

China, Russia and Ukraine

Ray McGovern

Ray McGovern was chief of the CIA's Soviet Foreign Policy Branch in the early 1970s, and served at the CIA for 27 years. He worked on the President's Daily Brief under Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Reagan. He now works with Tell the Word, a publishing arm of the ecumenical Church of the Saviour in inner-city Washington.

Washington's role in the *coup d'état* in Kiev on 22 February 2014 has brought the United States a pyrrhic victory, with the West claiming control of Ukraine, albeit with a shaky grip that still requires the crushing of anti-coup rebels in the east. But the high-fiving may be short-lived, once the full consequences of the *putsch* become clear.

What has made the 'victory' so hollow is that the US-backed ouster of elected President Viktor Yanukovich presented Russia's leaders with what they saw as a last-straw-type deceit by the US and its craven satellites in the European Union. Moscow has responded by making a major pivot East to enhance its informal alliance with China and thus strengthen the economic and strategic positions of both countries as a counterweight to Washington and Brussels.



Assistant Secretary of State for European Affairs Victoria Nuland, who pushed for the Ukraine coup and helped pick the post-coup leaders.

In my view, this is the most important result of the year's events in Ukraine, that they have served as a catalyst to more meaningful Russia-China *rapprochement*, which has inched forward over the past

several decades but now has solidified. The signing on 21 May 2014 of a 30-year, \$400 billion natural gas deal between Russia and China was not only a ‘watershed event’ – as Russian President Vladimir Putin said – but carries rich symbolic significance.

The agreement, along with closer geopolitical co-operation between Beijing and Moscow, is of immense significance, and reflects a judgement on the part of Russian leaders that the West’s behaviour over the past two decades has forced the unavoidable conclusion that – for whatever reason – US and European leaders cannot be trusted. Rather, they can be expected to press for strategic advantage through ‘regime change’ and other ‘dark-side’ tactics even in areas where Russia holds the high cards.

This Russian-Chinese *rapprochement* has been a gradual, cautious process – somewhat akin to porcupines mating, given the tense and sometimes hostile relations between the two neighbours dating back centuries, and flaring up again when the two were rival communist powers.

Yet, overcoming that very bitter past, Russian President Putin – a decade ago – finalised an important agreement on very delicate border issues. He also signed an agreement on future joint development of Russian energy reserves. In October 2004, during a visit to Beijing, Putin claimed that relations between the two countries had reached ‘unparalleled heights’.

But talk is cheap – and progress towards a final energy agreement was intermittent until the Ukraine crisis. When Russia supported Crimea’s post-coup referendum to leave Ukraine and rejoin Russia, the West responded with threats of ‘sectoral sanctions’ against Russia’s economy, thus injecting new urgency for Moscow to complete the energy agreement with China. The \$400 billion gas deal – the culmination of ten-plus years’ work – has provided powerful substance to the Russia-China relationship.

Indeed, you could trace the evolution of this historic *détente* back to other Western provocations and broken promises. Six months before his 2004 visit to China, Putin watched NATO fold under its wings Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia. Five years before that, Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic had become NATO members.

A major missed opportunity

Not only were these Western encroachments towards Russia’s border alarming to Moscow, but the moves also represented a breach of trust. Several months before the fall of the Berlin Wall in November 1989, President George H. W. Bush had appealed for ‘a Europe whole and free’. And, in February 1990, his Secretary of State, James Baker, promised

Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would move ‘not one inch’ to the East, if Russia pulled its 24 divisions out of East Germany.

Yet, a triumphant Washington soon spurned this historic opportunity to achieve a broader peace. Instead, US officials took advantage of the Soviet bloc’s implosion in Eastern Europe and later the collapse of the Soviet Union itself. As for that ‘Europe whole and free’ business, it was as if the European Union and NATO had put up signs: ‘Russians Need Not Apply’. Then, exploiting Moscow’s disarray and weakness, President Bill Clinton reneged on Baker’s NATO promise by pushing the military alliance eastward.

Small wonder that Putin and his associates were prospecting for powerful new friends ten years ago – first and foremost, China. And, the West kept providing the Kremlin with new incentives as NATO recruiters remained aggressive. NATO heads of state, meeting in Bucharest in April 2008, declared:

‘NATO welcomes Ukraine’s and Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership in NATO. We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO.’

That led to some very foolish adventurism on the part of former Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, who had been listening to the wrong people in Washington and thought he could play tough with the rebellious regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, including attacks on Russian peacekeeping troops. Russian forces gave the Georgians what Moscow normally calls a ‘resolute rebuff’.

The 2008 declaration of NATO’s intent is still on the books, however. And recent events in Ukraine, as a violent *putsch* overthrew elected President Yanukovich and installed a pro-Western regime in Kiev, became the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.

During an interview with CNBC on 23 May 2014, President Putin bemoaned the still-pending NATO expansion in the context of Ukraine:

‘*Coup d’état* takes place, they refuse to talk to us. So we think the next step Ukraine is going to take, it’s going to become a NATO member. They’ve refused to engage in any dialogue. We’re saying military, NATO military infrastructure is approaching our borders; they say not to worry, it has nothing to do with you. But tomorrow Ukraine might become a NATO member, and the day after tomorrow missile defense units of NATO could be deployed in this country.’

Putin raised the issue again on 24 May, accusing the West of ignoring Russia’s interests – in particular, by leaving open the possibility that

Ukraine could one day join NATO. ‘Where is the guarantee that, after the forceful change of power, Ukraine will not tomorrow end up in NATO?’ Putin wanted to know.

Forward-deployed missile defense

Putin keeps coming back specifically to ‘missile defence’ in NATO countries – or waters – because he sees it as a strategic (arguably, an existential) threat to Russia’s national security. During his marathon press conference on 17 April 2014, he was quite direct in articulating Russia’s concerns:

‘I’ll use this opportunity to say a few words about our talks on missile defence. This issue is no less, and probably even more important than NATO’s eastward expansion. Incidentally, our decision on Crimea was partially prompted by this ... We followed certain logic: If we don’t do anything, Ukraine will be drawn into NATO ... and NATO ships would dock in Sevastopol ... [Key elements of the latest missile defence system are ship-borne.]

Regarding the deployment of US missile defence elements, this is not a defensive system, but part of offensive potential deployed far away from home ... At the expert level, everyone understands very well that if these systems are deployed closer to our borders, our ground-based strategic missiles will be within their striking range.’

On this neuralgic issue of missile defence in Europe, ostensibly aimed at hypothetical future missiles fired by Iran, former Secretary of Defence Robert Gates has taken a perverse delight in having increased concerns in Moscow that such a system might eventually be used against Russian inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).

In his book *Duty*, Gates defends himself against accusations from the Right that it was his concern for Russian sensitivities that prompted him to revise the missile defence plan for Europe. The revised system included sea-based missiles that were not only cheaper but also more easily and cheaply produced. (Does anyone see why Putin might have been concerned about NATO ships based in Crimea?)

‘I sincerely believed the new program was better — more in accord with the political realities in Europe and more effective against the emerging Iranian threat,’ Gates added. ‘While there certainly were some in the State Department and the White House who believed the third site in Europe was incompatible with the Russian “reset”, we in Defense did not. Making the Russians happy wasn’t exactly on my to-do list.’

Gates proudly noted that the Russians quickly concluded that the revised plan was even worse from their perspective, as it eventually might have

capabilities against Russian inter-continental missiles.

As for President Obama, in an exchange picked up by microphones during his meeting with then-Russian President, Dmitri Medvedev, in Seoul in March 2012, Obama asked him to tell incoming President Putin to give him some ‘space’ on controversial issues, ‘particularly missile defense’.

Obama seemed to be suggesting that he might be able to be more understanding of Russian fears later. ‘After my election I have more flexibility,’ Obama added. But it seems a safe bet that Putin and Medvedev are still waiting to see what may eventuate from the ‘space’ they gave Obama.

Since taking over as Secretary of State in February 2013, John Kerry seems to be doing his best to fill Gates’s ‘tough-guy’ role, baiting the Russian bear. Kremlin leaders, after watching how close Kerry came to getting the US to start a major war with Syria on evidence he knew was, at best, flimsy, simply cannot afford to dismiss as adolescent chest-pounding Kerry’s nonchalant remarks on the possibility that the troubles in Ukraine could lead to nuclear confrontation.

As much of a loose cannon as Kerry has been, he is, after all, US Secretary of State. In an extraordinary interview with the *Wall Street Journal* on 28 April 2014, Kerry made clear that the Obama administration and the US military/intelligence establishment are ‘fully aware’ that escalation of the crisis in Ukraine could lead to nuclear war. Are we supposed to say, ‘wow, great’?

A half-century perspective

Though my Sino-Russian lens is 50 years old, I think that the perspective of time can be an advantage. In January 1964, as a CIA analyst, I became responsible for analysing Soviet policy towards China. The evidence we had – mostly, but not solely, public acrimony – made it clear to us that the Sino-Soviet dispute was real and was having an important impact on world events. We were convinced that reconciliation between the two giants was simply out of the question. Our assessments were right at the time, but we ultimately were wrong about the irreconcilable differences. It turns out that nothing is immutable, especially in the face of ham-handed US diplomacy.

The process of ending Moscow’s unmitigated hostility toward China began in earnest during Gorbachev’s era, although his predecessors did take some halting steps in that direction. It takes two to tango, and we analysts were surprised when Gorbachev’s Chinese counterparts proved receptive to his overtures and welcomed a mutual agreement to thin out

troops along the 7,500-kilometer border.

In more recent years, however, the impetus toward *rapprochement* has been the mutual need to counterbalance the 'one remaining superpower in the world'. The more that President George W. Bush and his 'neo-conservative' helpers threw their weight around in the Middle East and elsewhere, the more incentive China and Russia saw in moving closer together. Gone is the 'great-power chauvinist' epithet they used to hurl at each other, though it would seem a safe bet that the epithet emerges from time to time in private conversations between Chinese and Russian officials regarding current US policy.

The border agreement signed by Putin in Beijing in October 2004 was important inasmuch as it settled the last of the border disputes, which had led to armed clashes in the 1960s and '70s, especially along the extensive riverine border where islands were claimed by both sides. The backdrop, though, was China's claim to 1.5 million square kilometers taken from China under what it called 'unequal treaties' dating back to the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. This irredentism, a staple of Chinese anti-Soviet rhetoric in those days, has disappeared.

In the late 1960s, the USSR reinforced its ground forces near China from 13 to 21 divisions. By 1971, the number had grown to 44 divisions, and Chinese leaders began to see a more immediate threat from the USSR than from the US. Enter Henry Kissinger, who visited Beijing in 1971 to arrange the precedent-breaking visit by President Richard Nixon the next year. What followed was some highly imaginative diplomacy orchestrated by Kissinger and Nixon to exploit the mutual fear that China and the USSR held for each other, and the imperative each saw to compete for improved ties with Washington.

Triangular diplomacy

The Soviet leaders seemed to sweat this situation the most. Washington's clever exploitation of the triangular relationship was consequential; it helped facilitate major, verifiable arms control agreements between the US and USSR and even the challenging Four Power Agreement on Berlin. As for Vietnam, the Russians went so far as to blame China for impeding a peaceful solution to the war.

It was one of those rare junctures at which CIA analysts could in good conscience chronicle the effects of the Nixon-Kissinger approach and conclude that it seemed to be having the desired effect *vis-à-vis* Moscow. We could say so because it clearly was. In early 1972, between President Nixon's first summits in Beijing and Moscow, our analytic reports

underscored the reality that Sino-Soviet rivalry was, to both sides, a highly debilitating phenomenon. Not only had the two countries forfeited the benefits of co-operation, but each also felt compelled to devote huge effort to negate the policies of the other. A significant dimension had been added to the rivalry as the US moved to cultivate simultaneously better relations with both. The two saw themselves in a crucial race to cultivate good relations with the US.

The Soviet and Chinese leaders could not fail to notice how all this had enhanced the US bargaining position. But we analysts regarded them as cemented into an intractable adversarial relationship by a deeply-felt set of emotional beliefs, in which national, ideological and racial factors reinforced one another.

Although the two countries recognised the price they were paying, neither could see a way out. The only prospect for improvement, we suggested, was the hope that more sensible leaders would emerge in each country. At the time, we branded that a vain hope and predicted only the most superficial improvements in relations between Moscow and Beijing. On that last point, we were wrong. Mao Zedong's and Nikita Khrushchev's successors proved to have cooler heads, and in 1969 border talks resumed. It took years to chip away at the heavily encrusted mutual mistrust, but by the mid-1980s we were warning policymakers that we had been wrong; that 'normalization' of relations between Moscow and Beijing had already occurred — slowly but surely, despite continued Chinese protestations that such would be impossible unless the Russians capitulated to all China's conditions. For their part, the Soviet leaders had become more comfortable operating in the triangular environment and were no longer suffering the debilitating effects of a headlong race with China to develop better relations with Washington.

The Détente

Economics now is clearly an important driver from both Moscow's and Beijing's point of view, but the sweeping \$400 billion natural gas deal, including provision for exploration, construction and extraction is bound to have profound political significance, as well. If memory serves, during the sixties, annual trade between the USSR and China hovered between \$200 million and \$400 million. It had grown to \$57 billion by 2008, and hit \$93 billion in 2013.

Growing military co-operation is of equal importance. China has become Russia's arms industry's premier customer, with the Chinese spending billions on weapons, many of them top of the line. For Russia,

these sales are an important source of export earnings and keep key segments of its defence industry afloat. Beijing, cut off from arms sales from the West, has come to rely on Russia more and more for sophisticated arms and technology.

Author Pepe Escobar notes that when Russia's Star Wars-style, ultra-sophisticated S-500 air defense anti-missile system comes on line in 2018, Beijing is sure to want to purchase some version of it. Meanwhile, Russia is about to sell dozens of state-of-the-art Sukhoi Su-35 jet fighters to the Chinese as Beijing and Moscow move to seal an aviation-industrial partnership.

Those of us analysts immersed in Sino-Soviet relations in the sixties and seventies, when the Russians and Chinese appeared likely to persist in their bitter feud forever, used to poke fun at the Sino-Soviet treaty of 14 February 1950, which was defunct well before its 30-year term. Given the deepening acrimony, the official congratulatory messages recognising the anniversary of the Valentine's Day agreement seemed amusingly ironic. Nevertheless, we dutifully scanned the messages for any hint of warmth; year after year we found none.

But there is another treaty now and the relationship it codifies is no joke. Just as the earlier Sino-Soviet divide was deftly exploited by an earlier generation of US diplomats, clumsy actions by the more recent cast of US 'diplomats' have helped close that divide, even if few in Washington are aware of the significant geopolitical change that it symbolizes.

The treaty of friendship and co-operation, signed in Moscow by Presidents Putin and Jiang Zemin on 16 July 2001, may not be as robust as the one in 1950 with its calls for 'military and other assistance' in the event one is attacked. But the new treaty does reflect agreement between China and Russia to collaborate in diluting what each sees as US domination of the post-Cold War international order. (And that was *before* the US invasion of Iraq and *before* the US-backed coup in Ukraine.)

Earthquakes begin slowly

Like subterranean geological plates shifting slowly below the surface, changes with immense political repercussions can occur so gradually as to be imperceptible — until the earthquake hits and the old order is shaken or shattered. For a very long time, the consensus in academe, as well as in government, has been that, despite the *rapprochement* between China and Russia over the past several years, both countries retained greater interest in developing good relations with the US than with each other. That was certainly the case decades ago. But I doubt that is the case now. Either

way, the implications for US foreign policy are immense. Anatol Lieven of King's College, London, has noted:

‘Whether in the Euro-Atlantic or the Asia-Pacific, great power relations are becoming more contentious, with a loose Eurasian coalition emerging to reduce the US domination of global politics. ... The consolidation of Russia's pivot to Asia is an important result of the first phase of the Ukraine crisis, which will continue to reshape the global strategic landscape. The US has no other than Victoria Nuland, and Hillary Clinton who installed her as Assistant Secretary of State for Europe, to thank for this foolish mess.’

As the folks from the old *People's Daily* used to say, this could ‘come to a no-good end’.