

A New Orient?

U.S. pressure against China and Russia is creating a stronger Sino-Russian relationship By An Gang



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When China and Russia finally reached their long-sought-after gas deal in May after a decade of negotiations, many in the Western media exclaimed that a new Orient is on the horizon.

On May 21, under the witness of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia in Shanghai, the two countries signed the China and Russia Purchase and Sales Contract on the East Route Gas Project and a memorandum. According to the documents, the 30-year deal will see Russia's east route pipeline begin providing China with 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas annually from 2018, with a total value of \$400 billion.

Putin's trip in May was his first visit to China since President Xi took power, but it was their seventh meeting within a 15-month period. In March 2013, shortly after taking office as Chinese president, Xi chose Russia as the first stop of his inaugural trip abroad as China's head of state. Xi's trip was widely interpreted as a signal that China is adjusting its foreign strategy from primarily engaging with the Pacific Ocean in the east to paying equal attention to both its east and its west. After more than a year of intensive communication, China and Russia have taken their all-round strategic partnership

into a new phase. Additionally, the two have established an all-round energy cooperation partnership.

U.S. offensive

The monumental gas deal will effectively relieve the pressure that Western economic sanctions put on Russia. Since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis in February, relations between Russia and the United States as well as Europe have soured on numerous fronts. European geopolitical maneuvering appears to reflect the sort of crisis that followed the Cold War. Though Washington was completely unprepared for Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, it is unlikely to give in easily. In addition to intensifying sanctions on Moscow with the help of its European allies, Washington also set about a long-term program aimed at reducing Ukraine and other European countries' reliance on Russia's natural gas.

Furthermore, leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) industrialized Western countries boycotted the Group of Eight (G8) Summit due in Russia's Sochi and excluded Russia from the group as a punishment, causing the mechanism to return to its 2002 model. In early June, the Western leaders gathered in Brussels for a two-day G7 Summit without Putin. But the Russian president shrugged off the snub and declared publicly that pressure from the West would push Russia to turn to the East, saying that expanding cooperation with China is Russia's diplomatic priority.

Chinese scholars on foreign relations have been cautious about U.S. President Barack Obama's "pivot-to-Asia" strategy in the past three years. They now hope that tensions in Europe could help divert Washington's focus back to Europe, thus providing breathing room

for the overstretched Sino-U.S. relationship following multiple divergences and frictions. However, the Obama administration seemingly showed no sign of slowing down its march to the East.

In a recent speech, Obama made a high-profile reaffirmation of his "pivot-to-Asia" stance. In the meantime, the United States has become more directly involved in China's maritime disputes with Japan, the Philippines and Viet Nam. The Obama administration even escalated its China-bashing pronouncements, accusing China of muscle flexing, territorial expansion and changing the status quo in East Asia. Washington claimed that it will not sit back and watch, adding that the U.S. military has been fully prepared.

Chinese scholars regard the Obama administration's "double-offensive" tactic as a kneejerk reaction in the face of rapid changes in the international landscape, whereby Washington hopes to conceal its inner tension by acting aggressively. Maintaining its status as the sole superpower remains the goal of the Obama administration's foreign policy. It has increasingly regarded China as its major competitor in place of Russia. However, as the United States looks on worriedly at the rise of China, it also has to face the reality that Russia, a traditional power, is returning to a powerful global position.

In the roughly two decades since the end of the Cold War, the United States, acting as the victor, tried to fill the security vacuum of Europe and squeezed into the geo-strategic space of Russia. But the U.S. move ultimately elicited a strong backlash from Russia. The Russia-Georgia conflict in 2008, the Syrian crisis since 2011 and the recent Ukrainian crisis all saw the resolution of Moscow to prevent NATO from crossing the Dnieper River. Putin's Russia has awoken from the pipe dream of embracing the West in the Boris Yeltsin era and will no longer be subordinate to the West. Russia is seeking to regain a major-power status in its equal interaction with the West and restore its international influence.

The current occupant of the White House cannot see through to the enigmatic inner world of Putin, resulting in misjudgments of Washington in its tactics when contesting with Russia. The expulsion of Russia from the G8 by the U.S.-led Western group has sent a political signal that leaves adequate leeway, warning Moscow to stop before going too far over the Ukrainian crisis and begin talks with the West

to delimit the boundary between NATO and Russia. However, the move cannot form a substantial deterrent to Russia but rather adds new proof for the overall decline of the West in the world pattern. Putin is now trying to ease anxiety in the global community over worries that Russia may further seek to divide Ukraine into two parts—just not under the command of the West.

With the collective rise of emerging economies, the proportion of the total GDP of the G7 in the world has dropped from its peak of 70 percent to less than 50 percent. The era of Western dominance is gone forever. Russia, despite losing the membership of the G8 by which it could play a unique role as a bridge between emerging economies and the West, can still exert influence through international organizations such as BRICS, the Group of 20, the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Eurasian Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as well as its partnership with China.

Tripartite ties

Observers are closely watching the complex interactions among China, Russia and the United States with keen interest, looking for hints of changes of the power balance. If a new pattern emerges, these three countries are sure to be at the center of the action.

The three-way relations between China, Russia and the United States are emerging as the most strategic trilateral relationship in the world. They also form the framework of dominant powers' relationships in a multipolar world. These relations are marked by a tripartite balance of forces. Notably, the three do not constitute an equilateral triangle. From a strategic and military perspective, Russia and the United States are two big nuclear powers as well as military giants while China possesses only a small-scale nuclear arsenal and relatively poor armament systems. In the economic arena, the United

POWERFUL PAIR: Chinese President Xi Jinping holds a welcoming ceremony for Russian President Vladimir Putin prior to their talks in Shanghai on May 20



States and China are leading global players while Russia acts in a supporting role.

During the Cold War, China fell between the cracks of the two superpowers and ultimately chose to lean to the United States. Now China can no longer exploit rivalry between two opposing camps, but it has gained the ability to actively leverage competing interests, thus influencing the power balance.

Neither China nor Russia is willing to see the world dominated by a sole superpower. They hope to strengthen their position in dealing with the United States by deepening cooperation with each other. This is the fundamental reason why China and Russia are embracing each other. But both countries have no intention for an "all-out confrontation" with the United States. A "new Orient" might have already

come into being, but a "China-Russia alliance" targeting the United States is a figment of scaremongers' imagination.

At the height of the Ukrainian crisis, despite having sympathy for Russia's being besieged by the U.S.-led bloc, China disagreed with Russia's annexation of Crimea as it violated international law. Therefore, China abstained in UN votes on relevant issues. In May, shortly after Petro Poroshenko won the Ukrainian presidential election, President Xi sent a note of congratulations.

The United States, which is still battling the aftermath of the global financial crisis as well as multiple wars, cannot afford a "new Cold War." As an aggressive superpower since the end of the Cold War, the country is on the decline. A world full of challenges and conflicts is a living reality for all the major powers. Thus, the three-way relationship among China, Russia and the United States will eventually return to mutual communication and peaceful cooperation.

At a seminar hosted by the Washington, D.C.-based Center for Strategic and International Studies in early June, former U.S. National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, who advocated actively joining hands with China to combat the Soviet Union during the Cold War, noted that the future of the relationship between China, Russia and the United States depends on whether Washington and Beijing will continue to strengthen cooperation. This question will affect the future direction of the China-Russia relationship. ■