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THE DECREASING ASYMMETRY IN RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE WESTERN POLICY SHIFT TOWARDS CHINA

The changes in the Western policy towards China have the potential to diminish the asymmetry characterizing Russian-Chinese relations so far. China, increasingly alienated from the West, may be pushed closer to Russia, which would improve Moscow's position in its dealings with Beijing.

For the last decade, Russian-Chinese relations have developed under conditions of dual asymmetry. Firstly, the gap between the two states' material capabilities – measured in terms of GDP, trade, investments, and military budgets – has steadily increased to the advantage of China. Secondly, Russia needed China's support more than China needed Russia's.

The latter kind of asymmetry stemmed from different relations the two states have developed with the West, and with the US in particular. The relationship between Russia and the US has tended to worsen incrementally ever since 2005–06. Attempts to mend ties, such as the 'reset' policy, did not manage to reverse the general trend. Regardless of President Donald Trump's openings towards

Moscow, the US foreign policy establishment became united in the belief that Russia's policy is hostile. Sino-American relations, in turn, represented a mixture of selective competition and economic interdependence. The post-Cold War US policy towards China was based on the assumptions that Beijing could be socialised into the liberal international order and that China would ultimately emerge as a 'responsible stakeholder', one that would share the global governance burden with the US. Even the Chinese rejection of the G-2 concept put forward by the Obama administration and growing assertiveness in the South China Sea did not result in any decisive shifts in US policy.

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, its intervention in Eastern Ukraine and the resulting Western

sanctions only deepened the asymmetry of mutual reliance and need between Moscow and Beijing. Russia's room for manoeuvre vis-à-vis China diminished with Moscow's rising dependence on Beijing's political and economic support. At the same time as it maintained a good relationship with the US and benefitted from the open global order, China avoided taking sides and did not render explicit support to Russia in the latter's revisionist policy towards the West. Beijing did not want to back Russian actions that put pressure on the US. The majority of analysts and commentators agree that Russia's dependence on China only increased after 2014.

The looming change in the Western approach towards China, observed since late 2017, diminishes the above-described asymmetry.

It can therefore have far-reaching consequences for the Russian-Chinese relationship.

A new consensus concerning the US policy towards China has begun to emerge in Washington. The US establishment is on the verge of moving towards the ‘post-engagement’ policy. The 2017 US National Security Strategy referred to China as a ‘strategic competitor’ on a par with Russia. This shift in the US approach towards China is underpinned by the assumption that China has not met Washington’s expectations, and has not become a ‘responsible stakeholder’. Instead, Beijing is trying to undermine the US primacy.

The change in US policy is amplified by the broader perception that China has been waging an aggressive influence-building campaign in the West. In the US, pressure is mounting to limit Chinese investments in sensitive sectors and reduce the Chinese presence and money in higher education. At the May 2017 Belt and Road summit, the EU refused to sign joint statement on trade, proposed by Beijing, arguing that it had not included commitments to environmental sustainability and transparency. European states, supported by the European Commission, initiated a debate on the need for investment-screening mechanisms

which, in practice, would be mostly aimed at China. The 2018 Munich Security Conference report emphasised that China and Russia do not want to be ‘co-opted’ into the Western order, having developed ideas of their own on re-arranging international politics.

When assessing the implications of these changes for Sino-Russian relations, an important caveat must be added. China was able to compensate Russia for part of the losses the latter incurred as a result of Western sanctions after 2014. Even if Beijing’s economic support for Moscow remained limited, especially compared with the expectations voiced by the Russian elite, China had the potential to grant Russia a lifeline. Russia does not have such potential to offset Chinese losses.

Since the West no longer casts China as a prospective responsible stakeholder vis-à-vis an international spoiler, Beijing is about to lose the comfortable position it had enjoyed until recently with regard to Moscow. Growing parts of the trans-Atlantic establishment consider both states to be playing in the same league. In this altered international context, even if Moscow cannot provide economic alternatives, it can still offer closer political relations. From Russia’s point of

view, the risk of being marginalised by the emerging Sino-American bipolarity diminished at the same time as Russia’s ‘net worth’ for Beijing increased.

Closer relations with and greater readiness to support Russia politically were already apparent during Xi Jinping’s first term (2012–17). The potential estrangement of China from the West may become an additional incentive to cooperate with Russia. Beijing might be ready to support Russia’s anti-Western line and side more openly with Moscow in its conflict with the US. It might also pave the way for closer normative convergence with regard to global issues. So far, China has had more stakes in political stability than Russia. Moscow, lacking other instruments, thrived on instability. The new Western policy may influence and change China’s strategic calculus, making it more eager to engage in destabilizing policy actions and more determined to openly challenge the West. /