



AFPC Capitol Hill Briefing - The Beijing-Moscow Nexus: How Washington Should Respond to China-Russia Cooperation

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On June 8th, the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC) hosted a lunchtime discussion with an expert panel on the relationship between China and Russia, and its impact on American foreign policy. Shortly before Russia further invaded Ukraine in 2022, Beijing and Moscow announced a “no-limits partnership” that heralded strategic alignment between America’s two primary adversaries. Since then, Vladimir Putin has doubled down on the war in the face of international pressure and isolation. Meanwhile, Beijing has provided significant economic assistance to Russia while skirting the line of outright military assistance. This dynamic poses difficult questions to American policymakers: are Moscow and Beijing operating as allies? Did U.S. policies drive them closer together? How resilient is this partnership, and how should Washington respond? The session was moderated by Michael Sobolik. The event featured panel discussion by Mr. Ilan Berman, Dr. Mariya Y. Omelicheva, and Mr. Craig Singleton. A summary of the speakers’ remarks follows:

China and Russia Test the Limits of Friendship

Dr. Mariya Y. Omelicheva

The world has seen formidable consolidation of Sino-Soviet power and close cooperation in economic and military spheres. The strategic partnership outlined in the two nations’ joint statement regarding the “New Era and Global Sustainable Development” represents a renewed commitment to bilateral relations. However, it also conceals their history of tumultuous relations, animosity, and unresolved issues. This context limits their cooperation today, particularly in regards to Russia’s war in Ukraine. Beijing and Moscow do not have a formal alliance, and China is not obligated to come to Russia’s defense or to provide military assistance. To be sure, Vladimir Putin wants to leverage his relationship with Xi Jinping to dismantle of the US-led world order and bolster Russia against Western intimidation. Toward that end, Moscow and Beijing are deepening military and defense cooperation, expanding trade, and stabilizing their border. The partnership is strong now, but tensions simmer beneath the surface, particularly due to Moscow’s desire to retain strategic autonomy. This friendship with “no limits” will likely remain shrouded in distrust.

A forthcoming Sino-Soviet split?

Craig Singleton

Despite China and Russia’s alignment, mutual distrust persists, and the foundations of their collaboration are not as durable as many analysts believe. Putin and Xi have different visions of the world, and these differences are beginning to complicate China’s ambitions. Specifically, which can hinder Beijing’s goals if China does not tread carefully. The invasion of Ukraine has revealed these differences, with Russia seeking to dismantle the world order while Xi seeks to build a new one rooted in the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) values. Xi has walked a thin line between supporting Russia economically and preserving China’s broader relations in Europe. Beijing has seen the international condemnation of Russia and is seeking to evade diplomatic backlash by presenting the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as a global “peacemaking” power. China is ensuring Russia has what it needs to sustain the war, but not actually win it. These face-saving strategies will allow them to secure a resolution to the war that advances China’s interests. The CCP is also actively analyzing the Ukraine war with an eye on Taiwan, illustrated by Beijing’s twelve point peace plan for Ukraine which echoes China’s vision for unifying Taiwan with the PRC.

The China-Russia Alignment, not Alliance

Ilan Berman

China and Russia both seek to end American hegemony and replace it with a new world order. This strategic alignment, however, does not make Moscow and Beijing allies. Rather, their partnership is a transient condition subject to disruption. The historical record bears this out. After the establishment of the PRC in 1949, China relied on the Soviet Union's guidance as the leader of the global Communist revolution, but tensions escalated under Mao's tenure, as China no longer desired the position of "junior partner." The result was the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, which resulted in violent border clashes and nearly escalated into nuclear war. Today, the tables are turned. Russia is a declining power that, nonetheless, views China as a vehicle to lock in strategic gains. Eventually, though, Beijing and Moscow will likely collide. Recent evidence suggests that China is becoming increasingly hungry for Russian resources and contested territory. What we see today is a temporary alignment riddled with fissures. Those latent divisions create opportunities for the United States to exploit with competitive strategies.

Participant Bios:

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