greater degree on confrontation with the West as means of consolidating support for the ruling clique. While Russia is the younger state, Putin’s regime is much older than Xi’s not only in terms of exhausting its potential of modernization but also

in the sense of widespread boredom with the same people in the Kremlin and increasing desire for change among the urban middle classes.⁶⁷ Putin’s poorly timed decision earlier this year to legitimize the indefinite extension of his presidency by revising the constitution has split society and discredited his leadership. Compatibility between these regimes is limited and probably diminishing, as Beijing monitors the deepening discontent in Russia and calculates the dynamics of its decline accelerated by the sudden arrival of global recession. Repetitive demonstrations of mutual affection between the two autocrats cannot camouflage strengthening anxiety in Russia about China’s growing power and barely hidden disapproval in China of Russia’s economic mismanagement and military adventurism.

For the United States, this divergence undercutting the partnership-building between its two major adversaries is a positive force, which can be exploited without resorting to a Kissinger-style politics of playing one enemy against another aimed at reproducing the Sino-Soviet conflict of the 1970s. China is much more interested in sorting out the trade and economic issues with the United States than in backing Russia, which is stuck in an essentially unwinnable confrontation with the West. Russia is not able to provide any support to China in the trade wars and expects (or even hopes for) a steady aggravation of U.S.-China relations, seeing in this global conflict its only chance for escaping from the tight corner of unequal face-off with NATO.⁶⁸ Russia is by far the weaker party to the bilateral partnership-without-commitment; it has exposed itself to too many challenges and may feel compelled to challenge the West yet further in order to prompt a mobilization of support for the crumbling corrupt regime. China, instead of helping its over-stretched and troubled neighbor, may opt to take advantage of this calamity in various ways, from using the distractions provided by tumultuous Russia for quietly advancing its interests to extracting concessions in the vulnerable Russian Far East.

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