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Recovering Ukraine, dis-aligning Russia: a bet from Paris

In the current highly volatile and liquid international system, the shaping of an apparently ever-strengthening Sino-Russian relationship from a tactical alignment into a strategic partnership is a concrete issue. France appears to be considering in a EU framework Beijing a systemic rival and hence to support a careful rapprochement towards Moscow, in line with the current US administration's leanings.

Soviet/Russian-Chinese relations are long-standing. Historically, one of the most significant phases to look at is the Cold War period, in which an initially solid partnership had been established between the two leading countries of the Communist camp. In this period the balance of power between the two was tilted strongly in favour of Soviet Union; Beijing was the junior partner. The relationship back then was nevertheless uneasy culminating in the conflict that erupted in 1969 on the Ussuri River, leaving dozens dead on both sides. Eventually the relationship broke the senior-junior mould, thanks to the *Pingpāng wàijiāo* (ping-pong diplomacy) that opened direct relations with the USA in 1972.

Today, compared to the balance existing at the time of the Cold War, the situation is hugely different, not only due to the different global context, but to the reciprocal balance of power. Moscow, willy-nilly, is the more junior power, although Beijing is very careful in minimising its overall importance. The balance is against Russia in the sectors of demography, economy, international image and power projection.

Moscow sees clear challenges with the One Belt One Road initiative and its consequent effects over the former imperial areas of Russia's influence like the Far East (Dalniy Vostok), Middle East (Blizhniy Vostok), Eastern Europe (Beijing's led 16+1 Initiative), or Central Asia, with Beijing's expanding its strategic and economic role within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This time the centuries-long encirclement obsession of the *Russkij Mir* (Russian World) could actually be looming.

That said, there are Russian interests that find a commonality with China's: avoid isolation by the Euro-Atlantic constellation, regime survival, superpower status, authoritarian internal politics, and tactical

convergences in several regional theatres (see the first-ever Sino-Russian joint air patrol in the Yellow Sea in July) and, paradoxically, a relative confidence in multilateral arrangements vis-à-vis a more exceptionalist US policy.

Macron's Realpolitik, with the bilateral meeting with Vladimir Putin in Brégançon (19 August 2019), is once again trying to reassert its European leadership, thus overshadowing Germany, and assisting the US Administration in re-including Russia in a wider political conversation hoping to distance Moscow from Beijing and hence to start closing (or freezing again) different crises in Eastern Europe, starting with Ukraine. Like what Washington is trying to implement and could be strengthened with the departure of the National Security Adviser, John Bolton, it is ping-pong diplomacy in reverse.

That said, three main hurdles stand in the way of such policy approach:

- A divided US Administration and Congress on Russia;
- The Russian ambiguity between Euro-Asian hegemony and better relationships on par with the West;
- The position of NATO's neighbours to Russia, some of them still fearing further encroachments and promoting the Pilsudski's Intermarium vision (a sort of grouping of countries connecting the Baltic, the Black and sometimes the Adriatic Sea, stillborn in the Twenties of last century).

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