Russia’s ‘Pivot’ to China: Is It Real or Fake?
By Lilia Shevtsova

Authoritarian Russia has embarked on its own “pivot” toward authoritarian China. For Vladimir Putin, this is a convenient use of foreign policy to shore up his domestic support. But the dynamic between Russia’s faltering system and China’s rapid rise to power are complex. Moreover, the new Russian pivot may not be genuine, writes Lilia Shevtsova, and it is far from certain that Russia will find China a comfortable partner.

VLADIMIR PUTIN’S RETURN to the Russian presidency last May coincided with an upsurge in protests that forced the Kremlin to start looking for new ways to strengthen its hold on power. Having exhausted its internal resources for maintaining power, the Kremlin turned to foreign policy as a means of preserving the status quo. Long before Obama made his “pivot” to Asia, Moscow had turned to the east. What part will this Russian pivot play in the Kremlin’s attempts to maintain the current system? 

FOREIGN POLICY AS A MIRROR
Three clear features define Russia’s foreign policy since the USSR’s collapse. First, the Kremlin has not learned how to pursue a multi-vector policy and to operate within a multipolar system of international relations. It has failed to do this despite the Russian authorities’ long-standing calls to replace the US-dominated world order with a multipolar system. But a multipolar system requires building alliances with partners of differing strengths on the basis of interests rather than power projection. Instead, the Kremlin’s foreign policy is stuck in the Soviet era, mostly focused on preserving what remains of the old bipolar system (that is, focused on relations with the United States) and displaying an inability to co-ordinate actions with other partners and power centers.

Second, Russia’s foreign policy is much more oriented toward the authorities’ internal objectives than it was during the Soviet period. This is because Russia has still not made its civilizational choice and continues to make frantic leaps in all directions at once. The system’s internal instability forces the Kremlin to politicize relations with the outside world — to use them as a means for consolidating its hold on power at home. This comes through in the search for an outside enemy as a means of uniting society on a “besieged fortress” basis.

Third, because Putin’s foreign policy is all about political survival, it has no modernizing dimension. In the past, Russian authorities have twice used foreign policy as a means of modernizing the country. Both Peter the Great and Joseph Stalin borrowed technology from the more advanced nations of the West and temporarily boosted Russia’s development. The Kremlin has tried to repeat this idea, but it has failed because attracting technological know-how and investment, while simultaneously suppressing society and individuals, can no longer produce the needed boost toward post-industrial development.

The Putin government’s Asia policy reflects all three of these features. Its monolithic, big-player-oriented focus comes through in the emphasis the Kremlin puts on relations with China. That focus is natural enough, given China’s growing power, but without any strategic vision of relations in the region, Russia leaves itself no room to maneuver in its ties with Beijing.

The Kremlin rejects liberal Western civilisation. But rather than pursuing a pragmatic policy toward the US and Europe, it spends its time attempting to limit their influence, as well as the reach of Western laws and standards. This is a clear reflection of the way in which the domestic agenda has come to dominate foreign policy. Moscow’s relations with Asia have so far been free of this political and ideological dimension. However, the unresolved territorial dispute with Japan over the Kuril Islands has the potential to prompt the Kremlin to see Japan as an “enemy,” should the need arise. Anti-Americanism could prove ineffective as a consolidating factor for the people of Siberia and Russia’s Far East; thus, in this regard, the Kremlin could make more use of China in its domestic policy games. As Putin’s regime weakens and political survival becomes an ever more pressing imperative, the Kremlin could begin to use several Asian countries — either those that border Russia, or those with which it still has unsettled disputes — as a foreign policy ploy to pursue a domestic agenda.

Russia’s ruling elite has traditionally looked to the West and has not yet developed a clear position with regard to Asia. The elite are too busy worrying about day-to-day survival to draw up a consistent policy for relations with Asia as a region or with individual countries. A government that forms policy solely on a case-by-case basis will change tack constantly and use mutually exclusive ideologies. Such a player is hardly likely to be any good at the chess game of diplomacy — and certainly not several games of chess at once.

The Kremlin’s Asian policy will be for the most part an imitation, just as its foreign policy has been in Europe. Its declarations about integration with Europe are rhetorical: there is no willingness to accept European norms and principles. It is not possible to become a part of Europe while simultaneously rejecting Europe’s values. Aside from reflecting Moscow’s dissatisfaction with the West, Russia’s Asian pivot is also a result of the country still not having settled on its direction as a society. The ruling team cannot decide on an internal strategy, nor can it build a stable foreign policy. This “Asian” or “Chinese” pivot will most likely prove to be the same kind of Potemkin village that Moscow built for the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok: all façade and no substance. It is no surprise that journalists joked that the summit looked just as absurd as a man in a bird suit flying with Siberian cranes (as Putin tried to do). Putin’s Asian fling is likely to end in mutual estrangement, disappointment and perhaps even hostility.
One thing, at least, is clear: The Kremlin's Asian policy will rest on the same foundations as its foreign policy in general. Of course, a status quo policy could pursue pragmatic economic and military co-operation with individual Asian countries. But so long as Russia's personal power system remains in place, this will be focused, above all, on perpetuating the ruling elite in power rather than real modernization, which would require a different political system and a different foreign policy. Moreover, with the Russian system now in decline, co-operation will be inherently unpredictable and likely not to Russia's advantage.

ZIGZAGS ON CHINA

China’s weight and power, plus the familiar style of its authoritarian regime, make it a natural magnet for Russia’s elite. As Russia sees it, China pretty much is “Asia.” This view of China has changed over the past 25 years. China and its development model were the subjects of lively debate in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. Many supported the idea of reforming the economy before undertaking democratization. During Boris Yeltsin’s time, when Russia attempted integration with Europe, China was left in the cold, either forgotten or ignored as Russia pursued interests elsewhere. Moscow’s new focus on China came between 2004 and 2008, just as relations with the West started to turn sour and the Kremlin suspected Western countries of trying to export “orange revolution” to Russia.

Two approaches have emerged in Russian political circles since then. Pragmatic realism dominates the official line of building a “strategic partnership” with China. There is an anti-American dimension to this partnership, but it also reflects a genuine desire in Moscow for mutually advantageous economic co-operation with Beijing. The idea of Russia and Asia uniting to confront the US is an old one. Back in 1998, then-Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov proposed a Moscow-Delhi-Beijing strategic union to resist Western domination, but the idea didn’t get very far, and Moscow’s loss of India as a strategic partner made it an unrealistic project anyway. Today’s pragmatic realists, rather than seeing things in strategic terms, likely see the potential partnership with China in terms of a temporary tactical union. But whatever the case, the Kremlin takes co-operation with China seriously, as is evidenced by the fact that criticism of China is forbidden in official Russian documents.

At the same time, however, strong-state supporters, nationalists and more democratically minded liberals alike have expressed a growing fear of Chinese expansionism and Russia’s possible transformation into China’s “junior partner.” Zbigniew Brzezinski long ago foretold this possibility, but the official state propaganda machine has been slow to reflect these fears and the Russian population has continued to see China in an overall positive light. In 2012, for example, 35 percent of Russian respondents considered the US a hostile country, but only 9 percent saw China as Russia’s adversary.

At first glance, the sharp turn for the worse in Russia’s relations with the US and its stagnating relations with Europe would seem to lay a solid foundation for a partnership with China. Indeed, several features of Russia-China relations support this: active bilateral trade, military co-operation, a common stand on Syria and many other issues in the UN Security Council and co-operation within the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO).

But to what extent can a stagnant Russia hope to be an equal strategic partner with an increasingly powerful China? Strategic partnership is not just about common views on what the two parties reject, loath or fear; it is about the fundamental principles of internal and international order. Is China’s continued rise in Moscow’s interests? Is Russia’s obsession with enhancing its own great power status in Beijing’s interest? Would a strategic partnership with Russia be in the interests of a modernizing and democratizing Chinese society? And would such a partnership be compatible with Russia’s democratic transformation? The answers seem clear to me.

In short, a strategic partnership between a rising China and a declining Russia would most likely result in China turning Russia into a tool of its own agenda. We would have one authoritarian country using another authoritarian country to serve its own interests. There are only three possible developments that could help Russia avoid this fate: China sinks into stagnation and crisis; the US steps up its role in the Asia-Pacific region; and Russia undertakes democratic transformation and turns toward Europe. That said, if Beijing were to face crisis at home or a confrontation with the US abroad, it could be all the keener to play the Russia card.

Wars and conflicts are unlikely between liberal democracies, but they are common enough in relations between authoritarian regimes, which are almost always marked by mutual suspicion. (We can see proof of this in the ties between the Kremlin and its close ally, Alexander Lukashenko’s Belarus.) Furthermore, the Russian political elite has never forgotten Henry Kissinger’s calls for rapprochement between China and the US — the Kremlin’s nightmare scenario. The asymmetry of Russian and Chinese power is another issue. This has not come through in the two countries’ relations as yet, but it seems unlikely that the power gap between a declining empire that clings to its imperial longings and a rising giant with neo-imperialist ambitions will not spoil the friendship at some point in the future.

From the Russian liberals’ perspective, authoritarian Russia’s partnership with authoritarian China is a way to prop up Russia’s decaying system. This doesn’t mean that friendly relations and economic co-operation should be rejected: co-operation is usually better than hostility, though not always. We need to take a sober look at the consequences of these relations for both countries’ internal developments and objectives. So far, the Kremlin’s call to turn eastwards is only creating another support instrument for Russia’s archaic system of government. What’s more, the Putin regime’s co-operation with Beijing is likely to aid China’s own economic and military rise and transform Russia into a raw materials appendage of this new global power.

THE NEW DOMESTIC AGENDA’S IMPERATIVES

“You are wrong,” some foreign policy expert might say. “First, Russia and China have grounds for a solid alliance. Second, both countries are showing political stability and growth, unlike the decaying West, which has lost its drive.” Many would add that the world has entered a new age of Asian hegemony, with China as its driving force; Russia should therefore seize this opportunity to tie itself to this new “growth region.”
But let’s not be too hasty. History has seen many cases of regimes projecting an outward semblance of stability when in reality they are in their death throes. Many economic booms have spiraled into stagnation and collapse and many friendships between countries have ended in conflict. China and Russia are the last remaining authoritarian countries with global influence today — in particular as nuclear powers and builders of the post-World War II order. The fate of these regimes will have a big impact on authoritarianism in other countries too. What happens to their regimes will shape not just their foreign policies and the geopolitical landscape of the Eurasian and Pacific regions but the world order in general. It would be no exaggeration to say that the fate of the Russian and Chinese systems could become the 21st century’s greatest challenge.

Indeed, the future doesn’t look so rosy for either Russian or Chinese authoritarianism. The mood of public protest in Russia is as yet only making small ripples, but Putin’s regime is nonetheless heading for its end. To be sure, Russian authoritarianism still has the means to survive: an overall set of traditions and group interests are focused on maintaining a centralized state and suppressing freedom. In other words, Putin’s regime might fall, only to be replaced by a new regime based on the same personalized-power model. But continued authoritarianism in any form will only keep Russia on a course for decline, revolution and perhaps even collapse. If authoritarianism refuses to leave the political stage peacefully, its fall could yet shake up the Eurasian region.

For China, numerous studies of its internal political situation suggest that we need to prepare for a “moment of truth.”

China has not yet fully resolved the challenges of its transition from an agrarian society. At this point, the Chinese system may have the potential to prolong its life because the Chinese elite has shown an ability to adapt to changing realities and a willingness to pursue economic liberalization; these qualities give China’s authoritarian state an added boost. But even though they are at different points in the journey, the Russian and Chinese systems are nevertheless on the common path of centralized states with systems that limit society’s freedom and fail to keep up with the times.

If authoritarianism in both countries continues to decline, we will need to examine the regional and global consequences of this process. It would be good if both societies can peacefully transform their regimes, but what if they do not? What if they end up facing the prospect of state collapse? Russia is already heading for revolution. Even if it is the only state that ends up in this situation, the ensuing collapse would ripple throughout the entire region.

Let’s take, for example, the real possibility that Russia’s stagnation continues and the Kremlin gradually loses control of a deteriorating Siberia and Far East. How would Beijing react? Most experts say that China would refrain from any risky actions, as it does not want instability along its border with Russia. But what if China itself is also experiencing upheaval? Beijing might want to draw attention away from its own internal problems through conflict, expansion into the Russian Far East or other action against a weakened Russia. Are my fears totally ungrounded? Both countries flexed their muscles during their brief armed conflict in 1969, and Beijing is busy flexing its muscles today in its relations with Japan.

The Kremlin, for its part, might be tempted to recast China in the role of villain in order to maintain its hold on a Far East that seems to be slipping from its grip. In this region, the Chinese could make for a much more effective enemy than the US. Here’s another question: If China manages to achieve democratic transformation more rapidly than Russia, what effect would this have on Siberia and the Russian Far East? There are more questions than answers.

If we limit ourselves to analyzing official Russian and Chinese declarations of their “important consensus” on bilateral relations — in other words, things like counting the number of meetings between the two countries’ leaders and looking at the bilateral trade figures — we will see only surface realities that are of little help in understanding where the Chinese and Russian civilizations are going and what impact they will have on the surrounding world. We need to thoroughly analyze developments in both societies, as well as the willingness of those societies to support systems that limit freedom. Crisis in these authoritarian systems will inevitably have global consequences. We must therefore study the linkages between their domestic and foreign policies and the interaction between their internal dynamics and the global environment. Today’s world is interdependent, and only by understanding this can we protect ourselves from illusion and myth. Demystifying the Putin regime’s relations with the world and with Asia in particular would be the first step toward achieving a better understanding of the future taking shape before our very eyes.

Lilia Shevtsova chairs the Russian Domestic Politics and Political Institutions Program at the Carnegie Moscow Center.