

Racing to Multipolarity

The myopic focus on weakening Russia has had the unintended consequence of strengthening China.

By [Ted Snider](#)

Global Research, April 03, 2023

[The American Conservative](#) 27 March 2023

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [History](#)

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In a quest to maintain its hegemony in a unipolar world, American foreign policy [strategy](#) has sought to weaken a Russia that it sees as an "acute threat" and to confront and contain a China that it sees as "the most comprehensive and serious challenge to U.S. national security."

The immediate challenge is Russia, the theory goes, but the long-term challenge is China. It is not strategically optimal to fight both superpowers at once. Russia has to be weakened so China can be confronted in its challenge to the U.S.-led unipolar world.

The attempt to weaken Russia in the war in Ukraine, though, may be having the ironic effect of strengthening China's role in an emerging multipolar world.

An unprecedented sanctions regime was intended to punish Russia for its invasion of Ukraine and to prevent it from executing that invasion. It has not only failed to accomplish that goal; it also has had the unintended consequence of pushing Russia closer to China. Sealing Russia off from western markets forced Russia to look east to China, India, the Eurasian community, and a global community of sanctioned nations. So the sanctions regime has in fact hastened the advent of multipolarity, as well as strengthened China's position abroad.

Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin are "[in constant communication](#)." And on March 20, [Xi arrived in Russia](#) for talks that are aimed, in part, to "reaffirm the special nature of the Russia-China partnership."

On December 13, Xi [promised](#) that China "will work with Russia to extend strong mutual support on issues concerning each other's core interests, and deepen practical cooperation in trade, agriculture, connectivity and other areas." A week later, Xi [said](#) that China is

“ready to build up strategic cooperation with Russia, providing each other with development opportunities and remaining global partners for the benefit of our countries...” The Chinese Foreign Ministry said that “Any attempt to stop China and Russia from marching forward is doomed to fail” and that “China and Russia will deepen exchanges at all levels, and promote China-Russia relations and cooperation in all areas to a higher level...”

Russian-Chinese trade has increased dramatically. In his recent address to the Federal Assembly, Putin [said](#) that “the Russian economy has embarked on a new growth cycle. Experts believe that it will rely on a fundamentally new model and structure. New, promising global markets, including the Asia-Pacific, are taking precedence...” He promised that Russia “will expand promising foreign economic ties and build new logistics corridors. ... This will, in part, allow us to considerably expand our ties with Southeast Asian markets.”

The sanctions on Russia have had the unintended consequence of more firmly coupling Russia and China, a geopolitical shift away from unipolarity.

The American insistence on a world of blocs in which countries must choose sides—and face consequences if they do not align with the U.S. and sanction Russia—has not resonated well in most of the world. Large countries such as India, Brazil, and South Africa have refused to sanction Russia, preferring to align with China and its multipolar vision. India has maintained its regional concerns against China but has refused to join the American global rivalry with China; it has been a U.S. partner but has maintained its very close partnership with Russia. India has insisted on abstaining in U.N. votes and refused to sanction Russia; in fact, it has increased its trade with Russia.

While large countries like India maintain preferences for China’s multipolar world over America’s unipolar world, smaller countries have also reasserted their right to neutrality and rejected the U.S. unipolar vision. They have refused to join sanctions or to take sides, asserting a right to choose their own national interests. Like India, Saudi Arabia has [said](#) that “we do not believe in polarization or in choosing between sides.”

It is hard for Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa to hear the Manichean message of good and evil and democracy versus autocracy. They have memories, and the U.S. criticism of Russia’s violation of state sovereignty and of territorial borders smells of hypocrisy. They remember their democracies being replaced by autocracies in U.S.-backed coups. They too tend more toward China’s message of multipolarity. They want to benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative and from China’s economic growth without having to pick a side or face consequences. They too listen with greater interest to China’s investment proposals that do not require ideological alignment or economic or political structural adjustments.

American attempts to coerce countries into opposing and sanctioning Russia have moved them instead into a position of reasserting nonalignment and shaping a world that resonates with China’s multipolar worldview and strengthens China’s economic and diplomatic role in that multipolar world.

While the world has been focused on the U.S. as the power that will decide whether they will [block](#) or [encourage](#) negotiations to end the war, an unforeseen alternative has emerged. What if China played the role of superpower broker, and Ukraine and Russia signed an agreement, bypassing U.S. involvement?

On February 24, China [published](#) its “Position on the Political Settlement of the Ukraine

Crisis.” It is not yet a fully developed settlement proposal, but rather a declaration of China’s position and a pledge that China is willing to assume “a constructive role in this regard.”

The emergence of China on the diplomatic front is a hint at the potential of a multipolarity. It could be China, not the U.S., that rises to the role of broker of a diplomatic settlement, sidelining the U.S. and allowing China to shape the postwar world.

This potential was demonstrated on March 10 when China brokered a transformative agreement between rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia without American involvement.

China’s published position explicitly stipulates multipolarity. After insisting on the strict observance of international law and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all countries, point one of the position paper declares that “all countries, big or small, strong or weak, rich or poor, are equal members of the international community.” That is the negation of a unipolar world and the very definition of a multipolar world.

The second point is “abandoning the Cold War mentality.” This point reflects Russia’s long demand for an “effective and sustainable European security architecture” that transcends “bloc confrontation” and treats Russia as an equal power in a transatlantic security architecture in which it is not a subordinate nation but an equal in a multipolar world.

This second point challenges America’s unipolar right to expand NATO and enforce U.S. hegemony: “The security of a region should not be achieved by strengthening or expanding military blocs.” It insists that “the security of a country should not be pursued at the expense of others” and that “all parties should oppose the pursuit of one’s own security at the cost of others’ security....”

Russia has long countered the U.S. citation of the international principle that states have the free and sovereign right to choose their own security alignments with the citation of the equally binding principle of the indivisibility of security. This principle says that the security of one state should not be purchased at the expense of the security of another, as Richard Sakwa, professor of Russian and European Politics at the University of Kent, has [pointed out](#).

The U.S. has insisted on the first as a defense of NATO’s open door policy for Ukraine and the eastward expansion of its hegemony. Russia has insisted that NATO expansion to its very borders threatens its core security interests. In a conversation with Biden on December 7, 2021, Putin said that “every country is entitled to choose the most acceptable way to ensure its security, but this should be done so as not to encroach on the interests of other parties and not undermine the security of other countries.... We believe that ensuring security must be global and cover everyone equally.” Russia has even pointed out that NATO’s own principles resolve not to “threaten the legitimate interests” of other states.

China’s position challenges the U.S. expanding its hegemony by increasing the scope of its bloc and tipping the balance in further favor of a U.S.-led unipolar world.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has strengthened the transatlantic community. The U.S. and the European members of NATO have been united in their sanctions of Russia and their supply of weapons to Ukraine.

But there have been schisms and challenges. Biden [promised](#) that “if Russia invades... there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2. We will bring an end to it”; Victoria Nuland’s [assured](#) that

“if Russia invades Ukraine, one way or another Nord Stream 2 will not move forward”; and Antony Blinken [celebrated](#) the sabotage as a “tremendous opportunity.” These statements combine with [admissions from American officials](#) that the deed was carried out by a “pro-Ukrainian group” to suggest that it took a historic act of sabotage, an act of war, to keep Germany fully on board in America’s sanction regime. It took cutting Germany and Europe off from their crucial Russian fuel supply by blowing up the Nord Stream pipeline.

If China becomes more involved in the war in Ukraine, either by asserting itself as a diplomatic power or by aiding Russia with [nonlethal aid](#) or, for that matter, [weapons](#), the U.S., which is already insisting on shrinking economic cooperation with China, could demand more from its European partners.

The difficulty of persuading Germany to uncouple from China, especially when it has already been cut off from Russia, was illustrated by German Chancellor Olaf Scholz’s November trip to Beijing. Scholz defied the U.S. and NATO by becoming the first G7 leader to go to Beijing to meet with President Xi Jinping, who has supported Putin throughout the war. [Scholz was accompanied](#) on his trip by top German business leaders, including the CEOs of Volkswagen, BMW, BASF, Bayer and Deutsche Bank.

China is Germany’s most important trading partner. Since the Russian invasion of China, Germany’s has [increased](#) its investments in and economic dependence on China. It will be more difficult to pressure Germany to cut its Chinese economic ties than its Russian ones. It is asking a lot of Germany to tell it to cut ties with both.

A growing role for China in the current conflict could force a scenario in which the unipolar world is challenged by asking Germany and Europe to side with the U.S. and banish China. There is the hazardous potential of a decision that could divide the U.S.-led unipolar world and strengthen a new multipolar reality.

The attempt to weaken Russia in the war in Ukraine may have had the unintended consequence of strengthening China in a multipolar world that weakening Russia was intended to prevent.

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Ted Snider is a columnist on U.S. foreign policy and history at [Antiwar.com](#). He is also a frequent contributor to [Responsible Statecraft](#) as well as other outlets.

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