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Can a China-Russia Axis Bankrupt the US?

Russia and China have studied the end of the Cold War and how the US ultimately defeated the USSR by bankrupting it.

By J. Michael Cole

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According to Chinese State Councilor Yang Jiechi and Secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation Nikolai Platonovich Patrushev, 2013 was “a year of harvest” for Sino-Russian relations. It was also a year of new lows for the countries’ relations with the West — and from the look of it, things could get worse in 2014.

Much has been said in recent years about how two difficult wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a sagging economy cut the U.S. at the knees and created space for China. During this same period, China was enjoying double-digit economic growth and a relatively stable security environment, emerging as a hegemon in Asia. As the U.S. was struggling to extricate itself from, and was pouring billions of dollars into, unwinnable wars, Beijing was reaping the benefits of its “peaceful rise” by building its economy, resolving longstanding territorial disputes with neighbors, consolidating ties with smaller powers within the region, and neutralizing Taiwan as a potential source of armed conflict.

Thus, when China began flexing its muscles in the East and South China Seas, Beijing was not cowed by the U.S. “pivot,” or “rebalancing,” to Asia. For one thing, it was apparent that

Washington's renewed interest in East Asia would not — at least not in the medium term — be accompanied by a willingness to allocate sufficient capital and resources to make the pivot a credible counter to China. As Beijing and many U.S. defense experts saw it, the rebalancing was more a wish list and academic exercise than an actual strategy, let alone one that was anywhere near implementation. That is the reason why Beijing suffered little consequences when it threatened to alter the status quo within the region, such as with the November 23 declaration of its extended Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea. (There is every reason to believe that a credible U.S. pivot to Asia would have deterred Beijing, which ostensibly does not seek war at this point in time, from embarking on such adventurism.)

Now by working together, China and Russia could make sure that the U.S. rebalance to Asia, if it ever materializes, remains a diluted, and therefore ineffective, affair. They could do so by enlarging the spatial scope of U.S. security responsibilities and further stretching its military's diminished resources. A few years ago, Bobo Lo, an associate fellow at Chatham House, proposed the term "axis of convenience" to describe the relationship between China and Russia. Five years after the publication of his book of the same title, the relationship has never been more convenient. For the time being at least, Beijing and Moscow appear to have set their own territorial disputes aside, and by cooperating at the strategic level they are hoping to force the U.S. out of Asia altogether.

A substantial amount of attention has been paid to China's Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) strategy, with the DF-21D anti-ship ballistic missile (ASBM) serving as one of its principal components, and to which we can now perhaps add the ADIZ. Less, however, has been said of Russia's ongoing efforts to keep the U.S. out of its backyard. It is interesting to note that two weeks after China's ADIZ announcement, Russian President Vladimir Putin, meeting top military officers, stated that Russia would bolster its presence in the potentially resource-rich Arctic. Earlier that month and a little more than a week after China sprung its ADIZ surprise, the Russian navy announced that the Arctic would be its priority in 2014. As *The Diplomat* reported earlier this month, Russia is currently deploying aerospace defense and electronic warfare units to the area, and is now building a comprehensive early-warning missile radar system near Vorkuta in the extreme north, among other developments.

The growing presence of the Russian military in the Arctic — which stands to turn into a region of strategic importance — will surely prompt a countervailing response from the U.S. (it has already indicated plans to increase its foothold in the region). However, doing so — let's call it a "rebalancing to the Arctic" — would further strain the U.S. military budget and thereby take resources away from the "pivot" to Asia.

Simultaneously, the Russian military confirmed on December 16 that it had deployed nuclear-capable Iskander-M tactical ballistic missile systems, with a range of approximately 400km, into its Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad and along its border with NATO members Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. The news followed reports the previous weekend that satellite imagery had unveiled the presence of 10 such launchers in the exclave. Although President Putin denied the deployment on December 19, Russia has shown every indication that it seeks to expand its operations in its Western Military District, which aside from Kaliningrad also includes much of the European part of Russia.

There are questions over whether Washington can afford to substantially increase defense spending without bankrupting the country. It will find itself unable to counter both a resurgent China in East *and* Southeast Asia, where it has been speculated that China could eventually announce a second ADIZ, and a more muscular Russian presence in the Arctic and near the Baltic states. Either the U.S. will focus on one, or it will attempt to meet all contingencies, but do so with less-than optimal resources. With Washington feeling it has little choice but to choose the latter course of action, China and Russia will both benefit by confronting a diffuse and distracted opponent or succeed in breaking the U.S.'s back by forcing it to overspend — unless other countries like Japan and NATO members agree to greatly expand their defense spending, which appears unlikely. Furthermore, there are also doubts about whether the Japanese would agree to constitutional changes of the sort that would allow for military burden sharing of the type envisaged here.

Whether the U.S. has a “right” to be an actor in what Russia and China consider as their backyard is a question we’d better seek to answer elsewhere. But what is clear is that a weakened U.S., whose ability to meet the challenge of China’s “rise” is already very much in doubt, now seems on the brink of facing a multi-pronged challenge from a Sino-Russian axis that, if it is to be countered effectively, will require a number of “pivots.” Whether Russia’s economy can sustain a military expansion on the scale necessary to prompt a U.S. realignment is questionable, though the increasingly authoritarian nature of its leadership means that Moscow will be far less vulnerable than Washington to public discontent with huge defense spending in times of austerity.

Both Russia and China have closely studied the end of the Cold War and how the U.S. ultimately defeated the U.S.S.R. by bankrupting it. Two decades later, it looks like Moscow and Beijing are trying to return the favor.