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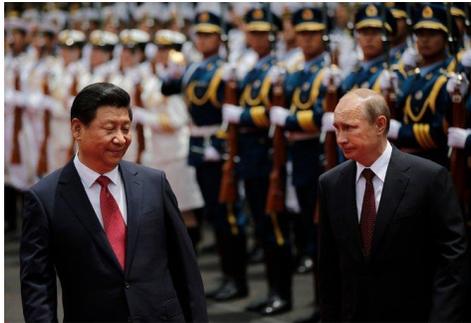
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As Russia Draws Closer to China, U.S. Faces a New Challenge

By PETER BAKER

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President Xi Jinping of China and President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia, in Shanghai in May, have found common ground.

President Obama flies to Beijing on Sunday to renew efforts to refocus American foreign policy toward Asia. But when he lands, he will find the man who has done so much to frustrate him lately, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. “You are pivoting to Asia,” Russia’s ambassador to Washington said last week, “but we’re already there.”

Mr. Obama is returning to Asia as Russia pulls closer to China, presenting a profound challenge to the United States and Europe. Estranged from the West over Ukraine, Mr. Putin will also be in Beijing this week as he seeks economic and political support, trying to upend the international order by fashioning a coalition to resist what both countries view as American arrogance.

Whether that is more for show than for real has set off a vigorous debate in Washington, where some government officials and international specialists dismiss the prospect of a more meaningful alliance between Russia and China because of the fundamental differences between the countries. But others said the Obama administration should take the threat seriously as Moscow pursues energy, financing and military deals with Beijing.

“We are more and more interested in the region that is next to us in Asia,” said Sergei I. Kislyak, the Russian ambassador to Washington. “They are good partners to us.” He added that a recent natural gas deal between Moscow and Beijing was a taste of the future. “It’s just the beginning,” he said, “and you will see more and more projects between us and China.”

The Russian pivot to China factors into a broader White House-led review of American policy toward Moscow now underway. The review has produced several drafts of a policy to counter what officials call Putinism over the long term while still seeking silos of cooperation, particularly on issues like Iran, terrorism and nuclear nonproliferation.

Though there is not a wide divergence of opinion inside the administration over how to view Mr. Putin, there is a debate about what to do. The review has pitted officials favoring more engagement against those favoring more containment, according to people involved. The main question is how the Ukraine dispute should define the relationship and affect other areas where the two countries share interests.

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Within the administration, Mr. Putin’s efforts at accord with China are seen as a jab at Washington, but one fraught with a complicated history, mutual distrust and underlying economic disparity that ultimately makes it untenable. “They’ll use each other,” said one government official, who declined to be identified discussing the internal review. “And when one of them gets tired or sees a better deal, they’ll take it.”

But others warned against underestimating the potential. “There’s just so much evidence the relationship is getting stronger,” said Gilbert Rozman, a Princeton scholar who published a book, “The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order,” this year and an article in Foreign Affairs on the subject last month. The rapprochement began before Ukraine, he added, but now there is a “sense that there’s no turning back. They’re moving toward China.”

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Graham Allison, director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard, said Mr. Putin seemed to have forged a strong bond with President Xi Jinping of China. “There’s a personal chemistry you can see,” he said. “They like each other, and they can relate to each

other. They talk with each other with a candor and a level of cooperation they don't find with other partners.”

Mr. Xi made Russia his first foreign destination after taking office and attended the Sochi Olympics as Mr. Obama and European leaders were boycotting them. Each has cracked down on dissent at home, and they share a view of the United States as a meddling imperialist power whose mismanagement of the world economic order was exposed by the 2008 financial crisis.

While past Chinese leaders looked askance at the Kremlin leader, “Xi is not appalled by Putin,” said Douglas Paal, an Asia expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The twin crises in Ukraine and Hong Kong have encouraged the alignment. State television in Russia portrays democracy protests in Hong Kong as an American-inspired effort to undermine China, much as it depicted the protests in Kiev as an American effort to peel away a Russian ally from Moscow. Chinese media present Mr. Putin as a strong leader standing up to foreign intervention.

In May, as the United States and Europe were imposing sanctions on Moscow over Ukraine, Mr. Putin sealed a \$400 billion, 30-year deal providing natural gas to China. Last month, China's premier, Li Keqiang, signed a package of 38 deals in Moscow, including a currency swap and tax treaty. Last week, Mr. Putin said the two countries had reached an understanding for another major gas deal.

The two had already bolstered economic ties. China surpassed Germany in 2010 to become Russia's largest trading partner, with nearly \$90 billion in trade last year, a figure surging this year as business with Europe shrinks.

“The campaign of economic sanctions against Russia and political pressure is alienating Russia from the West and pushing it closer to China,” said Sergei Rogov, director of Moscow's Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies. “China is perceived in Russia as a substitute for Western credits and Western technology.”

Masha Lipman, a visiting fellow with the European Council on Foreign Relations, said that the pivot to China “is taken very seriously” in Moscow and that “commentators regard this shift as a given, a done and irreversible deal.”

Yet talk of a Russian-Chinese alignment has persisted for decades without becoming fully realized, given deep cultural differences and a Cold War competition for leadership of the communist world. And Beijing has long opposed separatist movements, making it uncomfortable with Moscow's support for pro-Russian rebels in eastern Ukraine.

In Moscow, some fear Russia, out of weakness, has made itself a junior partner to a rising China. While China is now Russia's largest trading partner, Russia is only China's 10th largest — and the United States remains its biggest. Moreover, big Russian state companies can make deals, but China will not replace Europe for most corporations and banks, as there is no developed commercial bond market for foreigners in China akin to Eurobonds.

John Beyrle, a former American ambassador to Moscow, said discussions with Russian business leaders revealed nervousness, a sense that the turn to China was out of necessity as loans and investment from the West dry up. “One of them said that dependence on China worries the Russian elite much more than dependence on the West,” he said.

Lilia Shevtsova, a Moscow-based analyst with the Brookings Institution, said: “The pivot is artificial. And the pivot is to the disadvantage of Russia.”

Mr. Obama and Mr. Putin will cross paths twice this week, first in Beijing at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, and then in Brisbane, Australia, at a meeting of the Group of 20 nations. Mr. Obama hopes to advance a Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact. Russia and China are acutely aware they have been excluded from the proposed bloc, and Mr. Putin says it would be ineffective without them.

Such issues only fuel Russia’s move to China, Russian officials said. If the United States and Europe are less reliable, long-term partners, then China looks more attractive. “We trust them,” said Mr. Kislyak, “and we hope that China equally trusts us.”