



## PERSPECTIVES

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# Russian-Chinese Cooperation Is Not As Temporary As You Think

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** Many believe the Russian-Chinese partnership, which functions across a variety of economic and political spheres, is only temporary. But Moscow's disenchantment with the West, and the redirection of its foreign policy toward Beijing and beyond, is rooted in Russian historical thinking. The disagreement between Russia and the West is a full-scale geopolitical separation.

The most popular topic in modern geopolitics these days is probably the budding relationship between Russia and China. Articles on the subject are produced regularly, almost all of them concluding that Russia is only temporarily siding with China. It is just a matter of time, these articles claim, until disagreements between the two powers become inevitable.

These articles miss the fact that Moscow's move away from Europe is rooted deeply in Russian history. It goes back much further than the Ukrainian crisis, which triggered Moscow's recent troubles with the West.

The Russian-Chinese partnership is built around their common animosity toward the US. Both have been confronted by the US and have taken actions that go against Washington's worldview, which favors a division of the Eurasian landmass among multiple powers and the maintenance of control over the world's oceans.

These issues drove Moscow and Beijing to work together, but it should also be noted that each stealthily tries to use the other to gain political leverage in economic, military, and other spheres. Indeed, Russian tactics since the deterioration of relations with the West in 2014 have been to move closer to China and other Asian states, such as Iran and Turkey, to show how far

Moscow is willing to distance itself from the West against the background of growing US-China competition.

Putin's strategy seems to have worked to a degree, as various statements and policy moves over the past year or so indicate that the West is anxious not to lose Russia to Asia (especially to China). As troubles with China grow and the West is forced to contemplate the possibility of a China-led world, the loss of Russia would be tantamount to a geopolitical catastrophe.

That is because in that scenario, Chinese influence would spread to most of Eurasia and even to the Arctic, which is a rising geopolitical hotbed. Recall the first decades of the Cold War, when the Moscow-influenced communist movement controlled territory from Berlin to Vietnam.

But for the West, the loss of Russia to China would mean more than just a geopolitical catastrophe. Despite eternal discussions within Russia over who the country really belongs to, Asia or Europe, the West has always considered the Russian world to be a part of it. True, the West considered Russians to be barbarians during wartime, and tsarist ruthlessness, as well as Soviet methods of state-building and policy-making, were appalling. But from a grand strategic or even philosophical perspective, for the West to lose Russia would mean the reversal of almost a millennium of western European economic and cultural export eastward. In a sense, the Romanovs and the Soviets copied the West, which made them geographic and cultural extensions of European civilization.

This would represent a reversal in which the influence of China's culture and worldview – for the first time in many centuries – would extend beyond its borders, right up to the edges of Eastern Europe.

There are worrying signs that many in the Russian political class no longer want the same level of psychological attachment to the West, but prefer to be more evenly directed (in terms of foreign policy and economic relations) toward both Europe and China. Moreover, Moscow is building closer relations with Turkey and Iran. The Middle East can thus be a third theater of active Russian diplomacy.

There is a great deal of logic to this strand of Russian thinking. In a way, Moscow wants to free itself from "singularity" in its geopolitical approach to the outside world. We like to believe this change in perception began under Putin, but it has been at work since the 1990s, when Russia was weak and disillusioned. The only way to uphold its position was to stress global multipolarity, meaning the US would no longer be the sole dominant power but one of the many.

In fact, one can go even further back to trace attempts to “de-Europeanize” Russian foreign policy. When Peter the Great reformed Russia and heavily Europeanized the ruling elite, he was widely praised, but there were some who were deeply disenchanted. They believed Peter broke the bridge between the common folk and the Russian political elite and distanced one from the other. Moreover, many in Russia believed the country’s Europe-centrism limited Russia’s ability to position itself as a true global power.

In retrospect, it can be argued that the Bolsheviks came to power to bridge the gap with the ordinary population. In foreign policy they wanted to be internationalist, not Europe-centered, and this worked for a time. But Western technological progress eventually attracted the Russian elites of both the Romanovs and the Soviets, leaving no room for Russia’s Asian roots.

Putin’s “de-Europeanization” of foreign policy should thus be seen as a recurrence of this grand historical cycle. His foreign policy might be viewed as reflecting the Eurasianism created in the 1920s, which held that Russia’s Asian roots should be respected at least to the same degree as its European heritage.

But Putin can also be seen as a shrewd follower of yet another radical strand of Russian political thought: Slavophilism, which was created well before Eurasianism. Putin and the rest of the Russian political elite often make semi-nationalistic statements the Soviet leaders would not have uttered – statements that reflect Slavophile reasoning.

All Russian philosophical ideas have been deeply Europeanized. Not even those who severely criticize Russia’s Europeanness can deny those roots.

And this is a fundamental problem for the Russians. The country spans almost the entire north Eurasian landmass. It is culturally close to the West, but ever since the loss of Ukraine and the Baltic states, it has grown increasingly Asian because of the rise of China and the fact that most of Russia borders Asia. (This is speculation, but it is possible that if the ruling elite goes all the way with the nascent alliance with China, Russia could split violently into at least two large segments: the western part, populated with a more or less Europeanized population, and the rest of the country bordering on the Chinese giant.)

Russia’s distancing from Europe is likely not a temporary affair. Even if Brussels suddenly decides to take part in a grand geopolitical bargain in which Moscow reclaims Ukraine and other former Soviet states, Russia’s “de-Europeanization” of foreign policy is likely to continue. The political class within Russia is doing what Russian leaders have been trying to do for centuries: make Russia more independent in its foreign policy focus and diversify it toward other regions.

Russia's split with Europe is not about China's rise. It reflects Russian history and marks a continuation from previous centuries. What it will bring to Russia in the end is difficult to say, but the trend is likely to continue at least for the next decade.

Much will depend on what western Europe and the US offer Moscow in exchange for a near alliance to contain China. While this might sound unrealistic, recent discussions among western political elites show a shift on Russia. Serious concessions to Moscow might be forthcoming.

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