



## **Russia: Caught between US-China Competition**

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### **Introduction: What is Russia's view of the world today?**

Although the theme of this paper is Russia's view of US-China relations, before discussing the main topic, it is necessary to provide an overview of Russia's view of the world in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century to position US-China relations within a broad context. A wide range of studies have focused on Russian government policy documents, such as the National Security Strategy, and statements made by President Putin and other government leaders to piece together a picture of the Russian view of the world. Below is a summary of their findings.

First, Russia considers the unilateral hegemony of the United States that emerged after the Cold War to be a kind of "unipolar hegemony" to which it has expressed strong opposition. The idea of the "multipolar world" upon which Russia has insisted since the late 1990s is aimed at overturning this US "unipolar hegemony" and establishing a world in which there is cooperation among the major powers, while ensuring that Russia (and other non-Western major powers) maintains a certain degree of influence over the international order.

Second, Russia recognizes that the US "unipolar hegemony" has, since the late 2000s, entered into a period of decline. When seen from an absolute standard, in addition to the decline in US power (particularly when one considers the effects of the 2008 financial crisis--the so-called "Lehman Brothers Shock"), there has also been a shift in the relative power balance due to the emergence of developing nations such as China, Russia, and India.

Third, despite this, it often goes unrecognized that the current circumstances are not necessarily good for Russia. In addition to the United States' insistence on maintaining its hegemony and its concomitant refusal to accept any relativization of the power balance, this is due to the fact that, since the 2010s, Russia has, once again, experienced stagnation, as evidenced by economic, population, and science and technology indices. Generally speaking, although the

world may be becoming increasingly multipolar, this may not be the factor that determines the end of US hegemony, and thus there is a sense of crisis in Russia today over the possibility that Russia might not occupy any “pole” in the newly emerging global order. Since the Ukrainian crisis, the United States has intensified its pressure on Russia diplomatically, economically, and militarily. The fact that this pressure is causing a great deal of damage to Russian power reinforces this perception.

### **China as seen by Russia in 2020**

The issue is China’s position within these circumstances. In contrast to Russia’s stagnation, China has continued to rise throughout the 2010s, and currently its GDP is the second highest in the world (according to statistics released by the World Bank, China’s GDP is approximately US\$14,300,000,000,000, which is about 8.4 times Russia’s GDP of roughly US\$1,700,000,000,000), and its population has reached 10 times that of Russia. In terms of cutting-edge technologies, such as 5G, artificial intelligence (AI), and space exploration, China is on par with the United States, but Russia lags far behind in both investment and global share. It has been thought that Russia’s last remaining advantage is its military power (particularly in terms of nuclear weaponry and military technology), but Russia is losing to China even in this field (except in some highly specialized areas) because China has rapidly developed its scientific and industrial capabilities and increased its defense budget.

Therefore, Russia is falling behind China in addition to lagging behind the United States. At the same time, given that the US–Russia relationship has become increasingly tense, China and Russia have become increasingly close (particularly since 2014). This is likely because as its relationship with the United States and other Western nations has deteriorated and its exports of energy resources—which is one of its major sources of foreign currency—and investments have slowed, China is probably faced with a situation in which it has no choice but to seek alternatives. Is it possible, then, that Russia could become China’s junior partner?

Many experts in Russia have maintained that this is not only possible, it has already taken place to a certain extent, and the number of those in Russia who hold this view is increasing annually. However, when comparing to the relationship to the US, the view that a junior partner to China is not an unacceptable situation is gaining consensus.

First, since Russia shares an overland border with China that spans 4,000km, and because there are major power differences between the two countries, conflict between them would entail

a much more serious security risk than conflict with the West. Therefore, if accepting Chinese leadership does not expose these threats, Russia would calculate that this would be to their overall advantage. Second, China and Russia share the same view of national politics because they both have authoritarian political systems, and thus, unlike the West, China would not demand that Russia democratize (which would mean the overthrow of the Putin regime). In this sense, China would be the most reassuring partner and is advantageous also because it would help Russia maintain its sphere of influence in many countries that also have authoritarian political systems. Furthermore, China has not sought (for now) to expand its military and political blocs but has instead made inroads into the former Soviet Union centering on the economy.

Thus, even if it would be uncomfortable for Russia to become China's junior partner, many have begun to recognize that this would be a relatively viable option for Russia.

### **How does Russia view the US-China relationship?**

Now, we will take up the main theme of this paper, which is how Russia views current US–China relations.

As mentioned above, the rise of China is generally considered a positive development vis-à-vis relativizing US “unipolar hegemony.” Nevertheless, this would not necessarily be so if the United States and China were to engage in bilateral cooperation (i.e., a G2) or if it were to seem a realistic possibility that China would replace the United States as the country with global hegemony. The rise of China is acceptable to Russia today because China has a tense relationship with the US and therefore needs Russia.

Seen from another perspective, one could imagine a scenario in which Russia reconciles with the West on the condition that it keeps a distance from China. In fact, one could interpret the Trump administration's 2020 G11 proposal as an effort to create distance between China and Russia.

Nevertheless, Russia has indicated that it will reject the G11 proposal, and therefore it is difficult to imagine that this is a practical political agenda. Even if Russia were to return to the G11, it would simply mean that Russia had once again become a junior partner of the West, and it would likely also lead to even cooler relations with China. If Russia were to once again become a junior partner of the West, its voice in international affairs would be as weak as it had been during 1990–2000, it would be subjected to demands to democratize, and it would be

exposed to the threat of NATO's eastern expansion. Furthermore, such a move would not even ensure the removal of the sanctions under which Russia is suffering. As long as the West did not offer appeasement conditions to Russia that far outstripped a simple invitation to rejoin the G11—for example, the removal of sanctions on Russia's energy sector, which is the engine of its economy, or the promise that NATO would not be expanded (i.e., something like Yalta 2, recognizing Russia's claim to the same sphere of influence that the former Soviet Union had)—Russia would have little motivation to reverse its course of cooperation with China.

In other words, the fact that the United States has indicated concern over the possibility that Russia may become China's close junior partner acts as collateral that Russia could use to its advantage when dealing with the West.

In January 2020, Russian President Putin proposed that a P5 Summit be held as a way to allow the leaders of the five permanent members of the United Nations to meet and discuss international security issues. The objective of this was probably to allow China and Russia to reposition themselves as the powers responsible for the formation and maintenance of the post-WWII order, rather than the powers that are working to “change the status quo” of the international order.

However, while four countries besides Russia did not reject this proposal out of hand, they did not seem very enthusiastic either. The question facing the world today is whether the US-centric order (the post-Cold War order) that arose after the post-WWII order will be maintained or whether a new order (either a G2 or a US–China cold war) in which China plays a larger role will arise. This is because interest (by countries other than Russia) in a classic post-war order based on the Yalta system is low. Thus, for Russia the only realistic option would be to follow China, although the degree to which that would happen remains a debatable issue.

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