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## Russia and China Race To Be Next Superpower

By: Christopher Morris

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The increasingly close relationship between Russia and China has been well documented, yet the two nations are increasingly engaged in a race to become the world's next superpower.



### The BRICS agreement

With Russia and China both members of the BRICS grouping, the general consensus of opinion regarding the countries is that they are working together for common benefits. Indeed, Russia

and China are often common denominators in many geopolitical incidents nowadays. Most recently, that United States sought the effective blessing of both nations when drafting an Iranian agreement.

Moscow and Beijing have a great deal in common, beginning with a 2,500 mile border. Both have economies that are dominated by state-run commerce, and efforts have been made between the two nations to increase many aspects of economic and military cooperation. Yet Vladimir Putin has officially dismissed suggestions that there is a new Eastern military alliance with China. Putin has stated explicitly that he did not believe in a bloc-based approach, and instead emphasized that a more global effort was necessary.

What both countries do definitively share is a desire to limit American power. It is this that its most obviously reflected in the burgeoning trading relationship between the two countries, and both have a mutual interest in achieving a more prominent position in global economic institutions. Russia and China explicitly wish to be represented in organizations such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the Bank for International Settlements, with meetings such as those in Davos rarely populated by Chinese or Russian delegates.

With trade between the two nations having increased sixfold, Russian and Chinese worships having engaged in joint endeavors in the Mediterranean back in May, and both Russian and Chinese presidents appearing in Beijing to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, it may seem inevitable that the two countries have an unshakeable allegiance.

### **Shifting relationship**

But there are reasons to believe that the relationship between the two nations is more complex than many people presently acknowledge. The underlying conditions that have supported the cooperation between the two nations have been mutually beneficial, yet the variables that underpin this relationship are continually shifting.

So in an increasingly multi-polar world order, China is acquiring increasing military power, that is growing at a rate that seriously outranks that of Russia. Additionally, despite plenty of dramatic headlines in the West to the contrary, China's economic penetration continues to expand. The devaluation of the Chinese currency this week certainly generated a lot of bluster, but the reality is that China is now established as a true economic powerhouse.

Meanwhile, China has successfully economically penetrated central Asia, and impending leadership changes between the two nations could alter their relationship. While the story in China is one of progress, Putin faces several challenges at home. Political dissent is becoming commonplace in Putin's Russia, while energy issues have also blighted the country. The reliance of Russia on energy exportation has been seriously damaging considering the decline in the price over the last year or so, and this is exacerbated by the gloomy demographic prospects of the nation.



Russia is currently experiencing a negative birth rate as compared to its death rate, and this is leading to a rapidly growing population. Russia is by no means the only country on the planet to experience this phenomenon, with both Germany and Japan also particularly seriously affected. But it is certainly a massive issue for a country that has an extremely disparate population in terms of geographical location.

These and many other plausible changes in the socio-economic and political makeup of the nations could seriously impact upon the relationship of the two countries in the foreseeable future. At the moment there is something of a comfortable entente between Russia and China, but as variables develop this is certainly not guaranteed to continue into the future.

Perhaps the most explicit indication of Russian and Chinese cooperation has come in the United Nations. The two nations have persistently coordinated their foreign policy in order to prevent Western nations from dominating the geopolitical landscape. This has drawn considerable criticism in the West, but Russia and China both contest that they have not been the aggressors in recent history. And while their behaviour in the United Nations is unquestionably motivated by self-interest, it is certainly impossible to disagree with this particular assertion.

Both countries have therefore shared a commitment to a philosophy of state sovereignty, emphasizing non-interference and territorial integrity. Yet the recent behavior of China in the South China Sea area indicates that when the Beijing regime believes that it can benefit from a more hawkish conduct, it certainly won't be frightened of engaging in such behavior.

### **China to branch out**

At present, Chinese and Russian officials refuse to criticize each other's domestic and foreign policies in public. But there could certainly come a time when China in particular believes that it should engage in activities that are in its personal interest. At this time, it is far from inconceivable that Russia could actually oppose China in foreign policy ethos, although considering the cooperation between the two nations, this would almost certainly be handled tentatively in diplomatic terms.

What is particularly telling is that China has mainly sought a close relationship with Russia in order to strengthen its energy reserves, and in turn its economic position. This may still prove to be an extremely wise policy, considering the dependence of European nations on Russian oil and gas. But in a world in which commodity prices have slumped considerably, there is no guarantee that the particular assets that Russia brings to the table will remain as valuable to China in a longer-term economic outlook.

Based on the current demographics of Russia and China, it is certainly conceivable that the East Asian nation will strike out on its own at some point, and attempt to establish itself as a major superpower. This could occur with or without the consent of Russia, as its existing bargaining position seems to be weakened by events within and beyond its borders that it cannot control.