How can Russia, China, and the United States Change the World?

There are some serious changes taking place in the international order that has prevailed since the end of World War Two. After what has been almost three decades of Washington openly expressing its desire to establish a world order with a clear-cut US hegemony to serve its own interests, the policies of Russia and China have recently been growing increasingly influential internationally in various different parts of the world. That is why more and more objective attention is universally being paid to the triangular power dynamic of today’s three biggest players in international life: the United States, Russia and China.

“The unipolar world that had been proposed after the Cold War did not take place either. I consider that the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible in today’s world,” Vladimir Putin said at the Munich Security Conference back in 2007. He went on to criticize the existing world order, and spoke about how NATO has failed to fulfill its obligations, and of America’s disregard for international law, which many Western political elites criticized him for at the time. Ten years later however, one Western leader, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, began speaking about a “multipolar world in which countries such as China and India also have geostrategic goals.” Around the same time, Permanent Representative of France to the UN François Delattre characterized America’s withdrawal from the Paris climate accord as the “birth certificate of a multipolar world”.

In think tanks and at conferences around the world, experts and politicians are saying that large countries need to adapt to multipolarity and the emergence of new poles of power, regional powers, and large economies.

The West’s relations with Russia have never been straight-forward, but categorizing China as a US adversary was a far less predictable turn of events.
Let’s not forget that the United States and China came to a rapprochement in the early 1970s following US President Richard Nixon’s first visit to China, who happened to be ardently anti-Communist. His meeting with Chairman Mao Tse-tung was therefore a true show of American pragmatism in foreign policy.

After Mao’s death, when the Chinese leadership was launching its policy of “reform and opening-up” in the early 1980s, known in the West as the Opening of China, the West was confident that China would move towards democratization and liberalization. That is why Ronald Reagan’s National Security Strategy spoke about fostering “closer relations with the People’s Republic of China.” Under George H. W. Bush, the Celestial Empire was seen as another state that, like the United States, has “contributed crucially to regional stability and the global balance of power.” The need to cooperate with China was mentioned in the national security strategies of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barack Obama from 1994 to 2010. Obama’s National Security Strategy in 2015 even describes the rise of China as having the potential to “significantly impact the future of major power relations.”

However, in the US National Security Strategy for 2017, Beijing is already referred to as adversary, and the report admits that the Americans have lost all hope of liberalizing their partner: “Contrary to our hopes, China expanded its power at the expense of the sovereignty of others.” According to the White House, Beijing is operating similarly to Russia in that “they are contesting [America’s] geopolitical advantages and trying to change the international order in their favor.”

The trends that are currently being observed in relations between Russia, China and the United States indicate that we can expect to see greater strategic rivalry between the United states, the established global hegemon, and the powers that are emerging in Eurasia. In contrast to the United States, which is trying to cling onto its monopolistic control and the position of world domination it gained after the collapse of the socialist Eastern Bloc at the end of the twentieth century, Russia and China are now building their own axis, moving towards the goal of becoming a multipolar world.

Faced with a choice between the US and China, Russia has naturally gravitated closer towards Beijing for two reasons. From a political point of view, in a world where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization continues to exist, Moscow will never be able to reach a full understanding with the West. The existence of this transatlantic security alliance is still premised on a perceived threat posed by Russia, which is also the reason it gives for expanding its borders into other countries whenever an opportunity presents itself. Each new member state joining NATO is a move directed against Russia, and is unambiguously interpreted as a threat by Moscow.

The mutual economic benefits of partnering with the Chinese are another reasonable argument in favor of Russia’s partnership with China. China is a manufacturing powerhouse, while Russia is rich in natural resources. China has a massive labor force, which could help offset Russia’s serious demographic decline.

It is also possible that Russia’s future will be more orientated towards the East. Even from a purely geographical and strategic point of view, Moscow needs to invest heavily in developing its own Eastern regions, which are characterized by an extremely low population density, although they also make up more than 75 percent of the country’s total land area.

It is therefore no wonder that Moscow and Beijing are effectively taking similar stances on many controversial international issues, and the leaders of both countries have repeatedly stressed the importance of their bilateral relations in the face of external threats. They prefer to avoid direct confrontations on certain regional issues, such as Vietnam’s territorial dispute and energy policy in the South China Sea dispute, and avoid bringing up the points on which they do disagree in public discussion.

It should not be forgotten that the Soviet Union was the first state to recognize the People’s Republic of China. It was Moscow that helped lay the foundations to build Chinese industry, and although China is now unparalleled, none of this would have been possible without those foundations. By allowing the Chinese company Huawei to build Russia’s first 5G network, Moscow provided Beijing with the support it desperately needed as the trade war with the United States escalated.

Moscow and Beijing are working to strengthen and modernize their armed forces, and also hold joint military exercises. The goal of these actions is to contain the American war machine, which both China and Russia see as expansionism. The fact that China has purchased more weapons from Russia than from any other country indicates just how strong their ties are. The figures speak for themselves: about 80 percent of all weapons purchased by China are Russian. Beijing, in turn, has become one of Moscow’s top buyers in the defense industry: China’s share in Russian defense exports is about 25 percent.
Moreover, the US itself is encouraging China and Russia to develop closer relations by labeling them “strategic rivals”. By doing so, Washington is trying to achieve the impossible, pushing Beijing and Moscow closer together while trying to drive a wedge between them at the same time.

There is now talk of re-shaping the world order according to a new model as an alternative to the global hegemony proposed by Washington and making the rules of the game fairer, starting with relations on a bilateral level, then broadening out to include an increasing number of other countries. This may perhaps be what the world is looking for from Russia and China. For almost the entire second half of the twentieth century, the socialist system existed alongside the capitalist system. They spurred each other on. It is just as important to have competing motivations, ideologies, and proposed models for our world order as it is important to have competition in business. It drives our progression.

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