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Washington's Nightmare Comes True: The Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership Goes Global

By Andrew Korybko

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PART II: Geopolitical Application

It is now time to segue into the geopolitical applications of the RCSP. This section will begin with Northeast Asia and then proceed counterclockwise into exploring the dual approaches towards Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. It will then move on to Europe before looking at the Mideast/North Africa (MENA) and Latin America. It is only in Africa where the RCSP has yet to mature, although the possibilities most certainly are there for China to invite Russia's balancing influence into the continent in the future and to influence regional leaders to expand their trade ties with Moscow. Finally, the conclusion will unify the article and demonstrate that the RCSP is truly the most important relationship of the 21st century and the definitive vehicle for multipolarity.

The reader is recommended to keep the following in mind while perusing this section: **Each hand of the RCSP is intended to wash the other and complement its counterpart in regions/states where it may be at a relative disadvantage vis-à-vis its partner, with the end-game intent of establishing true global multipolarity.** With that being stated, the geopolitical examination of the RCSP begins.

Northeast Asia

The essence of the RCSP in Northeast Asia is to carefully confront the US’ “unsinkable aircraft carrier” and neutralize its lethality. Both Russia and China had existing territorial disputes with Japan prior to the commencement of the RCSP, but Japan did not begin to aggravate these tensions until the early 2010s. The Japanese problem could more accurately be viewed as an American problem due to its occupation of and mutual security with the country, so via proxy, the RCSP is effectively faced with the hurdle of American obstruction over the process of Northeast Asian pacification. Tokyo always has the ‘opt-out clause’ of a normalization of ties with Moscow (which is in the national interests of both actors), but this does not seem to be on the horizon under Abe’s administration. The US occupation is too strong and influential for the country to break free in the near future, but should a stroke of luck occur breakout and movement towards true foreign policy independence transpire, it would place Moscow in a position to play a positive role in moderating Tokyo’s actions towards Beijing.



Opening Russia-China joint Navy exercises, May 2014

In the current environment, however, both Russia and China understand that Japan, not North Korea (which both countries engage in the multilateral de-nuclearization talks), poses the strongest risk of Northeast Asian destabilization due to its aggressive pursuit of territorial claims. This is aided and abetted by the US in order to create the optimal Lead From Behind partner in the region and sabotage the prospect of pan-regional cooperation. Thus, however unlikely it may seem at the moment, in the event that war breaks out, Russia and China could either military cooperate or one or the other would use the strongest diplomatic and political tools at its disposal to try to influence Japan to back down and halt hostilities as soon as possible.

Central Asia

A lot has been written about a supposed Russian-Chinese rivalry in Central Asia, but in actuality, this is not the case, and it is nothing more than wishful thinking by those intending to split up the RCSP and see Russia and China butting heads over the region. Russia is in the process of politically and economically integrating with Kazakhstan and soon Kyrgyzstan under the auspices of the Eurasian Union, and it has mutual security commitments with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan under the CSTO (which also regularly partake in military drills). China, on the other hand, is more of a soft leader in Central Asia, having established lucrative

business contacts in recent years and struck extremely strategic energy deals with most of the region's members, first and foremost Turkmenistan.

The state of play in Central Asia is the following: Russia is consolidating its influence over the former Soviet sphere with states which it already has cultivated deep relations with, while China is moving in to fill the void in certain economic vectors. It is of the highest importance for China to be able to diversify its natural resource import routes in order to avoid the US-occupied and chokehold-prone Straits of Malacca, ergo its energy interest in Central Asia. It is through Russia's implicit acceptance of China's involvement here via the RCSP that it is able to proceed without a hitch, as it is also in Russia's interest to have a strong and as energy independent as possible partner in China.

The meteoric expansion of China's energy influence in Central Asia is also beneficial for Russia in a tangential way, however. The ties that it has fostered with Uzbekistan, which in the past few years has been moving away from Russia (it left the CSTO in 2012 and has plans to buy loads of NATO's leftover military equipment from Afghanistan) and closer to becoming the US' possible Lead From Behind partner post-Afghan withdraw, could be used to temper its regional policies. It is not to say that China can convince it to abstain from increased military cooperation with the US, but instead, it can exercise its impactful economic and energy influence over Uzbekistan to try to stave off a catastrophic military confrontation with Tajikistan that would likely involve Russia through its CSTO responsibilities.



Vladimir Putin meeting with Indian PM Narendra Modi, July 2014.

South Asia

This is a region of the world where the RCSP takes on a very complex nature and can be exceedingly difficult to discern except for the most careful of observers. To lay out the political arrangements, Russia is India's closest ally, with new Prime Minister Narendra Modi having recently proclaimed that "If you ask anyone among the more than one billion people living in India who is our country's greatest friend, every person, every child knows that it is Russia. Everyone knows that Russia has always stood side by side with India during the toughest moments and without demanding anything in return." This is a political relationship imbued with titanic global implications in its own right, but in the context of the RCSP, it allows Russia to exert a strong degree of influence over India in keeping the peace with China, especially as the

latter has ratcheted up its border dispute rhetoric over the past couple years in an ironically similar style to what Japan has done to China. Unlike Japan, however, China indicated two months ago that it is willing to finally settle this dispute, thereby opening the role for Russia to play a behind-the-scenes stabilizing hand to make sure that neither party acts recklessly and endangers the talks.

Moving along, China has a very close strategic relationship with Pakistan, India's mortal rival, and the two countries interact on a military and economic basis. China is interested in an energy conduit to the Indian Ocean that is firmly under its control, and Pakistan needs its larger northern neighbor to hedge against the Indian threat. This relationship obviously threatens India and sits atop the foreign policy considerations of the nation's diplomatic elite, as does China's String of Pearls naval strategy in the Indian Ocean. This is the name given to China's policy of establishing preferential naval relationships with Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar to increase its reach in India's backyard and secure its energy shipments through the region. With so much geopolitical rivalry ongoing between India and China, Russia's role over both actors takes on critical importance in securing peace and stability, and unlike in Northeast Asia and with Japan, in South Asia, Russia runs the high probability of being able to influence the course of events to a greater and more impactful extent.

Continuing along with China's String of Pearls strategy, this also opens up doors of opportunity for Russia as well. Due to Beijing's relationship with Islamabad and the political sensitivities of weapons shipments to its partner, Russia was able to go in by proxy and sell combat helicopters under the pretense of anti-drug assistance to Pakistan. Although irking India, this represents a "paradigm shift" in more ways than one: not only are Russia and Pakistan both snubbing the West, but Russia is able to use the trust it has with India to engender (however begrudging) Indian acceptance of this new military-customer relationship. This sale helps Pakistan as much as it helps China to balance against India by proxy (no matter how minor), and it also indirectly assists Russia with the post-2014 withdraw situation in Afghanistan. This monumental development was entirely due to Russia's intercession, as should China have sold similar equipment to Pakistan, it could have preceded a crisis in bilateral relations with India and scuttled the possible talks on finalizing the border dispute between the two.

What's more, on a tangential note, Russia could in the future use China's preferential trade ties with its String of Pearls partners to assist with the economic diversification of its agricultural products, a goal that it has embarked on since the counter-sanctions were enacted at the beginning of August. This would merely be reciprocation for what Russia allowed China to do in Central Asia with its energy diversification, for example, so it makes sense within the structure of the RCSP for China to lend a helping hand to Russia to do this for its agricultural and low-level trade diversification in South Asia. As was underscored at the beginning of the second part of this article, Russia and China complementarily aid one another in all possible ways, as this is the backbone of the strategic partnership. If one of them can open the front door to cooperation with a certain state or region for its own benefit, then they will let the other in through that entrance as well, if not through the backdoor which is away from public scrutiny.

Southeast Asia

This region of the world is one of the weakest for the RCSP but it still has an opportunity for both states. China is currently embroiled in a bitter spat with its neighbors over claims in the South China Sea, particularly with Vietnam. It is here where the opportunity is present for Russia to fulfill the strategic balancer role and work towards furthering the grand partnership with China. Russia and Vietnam have a long and friendly relationship stretching back to the Soviet era, and Moscow currently supplies Hanoi with valuable submarines that have given it a relative peace of mind against China. Although not as fierce, the Chinese-Vietnamese rivalry in Southeast Asia can be somewhat structurally compared to the Indian-Pakistani one in South Asia, and in both instances, Russia can be the mediator in balancing between both due to its unique position.

It is ironic that the Russian-Vietnamese relationship, built during the Cold War to counter China, can now be used to help Beijing in a convoluted way. Russia and China, as mentioned before, need each other to remain strong and stable in order to achieve the long-term goal of global multipolarity, so thus, Russia's weapons shipments to Vietnam should not be seen as trying to weaken China, but rather, to anchor Moscow's influence in a country that has already proven troublesome for Beijing. Through this deepening influence, Russia can then affect the decisions of the Vietnamese political elite in working towards a constructive (or at the least, non-military) solution, even if this results in a 'frozen conflict' or prolongation of the current stalemate. Of course, there are other actors influencing Vietnam as well (notably the US), but Russian influence in Hanoi should not be underestimated, as both countries are even talking about enhanced economic cooperation within the Eurasian Union format, thereby showing that the Russia factor still holds weight in the Vietnamese capital.



Europe

In light of the current tailspin in Russian-EU relations, there is practically nothing that Russia can do within the RCSP to help China, but China can in fact offer an opportunity for Russia. As it stands, one of China's grand strategic designs is to facilitate expedited trade with the EU via a

three-pronged approach: the New Silk Road (both land and maritime components), the Eurasian Land Bridge, and the Northern Sea Route. The last two paths run directly through Russian territory, be it land or maritime, thereby increasing Russia's geopolitical prominence between Europe and China, whether the EU likes it or not. It doesn't matter whether Europe reciprocates by transporting its goods through Russian territory or not since China is still highly forecasted to do so, which would still give Russia a stronger economic position and more tangible gains than it had before.

The Mideast and North Africa (MENA)

Ever since the 2011 Arab Spring Color Revolutions, MENA has been the focal point of intense Russian-Chinese political coordination. Sergei Lavrov declared in May 2011 after a meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister that "We have agreed to coordinate our actions using the abilities of both states in order to assist the earliest stabilization and prevention of the further negative unpredictable consequences there." This was in obvious response to the West's violation of UNSC 1973, when the Security Council resolution was blatantly abused to justify the NATO War in Libya and subsequent regime change there. Clearly, Russia and China understand that such a violation can one day occur even closer to their borders, and if they are perhaps confronting internal destabilization and relative state weakening by that time, then even within these countries themselves.

In the Mideast, one can also easily see both countries fulfilling their specific roles within the partnership. Russia's interactions with Syria and Iran, and most recently Egypt, visibly demonstrate its role as a military and political balancer. China has deeply involved itself in the energy trade in MENA, with 60% of its oil coming from there. It is also embedding itself into the region's non-energy economy, specifically within the UAE. Thus, besides the overall political coordination and absolute agreement between Russia and China in MENA, the region also serves to lay plain the distributive roles between them.

Latin America

This region, more so than even MENA, unquestionably shows the RCSP active in near-laboratory conditions. Latin America is far removed from the geopolitical intrigues of Eurasia, thereby making Russia and China's cooperation here easy even for the unaccustomed eye to observe. In the past decade, Russia has returned to Latin America both in style and in substance. Its ships have called port here and held joint exercises with Venezuela, and Russian bombers have flown over and refueled there on occasion. Nicaragua is even supposed to host a Russian base to guard the Chinese-financed canal that is being built in the country. Gazprom has begun investing in Bolivia and Argentina, and Rosneft is active in Venezuela. Medvedev and Putin have even paid visits to the region, and it has been speculated that Russia agreed to reopen its Soviet-era spy base in Cuba during the latter's last visit there in July. It can thus be argued that Russia is more influential in Latin America now than it ever was during the Cold War.



Major Chinese infrastructure project in Latin America -proposed transoceanic Nicaragua canal.

China, being the economic gateway that it is, is the fastest growing investor in Latin America and set to become its second-largest trading partner. As mentioned above, it is financing the revolutionary Nicaragua Canal, which will diversify trans-oceanic crossing away from the US' Panamanian client state and invite more non-American investment and trade into the area. This is actually already happening even without the canal. Russia is capitalizing off of its past decade of re-established contact with Latin America to diversify its agricultural trade away from the West due to the recent counter-sanctions. This reveals a larger strategy on behalf of Russia, which is to break the West's dominance on certain agricultural markets and provide producers with an attractive alternative option. Russia also wants to enhance its state sovereignty and thus has an impetus for lessening the West's economic influence over its domestic economy, hence its trade expansion to non-Western markets in the past few weeks.

Altogether, Latin America is the most suitable rear base for advancing the Multipolar World in the backyard of the fading unipolar giant. Russia and China have absolutely no competing interests whatsoever in this theatre, thus unquestionably showing the grand strategic aims of the RCSP in general. Russian and Chinese involvement in the region is growing at a spectacular pace and in a multifaceted way, thus opening the possibility for a dramatic geopolitical transformation right on the doorsteps of the US. Latin America is in many ways to the US what Eastern Europe is to Russia – a region harboring intense dislike for its larger neighbor and therefore able to be flexibly managed from afar to partake in even more detrimental actions against its former hegemon.

Concluding Thoughts

The Russia-China Strategic Partnership (RCSP) is truly global in scope, having come to encompass the entire world to varying degrees. The axioms presented earlier must be restated in order to remind the reader of its essence:

Each hand of the RCSP is intended to wash the other and complement its counterpart in regions/states where it may be at a relative disadvantage vis-à-vis its partner, with the end-game intent of establishing true global multipolarity.

Russia is the Balancer and China is the Gateway. The further that one moves from these two, for example, to the Mideast and Latin America, the more they can see the pure multipolar objectives and close coordination between these states; likewise, the closer they get to these two Eurasian cores, the more complex the relationship appears and the more difficult it may be to understand.

With this always in mind, the RCSP is more easily grasped and its multipolar ambitions become more readily apparent. Returning back to the beginning of this composition where the detractors and distracters were mentioned, it is now shown that the distracters have been using smoke and mirrors to hide the obvious – **the RCSP is a very real and tangible force all throughout the world.** The detractors, on their end, were wrong when they alleged that this partnership is aggressive. **It surely is challenging the Washington Consensus, but it is doing so through peaceful and political means, largely through the hand-in-hand approach of Russia's military-diplomatic contacts and political balancing and China's economic gateway role.** Thus, it is indisputable that in the 21st century, the RCSP will continue to be the most dynamic partnership in constructing multipolarity all across the world and pushing back against the US' desperate attempts to preserve its unipolar anachronism.