



## The Chinese View of Western-Russia Competition

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The ongoing competition between Russia and the West is likely to continue unabated for years to come. Beijing will endeavor to widen that gulf by supporting Moscow in its efforts to implement China's signature Belt and Road Initiative in the Middle East and Eurasia.**

The interrelation of Russia, China, and the West (primarily the US) will largely dictate how Eurasia develops in the coming decades. Will the super-continent disintegrate into several spheres of influence, or will it remain a space in which, as in the post-Cold War period, Western influence remains unopposed?

Much attention is paid to the struggle between Russia and the West, but less to China's view of that competition—a view that is critically important. Russia is not strong enough to effectively counter Western influence, and the US is on the defensive and squabbling with allies. China is the only world player with the financial and military might to challenge the existing balance of power.

Chinese territory is immense, and it juts deeply into the Eurasian continent. This makes it highly vulnerable to the forces of geopolitical competition on the continent and highly sensitive to opportunities to tip the balance. For China, the territories in the Eurasian landmass to the west, from Xinjiang to Portugal to Scandinavia, are the space in which its rise can play out.

While it is often argued that China's economic rise is the most important aspect of the quickly changing world order, it should be noted that economic progress, however grand in scale, will not suffice to reshape the world with China at the top. As would any great power, China needs opportune geopolitical circumstances on the Eurasian landmass to [advance its interests](#).

One such opportunity is the Russia-West confrontation. It is often forgotten that for the Chinese, Russia and the Western states fall within one category: powers that once pursued a colonial presence on Chinese territory (Russia in the country's north and the Western maritime empires on the coast). There is no outright hatred, but this perception of Russia, the US, and other Western powers is deeply ingrained in Chinese political culture.

In terms of a grand strategic vision, it is in the Chinese interest to keep its Eurasian competitors as divided as possible. To accomplish this, Beijing could side with one power and then switch to the other in a few decades. During the Cold War, China sided with the Soviets and approached the US as a competitor. Later, Beijing's relations with Moscow deteriorated and Washington became a major supporter of China.

In the recent past, Chinese foreign policy has made ample use of the strategy of playing one against the other. Beijing has both tacitly and openly supported Moscow in its confrontation with the West, whether through votes at the UN or through economic and military cooperation in contravention of Western sanctions imposed on Russia. By supporting Moscow in this way, China forces the US to dedicate military and economic resources to the containment of Russia in the former Soviet space, Africa, the Middle East, and the Black and Mediterranean Seas.

The Chinese attitude toward the Russia-West confrontation has created a suspicion in Moscow that Beijing is intent on a complete overhaul of the existing world order. But while it is fashionable to portray all Chinese moves as part of that kind of grand strategic design, China actually benefits a good deal from the current world order. Economic relations have allowed China to attain high growth levels and stake a larger claim in global supply chains. Russia-China relations are more about the two sides using each other to disrupt the US-led status quo than to catapult China to world domination. At this stage, Moscow is no more dependent on China than the other way around.

With that said, it is another common misconception that Beijing considers Moscow to be on an equal footing with it. Judging from statements by Chinese politicians and the country's analytical community, Beijing sees Russia as just another piece in the Eurasian geopolitical game. Russia's recent gain in influence has not been as fundamental as that of China, which limits Russia's chances of an eventual Russia-China-led Eurasia.

The Russia-West confrontation also helps China within the context of Russian Middle East policy. The region is economically important to Beijing, but it has been divided and mostly dominated by Western powers. Russia's actions

have disrupted and diminished the Western posture in the region, which benefits Beijing.

In the long run, as Russia is unlikely to maintain its current level of influence in the Middle East, China could play a more active role in the resource-rich region. Moreover, the Middle East's importance will grow in China's calculus because of the region's geography as one of the connection points with Europe's almost 500 million person market.

It is not enough for a rising global power to have a powerful economy, though that is very important. A rising power also needs opportunities to widen gaps between other major players that are in competition. The Russia-West rivalry is just such an opportunity for Beijing.

The rise of the US to preeminence on the world stage by the end of WWII was made possible not only by its economic power, but by rivalries among the European states that cleared the way for American military and economic dominance. While China's modern foreign policy is not about fostering war on the Eurasian landmass, diplomatic and economic competition between Russia and the West offers Beijing a chance to pursue its wider economic interests—namely, the Belt and Road Initiative—on a much higher level.

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