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Russia, China and the Power Shift in Eurasian Security

Paul Hansbury

Summary

In early February the leaders of Russia and China, meeting on the opening day of the Winter Olympics in Beijing, heralded their close ties and a new global order. Their friendship, they averred, had 'no limits'. Three weeks later Russia launched a multipronged invasion of Ukraine – and China demurred in its support. More recently, with signs that the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation is fraying, Russia is losing out to China as a security actor in a power shift in Eurasia.

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Big brother and little brother

Eurasia's two largest states do not make for natural bedfellows. The Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War serves as a reminder of the potential for border skirmishes and rivalries over leadership. Despite this, the past three decades have brought growing cooperation and deepened political, military and commercial ties.

The states have signed successively far-reaching agreements beginning in the 1990s with contracts to increase Russian energy supplies to China. Agreements this century range from the 2001 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation to February's announcement of a friendship without limits. Meanwhile they have committed to a 'de-dollarisation' of their relationship, using the renminbi or rouble as a unit of exchange in place of US dollars.

China and Russia have endorsed each other's belief that a global power shift is underway. They believe that China is on course to displace the United States from its position at the top of the global pecking order and have spoken of their commitment to an emergent multipolar order. Their joint use of UN Security Council vetoes impeded

western states' calls to punish the Syrian regime during that country's civil war and prevented UN sanctions on North Korea earlier this year; to many Chinese and Russians these actions are part and parcel of declining western global influence.

From one perspective, China's rise makes Russian leaders uncomfortable since it entails Russia's own loss of relative power, but many Russians have sought comfort instead by preferring to focus on a narrative of US, and by extension western, decline.

> They pushed the thought of playing second fiddle to China down the road, emphasising multipolarity over China's potential to become a new hegemon.

One imagines that figures in the Kremlin hoped that the war in Ukraine would have crystalised Russia's continued role as a leading security and defence actor in Eurasia.

Ukraine war exposing the CSTO as a paper tiger

In fact, the Ukraine war is arguably hastening the shift to China as a security actor. Not in Ukraine directly, where Russia's Vladimir Putin appears to think that Russia will prevail and that history will vindicate his actions, and where the extent of China's support is unclear but undoubtedly very limited at present. Rather, the Ukraine war is helping along a shift in institutional power from the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).

Although Russian commentators sometimes smart at the notion Russia 'leads' the CSTO, its preponderant size means this has always been the reality. The Soviet-legacy also fostered this leadership role, as it likewise ensured Russia continued to wield influence in Central Asia and eastern Europe. Unable to compete with China in the economic sphere, Russia took pride in its hard power and sought to specialise and maintain the prominent role in security relations in Eurasia. The CSTO was its best effort to institutionalise that role.

This year began with a glimmer of optimism about the organisation's future. Kazakhstan invoked the Collective Security Treaty's mutual defence clause for support in dealing with street protests and the organisation dispatched a contingent of troops, largely Russian but including Armenian, Belarusian, Kyrgyz and Tajik soldiers.

Russia's 24 February invasion of Ukraine changed much: some would argue that the CSTO was always a paper tiger, but its lack of bite is more evident than ever today. None of Russia's CSTO allies appears entirely pleased with Russia. As tensions flared in Nagorno-Karabakh this year, Armenia invoked the CSTO's mutual defence clause and

was left disappointed by the lack of response. Kyrgyzstan recently cancelled CSTO military drills on its territory; there have been border clashes between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan over the summer; and at the opening session of the UN General Assembly Kazakhstan's president bemoaned the actions of 'nuclear states' in a thinly-veiled criticism of Russia's rhetoric around nuclear weapons.

In this context the 12 October UN General Assembly vote condemning Russia's 'attempted illegal annexation' of eastern and southern Ukraine proved instructive. All Russia's CSTO allies, aside from Belarus, abstained. After a year that began with hope for the CSTO, the military alliance has seldom looked so toothless. Unfortunately for Russia, there is a rival institution which four CSTO states (including Russia) belong to and which they may turn to instead in the future.

China (still) rising

The SCO, in contrast to the CSTO, goes from strength to strength. It may not be a defence alliance like the CSTO, but its military activities have expanded considerably to include regular war games. It reaches far beyond its original 1990s focus on border issues in Central Asia in terms of both its remit and geographical scope. Although Russia would like to be seen as a leading member, there is little doubt China wields the real influence. One of the SCO's aims is to guard against the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism and extremism; Russia endorses all of these aims yet it is a Chinese conception of the organisation's goals through and through.

Moreover, the SCO today encompasses India and Pakistan, while Iran and Belarus progress towards full membership in the next couple of years. As Yauheni Preiherman recently noted, last month Belarus became '*the first European state* to apply for SCO membership.' I have added the emphasis in the last sentence because it is telling; China has appeal in other corners of the continent. Importantly, China's image in Europe has suffered this year and not benefited from association with Russia – a good reason for it to keep some distance from Russia.

> Mimicking NATO's efforts to give non-member states various forms of status vis-à-vis the alliance, the SCO has 'observer states' and 'dialogue partners' throughout south-east Asia and the Middle East, which create a grey area about the organisation's direction and ambitions.

With the CSTO looking less and less relevant, the SCO looks like a clear reflection of China's growing power and influence in Eurasia.

Russia sees itself embroiled in a battle against the ‘collective west’ and has sought to enlist China in that fight. While China shares Russia’s belief that US hegemony ought to be displaced, its leaders believe that they merely need to bide their time and power will shift in Beijing’s favour; accordingly, more overt support for Russia in Ukraine is unnecessary. But Russia, whose reputation and power has weakened drastically in western eyes since February, is arguably enabling China’s rise.

The institutional arrangements on the Eurasian landmass are shifting to accommodate China’s newfound relative power. Traditionally, analysts have looked to the rise of financial institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank or the Shanghai-headquartered New Development Bank (formerly the BRICS Development Bank), as alternatives to western-dominated organisations. The SCO is usually not presented as a military alliance, but with the CSTO floundering it may well take over that role. Ultimately China’s rise is to Russia’s cost as well as the West’s and this is beginning to play out in the security sphere.

Paul Hansbury
Associate Fellow, Minsk Dialogue Council on International Relations