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Review Essay

China–Russia Relations and the Inertia of History

Brian G. Carlson

Inertia of History: China and the World in the Next Ten Years
Yan Xuetong. Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2013. RMB 42.00.
259 pp.

US relations with both China and Russia have become increasingly fraught. The broad outlines of a potential great-power clash between the United States and a rising China are growing more apparent each year. Against this backdrop, a series of maritime disputes between China and its neighbours, including US allies, threaten regional stability in Asia. US–Russian relations, meanwhile, have suffered greatly from the Ukraine crisis, plunging to their lowest level since the end of the Cold War. Under these circumstances, the possibility of an anti-Western, China–Russia alliance has re-emerged with new urgency.

The conventional wisdom in both countries, as well as in most Western analysis, is that no such alliance is forthcoming. The foundational document establishing the two countries' post-Cold War relations, the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighbourly Friendship and Cooperation, asserts that the relationship is not directed against any third party, a point that many subsequent joint declarations have reiterated. Officials from both countries regularly declare that they have no need or intention to form an alliance.

Yan Xuetong, a leading international-relations scholar at Tsinghua University in Beijing, offers a prominent dissenting view. He argues that the

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structure of the international system is becoming bipolar, with the United States and China as the two poles. Under these circumstances, China needs allies, and it has no better strategic option than Russia. Yan laid out his case for an alliance with Russia in a 2012 article titled 'Is Russia Reliable?'[1] He fleshed out his view of the emerging world order, including the need for a China–Russia alliance, in his 2013 book *Inertia of History: China and the World in the Next Ten Years*. Both works preceded the Ukraine crisis, but Yan has reiterated his view in subsequent opinion articles and media appearances.

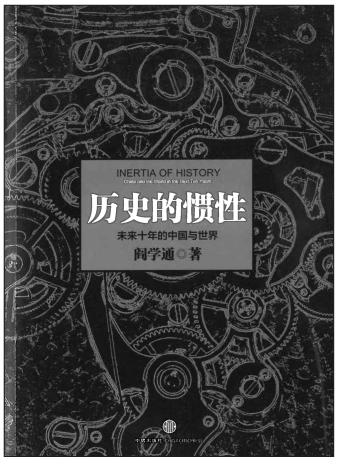
As of 2013, Yan writes, the structure of the international system was still unipolar, yet there was an unmistakeable trend toward bipolarity, which will become an established fact by 2023. In public statements, including joint declarations with Russia, Chinese leaders often express their desire for the formation of a multipolar international system because China would face less strategic pressure from the United States in a world of several great powers than if it were the sole challenger to the US position. Yan quotes Deng Xiaoping, who declared in 1990 that China would be satisfied with a world of three, four or five great powers.

Yet the inertia of history is stubborn. In Yan's view, those in China who are hoping for multipolarity are likely to be disappointed. China is on track to become a major power, despite the inevitable slowdown in its rate of economic growth. By contrast, other candidates for great-power status, including Russia, Japan and Europe, are all likely to be weaker in 2023 than they were ten years earlier. Each will be reduced to the status of a regional power, with little global influence. In the dying days of the Soviet Union, Deng predicted that Russia would always be one of the world's leading powers, even if it were to lose the other Soviet republics. By 2013, Yan writes, it was clear that this prediction was wrong.

In a bipolar world, Yan argues, China will have to abandon its policy of non-alignment. Deng originally proclaimed this strategy in 1982, when China began to pull away from a close alignment with the United States and to explore improved relations with the Soviet Union. Deng also admonished China to 'bide its time and hide its capabilities' (*taoguang yanghui*). This policy of non-alignment was rational during the late Cold War years, Yan writes, when China was not one of the superpowers in the bipolar structure.

Under these circumstances, China could strengthen its bargaining position through non-alignment. It made sense to continue this policy in the era of unipolarity that followed the Soviet Union's collapse, when China's power lagged far behind that of the United States.

In the emerging bipolar structure, the old logic no longer holds. New circumstances will cause China to reconsider both its non-alignment and its 'biding time' approach. Two factors will force China to change its strategy, specifically US rebalancing toward Asia and the attitudes of neighbouring countries toward China's rise. These two factors are closely related. In the emerging US–China competition, Yan argues, the United States has a distinct advantage because it has dozens of allies, including several in Asia, whereas China lacks even one ally in the full sense of the term.



In the coming US–China strategic competition, friends will be especially important. This competition, Yan writes, will not be a repeat of the Cold War, which was a struggle for world leadership featuring military build-ups, proxy wars, ideological conflict, and severely restricted economic and cultural links. The United States and China, by contrast, will engage in a mixture of competition and cooperation. They will compete in the political and military spheres, but their competition is likely to be regional rather than global in nature, and is unlikely to erupt into war. Meanwhile, they will continue to seek economic cooperation, to enjoy strong cultural connections and to avoid an overarching ideological dispute. In short, bipolarity does not automatically mean a new cold war.

If the US–Soviet confrontation was like a boxing match, with violence as a regular feature, the US–China competition will, according to Yan, be more like a soccer match, in which limbs will occasionally collide but violence will not be the main form of competition. US–China relations will be primarily a team competition in which the objective is to win the support of other countries. China will have to win friends in order to ensure political support for its rise. This, in turn, will require China to form alliances and

even to consider providing security guarantees for small and medium-sized countries.

Under these circumstances, China has no better strategic option than alliance with Russia. Any Chinese overtures to Russia are likely to receive a warm reception, because Russia also has no better option than China. In the present international environment, China and Russia do not have the option of joining the West, because the United States could not accept either country as an ally. If the United States were to allow Russia to join NATO, the Alliance's European members would no longer trust the reliability of the US security guarantee. Likewise, if the United States were to accept China as an ally, then US allies in Asia would no longer believe that the United States would protect them. Both NATO and the US alliance system in Asia would collapse. This analysis is true as far as it goes, but it overlooks the possibility that China and Russia could maintain constructive working relationships with the United States that fall well short of alliance.

Yan warns repeatedly about US 'strategic pressure' (*zhanlue yali*), using a term that appears frequently in Chinese strategic discourse. Far from slackening, US strategic pressure on both China and Russia is likely to increase by 2023, he writes. As the United States seeks to pull back from the Middle East, it will attempt to strengthen its positions in Europe and Asia. US opposition to the domestic and foreign policies of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who may remain in office until 2024, will ensure continued tension in US–Russian relations, while US efforts to protect its position in Asia against a rising China will mean turbulence in US–China relations as well. China and Russia both fear that the United States will attempt to arouse domestic opposition within their countries.

In short, China will be unable to avoid US strategic pressure by keeping its head down. The pressure will come, and when it does, China had better have friends.

The benefits of alliance

For Beijing, alliance with Russia will become increasingly attractive as China assumes the No. 2 position in the world and expands its global interests. Alliance with Russia would ensure the stability of China's northern

and western border regions, allowing China to focus on areas of strategic tension to the south and east. It would also prevent China from becoming isolated in the UN Security Council. Moreover, because China will be the stronger alliance partner, it will have greater influence in the alliance than Russia.

For Russia, alliance with China also would have great value. Yan argues that Russia will continue to be more concerned about Western pressure than the growing power gap with China. The period during which Russian leaders and public opinion considered it unacceptable that China's power should outstrip Russia's has already passed. The 'China threat theory' and fears of unrestrained Chinese immigration into the Russian Far East have also subsided. In the future, the desire to harness China's economic power to promote Russian domestic development will become a mainstream view. Alliance with China will allow Russia to strengthen its position in the Asia-Pacific region, though Russia will have to accept China's growing influence in Central Asia.

Some Chinese critics, citing both the collapse of the Sino-Soviet alliance of the early Cold War era and Russia's erratic behaviour in recent years, argue that Russia would not be a reliable ally. Yet the nature of a China–Russia alliance in the present environment, Yan counters, would ensure Russia's reliability. Relations among allies are different from relations among friends. Friendships are based on emotional connections, but alliances are based on interests. If the members of an alliance share significant mutual security interests, then they will be reliable allies, regardless of disagreements on other issues or their general feelings toward each other.

In some crucial respects, a new China–Russia alliance would be different from the Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s. In the earlier alliance, the Soviet Union wanted to play the role of 'big brother' to China's 'little brother', a relationship that China would not accept. At present, even though China's comprehensive national power is rapidly outstripping Russia's, Russia remains a first-rank military power, thus ensuring that a China–Russia alliance would be relatively equal in military terms. During the period of Cold War alliance, the Soviet Union and China both sought to promote communism throughout the world. A new alliance, by contrast, would be a

defensive alliance for the purpose of resisting outside strategic pressure and preventing the worsening of both countries' strategic environments. Studies in behavioural psychology have found that people are more determined to prevent loss than to secure gains. Therefore, a defensive alliance would be more reliable than an alliance devoted to worldwide ideological expansion.

Henry Kissinger has often argued, including in the context of the US–China–Russia triangle, that in a group of three great powers, the optimal situation is to enjoy closer relations with both of the other two than they enjoy with each other.[2] The United States enjoyed this advantage during the second half of the Cold War and for much of the post-Cold War era, but it appears to have slipped away. In addition to shared interests, Yan writes, China and Russia have built a large reserve of strategic trust from their cooperation in recent years. They enjoy greater strategic trust with each other than with other great powers. By 2023, this will still be true.

Yan's Chinese critics also argue that forming an alliance with Russia could stimulate a new US–China cold war or allow Russia to drag China into wars that are not in China's interests. Yan argues, however, that the overall power positions of the United States and China, not outside factors such as Russia, will determine the nature of US–China bipolarity. For example, the 2001 China–Russia treaty and the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation that same year did not heighten the structural contradictions between the United States and China, but the financial crisis that began in 2008 did. Moreover, Russia has fought a series of wars in the post-Soviet era, but none has required support from China or any other outside power. In the near future, Russia is unlikely to wage a war that would require military support from China.

Critics weigh in

Yan's arguments appear to lack widespread support within China's leadership, judging by policies and official statements to date. They also arouse widespread opposition within the scholarly community, both among foreign-policy generalists and among experts on Russia.

Jiang Yi, an expert on Russia with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, calls the suggestion of forming an alliance with Russia 'irresponsible'.[3]

During the post-Soviet era, China and Russia have never based their relations primarily on opposing the United States, he argues. Rather, the main driving force has been both countries' desire to become 'good neighbours' in order to avoid the tensions of the past and to pursue mutual gain. The international environment is important, but only in a secondary way. Many of the common objectives that China and Russia pursue, including regional stability and increased economic exchange, have little connection with the United States. Even the aims of opposing hegemony and promoting multipolarity are not equivalent to opposing the United States. If China and Russia were to pursue an anti-US alliance, they would risk the onset of a new cold war and the loss of many benefits that their bilateral relationship produces.

Another powerful critique of Yan's argument comes from Zhao Huasheng, an expert on Russia and Central Asia at Fudan University in Shanghai.[4] Zhao argues that Yan's analysis contains several mistaken judgements about the nature of alliances, the costs and benefits of an alliance with Russia, and Russia's own willingness to join an alliance.

An alliance is a military coalition. It is a serious commitment. It requires the alliance partners to form a united position on security and to support each other militarily if war breaks out. China and Russia are simply not prepared for such a commitment, Zhao argues. The 2001 treaty includes a clause that falls short of a mutual security guarantee, but which requires bilateral consultations in the event of a security crisis involving either country. China and Russia have never invoked this clause, neither during any of Russia's wars in former Soviet territory, nor in response to any of China's crises with neighbours involving territorial disputes.

After Russia's war with Georgia in 2008, China declined to join Russia in recognising the sovereignty of two breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In a UN Security Council vote in March 2014 to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea, China abstained. China traditionally has made the preservation of state sovereignty a pillar of its foreign policy and has no desire to set a precedent that could encourage Taiwan's independence or jeopardise Beijing's rule over Xinjiang and Tibet.

In any alliance, the members have two main worries: being abandoned, and being drawn into a war by their ally. In a potential China–Russia

alliance, both concerns would be acute. Yan's assumption that Russia would not wage a war requiring China's military support is imprudent, Zhao argues, because it would mean preparing from the outset not to honour a promise. If unforeseen circumstances led either partner to break a promise of military support, the consequences could be tragic.

Calls for an alliance with Russia also display a misunderstanding of Russia's thinking, Zhao argues. Despite Yan's insistence that Russia has no better strategic option than to form an alliance with China, Russians themselves seem not to think this way. Russia clearly seeks increased cooperation with China, but both the leadership and the scholarly community – including many scholars who are friendly toward China – consistently argue against alliance with Beijing. The notion that Russia would be content to serve as the junior partner in an alliance that was increasingly lopsided in China's favour misunderstands Russia's mentality, according to Zhao.

Russia also has good reason to avoid involvement in any US–China confrontation, a point that both government officials and analysts make regularly. The notion that Russia would 'pull China's chestnuts out of the fire' in the course of a US–China confrontation is, Zhao writes, unrealistic.

Russia also maintains neutrality on China's territorial disputes in the South and East China seas. China has sought to form a united front with Russia in both countries' island disputes with Japan, but Russia, seeing the disputes as separate, has demurred. In any case, the two disputes are fundamentally different in structure, considering that Russia controls the disputed Kuril Islands, whereas Japan controls the Senkaku Islands, which China calls the Diaoyu and claims as its own. Even if China and Russia were to form an alliance, they would continue to act according to their own national interests. In practice, this would mean that China would stand aloof from Russia's conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, while Russia would maintain neutrality on China's maritime disputes.

Ultimately, Zhao argues, China and Russia can achieve all of the purported benefits of an alliance through their existing relationship, which they call a strategic partnership, without incurring the costs and risks of an alliance. Without forming an alliance, China and Russia can still maintain

solidarity in the UN Security Council and provide mutual support in opposing what they view as undue US strategic pressure. They can also avoid the inevitable disappointments and resentment that would result from an alliance in which aspirations for unity outstripped reality.

The arguments advanced by Yan's critics are persuasive, which helps to explain why his view has minimal support within the Chinese government. Yan's analysis probably underestimates the durability of US primacy, as well as the challenges faced by China in becoming a peer competitor of the United States. If so, then true bipolarity may not arrive as soon as Yan expects. For now, China's leaders prefer a strategy of carefully probing the limits of US power and commitment in Asia. They will continue to seek close relations with Russia, and tensions between Russia and the West may provide China with additional room to manoeuvre.

Forming an alliance with Russia, however, would raise the stakes immensely. In the short run, it would be likely to increase, rather than alleviate, US pressure on China, because it would constitute a direct challenge to the United States at the global level. In the worst-case scenario, it could accelerate the onset of a new cold war for which China would not yet be prepared. In such a scenario, the assistance that China could expect to receive from Russia probably would not match the heightened risk that China would assume by challenging the United States so directly. China's leaders believe that time is on their side. A hasty and ill-considered alliance with an ally that faces its own immense problems could forfeit this advantage, with little to gain in return.

The opinions of such an eminent scholar as Yan Xuetong are nevertheless worthy of careful attention. By making a forceful argument grounded in international-relations and alliance theory, and a vision of how the international system might evolve, Yan has stirred a debate that is likely to last for many years. New ideas often do not take hold at once, but must wait for their time. Yan's argument is now part of the intellectual firmament in China's foreign-policy debate. Historical inertia – or unforeseen historical upheaval – eventually could cause Yan's idea to become more appealing to Chinese leaders. If this happens, then they may seize it, especially if they sense that Russia is ready to reciprocate.

Notes

1 Yan Xuetong, 'Eluosi kekao ma?' [Is Russia Reliable?], *Guoji Jingji Pinglun*, no. 3, 2012.

2 Kissinger argues that one of the hallmarks of German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck's diplomacy during the second half of the nineteenth century was his determination to remain closer both to diplomatic partners and to contending parties to disputes than any of them were to each other. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 122, 158. According to him, during the triangular diplomacy of the Nixon–Kissinger years, the United States sought to maintain closer relations with both the Soviet Union and China than they did with each other. Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1979), pp. 191–2, 712, 836. Kissinger argues that wise US foreign policy can prevent the formation of a China–Russia alliance in the twenty-first century. 'Only the unlikely prospect of relentless American bullying of both could drive them to a deeper partnership', he writes. Henry Kissinger, *Does America Need a Foreign Policy? Toward a Diplomacy for the 21st Century* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), p. 117.

3 Jiang Yi, 'Bu kaopu de "ZhongE jiemeng" shuo' [Irresponsible Talk of 'China and Russia Forming an Alliance'], *Shijie Zhishi*, vol. 5, no. 52–53, 2012.

4 Zhao Huasheng, '"ZhongE jiemeng" weihe quefa xianshi kexingxing' [Why a 'China–Russia Alliance' Lacks Realistic Feasibility], *Renmin Luntan*, 24 July 2013, http://www.rmlt.com.cn/2013/0724/91927.shtml.