OPINION

The myth of a China-Russia axis

The two cooperate when interests match, but true military alliance remains unlikely

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Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping have tea following a meeting at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing on May 20. © Reuters

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In the wake of the memorandum of understanding signed by the U.S. and Iran, American national security strategists are returning to their favorite pastime: wringing their hands over great power competition with Russia and especially China.

As one columnist noted recently, "For Beijing and Moscow ... evidence of America's military industrial weakness [from the conflict with Iran] may catalyze decisions to move forward on their own strategic interests." Looming especially large in the minds of Washington strategists is the dark specter of a China-Russia alliance as a so-called axis of authoritarians.

Yet as I outline in a new explainer, such fears are substantially exaggerated. The China-Russia relationship is better characterized as a "quasi-alliance" that falls far short of a mutual defense commitment or a genuine threat to America. As illustrated in the Russia-Ukraine war, the supposed "no limits partnership" clearly has major limits in reality.

The two Eurasian giants have not joined in a tight alliance for various reasons, including that they do not wish to further antagonize Washington. The China-Russia bilateral relationship remains, to a large extent, commercial in nature.

Nevertheless, American strategic pressure in the form of excessive balancing over the last three decades has pushed Beijing and Moscow closer together. That has come mainly in the form of a build-up of U.S. forces and military exercises in both Eastern Europe and simultaneously in East Asia.

American concerns about the China-Russia relationship are not unfounded. Anxieties regarding a possible "Asian colossus" go back more than a century to the original tenets of the study of geopolitics. Just last year, a leading Harvard international relations scholar put the question crisply, "The crux of the problem, in short, is regional hegemony in Asia."

It's true that a fully activated China-Russia alliance could prove formidable. Russia offers China not only immense natural resources but substantial military and diplomatic prowess, as demonstrated by the Kremlin's recent liaisons with both North Korea and Iran.

Workers gather during a ceremony to start construction of the China-Russia East Route gas pipeline. The relationship between the two nations remains heavily commercial, centered on trade, energy and resources. © AP

Still, Beijing abjures any sense that it is trying to create a rival military bloc to counter the West. This has been a consistent theme of China-Russia joint statements going back decades.

Unfortunately, the trend in Washington has been toward ever-greater threat inflation, as when a U.S. think tank report declared that "Russia covets Europe, while China covets Asia (and beyond)." Such blatant exaggeration fuels misperception and rivalry, which could even help bring about a new cold war with all the attendant arms races, nuclear crises, and possibly catastrophic great power conflicts.

There are numerous reasons why China and Russia are unlikely to form a tight alliance with security commitments, shared command structures, and bases on one another's territories. First, both powers are well aware that they tried such a tight relationship in the 1950s and it did not end well -- to put it mildly. Such intensive interactions bred dependence and resentment that yielded to ideological and military rivalry by the end of the 1960s.

The relationship as it stands today, moreover, is also imbalanced with China's power greatly exceeding Russia's -- a reversal from the earlier period when China was the junior partner. Undoubtedly, this causes some insecurity on the Russian side, which is already facing a perceived threat on its western frontier from NATO, and is also in the midst of a serious demographic crisis, particularly in Siberia and its Far East.

While the interests of China and Russia sometimes do overlap, there are substantial differences too. Russia has no major interests in the South China Sea while China has little to no stake in the Baltic and Black seas.

Such divergent interests are also evident in the Ukraine war, wherein Beijing has offered diplomatic and economic support to Moscow but has not provided weapons or munitions. If Beijing opted to increase its involvement, it could alter the military balance substantially, yet it hasn't.

Instead, a medium-level pattern of strategic cooperation has become the norm. Russian technologies have been critical to the large-scale modernization of the Chinese armed forces across the board, from fighter aircraft to anti-ship missiles to submarines. Today, the Chinese and Russian armed forces undertake regular joint military exercises, but they are still generally small in scale.

Transfers of weaponry have dropped off in recent years, though this pattern could change. For instance, Russian naval strategists are increasingly interested in revamping Russia's fleet with China's sleek designs for surface combatants. Some Chinese strategists want to work more closely with Russia on submarine development.

The U.S. shouldn't be alarmist about the China-Russia relationship but it also shouldn't unwittingly strengthen it. Washington needs to finally recognize that simultaneous encroachment on the core interests of these great powers, particularly with respect to Ukraine and Taiwan, has played a deleterious role.

Rather than try to wedge apart the China-Russia relationship, the U.S. would be wise to adopt relatively simple steps to reduce strategic pressure on each of the powers simultaneously.

U.S. foreign policy does not need a "reverse Kissinger" maneuver -- which has been much discussed in the second Trump administration. Referring to this American strategist's famous diplomatic breakthrough with Beijing in the early 1970s, this line of thinking had theorized that a similar breakthrough now with the Kremlin could unhinge the evolving China-Russia partnership.

However, closer study of this historical feat of diplomacy illustrates that Kissinger was actually seeking to improve ties with both China and also the Soviet Union at that time, and indeed global tensions were much reduced as a result. Likewise today, Washington should aim for a "double Kissinger" diplomatic strategy that would see Washington pursue pragmatic and respectful relations with both Moscow and Beijing.

The second Trump administration has achieved some decent progress in this direction. The alternative of assuming a China-Russia tight alliance and going all in on great power rivalry, as characterized by the last two U.S. administrations, has been shown to recklessly escalate global security risks.