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CHINA - RUSSIA RELATIONS

AGE OF TRIANGULAR POLITICKING

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China and Russia found themselves entangled in two separate triangular dynamics with the US and India. Russia, however, found itself in a curiously pivotal position within the two geopolitical triangles: an “innocent” bystander in the Beijing-New Delhi-Moscow trio and a useful, delicate balancer in the Washington-Beijing duel. Between its strategic partner (China) and persistent yet unrequited courter (the Trump administration), Russia carefully played its cards from a position of strategic weakness. By end of summer, the US-China-Russia triangle made its way into the US 2020 presidential elections as presidential candidates played the “Russia” and “China” cards. No matter who wins the 2020 US election, the stakes are high for China and Russia.

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While the coronavirus raged throughout summer 2020, China and Russia found themselves entangled in two separate triangular dynamics with the US and India. China faced off with India along the long mountainous border, culminating in the June 15 deadly brawls. Meanwhile, the “[whole-of-government approach](#)” of the Trump administration against China led to a near-freefall in bilateral relations, featuring the highly ideologized, militarized connotations of the Cold War (1947–1991). In both cases, China’s strategic space was increasingly constrained.

Russia, however, found itself in a curiously pivotal position within the two geopolitical triangles: an “innocent” bystander in the Beijing–New Delhi–Moscow trio and a useful, delicate balancer in the Washington–Beijing duel. Between its strategic partner (China) and persistent yet unrequited courter (the Trump administration), Russia carefully played its cards from a position of strategic weakness. By end of summer, the US–China–Russia triangle made its way into the US 2020 presidential elections as presidential candidates played the “Russia” and “China” cards. No matter who wins the 2020 US election, the stakes are high for China and Russia.

Virtual Diplomacy, Real-world Issues

Summer is peak season for diplomatic activities and Moscow and Beijing planned a series of high-level exchanges for the 75th anniversary of Russia’s Great Patriotic War (World War II) victory. The pandemic, however, forced the two sides to suspend all planned activities, replacing a few of them with phone calls and videoconferencing.

On May 8, Xi initiated a [call](#) to Putin, congratulating the Russian president on the Great Patriotic War anniversary. Several leaders—including Boris Johnson, Angela Merkel, Emmanuel Macron, Benjamin Netanyahu, Abe Shinzo, and Donald Trump—also called Putin prior to the commemoration. The Chinese president, however, sought to connect China and the Soviet Union by saying the two countries were the main WWII theaters for, respectively, Asia and Europe. He noted the special importance of this date for the peoples of their countries, who sustained the heaviest losses in the war. And China was willing, together with Russia, to safeguard the victory of WWII and the international order for

international justice, multilateralism, peace, and development.

[Putin thanked](#) Xi for preserving the memory of thousands of Soviet soldiers and volunteers that perished in China. According to Chinese Ambassador Zhang Hanhui, the Soviet Union was the only country to provide direct military assistance to China in the early phase of China’s war with Japan. This included \$170 million in funding, 1,200 airplanes, 1,317 artillery pieces, large amounts of munitions, and petroleum. While history embodies powerful symbolism for Russia and China, the two also discussed current challenges, particularly the pandemic. They reaffirmed cooperation for vaccine development, joint efforts to control the pandemic at the global level, and avoiding politicization of the issue. They also agreed to enhance communication and coordination within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS frameworks, and that the two countries would resume [high-level visits](#) after the pandemic.

On July 8, Putin and Xi talked again by phone. [Xi](#) congratulated Putin on the success of the national vote on the constitution, which allows the 67-year Putin to potentially [stay in power up to 2036](#). Xi pledged China’s support for Russia’s choice to follow its own path of development and its effort to reach its goals. The Russian president [expressed thanks](#) for the People’s Liberation Army’s participation in Russia’s Victory Day parade and said Russia’s constitutional amendments helped maintain Russia’s long-term political stability, better safeguarding national sovereignty and opposing external interference. Regarding a national security law for [Hong Kong](#), Putin told Xi that Russia firmly supports China’s efforts to safeguard national security in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

The two calls were perhaps the most they could do in the pandemic, which posed “[a serious challenge](#)” to bilateral relations, according to a joint group of scholars in late Aug. In his phone call with Putin on July 8, Xi went as far as to anticipate a “[prolonged pandemic](#).” For this, the Chinese leader suggested that the two sides adopt more flexible and diverse ways for cooperation, including the reopening of the economy.

Senior diplomats managed to engage on many occasions. Chinese officials and diplomats

[publicly supported](#) the Russian constitutional amendment, while, Russian officials endorsed China's position on the Hong Kong issue. Regional issues and hot spots also attracted their attention. Foreign ministers of SCO and BRICS met via videoconferencing on May 13 and Aug. 26, respectively. On May 14, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Chinese counterpart [joined](#) a four-party videoconference with Iran and Pakistan on Afghanistan. This was followed by a trilateral teleconsultation on June 4 between the Russian, US, and Chinese special representatives on Afghan affairs.

Russia between Two Partners: Diplomacy of Doing Nothing?

The India-China border disputes injected new chemistry into Eurasian politicking, as both sides are Russia's strategic partners. Starting from early May, [a series of standoffs and physical clashes](#) occurred along the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in the Pangong Lake area and then Sikkim. On June 15, an hours-long [brawl](#) occurred in the remote Galwan Valley. Twenty Indian soldiers reportedly died, dozens were wounded, and several captured (before being released later). Chinese casualties were unknown. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Indian counterpart Subrahmanyam Jaishankar talked over the phone on June 17 and [agreed to de-escalate](#).

This border clash, the worst in 40 years between the two Asian giants, alarmed Russia. For more than three decades Russia has promoted and steered the Russian-Indian-China trilateral mechanism (RIC) for multiple purposes. This included projecting Russian influence across Eurasia and countering perceived Western influence, but also balancing steadily growing Chinese clout. Russia's effort to bring India into the SCO, which occurred in 2017, was seen as part of Russia's grand strategy for the volatile Eurasian landscape. The June 15 clash was an immediate, serious challenge to Russia's special role in the trio as well as Eurasian stability.

Lavrov and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov [expressed concerns](#) on June 17. "Both China and India are very close partners for us, allies," said Peskov. "We are paying close attention to what is happening on the China-India border." He also believed that China and India "are capable by themselves of taking steps so that such situations do not happen again ... and so that

this region is safe for the peoples of China and India."

Despite the clash and growing pressure in India to "[punish China](#)," the scheduled Russian-Indian-China dialogue (RIC) went ahead on June 23 with Russia chairing the annual tri-party talks via videoconference. In their televised opening speeches, none of the three foreign ministers directly addressed the border clash.

While Lavrov and Wang covered the pre-set agenda of global/regional issues, COVID crises, etc., [Jaishankar](#) went out of his way to remind his Russian and Chinese counterparts of India's contribution to the victory of WWII, in which 2.3 million Indian troops helped the Allies win World War II. The history-minded Indian secretary of external affairs, however, also aimed at China's unwillingness to support India's ascendance to permanent membership of the UN Security Council (UNSC). Russia already publicly supports India as a permanent member of a reformed and expanded UNSC, which [Lavrov reiterated](#) at his post-conference news briefing.

The circumvention of the clash was expected given the RIC rule of not addressing bilateral issues. After the RIC session, [Lavrov](#) ruled out the possibility of Moscow acting as a mediator between India and China. "I see no reason that Russia or anyone else would be imposing their services on India and China in order to solve their own problems," he remarked, adding that "I don't think that India and China need help and assistance aiming to somehow resolve their disputes or situations ... Military commanders met on the ground immediately after the border incidents, and foreign ministers contacted each other, too. As far as I understand, these contacts also continue today. Neither party has made any statements about a reluctance to reach an agreement under mutually acceptable approaches."

Russia's reluctance to mediate, at least publicly, does not necessarily mean nothing happened between the three top diplomats. During their videoconference, Lavrov proposed a RIC defense ministerial meeting later this year. Wang supported the idea and suggested a series of [RIC ministerial dialogues](#) for cooperation in trade, energy, transportation, education, cultural exchanges, health, and forums of experts and VIPs. Moscow searched for some quick crisis management actions, while Beijing looked to

some medium and long-term solutions for the difficult border issue.

For Moscow, the border faceoff had far-reaching geopolitical implications as part of the US “containment” of China through the formation of the Indo-Pacific coalition in which India was seen as the main “counterbalance” to China. For Moscow, “the emergence of a rigid bipolar relations system in Asia is also strategically dangerous, since it entails the loss of Russia’s current room for maneuver that greatly benefits Russia’s diplomacy today,” warned a group of Russian scholars in their [report](#) with their Chinese counterparts. “Like China, Russia is not interested in further rapprochement between India and the United States, since it will inevitably produce problems for Russia-India relations. Therefore, every effort should be channeled into normalizing China-India relations. The trilateral RIC mechanism could be used for that purpose.”

The border situation, however, remained tense and volatile despite the RIC efforts and Russia’s influence. On the night of Aug. 29-30, Indian troops “[preempted](#)” the PLA’s “provocative military movements” by taking several [strategic heights](#) on the Southern bank of Pangong Lake. China [rejected](#) India’s accusations, saying Chinese forces never crossed the LAC. By the end of the summer, India and China looked poised for a protracted faceoff. It is uncertain how much this will affect Russia’s investment in RIC. Its sustainability requires not only Russia’s constant steering but also chemistry between the other two participants. The crisis also laid bare that RIC has been largely symbolic with relatively little institutional embedment. Wang’s push for more bureaucratic infrastructure may be too little, too late.

US Strategy: China-fright, Russia-friendly

From Beijing’s perspective, China’s posture within the US-China-Russia strategic triangle became increasingly asymmetrical as the Trump administration applied a “whole-of-government approach” to delink and denounce China while flirting with Moscow to find any opportunity to snatch Russia away from China.

US-China relations have been deteriorating rapidly across all areas: from trade, high-tech, education, to diplomacy and security. In less than one month, four senior Trump administration officials—[Robert O’Brien](#),

[Christopher Ray](#), [William Barr](#), and [Michael Pompeo](#)—took turns publicly denouncing China. Starting from the release of the “[US Strategic Approach to the People’s Republic of China](#)” on May 26, Washington’s China strategy became highly ideologized as high-level officials used charged vocabulary like “CCP,” “general secretary,” “regime,” “Politburo,” “tyranny-vs-the-free-world,” etc., closely resembling the early years of the Cold War. The US military conducted increasingly provocative maneuvers in sensitive areas of the South China Sea (SCS), the Taiwan Strait, and East China Sea, including a [U-2 spy plane](#) trespassing into a no-fly zone of a PLA live-fire drill on Aug. 25, which “seriously interrupted the Chinese troops’ normal exercises.”

This sharply contrasts with Washington’s outreach to Moscow at the same time: from the [joint statement](#) on April 25 for the 75th anniversary of US-Soviet troops meeting on the Elbe, to several phone calls between Putin and Trump (May 7 and June 2, offering medical supplies and inviting Putin to G7), two rounds of strategic arms control talks, etc.

This made perfect sense to the US, whose interest lies in preventing Putin from playing a “reverse Nixon” shock “if Moscow and Beijing aligned more closely,” argued John Arquilla of US Naval Postgraduate School in a US Defense Department [White Paper](#) in May 2019. One of the key areas of possible agreement with Russia was nuclear arms control, wrote Arquilla, because the current nuclear competition “is no longer bilateral,” and therefore Washington and Moscow should “work together to corral the others who are now making dangerous progress with intermediate and other—including long-range—weapons.”

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Russian Strategic Intentions

A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper

May 2019

Figure 1 US Defense Department Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper. Photo: US Department of Defense

US' "Unilateral Cold War" and Russia's Options

US outreach to Russia in 2020 seemed to follow the Arquilla script. More momentum was generated on Aug. 5 when more than a hundred of former top US officials and prominent academia/experts signed an [open letter](#) urging for more cooperation with Russia. Among the signatories were George Shultz, William Perry, John McLaughlin, Sam Nunn, Gary Hart, Joseph Nye, Graham Allison, John Mearsheimer, etc. No such open letter has been initiated at this level of prominence for US-China relations. Though some (like Stephen Blank, senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute) believe China and Russia are developing "a [burgeoning alliance](#)," the China-heavy, Russia-lite US strategy alarmed Beijing. [Pundits](#) and [laymen](#) debated the potential scope and implications of the perceived asymmetrical strategic triangle, as well as the degree of and speed at which China and Russia were deepening their strategic partnership.

At the expert level, however, the assessment of triangle was reserved. An authoritative report ("[Russia-China Dialogue: the 2020 Model](#)") by prominent analysts from both Russia and China saw that

the exacerbation of the US-China confrontation opens up additional strategic opportunities, although Russia will have to exert significant efforts in order to make full use of them. At the same time, the deterioration of relations between China and the United States does not automatically mean that relations between Russia and the US will improve. On the other hand, escalating tensions between Beijing and Washington create new challenges and risks for Moscow that are difficult to predict with any degree of accuracy and almost impossible to prepare for.

As a nation with real experience with a Cold War with the US, influential Russian academics and policy experts shared insights with Chinese counterparts. In an [interview](#) with China's *Global Times* at the end of August, Alexander Lukin, a leading Sinologist in the prestigious Moscow Higher School of Economics (HSE), coined the term "neo-unilateral Cold War" as a "protracted geopolitical confrontation" between Beijing and Washington. It actually started, according to Lukin, in the Obama administration and was publicly proclaimed by Trump.

Current US actions were driven primarily by three ideational factors, said Lukin. One was a conviction, which China has defied, that economic prosperity would inevitably lead to Western-style democratization. Second, the current "bipartisan consensus" against China is derived from the belief that US economic difficulties are due to China's dishonest, unfair, and deceptive actions. It is inconceivable, from the US ideological perspective, that the US economic system itself could have any problems. Last, he argued, the "classic American logic" is all-or-nothing: "My stuff is mine. So let's talk about your stuff."

Lukin ruled out Russia siding with the US against China for at least three reasons. One was a lack of trust after US sanctions against Russia following the 2014 Ukraine crisis. Second, the US would never respect Russia's legitimate interests in its near-abroad space. Third, any big country would be regarded as a US competitor if it did not want to become part of the US sphere of influence and if it practiced a different political system. Both Russia and China fell, therefore, into the category of US competitors. Because of these developments, current US-Russian relations were the "worst in a century, at least from the establishment of US-Soviet diplomatic relations in 1933."

Lukin also argued that current US policy toward China is a "new norm"; anti-China measures will come continuously and China needs to learn how to live with them. Perhaps more importantly, Lukin took the opportunity to share Russia's "speak softly" approach in dealing with Washington. Russian officials, including Putin, avoid harsh rhetoric while referring to Americans as "our partners," making sure to leave the door open to cooperation.

Other Russian scholars were more concerned about the limits of Russia's ability to maneuver within the triangle. [Dmitry Trenin](#) of the Carnegie Moscow Center cautioned that Russia should "carefully maintain equilibrium, though not equidistance" in the US-China rivalry and emerging US-China bipolarity. [Sergei Karaganov](#), head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, strongly criticized Washington's "unwillingness to cooperate with anyone in hope to make a last stand for its waning hegemony," but was not entirely comfortable with China's "excessive power, especially due to its increasingly offensive,

though not aggressive, policies with regard to smaller and dependent countries.” Karaganov advised that Russia “will not ‘ditch’ China, but will look, and is already looking, for ways to expand the room for maneuver,” meaning to improve relations with European countries and key Asian countries.

Both Lukin and Karaganov expressed grave concerns that the new cold war may not stay cold. While Lukin warned about an “unintentional hot war” resulting from either a local conflict such as Taiwan or the South China Sea, [Karaganov](#) said “the American elite has opted for an almost all-round confrontation with China.” This “is simply dangerous ... with the deteriorating situation in the military-technical sphere—more and more destabilizing weapons appear in the world, the remaining arms limitation regimes are being torn down, and the intellectual level and responsibility of elites in a number of countries are degrading—this hostility increases the likelihood of an unintended war and its escalation to the level of global nuclear catastrophe.” In February, Washington announced that in six months it would suspend participation in the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty unless Moscow destroyed missiles which, the US and its NATO allies alleged, violate the agreement. On Aug. 2, the US [formally withdrew](#) from the treaty.

In this regard, Russia (Karaganov) and the US (Arquilla) converge over the prospect of WMD proliferation. Publicly, Russian officials continued to [deflect the US suggestion](#) that China be part of nuclear arms control talks. Behind the scenes, however, the Russians told their Chinese counterparts Moscow would like to at least partially retain its strategic arms control mechanism with the US and [ultimately make it trilateral with China’s involvement](#). The absence of an effective arms control mechanisms between major nuclear powers would increase “the overall risks to the stability of international relations, which is a problem for all of its actors, including Russia,” according to [the 2020 joint annual dialogue](#).



Figure 2 The 2020 Russia-China Dialogue. Photo: [Russian International Affairs Council](#)

Russia’s apparent concern about China’s growing strategic capabilities was not a surprise for many in China, who had suspected Russian “acquiescence” with the US at the strategic level. For veteran Russologists such as [Guan Guihai](#) of Peking University, this was consistent with reports in John Bolton’s memoir (*The Room Where It Happened*). In its leaked version to the public in late January, the former national security advisor to Trump painstakingly documented his meetings with top Russian officials, including Putin and Defense Minister Sergey Shoygu, who reportedly shared concerns about China’s nuclear capabilities.

At the strategic level, China should not expect Russia to “unconditionally side with China no matter how bad US-China relations and how bad Sino-Russian relations are,” said [Guan](#). Guan also downplayed the significance of Russia’s possible “defection” for three reasons: 1) Russia’s goal was a state of equality with other major powers; 2) it would not accept the role of “junior follower,” either of China or the US; and 3) China would be more willing than the US to recognize Russia as an equal.

At the systemic level, the emerging US-China bipolarity may well be a “new beginning” of US-China-Russian trilateralism, [argued Zhao Huasheng](#), a prominent Russologist in Shanghai in June. Such dynamics mean both challenges and opportunities for Russia, which is expected “to pursue more independent and more flexible posture between China and the US,” Zhao said.

Likewise, Russia’s strategic thinking was equally, and even more brutally, realpolitik. Bolton’s account of his encounters in Russia need to be taken with caution, said [Dmitry Trenin](#), because of his “ambition to create an anti-Beijing coalition and draw Russia into it.”

Russia should not take the bait, warned Trenin, and it would “be crazy to fall for Trump’s entreaties—even if he did have something to offer in return.”

Trenin’s point was echoed by the Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman [Maria Zakharova](#), who said that Russia was “surprised” by the “defiant tone” as well as the “crude references to China, its social and political system and its leaders” in Pompeo’s July 23 speech. “The tension in relations with Beijing is being provoked by Washington,” added Zakharova. She further stated that US attempts to drag Moscow into the US anti-Chinese campaign were a naive effort to complicate the Russian-Chinese partnership and drive a wedge into their friendly ties.

Nukes and Missile Defense

Given the stakes for Russia in the US “unilateral Cold War” or *de facto* “dual containment,” Moscow [recognized](#) that the sharp deterioration of US-China relations “creates significant risks for the entire world and specific threats for Moscow.” Russia therefore should carefully assess its interests and possible actions regarding its strategic partnership relations with Beijing. In addition to strengthening bilateral cooperation in global and regional affairs, as well as in non-conventional security issues such as the pandemic, Russia-China military-strategic cooperation was transforming from a “bilateral component” of bilateral relations into “a major geopolitical factor of global significance,” noted the joint assessment, and “the US-China confrontation reinforces the trend.” One indication was that Russia and China had “heightened levels of secrecy” in their military and technological consultations for the increasingly complicated global military and political situation.

Both sides looked for more and even “radically deepened” military and political cooperation. Some Russian participants in the annual dialogue recommended “the creation of a certain quasi-alliance” based on political consensus. This “informal” alliance had already reached a level that “a potential adversary preparing an attack on one has to account for various joint response scenarios. Such strategic certainty will act as a deterrent for any hypothetical adversary and their allies.”

In the summer, both Moscow and Beijing were visibly moving toward more preparedness for the post-INF world. On June 2, Putin endorsed [Russia’s nuclear deterrent policy](#), which allows him to use nuclear weapons in response to a conventional strike against the nation’s critical government and military infrastructure. This reflects Russian concerns about the development of weapons that could give the US the capability to destroy key Russian military assets and government facilities without resorting to nuclear weapons.

China’s “no-first-use” nuclear deterrence strategy remained unchanged, at least officially. The cry for more proactive nuclear posture, however, grew throughout the summer. [Hu Xijin](#), editor of *Global Times*, publicly proposed on May 8 that China needed to expand the number of its nuclear warheads to 1,000 “in a relatively short time” to “curb US strategic ambitions and impulses toward China.” Hu argued that this was imperative because China was “facing an increasingly irrational US, which only believes in strength.”

This is not the first time the nuclear factor has been injected into bilateral US ties. A few days after Trump was inaugurated in 2017, China unveiled the mobile and MIRV-capable Dong Feng-4, the most powerful ICBM in China’s nuclear arsenal. In the five years between the 2015 military reforms, which officially created China’s strategic missile force as an independent service of the PLA, and mid-2020, China’s ICBM forces had reportedly increased to [20 brigades](#), an increase of 60%. Hu’s call for up to 1,000 nuclear warheads apparently took place under the assumption that China’s nuclear stockpile is far lower than that. One estimate puts China’s arsenal at no more than [500 nuclear warheads](#), far lower than Russia’s 6,500 and the US’s 6,185.

In 2020, the US sharply increased its naval and air activities around China’s peripheries (the South China Sea, Taiwan, etc.). According to China’s count, the US conducted more than 2,000 reconnaissance flights in the first half of 2020 in the SCS alone. Several times in 2020 ([Fe. 4](#), [Aug. 4](#), and [Sept. 2](#)), the US tested Minuteman III ICBMs. On Aug. 26, China [tested](#) its highly accurate DF-21D (1,800-km range launched from coastal province of Zhejiang Province) and DF-26B (4,000-km range from inland Qinghai Province). Both hit the same target ship in the SCS at the same time.

Amid such posturing, talks in Russia and China about joint efforts for a missile defense mechanism were in the making. Putin had announced in December 2019 that Russia was helping China develop its national missile attack warning system, which would “radically increase China’s defense capabilities.” By April 2019, China and Russia had conducted three computerized missile defense simulations, indicating a degree of [information/intel-sharing](#) for early warning purposes.

On Aug. 24, [Sergei Boyev](#), chief designer of Russia’s missile attack warning system and CEO of Vimpel Company, told TASS at the Army-2020 forum that Russia had started work on elements of the Chinese missile attack warning system and had “achieved certain success in this area.” The coronavirus outbreak affected the pace of the project, but “cooperation is proceeding in a planned manner.” Boyev indicated that the two sides were working on “the area of space control” or “space-based echelon comprises satellites that can detect launches of ballistic missiles from the territory of any state in real time.” It happened that Russia and China signed an agreement on cooperation of the GLONASS and BeiDou satellite systems, which is capable for both civilian and military uses.

Chinese pundits recognized the value for China of Russia’s rich experience in missile defense strategies and operations. Russia’s vast northern landmass was a natural and short path for the US land-based ICBMs to reach targets in China. Russia’s existing early warning system would be ideal for China. Meanwhile, China’s rapidly developing electronic and AI capabilities, would be a huge plus for upgrading Russia’s early warning infrastructure. China’s own vast territory, with early warning radar networks south of Russia, would be vital for Russia’s missile defense capabilities against US sea-based SLBMs from the Pacific and even the Indian Ocean. This type of more integrated early warning and missile defense system for China and Russia remained out of reach, veteran Chinese military expert [Chen Feng](#) said, given Russia’s deep suspicion of China. The potential, however, was there and external pressure from the US and Europe may lead them toward a more integrated early warning system.

2020 US Election and Triangularism: Inside-out or Outside-in?

The 2020 US presidential election is destined to be consequential, not only for US domestic politics, but also Russia and China. Although both are US strategic competitors, Russia and China have been treated vastly different. The Democrats will never let Russia off the hook, and Putin’s preference for Trump’s second term is therefore understandable. The Chinese have so far refrained from publicly expressing a preference for the US election because there is no good choice between Trump’s nonstop “shock-and-awe” and the Democrats’ softer tone with a much bigger “stick.” China therefore opts to wait for the dust to settle.

Neither Russia nor China want to see further destabilization of the US domestic scene, leading to major breakdowns of the political, social, and economic infrastructure. Both China and Russia have become far more conservative when it comes to radical social transformation and revolution in the wake of their own turbulent times in the 20th century. This is one reason for their strong opposition to US interventionism around the world. Any radical decline of the US domestic order is not good for Russia, according to one [penetrating analysis](#). China shares much of Russia’s concerns, given the scope and depth of US-China economic, educational, and societal exchanges.

China and Russia’s deep unease with the prospect of a disorderly United States may also derive from their cultural anchorage in Confucianism and Eastern Orthodox/Slavic culture, respectively. It is unclear if the US will be able to manage its decline peacefully without deep cultural underpinnings aside from a political ideology of liberalism. Lukin, for one, expressed alarm at the “excessive” liberalism of the US, which is dedicated to an “[anti-racist universalism](#).” He said: “A new all-embracing totalitarian theory is looming ahead, according to which all social and historical phenomena will have to be analyzed from a ‘racial’ point of view, just as the Marxists analyzed them through the lens of ‘class struggle.’”

What Russia and China think about the US may not matter too much to US domestic dynamics. They must, however, be ready to deal with outcomes of its policies. For Russian strategic and thinkers like [Dmitry Trenin](#), for example, the current US focus on China “has not eased the

pressure on Russia; it is practicing dual containment ... In reality, all Trump has done is sign American sanctions against Russia into law, which has made them virtually eternal,” wrote Trenin in his assessment of Bolton’s book in the *Moscow Times*.

Regardless, the stage is being set for a more dynamic triangularism both in and outside the US for the remainder of 2020.

CHRONOLOGY OF CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS

MAY – AUGUST 2020

May 8, 2020: President Xi Jinping [initiates a telephone call](#) with President Vladimir Putin, congratulating him on the 75th anniversary of Victory in the Great Patriotic War. The two heads of state also agreed to resume [high-level visits](#) after the pandemic.

May 13, 2020: [Eight SCO foreign ministers hold](#) videoconference and discuss the coronavirus pandemic. They also discuss an action plan to ensure sanitary, epidemiological safety and biosafety to be discussed in the [SCO summit](#) to be held this year in St. Petersburg.

May 14, 2020: [Lin Songtian](#), appointed head of the Chinese Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, [meets](#) Russian Ambassador Andrey Denisov in Beijing to discuss cooperation in dealing with COVID and the 75th anniversary of Russia's Great Patriotic War.

May 18, 2020: Russia [chairs](#) a [four-party videoconference](#) with China, Iran, and Pakistan on Afghanistan.

May 20, 2020: Russian Ambassador to China Andrey [Denisov says](#) in a news briefing that Russia is “carefully studying China’s large-scale measures” for both pandemic control and economic stimulation.

May 26, 2020: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov says in the CIS foreign minister conference that “the [Hong Kong](#) issue is completely one of China’s domestic politics.”

June 2, 2020: Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria [Zakharova tells](#) RIA Novosti news agency that President Trump’s suggestion of an expanded G7 session including Russia “is right in principle,” but “could not be a success without China’s participation.”

May 30, 2020: President [Trump](#) says that he planned to postpone the annual G7 summit until September and that he wanted to [invite Russia](#) to rejoin and to discuss the future of China.

June 3, 2020: Chinese Foreign Minister spokesman [Zhao Lijian says](#) that China “respects and understands Russia’s effort to safeguard its national security efforts,” referring to Putin’s endorsement of Russia’s [nuclear deterrent policy](#), which allows Russia to use nuclear weapons in response to a conventional strike against the nation’s critical government and military infrastructure.

June 3, 2020: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor [Morgulov has](#) a telephone conversation with Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui, discussing Russian-Chinese relations and cooperation between Russia’s Eurasian integration project and China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

June 4, 2020: [Trilateral consultation](#) between the Russian, US, and Chinese special representatives on Afghanistan affairs [takes place](#) by telephone. Russian Presidential Representative for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov and a Pakistani representative also took part.

June 10, 2020: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister [Igor Morgulov speaks](#) via telephone with Chinese Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng, discussing cooperation in countering the pandemic and plans to develop bilateral relations.

June 15, 2020: Chinese and Indian forces [clash](#) in the remote Galwan Valley in the Himalayas, resulting in at least 20 deaths on the Indian side.

June 19, 2020: Russian Ambassador to China [Andrey Denisov tells](#) Russian media that the charge that China intentionally concealed information about the coronavirus was “groundless.”

June 23, 2020: Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Indian Minister of External Affairs Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi [take part](#) in a regular [RIC](#) videoconference. Lavrov proposes a trilateral [defense ministerial meeting](#) and China [supported](#) the idea.

June 23, 2020: Putin [proposes](#) a summit of five permanent UNSC members in 2020 in his address to the World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem.

June 24, 2020: Russia holds massive military parade in Moscow with more than 13,000 service personnel for the 75th anniversary of Nazi Germany’s capitulation in World War II. The event was rescheduled from its original date, on May 9 because of the COVID pandemic. [105 Chinese military honor guards join](#) the parade together with 13 other countries.

July 4, 2020: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister [Sergei Ryabkov describes](#) the US idea for an expanded G7 summit without China as “flawed.”

July 6, 2020: Putin [sends a message](#) to Xi, conveying his condolences over heavy flooding in southern China.

July 7, 2020: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin [speaks by telephone](#) with Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu. They discussed cooperation in multilateral forums (UN) regarding Syria, Yemen, and the WHO.

July 8, 2020: Xi [calls](#) Putin, congratulating him on the successful constitutional amendments and discussing economic and tech cooperation while containing the pandemic.

July 8, 2020: SCO health ministers hold their 3rd session via videoconference.

July 10, 2020: [Lavrov describes](#), in the Primako Forum, US-China tensions and US accusations against China as “really alarming,” saying Russia “would not decline” to perform as “a balancing influence” between them.

July 17, 2020: Wang takes part in a telephone conversation with Lavrov, stressing the importance of prioritizing a Sino-Russian strategic partnership in each other’s foreign policy. Both criticize US unilateralism and exceptionalism.

July 24, 2020: Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria [Zakharova says](#) Russia was “surprised” by Pompeo’s “defiant tone” and “crude references to China, its social and political system and its leaders” in his [speech](#) the day before at the Nixon Library.

July 24, 2020: Kremlin spokesman Dmitry [Peskov tells](#) a daily briefing that Russia won’t join any alliance against anyone, especially China, as Moscow and Beijing share special relations.

July 25, 2020: Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson and head of the FM Information Bureau [Hua Chunying holds](#) videoconference with Russian counterpart Maria Zakharova, discussing cooperation in countering disinformation and fake news, particularly amid the pandemic.

Aug. 2, 2020: US [formally withdrew](#) from the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty with Russia, claiming it undermines its national security interests. In February, Washington had announced that in six months it would suspend its participation in the treaty unless Moscow destroyed missiles, which the US and its NATO allies allege violate the agreement.

Aug. 8, 2020: Russian Foreign Ministry Spokeswoman Maria [Zakharova criticizes](#) US restrictions on the TikTok app for the purpose of dominating the international information space.

Aug. 18, 2020: [Chinese media reports](#) that only 46% of Sino-Russian trade in the first quarter was done with US dollars, the lowest in history. 30% of bilateral trade was made with euros and 34% with Chinese yuan (RMB) and Russian rubles. Meanwhile, 15% of Russia's foreign reserve was in RMB, which constituted a quarter of all RMB in the world held as foreign reserves.

Aug. 23, 2020: Russian Foreign Minister [Lavrov says](#) that Russia is [ready](#) to cooperate with China and its Huawei on 5G technology.

Aug. 26, 2020: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister [Mikhail Bogdanov chairs](#) a consultation via videoconference with deputy foreign ministers/special representatives of the BRICS countries for the Middle East and North Africa. They issue a joint statement on the situation in the Middle East and North Africa.

Aug. 28, 2020: Chinese President Xi and Russian President Putin [send greetings](#) to the opening ceremony of Russian-Chinese Scientific, Technical and Innovative Cooperation 2020-2021.

Aug. 28, 2020: Despite the pandemic, Russia poultry exports to China [increase seven times over](#), amounting to 67% of Russia's poultry exports. The increased export of Russian agricultural and meat products was the result of marked improvement of export infrastructure in Russia as a result of investments from both Russia and China.

Aug. 31, 2020: India informs Moscow that it won't participate in Russia's "Kavkaz-2020" multinational exercises in southern Russia's Astrakhan region in early September, shortly before India accuses China of fresh "provocative" military movements at the site of the brawl in June on their contested border. India cites COVID for not attending the exercises.