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APEC Summit in Beijing

Three to Tango—Xi, Putin, Obama

by NORMAN POLLACK

November 12, 2014

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit is now underway. The subtext of the meeting is the transformation of international politics, and sub-subtext, a Russia-China rapprochement directly in the path of US global military-political-economic dominance, unilateral hegemonic power since World War II vs. an until recently slowly emergent decentralization of the world power system shaking its foundations and today rapidly a qualitative shift to a new ballgame in which America is no longer the exclusive center or chief architect of the international order. Obama the paper tiger, all smiles, enters the den of, by his own construction (the Pacific-First Pivot AND the Trans-Pacific Trade Partnership, one shifting military assets to the region, the other, a negotiated trade pact excluding China), America's Public Enemy No. 1: China. Of course, Russia is a very close second, and both Xi and Putin will be present in Beijing attending the summit. Putin already sees through him; Xi is getting there. I'm afraid their own tango, the very thing Obama and the US seek to break up, never allow to coalesce, will exclude him; increasingly, he will dance alone as the world catches on to his totalitarian patter. (Do chastise Xi for cyberespionage while changing the subject about massive surveillance of the American people, extended to eavesdropping on foreign leaders; do chastise Putin on Ukraine while changing the subject about US intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, covert operations for regime change—including Kiev—worldwide, and, most fitting, drone assassination.)

There is a lot on the table in Beijing, spheres-of-influence canapés, nuclear-modernization soup (for improved lethality), the main course of American-inspired counterrevolution, and for dessert, the possibility of breaking the hold of the IMF and World Bank on shaping global development with the proposed Asia Infrastructure Bank. In all cases, Obama will find to his discomfiture a united front of Xi and Putin, themselves shifting the axis of world power away from America and Europe, Russia clearly looking eastward in response to the US-EU sanctions regime, threats, bluster, and all-around hostility. Europe needs Russia more than Russia needs Europe, while America, perceiving that China has become the world's leading economic power, can only double-up on militarism, aggressiveness in all its forms, and perhaps a sinking or sneaking realization of DECLINE. Whatever came of the American Century, is now dead, buried, and unmourned (particularly in Asia, Latin America, and perhaps Africa).

Obama may therefore smile, clasp shoulders, engage in small talk, but he represents a dying order, tied together with Wall Street baling wire of financial skullduggery and bundled in the wrapping of military power. China can afford to be charitable, a gracious host, but that only drives home the message: US stop turning the world inside out to your own advantage, your CIA fun-and-games, your control of the international financial system. You've had your shock-and-awe bombings, your My Lai massacres, your counterterrorism-ballyhoo as a means of designing compliance into the US war machine, your abysmal record of wealth-distribution (hardly comporting with the definition and expectations of a democratic society). So, what, Mr. Obama, do you bring to the table at the APEC summit? Precious little, as Asia, despite your personal actions and your country's geopolitical planning, comes into its own, with Russia now shifting eastward in a spirit of cooperative advancement.

For context, let me look first at Nicholas Kristof's New York Times op. ed. article, "A Changed China Awaits Mr. Obama," (Nov. 9), Kristof the paper's humanitarian poster boy, who appears to be moving increasingly to the Right. ("Humanitarian" as in the Samantha Power version of liberal humanitarianism oddly conducive to the pursuit of American self-interest.) Immediately he jumps on China, his swipe at Xi interchangeable with our customary demonization of Putin. Before the visit, Obama "has already been mocked," the state-run Global Times stating, "He has done an insipid job, offering nothing to his supporters. U.S. society has grown tired of his banality." (I wish I could have said that, but the Global Times beat me to it!) And Kristof exclaims: "What a welcome! Global Times is often shrill, but that tone reflects the way President Xi Jinping is tugging his regime in a more nationalistic, assertive and hard-line direction." Like an incantation, nationalistic, assertive, hard-line are standard descriptive terms applied to Putin and Russia as well—and presumably anyone else large enough to command notice in crossing America's path. Kristof is not to blame; it is in the DNA of present-day American journalism. Either you are for us or against us, the ethnocentrism woven into the US ideology and political culture.

Regrettably the article is also self-serving: "Then there's something a bit more personal: China doesn't seem to want to give me a visa." He recovers his poise, so as to counterattack: "Xi has been ruling China for two years now, and he has shown some inclination toward economic and social reforms. Two years ago, I thought Xi might open things up a bit. Boy, was I wrong!"

Instead, it increasingly seems that Xi may deepen reforms in some areas but, over all, is a tough-minded nationalist who takes a hard line on multiple fronts so as to challenge nearly everything that Obama stands for[.]” (That should not be hard, for anyone on the continuum from social democrat to Marxist. As one approaches Centrism and then turns Right, however, it becomes difficult to challenge him—and no reason for doing so—at all.) What are the multiple fronts? An aggressive stand on maritime disputes in the East China and South China Seas; repression of dissidents—Xu Zhiyong and Liu Xiaobo; and controls on the Internet. One does not have to be an apologist for repression of dissent in China (Kristof is correct), but why ignore worse or equally bad in the US, as in Espionage Act prosecution of whistleblowers under Obama? Perhaps worst in Kristof’s view, China is not doing so badly: “Xi comes across as cocky and proud that China is now booming and strong, and he has been willing to poke his finger in the American eye.”

Poor POTUS, the cards are being stacked against him: “All this creates a challenge for Obama. The United States doesn’t have many China experts in senior roles, and neither in Beijing nor Washington are many officials fighting for an improved relationship.” Then, too, there is cyberwarfare—which will not go away. Kristof wants China “to step up and play a constructive role [he praises its work on Ebola in Liberia]...especially on climate change.” But on balance, he appears ready for confrontation: “So for those of us who love the Middle Kingdom, it’s sad to see it veer toward a nationalistic and repressive line under Xi. Obama won’t be able to change China, but he too often signaled weakness in the Middle East and Ukraine. In China, he should stand firm.” Signaled weakness? Kristof here comes full circle to Russia, and implicitly, the Russia-China rapprochement, on which Obama also must stand firm.

Peter Baker, The New York Times’s political savant poster boy, deservedly when he is on, as now, has an article, “As Russia Draws Closer to China, U.S. Faces a New Challenge,” (Nov. 8), which cuts to the chase on power politics through showing Washington’s concern about the possible game-changer in world politics. For decades, America was confident China and Russia would never find sufficient common ground to mount a collective challenge to US world supremacy. And rightly so, Mao and Stalin in fratricidal struggle over rival ideological claims and coveted territorial expansion. That time has passed, not simply because of leadership changes on both sides and developmental trajectories containing significant elements of capitalism in each, but also because the US in its own hubristic quest for global supremacy has acted to bring the two nations together, unavoidably so, in light of the xenophobic mistrust America has of any social system not replicating its own. The US containment of Russia and China, decades old, in fact the cornerstone of its foreign policy as crystallized in the Cold War, always had the potential for culminating in war—to which the other two countries could never be indifferent. Finally, the marriage of borscht and chow mein, like Germany’s much-vaunted marriage of iron and rye, has a formulaic splendor for announcing, on the world stage, a new configuration of POWER.

None of this is in Baker’s article (his good fortune), except the US concern over what this configuration spells for the eclipse of America’s power. From now on, global unilateralism is pie-in-the-sky ideology. Yet, the nation appears stone-deaf to reality. Obama comes to Beijing, he writes, “to renew efforts to refocus American foreign policy toward Asia,” where Putin, “who has done so much to frustrate him lately,” is also present. Baker quotes the Russian ambassador

to Washington: “You are pivoting to Asia, but we’re already there.” (It should be added, the US pivot was initially and still is largely military both in conception and practice, while the Russian pivot is diplomatic and economic, a fraternal rather than an adversarial relationship.) Baker acknowledges the obvious, that Obama comes to Asia “as Russia pulls closer to China,” thus “presenting a profound challenge to the United States and Europe.” Putin, “estranged from the West over Ukraine,” is in Beijing seeking “economic and political support, trying to UPEND THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER by fashioning a coalition to resist what both countries view as American arrogance.” (My caps.)

There is skepticism among officials and specialists that the coalition would be possible, an issue setting off “a vigorous debate in Washington,” but others think “the Obama administration should take the threat seriously as Moscow pursues energy, financing and military deals with Beijing,” each in turn of importance, e.g., the military fitting into a common defense posture. Kislyak, the Russian ambassador in Washington, translates the pivot as a broader shift of direction: “We are more and more interested in the region that is next to us in Asia. They are good partners to us.” The recent natural gas deal between the two countries foreshadowed the future: “It’s just the beginning, and you will see more and more projects between us and China.” Here Baker has the sense to recognize that, from the US perspective, Russia and China must be treated as interrelated problems facing American foreign policy: “The Russian pivot to China factors into a broader White House-led review of American policy toward Moscow now underway.”

One gets to Moscow via Beijing—again not Baker’s thought, but clearly in the thought of the national security advisers. The US wants its cake and eats it, opposition to what is being called “Putinism... while still seeking silos of cooperation, particularly on issues like Iran, terrorism and nuclear proliferation.” We need these guys, but only on US terms, the imagery of the silo—heard with greater frequency in policy circles—that of a sealed storage unit that excludes air, suggesting issue compartmentalization while leaving the status quo/wider context intact. Ideally, there would be continued prosecution of the Cold War, yet, by invitation, support of causes we deem appropriate—with no promise of, or desire for, working toward better relations. (Very much the way Israeli occupation policy affects the Palestinians—occasional cooperation when necessary, but the hemmed-in people of a wider silo whose condition is unaltered.)

What, then, of Russia? “Though there is not a wide divergence of opinion inside the administration over how to view Mr. Putin,” Baker writes, “there is a debate about what to do.” The range of disagreement is absurdly small: engagement vs. containment (the former of course supposing a strong element of the latter), although he doesn’t realize it; operationally, “the main question is how the Ukraine dispute should define the relationship and affect other areas where the two countries share interests.” But if that is the case, Ukraine front and center, then Team Obama (Brennan, Rice, Power, and their military counterpart) has resolutely dug in for the Great Confrontation. And now, “within the administration, Mr. Putin’s efforts at accord with China are seen as a jab at Washington”—what else could it be, though “jab” understates the reality. Still there is disbelief in Washington; the Russia-China relationship is one “fraught with a complicated history, mutual distrust and underlying economic disparity that ultimately makes it untenable.” One insider (as usual, anonymous) is fairly typical: “They’ll use each other. And

when one of them gets tired or sees a better deal [where?], they'll take it." Dream on, proverbial cynic.

Actually, some American academics find the potential for an accord good. Gilbert Rozman of Princeton, who wrote "The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order," states, "There's just so much evidence the relationship is getting stronger.... [It began prior to Ukraine, and now there is a] sense that there's no turning back." Graham Allison of Harvard speculates, of the Xi-Putin relationship, "There's a personal chemistry you can see. They like each other, and they can relate to each other. They talk with each other with a candor and a level of cooperation they don't find in other partners." Then the nitty-gritty: In May, at the time US-EU sanctions were imposed, Putin negotiated a \$400B, 30-year deal providing China natural gas, and in October, China's premier, Li Keqiang, "signed a package of 38 deals in Moscow, including a currency swap and tax treaty." And only last week, Putin announced another gas deal in the works with China. China is now Russia's largest trading partner. Sergei Rogov, of Moscow's Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies, summarizes for us: "The campaign of economic sanctions against Russia and political pressure is alienating Russia from the West and pushing it closer to China. China is perceived in Russia as a substitute for Western credits and Western technology."

To Baker's credit, he also presents rational arguments for the downside of the accord, notably, the big economic disadvantage for Russia: "In Moscow, some fear Russia, out of weakness, has made itself a junior partner to a rising China. While China is now Russia's largest trading partner, Russia is only China's 10th largest—and the United States remains the biggest. Moreover, big Russian state companies can make deals, but China will not replace Europe for most corporations and banks, as there is no developed commercial bond market for foreigners in China akin to Eurobonds." Yet Ambassador Kislyak again: Given that US-EU long-term partners are problematic strengthens the turn to China: "We trust them, and we hope that China trusts us." After Beijing, there is also the Group of 20 in Brisbane, where Obama and Putin will again be present—Obama's Trans-Pacific Partnership, which excludes both Russia and China, not calculated to assuage their feelings or engender respect.

In this preliminary assessment of APEC and future relations of the Three Powers, I turn to Washington Post reporters David Nakamura and Steven Mufson's article, "Obama, Xi to meet in Beijing amid political and economic strains," (Nov. 9), coolly realistic when, in describing the planned opening fireworks, they say, "But there is little to celebrate. In the 18 months since Obama and Xi first met," the two countries "have confronted each other over Asian security, territorial claims, economic cyberespionage and U.S. opposition to China's proposal for a new Asian Infrastructure bank." This last, often passed over, reveals not only America's pressures on behalf of the World Bank and IMF, but also a partial remedy for Russian business concerns about developed financial institutions in China. And they come right to the point: "Beneath those issues lie larger questions of how the United States adjusts to a more prosperous and outward-looking China and whether China's rise bumps up against the United States and its allies in the Pacific or whether all nations will benefit."

Adjustment via military and trade expansion is no adjustment, expectation of universal benefits itself defying the American paradigm of commercial-financial-industrial penetration, in which the US seeks to best China and all comers, though hardly realistic as, in myriad markets in Asia and the world, China has already outperformed America. The reporters are not overly sanguine about the APEC summit, noting, “A string of nasty articles about foreign forces has appeared recently on blogs and in the state-run media, coloring the political atmosphere.” They nonetheless see a good-faith effort on both sides (e.g., the administration did not overtly support the demonstrators in Hong Kong), and criticism of Obama in China is muted, the midterm elections pointed to as reducing his stature though he is credited with still having a free-hand in foreign policy. To be avoided, they write, is misunderstanding over semantics, the use of “pivot to Asia” having been construed by the Chinese (I think, correctly) as provocative of war, so now the Obama administration has a new phrase, the strategic “rebalance” for the region. Why not? The moon is made of green cheese.

Obama’s idea of striking a balance between “accommodation and firmness” seems like gobbledygook the moment preconditions for the former are set (the same silo-effect): Do your part on Ebola, but don’t challenge US power—in its various forms, and anywhere in the world. Yes, China is assertive; assigned a junior-grade status in contradiction to prevailing global dynamics, its own ascent, and America’s decline, makes the situation ripe for challenges to US power. Last year at this time, Secretary Rice, speaking at Georgetown, made clear the gradations of acceptable power, the US managing “inevitable competition while forging deeper cooperation on issues where our interests converge,” i.e., China as super errand-boy in bringing North Korea and Iran into line. Not surprisingly, two days after her speech, China took to the skies, announcing an air-defense zone over the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, which served notice on Japan and South Korea that China had full intention to act on its interests (its real audience of course was the US), to which America, in response, flew two B-52s over the zone. The friction between the two countries will not be dispelled by last night’s display of fireworks, but the interesting point, no doubt the US gnashing its teeth, is the amicable Xi-Abe meeting, possibly long in preparation, at APEC, foiling America’s divide-and-conquer strategy between Japan and China.

The reporters point out that in April, when Obama visited Tokyo, although he did not take a stand on the disputed islands’ sovereignty, he did emphasize the US “would defend Japan against any attack based on their long-standing security treaty—marking the first time a U.S. president said so.” It is precisely this fishing in troubled waters (pardon the pun) that China’s growing influence in the region may put to an end. Yet my guess is that this island tit-for-tat merely hides more underlying issues. While the US-China bilateral trade is some \$562B, America uses as a test of good international behavior the acceptance of the World Bank and IMF (so as to structure trade, finance, and investment in its favor, here, in a decisive region of the world economy), while China makes no secret of labeling these institutions as “U.S.-led proxies aimed at maintaining the West’s advantage.” How Obama can appear at APEC with the Trans-Pacific Partnership, excluding China, in his pocket, is pure chutzpah.

I’m not an old-fashioned economic determinist, but am intrigued by the proposed bank and what it means for undercutting US power and influence in the region. Nakamura-Mufson seem to have caught on. They write: “Last month, China overtook the United States as the world’s largest

economy, but Beijing is frustrated by the failure of the United States to give it a bigger voice at the IMF, where it has only a 3.81 percent voting share—smaller than France.” To an American colonialist/imperialist France may seem larger, more important, than China, but what I perceive, APEC being merely symptomatic, is, as in the quoted portion with caps. seen above, the upending of the international order is very much in prospect and on the historical agenda, exactly what the US most fears and can—except for outlandish military acts—do little about. The end of the American Imperium: an exciting prospect for much of the remainder of the world, even some force-fed US “friends and allies.” Here then, they continue, to such cavalier treatment (the IMF an especially sensitive barometer of US policy valuations—who the good guys and bad guys are) China now fights back: “In response, Beijing has sought to establish its own multilateral institutions, foremost a new Beijing-based Asian infrastructure bank initially funded with \$50 billion from China.”

The gnashing of teeth, hopefully not the next step, deliberately provoking a war. One Japanese official is quoted as saying (in a way, the mirror-image of what America has succeeded in doing, rendering the US-China rivalry all the keener): “The idea of the bank is that China would assist in development, but really they want the bank as projecting an Asia organized by China.” (The Chinese are proving apt students of American policy.) Things are moving fast. “On Oct. 24,” they write, “China signed a memorandum with 21 countries, excluding South Korea, Australia and Indonesia, to establish the infrastructure bank. The Australian Financial Review reported that Kerry had personally asked Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott TO KEEP AUSTRALIA OUT.” (My caps.) Kerry, dutiful servant of power. The reporters: “But many experts say the Obama administration is waging a losing battle.” And they quote Wing Thye Woo of UC, Davis, who has this common-sense observation: “For the U.S. Treasury to go about telling people to not do what is in your best interests is shooting ourselves in our foot.” Obama had best have thick soles in Beijing.

A final point: Obama landed in Beijing, hitting the ground running, his immediate challenge, how to break open China’s market to American business. (Lord Crassness, have you no shame?) The TPP, by excluding China, an obvious nonstarter to bruit about, so, according to Mark Landler’s New York Times article, “Obama Arrives in China on Trip With Complex Agenda,” (Nov. 10), “Obama’s main commercial proposal for the Chinese will be a new bilateral investment treaty between the countries. Economists said it could be the most significant opening of the Chinese market for American companies since China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001.” A one-sided arrangement, chutzpah compounded. US businesspeople see the treaty as a test of Xi’s intentions. “It would require the Chinese,” Landler writes, “to open dozens of sensitive markets, some that remained closed to American companies, or required Chinese partners.” The US-China Business Council, perhaps Obama’s new dancing partner should he get lonely in Beijing.

My New York Times Comment on the Kristof article, same date, follows:

I’m disappointed that China would even invite Obama, particularly after his “pivot” of military assets to the Pacific, a very clear indication of US attempts to contain and isolate if not also dismember China (precisely the same policy directed to Russia). The US has adopted a hostile stance toward China, as in encouraging PM Abe to rearm contrary to Japan’s constitution. US-

Philippine joint-maneuvers are also directed against China, as are the efforts to coordinate policies with Australia to the same end.

The US seeks confrontation, making Obama's visit a farce. Xi should adopt the same skepticism toward America that Putin does, and with Putin seek a de-centered global structure no longer the one we've seen of US unilateral global hegemony. Obama is a spoiler, anything for war and intervention. I'm sure China realizes this and I hope it gives him the cold shoulder so that he doesn't entertain ideas of seeing it as a pushover in international politics (the opening he seeks for renewed tensions). The test for Monday's visit is whether or not he will renounce TPP, which of course he won't. Trade, for Obama, is just one more mode of encirclement.