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The nonexistent Sino-Russian “Axis”



Nearly a year ago exactly, Russian and Chinese representatives put the final touches on the second of two major gas deals between the Moscow and Beijing in 2014. [Sealing the arrangement](#) for a western pipeline route last November, Russian President Vladimir Putin said he saw the deal as one that would make the world “more stable, more predictable.” Only six months after flubbing international law and beginning its occupation of Crimea, Russia had finalized its move toward the East, with China providing the financial largesse and eager clientele for Russia’s gas markets.

Or so it appeared, at least. The relationship made a form of facile sense. Both countries enjoyed an autocratic, state-heavy rule; both nations claimed they stood anathema to Western meddling; a rising China appeared eager to guzzle as much gas as it could land, with Russia suddenly casting about for willing customers. Further, Chinese banks could provide the lifelines [necessary to cushion the blow](#) from sanctions against Russia. The marriage was not simply of convenience, not simply of necessity, but of a purported logic.

Such was the rhetoric twelve months ago: a resurgent Eurasia, swelling behind the twin peaks of Moscow and Beijing. A firmer partnership, cemented in the thrall of gas fields and loan injections. An axis of autocracy, set to challenge - or dismantle - a reeling, emasculated West.

The [fruits of such partnership](#) came early, and often. A \$25 billion investment fund, set to develop Russia's eastern stretches. Deals for food production, for airplane production, for a high-speed rail-line from Moscow to Kazan. More than \$110 billion in joint ventures, pulling Beijing and Moscow closer with each pledge. And the gas - the gas deal, the carbon camaraderie, a decade in the making. Suddenly, as Carnegie's Alexander Gabuev wrote, [price discrepancies evaporated](#) - Gazprom and China's CNPC found a common cause, and agreed to a staggering \$400 billion deal that would source China with Russian gas for the next three decades. Add in a new Altai pipeline, threading China's western reaches, a separate pipeline from Khabarovsk to Vladivostok, and increased CNPC stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG project, and the Sino-Russian hydrocarbon machine seemed like a partnership as obvious as it was massive. The [envisioned](#) \$200 billion in overall trade turnover between the two, pledged in 2011 and due by 2020, suddenly looked all but certain. Not only had China leapt into position as Moscow's second-largest trading partner, but the aftermath of Russia's Ukrainian misadventurism was going to rocket the relationship that much faster, and that much further.

The relationship, of course, wasn't one of *prima facie* equality; population numbers, growth projections, and economic heft attested to as much. "But this doesn't mean Russia will be dominated by China," Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, [said](#). "Moscow will likely find a way to craft a special relationship with its partner." Moscow stood well aware of the shadows casing the relationship, of the resources Beijing brought to the table that the Kremlin couldn't hope to match. But the gas provisions, and the shared notion of a multipolar world, were too good to pass. Overlooking the rote necessity of the move, Moscow convinced itself of Chinese comity in welcoming both business relations and geopolitical alignment. China was Russia's out, Russia's reprieve. And partners they would shortly become.

But then, hitches arose. Not all at once; not even necessarily expectedly. But problems quickly cropped up, and quickly piled, reinforcing each other, refracting the underlying fractures existing within the purported partnership. "One can't avoid the impression that this is a new game of 'Let's Pretend!' in which the two dancers understand perfectly well what they are involved in," Brookings's Lilia Shevtsova [found](#). "But do the members of the new 'axis of convenience' (convenient for whom?) know where their tango will bring them?" Spinning panegyrics to partnership is one thing; reifying that partnership, with all of the nuts and bolts and bottom-lines attendant, is another altogether. A relationship built purely on lip service cannot last. As Shevtsova continued, "This very asymmetry makes the relationship fragile, creating [an] impetus for the stronger partner to use the weaker one to serve its interests."

And in that imbalance, projects slipped off the paper, and trundled straight into failure. Take the [\\$400 billion gas deal](#), building the *Power of Siberia*. Prices had been negotiated, finalized - we were told. But no details ever leaked, and now, months later, the project has "[barely progressed](#)." The same went for the Altai line, feeding China's Xinjiang region. This western route discovered even less traction; not only was Xinjiang already flooded with Central Asian gas - states that [once serviced Russia](#), now shuttling their reserves to Beijing - but, as it happens, China's since realized that the planned transit may not altogether be necessary for the country's continued growth. Toss in decimated hydrocarbon prices, a slowing Chinese economy, and concerns about over-stepping US sanctions - the latter of which have also paused Chinese interest in propping Russia's internal finances - and the routes plotted suddenly stand as questionable as before, continuing their decade-long trajectory of futility. Now, the \$200 billion in trade turnover once pledged looked distressingly suspect - all the more [after](#) Sino-Russian trade in the first half of 2015, per Gabuev, "dropped by a whopping 31.4 percent, to \$31 billion."

But economics is only one leg of the crumpled Sino-Russian axis. Geopolitically, not only has China stood wary of Russia's potential malfeasance in Central Asia - Putin's [questioning of Kazakh statehood](#) surely displeased China, who remains eager for stability on its western front - but Beijing has begun to wean itself from the international organizations tethering Moscow and Beijing. China stood willing to weaken the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), effectively neutering the organization by allowing both India and Pakistan to join. Further, China leap-frogged the Russia-led push for a BRICS New Development Bank, instead crafting the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank whole-cloth. And while Russian President Vladimir Putin may try to save face by claiming equanimity between his Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road Economic Belt, it's [clear to all involved](#) that the former remains a mirage of empire, while the latter continues to provide necessary infrastructural investment for Central Asia and beyond. As *Intersection Project's* Vladislav Inozemtsev [recently wrote](#), China's "integration of Central Asia may become integration not with Russia, but in some ways against Russia."

And then there's Ukraine. Where Russia may have once taken heart that China abstained from speaking against Russia's annexation of Crimea, it's since become clear that China [stands nonplussed](#) with Moscow's actions in Ukraine. While Beijing may ape Moscow's rhetoric on sovereignty, you can't help but notice that Chinese Premier Xi Jinping took aim square at Russia's rhetoric of spheres of influence: "The big, strong and rich should not bully the small, weak and poor," Xi [said](#) at the United Nations General Assembly. "...The law of the jungle leaves the weak at the mercy of the strong; it is not the way for countries to conduct their relations." After all, why would Beijing support moves to fracture the country from which it gets its [largest stock of corn](#)?

Twelve months on, twelve months after prognosticators on both sides of the Atlantic claimed the rise of a new Sino-Russian coalition, the partnership is anything but. China maintains a whip-hand over Moscow; Russia, refusing to deign to Chinese demands, puffs its chest and sinks further yet. (While not caving to [nationalist concerns](#) about Chinese land-grabs, at least.) "[The] Kremlin," wrote Shevtsova, "has but two choices: play the role of lap dog, or get ready to whine about how it is being humiliated all over again." Blinded by aspirations of equality, battered by China's realist demands, the choice remains Russia's. But the dreams of *partnyorstvo*, flames of a vision of Eurasian alliance, are off the table, now and for as long as anyone would like.

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