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*“Russia End State: China and the Global South”*

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## ***Introduction***

Prior to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Russia-China “no-limits friendship” (February 4, 2022) and strategic partnership was understood to be respectful, pragmatic, and non-ideological, translating into “not always for but never against,” with both countries determined to uphold their own strategic autonomy in decision-making and military operations, political, and economic realms. China has committed itself to transitioning from ‘a’ global power to ‘the’ global power after 2049. China encourages all developing nations to initiate their own paths to modernization, in contrast to Western endeavors, and implicitly, Russia’s (Russia lacks its own compelling vision of the future, a developmental or modernization paradigm).

After Russia’s full-scale multi-axis attack on Ukraine, the invasion of February 24, 2022, this formula allowed for expanded economic and political cooperation, but not military alliance. Russia’s invasion raised concerns in China that alignment with Russia could trigger secondary sanctions with the West. Russia’s poor military conduct and threats of horizontal and vertical escalation also are of concern to China, particularly the potential use of non-strategic nuclear weapons (China’s “red line”). A Russia that is economically and militarily weaker and more politically isolated, we might suppose, becomes a more dependent China partner. But a collapsed Russia constitutes a critical liability for China for two reasons. First, Russia potentially evolves into a “second DPRK”: nuclear, nationalist, and unpredictable. Second, the West is better able to unite against and focus on Chinese malign strategic behavior.

In this second FY24 monthly virtual seminar we explore Russia in a global context, focusing on three issues: first, Russia’s relationship with China in the context of the recent Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) meeting in San Francisco (November 2023); second, ongoing Chinese military aid and assistance to Russia; and, third, Russia’s foreign policy thinking towards the Global South and the potential implications of these positions for its relationship with China.

## ***APEC: United States and China Without Russia?***

Since the first meeting of the Economic Leaders took place in Seattle in 1993, APEC states have met annually. The meetings provide a neutral space for leaders to conduct adjacent bilateral meetings. In San Francisco, when Russia was absent, President Joe Biden and Xi Jinping took the opportunity in a bilateral meeting to prevent a competitive relationship from spiraling into a more contentious confrontation. That the meeting itself took place was the message - the United States and China are still in strategic economic dialogue. And that it took place without Russia underscored Russia's diminished middle range economic status. The APEC meeting highlighted two important dimensions of the Russia-China relationship that are coming into sharper focus.

First, the extent of U.S.-Chinese economic interdependence, the volume and density of trade and investment, and how this impacts Chinese strategic decision-making, does not register in Russia. The scale, scope, and implications of this U.S.-China bilateral interdependence dwarf that of Sino-Russian trade. In addition, as Russia has sacrificed economic modernization and development for a “forever war” and a restorationist not future narrative (“the future as history”), Russia fails to understand the importance of this economic dynamic (slowdown and debt overload) in Beijing, and the impact of this change on foreign policy-making in Beijing. Xi Jinping is the key determinant as to whether China confronts, competes, or cooperates. Russia struggles to understand why Xi has changed many key figures in China's economic team, including the finance minister. This is beyond the Kremlin's understanding, as is the firing of China's defense and foreign ministers (the interlocutors of Shoigu and Lavrov). The ostensible reason – corruption – is not believed and Russia suspects a new dynamic in Chinese foreign policy. This in turn suggests that Russian assumptions regarding a gradual escalation of tension in U.S.-Chinese relations may not be correct. Russia's long-serving Beijing ambassador (Denisov) has been replaced and gone are his insights into Chinese decision-making centers and connections to Chinese elites.

Second, China and the United States are more aligned regarding Gaza and the need to avoid “horizontal escalation” and a wider regional conflict, while Russia and China are more divergent. Wider escalation aligns with Russian interests in that it would increase the price of oil (it is almost axiomatic in Russian foreign policy that crisis in the Middle East means greater hydrocarbon revenues) and would also stress Western decision-making centers and distract from support for Ukraine. The Gaza crisis highlights the degree to which Chinese and Russian interests in the Middle East lack harmony and belies the boast of “no-limits friendship.”

## ***Chinese Military Assistance to Russia***

There is no evidence that China is sending direct military aid to Russia. This may be the result of U.S. warnings to Beijing that such aid would result in high political and economic (sanctions) costs for China, that such assistance was not deemed necessary by China, or that China did consider the option but that publicity given to bilateral Russian-Chinese discussions on this issue dissuaded China.

While direct military assistance is not a feature of the relationship, Chinese companies do engage in direct dual (civilian and military) use transfers of equipment and indirect military transfers (e.g. trucks, navigation equipment, fighter jet parts, and jamming components) through parallel imports using intermediaries and third countries. Russia receives 70% of its high technology

imports from China, with semi-conductor chip imports doubling since the start of the invasion in 2022 (though with up to 40% failure rate suggesting poor quality assurance procedures). Both Ukraine and Russia receive commercial DJI drones (China's preeminent manufacturer) indirectly through parallel channels and China supplies the engines for Iran's Shahed drones.

There is neither evidence to suggest that China is becoming more supportive of Russia over time nor evidence arguing that western pressure is causing China to pull back from existing levels of support. CSTO states are not sending their equipment to Russia, with China backfilling and so extending its influence. China remains neutral regarding DPRK transfers of conventional military artillery shells to Russia – DPRK does not require Chinese “political consent.” (China's influence over DPRK foreign policy, such that it is, is strongest in the sphere of DPRK nuclear testing). China has well-established military links with Belarus, and does develop a military answer to HIMARS (the multiple rocket launch system - Polonez-M). However, this is in limited numbers and Belarus does not function as an entrepot for Chinese arms transfers destined for Russia. China may in the future play a larger role in reconstituting Russia's conventional combat capability, but it is unlikely to be a mediator in any Russian-Ukrainian ceasefire or peace negotiations. It has no desire to be one, lacks the expertise, and is not perceived to be a neutral arbiter.

### ***Russian Foreign Policy Thinking, the Global South, and China***

We can examine Russia's foreign policy thinking towards the Global South at two levels. The first pragmatic and transactional level is evidenced by remarkable trends. First, the shift in Russia's external trade from Europe to Asia and financial flows from London and Frankfurt to Dubai and Hong Kong. Second, and in parallel, the gradual formation of a new semi-bloc of sanctioned countries from Venezuela to North Korea. Hanna Notte characterises this grouping as “Russia's Axis of the Sanctioned” and Jahangir Arasli uses the acronym “BRINKS” (Belarus, Russia, Iran, and North Korea). This shift in the international system is being forged by new supply chains and a new geography of financial flows, and consolidated by an expanded BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative, and the SCO. These shifts are potentially sustainable and will gradually institutionalize Russia's new position in the global political economy. The second, more abstract, cognitive and discursive level centers on Russian foreign policy thinkers and their thinking - their attempts to try to make sense of these institutional changes. Here we see that the war in Ukraine, Russia's relations with China, and Russia's policy towards the Global South are all interlinked. We can identify three – or perhaps three and a half - positions.

**Classical Liberal:** The first is a classic liberal position, which builds on two premises: (i) that multipolarity is exaggerated and U.S. hegemony is impregnable, and (ii) that as Russian civilizationism is a myth Russia should align with the West as much as possible - not least to avoid subordination to China. This position was advanced in the now (in)famous article of the director of ISKRAN Valery Garbuzov (he was subsequently dismissed). Garbuzov argued that Russia was undergoing a “delayed post-imperial syndrome” but “still has a strong expansionist charge and an as yet unrevealed ambition for global geopolitical influence.” Garbuzov is critical of Russia's geopolitical activity in the Global South, including the creation of the SCO or the BRICS - and its attempts “to rally around itself on an anti-Western platform the former colonial and oppressed peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America” or to act as “the leader of the ‘global majority.’” He views this activity as essentially instrumental. He writes that “the purpose of all this is quite obvious - plunging one's own society into a world of illusions and accompanied by

great-power and patriotic rhetoric, the undisguised and deliberate indefinite retention of power at any cost, the preservation of property and the political regime by the current ruling elite and the oligarchy integrated with it.” As a result, he argues, Russia has become “frozen in the past,” trying “to regain its former greatness, lost possessions, and global influence.” This is a view that calls for a Russian retreat from globalist thinking, a realignment with the West, and Russia acting as a counterpoint to China. Ultimately, if Russia must choose, it should be aligned with Europe and not China. Russia is not ultimately a separate civilization - nor should the world be constructed around civilizations. This article has prompted a flurry of responses that represent two further positions.

**Defensive civilizationism:** This position can be characterised as one that is a kind of semi-isolationist camp that views Russia’s relations with the Global South as helpful but not vital. We can call this ‘defensive civilizationism.’ Here the views of Boris Mezhuev, an advocate of what he calls “conservative enlightenment,” are interesting. He has set out what he calls five principles of Russian paleo-conservatism.

- First, the global world is broken and is dividing into competing military-economic blocs.
- Second, the bloc that we call the collective West will not include Russia in any version that is acceptable to us. At the same time, Russia is not interested in the disintegration of the West.
- Third, the most important task is to mark a boundary between ‘the Russian World’ and ‘the Collective West’ including a ceasefire line in Ukraine.
- Fourth, Russia would like to see a deeper conflict between China and the West that would enable Russia to retain its position as a third force.
- Fifth, Russia needs an informal ideology, such as conservative enlightenment, to distinguish it from China and the West.

The overall goal is the protection of Russian civilization from the West and in this sense, it represents a kind of defensive civilizationism. In this worldview, the Global South is primarily a way for Russia to survive - not primarily an arena for global struggle against the West. Here there is no great interest in Russian activities in Africa or supporting Hamas in Gaza, except as a tactic to limit Western efforts against Russia.

**Offensive civilizationism:** The third position is more radical and revolutionary. It views Russia as the vanguard of an anti-Western camp. It borrows heavily from Soviet terminology and anti-colonial discourse and calls for Russia to lead an anti-colonial axis, with the goal of deconstructing U.S. and Western hegemony. The basic premise is simple. One cannot have a world order based on civilizations unless Western hegemony is first undermined. This camp includes diverse voices that normally disagree, from people who have always argued this way such as Alexander Dugin, to include more recent converts such as Sergei Karaganov, who argues that Russia needs to “force the West to retreat in a fundamental way, to agree a new status quo.” In recent speeches, Putin has increasingly adopted this position. In his September 30, 2022 speech marking the annexation of four Ukrainian regions, he railed against U.S. hegemony and claimed Russia’s role in leading an anti-colonial platform uniting countries in the Global South. In his October 5, 2023 speech at Valdai, Putin claimed that “the world is on its way to a synergy of civilization-states, large spaces, communities identifying as such.” This is a radical vision for a post-liberal world order that has become increasingly mainstream in Russian foreign policy. There are more and less radical positions within this view. A more radical view sees China as Russia’s ideological ally, making any concerns about a junior partnership unnecessary. In this

view, China does not threaten Russia’s civilizational uniqueness – unlike the West. Instead, the two countries are driving changes “the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years,” as Xi put it in a meeting in Moscow in March 2023.

Each of these views has serious problems.

1. The classical liberal view lacks any understanding of serious structural shifts in the global economy. It banks on a 1990s style unipolarity, an unlikely rapprochement between Russia and the West and an equally unlikely distancing between China and Russia. The lack of clear foreign policy thinking – including on future relations with China - among Russia’s political opposition (including its diaspora), poses a challenge for the future.

2. Defensive civilizational is more likely to grow in influence. Potentially it could coalesce with former advocates of *realpolitik* for a more restrained foreign policy, but one still driven by civilizational values and a hostile relationship with the West. Former advocates of *realpolitik* such as Dmitry Trenin, also praise “a sea change in Moscow’s worldview and international positioning toward the world’s rising non-Western majority.”

3. The sharp anti-Americanism in Russia’s offensive civilizationism mobilizes some supporters, but its rhetoric appeals to a relatively limited constituency – even in China. The economic ties between China and the U.S. are underestimated in Moscow, as noted above. The “Axis of the Sanctioned” (basket-case economies) is important but hardly ground-breaking.

## ***Conclusions***

Nevertheless, for now, while Russia’s foreign policy may be based on post-imperial illusions, it is also riding on some genuine shifts in international relations, whether the war in Gaza or the tensions between the U.S. and China. We should not underestimate the significant traction for Russia on some key international issues in the Global South. Gaza is the most obvious challenge – and will come back time and time again in Russia’s narrative. U.S. support for Ukraine is equated with unipolarity, whereas a Russian victory over the West and the march to multipolarity occurs when Russian-Ukrainian “reunification” is complete. While many countries want a reduced U.S. role in their regions, few want to see the kind of world envisaged by Russia, divided into macro-blocs around great powers. In addition, and most importantly, President Xi needs breathing space to address the consequences of China’s economic problems and seeks to reduce confrontation with the United States and create a more stable IR environment, one that also favors BRI transactions. Russia’s spoiler foreign policy thrives on and fosters instability and crisis, contexts that give Russia strategic relevance. Russia faces the constant of Chinese disapproval when it seeks to deepen relations with India and Vietnam, for example, and enable horizontal escalation in the Middle East.

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