



Pivoting to the East: Russia Considers China Its Ally but the Feelings Aren't Mutual

By Maxim Trudolyubov



Today, Russian ideologues and propagandists are [raising alarms](#) over the “West’s attempts to introduce ideals and norms alien to Russia. They denounce the Russian opposition, which allegedly [operates](#) under “orders from the West.” And they stoke fears among television audiences that the West is [preparing](#) “nothing short of a war” on Russia. In turn, American, British and Western European commentators accuse the Russian government of waging [targeted attacks](#) on Western institutions and conducting an [information war](#) against the West.

While all this noise can be tuned out, if you pay attention for just a moment, you quickly realize that the point of all this sensationalism isn’t the content itself but the feeling of comfort these ideologues and publicists evoke. Amid all the accusations of “Western operatives” and “hybrid warfare,” there’s a nostalgia for the former bipolar order in which Russia — or perhaps more specifically, the post-war USSR — had a clear and leading role. Western politicians and authors, meanwhile, long for times past when they were triumphant champions of the twentieth century’s global conflict.

Preparing for a war gone by

All of these mutual threats hark back to the Cold War, which was more than just a frozen standoff between two superpowers (played out in regional wars). It was also a clear and comprehensible

system of international relations, especially when viewed from Moscow and Washington. Each of these global poles flew a flag that other countries were compelled or enticed to rally around — coying up to the (capitalist) West or to the (socialist) USSR.

From the Western point of view, the twentieth century was dedicated to a deadly standoff against the ideologies of fascism and communism, followed by another one between capitalism and communism as political and economic systems. All of these worldviews and doctrines were formed in Europe more than a hundred years ago. In this sense, Vladimir Putin — who never tires of [evoking](#) Russia's triumph in World War II and the resulting repartition of the globe — holds a distinctly Western point of view. His position may be contentious, but it's framing is rooted in Westernism all the same.

Meanwhile, hidden by the pall of conflict between capitalism and socialism was another confrontation entirely. The Cold War ruthlessly dragged in third countries, quashing their pursuit of decolonization, sovereign nation building, and the formation of their own political systems, writes Yale historian Odd Arne Westad in one of the [best books](#) on the history of the Cold War.

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From a non-Western point of view — or more precisely, from the point of view of most non-Western people — the main global development of the twentieth century was the appearance of independent nation states from the ruins of European and Asian empires. Of course, people in Egypt, India, China, Pakistan, and Thailand, can imagine what worries Americans and Europeans (indeed, thanks to the ubiquitous spread of the English language, this isn't so difficult for them to do). But the world looks different “from the other side.” From the perspective of those outside of Washington and Moscow, what's important isn't the conflicts “within the Western world,” but rather the relations between former colonies (or states caught in the orbits of these empires) and former colonizers.

Human rights and democracy as neocolonialism

In this prolonged and painful conflict with the West, which goes back much further than the Cold War, Russia occupies a unique and dualistic position in terms of both geography and history. In a recent meeting with his Chinese counterpart Wang Yi, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov signed a joint declaration, “on several issues of global governance,” which stated that human rights should be protected “in conformity with national specificities.”

Legal mechanisms aimed at protecting the rights of the individual first appeared in international agreements and legal documents in the 1940s, at the end of World War II and the beginning of the post-war era.

The authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Charter of the Nuremberg International Military Tribunal, the European Convention on Human Rights and other documents from that period were driven by an effort to protect the groups and nationalities that were victims of the crimes exposed at Nuremberg and in other post-war trials. It was therefore imperative to create a [concept of human rights acceptable to conservatives](#) simply because up until the 1940s, the idea of human rights itself was associated with the revolutionary tradition of *droits de l'homme* and the communist movement. It was important for the Christian Democrats and other centrist parties to create a “Judeo-Christian democratic” version of human rights that denied the communists (who were popular in post-war world) a monopoly on human rights.

The mass killing and widespread suffering of those persecuted during the war years was heightened by the exceptional difficulties Jews and other refugees had crossing borders. Some countries wouldn't let them out, while others wouldn't take them in (this included the United States, as evidenced by the unforgettable tragedy of the [Voyage of the St. Louis](#)). Human rights protection thus had to exist at a level above borders. The idea of human rights protection, which was established in the Universal Declaration and other post-war documents, arose from the existence of a moral absolute that reigned supreme above nations' sovereignty over their territory.

This in turn became a predicament for the Soviet Union, even though it was founding member of the United Nations and its ambassador, Alexander Bogomolov, [participated](#) in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The leaders of the USSR and the leaders of other socialist states and countries, which in the second half of the twentieth century were called the "third world" (in the sense that they were initially neither capitalist nor communist) came to see "western" human rights as a pretext for interfering in their affairs.

The communists and their satellites saw their human rights not as political and civil rights, but as social rights: the right to have a roof over one's head, clothes to wear, employment, and social services. While, the West reproached the communists for violating human rights (through suppression of opposition and lack of elections), the communists reproached the West for violating of social rights (due to unemployment and extreme inequality).

Even though Russia has grown closer to China and comes out on China's side in the battle with the West, Russia still belongs to the "historical West" and, as such, faces grievances from China — and the exact scale of these grievances remains unknown.

Today's Russian leaders are fond of emphasizing their conservatism and consider themselves guardians of traditional values. Yet the version of human rights they choose is not conservative democratic — it's socialist. That is to say, it's based on social rights, rather than civil or political ones.

China has long been at odds with its Western partners over human rights. "China, along with the rest of the developing world, chooses to first prioritize economic and social rights, as opposed to the Western focus on civil and political rights," [explains](#) Phil Ma, a researcher at Duke University. "These rights emphasize collective values and opportunities for economic growth, not just democracy promotion." More importantly, criticism for human rights violations in Tibet and Xinjiang are taken by Chinese politicians not in the context of the recent Cold War, but in the context of the Century of Humiliation, the period that ended with the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949.

The period from 1842 (the defeat of the Qing Dynasty in the First Opium War) to 1949 (the establishment of the People's Republic of China), during which China lost a significant amount of territory and economic independence. China suffered one defeat after another at the hands of Western powers, which dictated trade conditions, including supplies of opium to China and taking Chinese cultural treasures to Europe. The destruction of the [Old Summer Palace](#), burned and looted by the British and French during the Second Opium War in 1860, stands as a symbol of China's foreign humiliation during this period.

In a broader context, contemporary Chinese state leaders act as representatives of a preeminent non-Western power trying to overcome challenges they inherited from the colonial period. These leaders therefore perceive human rights and the spread of democracy as nothing other than the

West's attempt to teach eastern barbarians to be "civilized." Makau Mutua, a Kenyan-American professor at the SUNY Buffalo School of Law, calls this the "[savages-victims-saviors](#)" construction. This approach, in his opinion, is dangerously close to the old imperial notion that western civilizers are called to come and save eastern savages from themselves.

China's Communist Party bases its legitimacy not in ideology, which lost its relevance when the Cold War ended, but in its role as a nation-building power. It was the party, after all, that brought an end to the era in which China suffered territorial and economic losses from the actions of great powers, namely Great Britain, France, the United States and, yes, Russia.

Celebrating victory over Russia

The Indian essayist and novelist Pankaj Mishra opens his book "[From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia](#)," with a story of what the defeat of the Russian navy in the 1905 Battle of Tsushima meant to the world outside the West. Japan, which won the battle, was not the only country celebrating. This good news covered the pages of newspapers in Egypt, China, Persia, and Turkey. It marked the first time in the new era when a non-European country was able to defeat a European power in a full-scale military conflict.

Intellectuals and reformers from the non-European world have regarded that day as a pivotal milestone. Mustafa Kemal, who would later come to be known as Atatürk, wrote that he became convinced at that point that modernization according to the Japanese model could change his country. Jawaharlal Nehru, the then future first prime minister of independent India, recollected how news of Tsushima gave him a breath of inspiration and hope for Asia's liberation from their subordination to Europe. American civil rights leader and intellectual William E. Dubois wrote of a worldwide surge of "colored pride."

Historically, Russia has been one of the colonialist powers. At the dawn of the new era, Russia was part of the West; it acted like a Western empire and was regarded as such by the non-European world. China's grievances towards Russia, which essentially remain in place to this very day, are the standard objections of a former colony to a former colonial empire. When Deng Xiaoping met with Mikhail Gorbachev in Beijing in 1989, the Soviet leader was [taken back](#) by the array of "old" issues raised by the Chinese leader. Gorbachev had arrived to iron out relations with the USSR's partner, only for the Chinese leader to remind him of Russia's Tsarist policies, humiliations from years past, the territories ceded to Russia in the Treaty of Aigun and the Treaty of Beijing, and China's resulting territorial disputes.

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Gorbachev, like all Russian leaders existing within the Western political agenda, couldn't come up with a response "Protocol dictated that Gorbachev reply by laying out our position, our vision, but he didn't do that, as he wasn't prepared for such a reception. He was silent, effectively agreeing with Deng Xiaoping's rendition," [recalled](#) Andrei Vinogradov, a China specialist from the Institute of Far Eastern Studies, in a recent interview. In China, the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict is also seen as a "pushback against the northern aggressors." On a recent anniversary of the clash in China, participants of the events were honored with awards.

In March 1969, an armed conflict broke out between the USSR and China over Damansky Island (Zhenbao Island), which is located near Manchuria. The Soviet Union regarded the island as its own,

while the PRC saw it as territory Russia obtained thanks to colonial treaties. The clash killed 58 Soviet military personnel and injured 94 others. Estimates of the Chinese casualties range from 100 to 300, though the exact number remains unknown.

The island went to China after the border demarcation in May 1991. China [acquired](#) several other islands and territory totaling more than 300 square kilometers (nearly 116 square miles) during demarcation in 2005.

A Different historical perspective

Although the European Union continues to be Russia's main trading partner, trade with China is on the rise. While seven years ago, the volume of EU trade with Russia exceeded trade with China five times over, today it's only twice as large. China has already overtaken Germany in the role of Russia's primary supplier industrial equipment. The relatively modest amounts of Russian natural gas exported to China are now increasing. Military collaboration is becoming ever closer and is most evidently expressed in the form of joint drills. There are realistic prospects of Russia gaining entry into China's technological sphere of influence, specifically in the area of 5G network construction.

In his [research](#) examining the prospects of Russian integration into Pax Sinica (China's geopolitical space), Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, has found that for the time being China is exploiting its economic advantage, mostly by extracting better terms of trade — specifically, reduced prices for oil and gas. As Russia's dependence on China grows, Chinese politicians could very well start to pressure Russia in areas other than commerce, for example to end military alliances with PRC antagonists, or to convince Central Asian countries to permit Chinese military presence on their territory as security for the Belt and Road Initiative. Short-term gains for Russia could turn into long-term losses.

While it's still expedient for Kremlin politicians to play the role of zealous warriors against the West, Moscow's non-Western partners have a much longer memory than the Russians do. The Kremlin's logic is clear, but it's dictated by views that were formulated during the Cold War years. The Russian perspective encompasses merely several decades, while Chinese politicians view Russia — and the rest of the world — from a centuries-long perspective. Thus, even though Russia has grown closer to China and comes out on China's side in the battle with the West, Russia still belongs to the "historical West" and, as such, faces grievances from China — and the exact scale of these grievances remains unknown.

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