

NOVEMBER 16-18, 2018

BEIJING'S CRAVINGS, KREMLIN'S GREMLINS: FREEDOM'S FOES

— Kori Schake

President Donald Trump's *National Security Strategy* puts much greater emphasis on the return to great power competition than other American post-Cold War strategy documents. It describes China and Russia as our main adversaries: "China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence."

This is not quite accurate; or rather, it is accurate in describing their common motives, but not their respective stature.

China is certainly a rising power, with an enviable economic growth rate of nearly seven percent (if its figures can be believed), and a GDP that will soon overtake that of the United States in purchasing power parity. Its 243 billion USD annual defense spending is second only to the United States. Its predatory behavior in the South China Sea has alarmed neighbors, and the US alike. Vice President Mike Pence has asserted that China is engaged in clandestine usurpation of free elections in the United States to an even greater degree than is Russia. The 900 billion USD Belt and Road Initiative could succeed by two methods: either as advertised, in rerouting regional trade and investment to China's advantage, or as a gigantic debt for equity swap, with China repossessing infrastructure that creates security frictions and conflict.

Russia, however, is more a threat through its weakness rather than its strength. Vladimir Putin is playing a weak – and weakening – hand aggressively, but perhaps not well. Russia's population is

contracting through reduced birth rates, declining life expectancy, and emigration; it is also Islamizing, the socio-political consequences of which will be aggravated by Putin's embrace of Russian ethnicity, the Orthodox church, and intervention in Syria. Russia's once-vaunted science and technology sectors have declined as the education system has faltered, the rule of law remains unreliable, and political repression advances. While intervention in Syria and the logistic success of the Vostok military exercises demonstrate the considerable success of Russia's military modernization program, defense spending had to be cut nearly 20 percent last year, portending future instability.

Putin's foreign policies have exacerbated Russia's decline, incurring sanctions for the invasion of Ukraine, assassinations, and interference in Western elections. They cannot raise capital on international markets, which explains the need to cut defense spending so radically. Putin's choices may have succeeded in causing the West to over-estimate Russian power; but they have also convinced Western governments and publics that Russia is an adversary, even an enemy. Recent assassination and intelligence operations cast doubt on the portrait of Russia as capable but corrupt; it may simply be corrupt.

The United States rightly worries about the prospect of China and Russia cooperating to disrupt the international order Western countries have constructed. China's participation in the Vostok exercises is being touted as the beginning of closer military allegiance, possibly pulling the whole of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization into alignment; an authoritarian countervailing bloc to challenge the West.

There are reasons to be doubtful of this story line, however. It is already evident that Russia is not China's peer, and it is difficult to see how a Russia so stature-conscious that it scorned the NATO-Russia Council will accept a subordinate role, or that a China so stature-conscious will grant Russia equivalence. Russia complains about the West, but it worries about China. Russia's violation of Ukrainian sovereignty may someday prove useful for China justifying absorbing territory in Siberia. The resentment Russia harbors against the West will likely be extended to China as it gallops past Russia's level of development. China's defense industrial base no longer requires Russian technology or expertise, as its companies hold two of the top ten revenue spots (and Russia none). China's modest force contingent in the Vostok exercise might have participated so as to learn from Russia's operational experience in Syria, something China's military has no experience with.

We in the West often give our adversaries credit for strategic vision and discipline we lack. We consider Putin a genius for taking up opportunities our inaction created in the Middle East, and assume Russia's criminal complicity in Syrian atrocities will make them a preferred interlocutor. Yet we don't weigh those near-term gains with the generational costs of buying enmity through unprincipled brutality, or of cementing the view in the West of Russia as a malevolent and criminal state. Nor do we weigh the burden for China of navigating the middle-income trap, sustaining its development up the economic value chain while repressing its citizens.

The brazenness of its intellectual property theft and coercion of businesses have Western countries now shielding their businesses, renationalizing supply chains and investment. For a country with a supposed hundred-year strategy, they activated antibodies against their continued rise well before having exhausted the gains available through cooperation with, and lazy inattention by, the West. These are formidable impediments to the continued success of both China and Russia.

Western strategy is slow, messy, and profligate. Our values inhibit crisp and efficient decision making, and often prevent our governments from making or sustaining strategically advantageous moves. We are often self-absorbed, ill-informed, or just wrong in our choices. But we are accountable. And because our values do genuinely have universal appeal, we have the ability to make enduring commitments to each other and gather others to voluntarily contribute to, and participate in, what we attempt to achieve. Neither China nor Russia have demonstrated that magnetic ability, and values are a large part of why they cannot.

China and Russia do pose threats and challenges to the West, but we have the means to manage those threats, and meet those challenges by working together.

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