Three turns in the evolution of China–Russia presidential pseudo-alliance

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Abstract
The unique quality of relations between Russia and China cannot be captured by the term “partnership,” but the development of high-level ties does not signify a process of alliance building. The two states stand, in geopolitical terms, back-to-back to each other, as Russia gives priority attention to the confrontation on its Western theatre and China focuses of security matters in East Asia and trade relations with the United States. The China–Russia presidential pseudo-alliance has experienced at least three major turns in its development since the middle of this decade. Presently, it has transformed into a one-sided Russian dependency upon indifferent China and is certain to experience further challenges, as the two parties proceed along clearly diverging courses.

Key words
China, crisis, partnership, Russia, security

1 | INTRODUCTION

The extracordial reception granted to Russia’s President Vladimir Putin during his state visit to Beijing in June 2018 was supposed to demonstrate the progress achieved in building the China–Russia strategic partnership. Both Putin and China’s President Xi Jinping strive to outdo one another in superior definers for this partnership with adjectives such as “comprehensive” or “all-encompassing.” There is indeed a unique quality in the present-day relations between the...
two states, which goes beyond the conventional definition of “strategic partnership” but cannot qualify as alliance. The proposition that an alliance is in the making attracts much expert debate, but the official discourses in both states carefully avoid it, and the arguments in favour amount to a mix of speculations and fears.¹

It is not only the obvious weakness of economic ties between fast-growing China and declining Russia that makes the prospect of an alliance doubtful; it is also the striking divergence of their geopolitical priorities. China is predominantly concerned with the remarkably peaceful conflict developments in East Asia and focuses on managing the hugely important relations with the United States.² Russia is engaged in an evolving confrontation with the West and the United States and concentrates material and “hybrid” efforts on its Western theatre, so its “pivot to Asia” remains largely declarative.³ The two huge Eurasian neighbours stand—in terms of geopolitical orientation—back to back, so the term “axis,” even if supplemented by the qualifier “of convenience” (suggested by Bobo Lo) is not entirely correct and loaded by misleading historical connotations (Lo, 2008).⁴ For the lack of better term, “pseudo-alliance” can serve as the descriptor of relations that are deliberately presented as much closer and richer in substance than they really are.⁵

One important feature of this pseudo-alliance is the prominent role of the two leaders in upgrading it, so the adjective “presidential” appears appropriate. Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are indeed going to great lengths exhibiting perfect rapport and awarding one another the highest decorations. It is not difficult to discern falsity in this show of friendliness; for that matter, an attentive observer would notice that Putin did not really enjoy the lavish reception in Beijing, which reminded him of Russia’s deepening dependency upon the super-power-building China.⁶ The fact that the two control-obsessed rulers preside over increasingly authoritarian regimes does not make them natural friends.⁷ Their backgrounds, formatting experiences, and personal preferences are so different that the limited mutual understanding allows for very little trust between the two autocrats (Baev, 2016a).

This top-driven relationship may appear stable and reliable, but in fact, it is fluid and has registered at least three major turns since the middle of this decade. The first one happened soon after the eruption of the Ukraine crisis in spring 2014, when Russia was in a desperate need to upgrade its ties with China in order to counter the mounting pressure from the West, and Xi Jinping obliged. The second turn occurred in the second half of 2016, when China clearly preferred Hillary Clinton to become the next U.S. president, whereas Russia opted to interfere in the U.S. elections seeking to pave the way for Donald Trump’s victory. This interference was successful beyond expectations, but it has backfired badly, causing a severe and still mounting damage to the Russia–U.S. relations, whereas China has stayed clear of this fray and even benefitted from it. The third turn is happening with the extraordinary erratic development of the North Korean crisis, partly discharged with the Singapore summit on June 12, 2018, but

¹A typical sample is Majumdar (2018).
²On China’s key role in sustaining the East Asian peace, see Tønnesson (2017).
³On Russia’s preoccupation with its Western theatre, see Baev (2018).
⁴For a recent reevaluation of this idea, see Lo (2017).
⁵One supporting view for applying the “pseudo” modifier is Huang (2017). An earlier version of this article used the term “cartel,” but the criticism of the reviewers convinced the author in its confusing connotations: China and Russia are indeed not striving to control any market, economic, or geopolitical.
⁶A sharp description can be found in Kolesnikov (2018).
⁷This point is elaborated in Brands (2018).
managed primarily through an unprecedented cooperation between the United States and China, whereas Russia is left grumbling and following Beijing’s lead.

This article examines the drivers and parameters of these turns, aiming at assessing the range and directions of possible further shifts that could transform or derail the ambiguous presidential pseudo-alliance. Policy planning in both Beijing and Moscow is severely secretive, so the conclusions are deductive and never free from bias, hard as this author has tried to overcome his.

2 | THE UPGRADE UNDERPINNED BY THE “GAS DEAL”

Gradual improvement of the Soviet–Chinese relations started back in the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev refrained from any criticism of the brutal suppression of the Tiananmen protests. The implosion of the USSR in 1991 was a big shock for China, but Boris Yeltsin did his best to put the relations back on track and even pronounced a “new era” in bilateral ties visiting Beijing in December 1992. Putin inherited a budding “strategic partnership” and continued on this pattern, making some territorial compromises in order to conclude the border agreement (2008), which was supposed to draw the final line under the long dispute (Weitz, 2008). Russian oil export became the main subject of deal making, whereas arms export and construction of nuclear power plants were also of importance. Already at the start of this decade, as Moscow began to entertain ideas about a “turn to Asia” preparing for the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok, China’s strong rise gradually put Russia in the position of a junior partner in the formally cordial relationship.

The eruption of the Ukraine crisis in spring 2014 delivered Russia into a profound and deepening confrontation with the West, in which it had a significantly weaker position than the one that USSR occupied during the Cold War—and did not have a single ally. Expansion of ties with the Asia-Pacific, which had been a promising proposition at the start of the decade, became a matter of crucial necessity, so even those Moscow experts who specialized in the U.S. and European matters started to argue for an urgent “pivot” to the East (Karaganov, 2016). In this dynamic and heterogeneous region, Japan and South Korea, Taiwan, and Australia are U.S. allies and parts of the collective West (even if South Korea opted not to join the sanctions regime), so the Russian pivot was inevitably reduced to strengthening ties with China. The Chinese leadership harboured and even expressed reservations against Russian “revisionism,” seeing it as disruptive for the natural evolution of the world order. Beijing could not approve or even condone Russia’s annexation of Crimea but found it beneficial to grant support to its troubled partner. The expected benefits included the possibility to control the development of traditional ties between Russia and Vietnam, and in particular to check the export of arms to the latter.

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8Useful overview of that period of relations is Wishnick (2001). An examination of the content of early “strategic partnership” is Jacobsen (1998).
9The early signs of Russia’s subordinate position are identified in Kuhrt (2014).
10One insightful examination of the Chinese stance is Zhao (2018).
11Bobo Lo (2015, see particularly pp. 141–150) argued about the instrumental character of that conditional support.
12Not a single new deal on exporting arms has been signed between Moscow and Hanoi since 2014; see on that Baev and Tønnesson (2015).
The upgrade in strategic partnership was formally registered during Putin’s visit to Shanghai in May 2014, when Xi Jinping (then still relatively new in the job) praised the ties with Russia as a model for the “new type of great power relations.” This amounted to giving a signal for the due propaganda support to partnership building with Russia, and—more importantly—it also marked a beginning of his “new thinking” about international affairs.\(^{13}\) He sought to promote this “new type” idea first and foremost for reconfiguring China’s relations with the United States, but it did not get much traction in Washington, where concerns about China’s discriminatory trade policy were adding urgency to the efforts at bringing the negotiations on the Trans-Pacific Partnership to a successful conclusion.\(^{14}\) Xi Jinping achieved greater success in improving these pivotal relations during the state visit to the United States in September 2015, but it is characteristic that China’s expanded ties with Russia were of little if any relevance for securing that success.\(^{15}\) Moscow was in fact getting uncomfortable with the progress in the China–U.S. relations suspecting that the implementation of Xi Jinping’s “new type” proposition implied that Russia was to all intents and purposes excluded from the ranks of “great powers.”\(^{16}\)

Such worries were rooted in the reality of prime emphasis on the energy matters in the crucially—for Moscow—important upgrade its of strategic partnership with China to the level of pseudo-alliance. In the mid-2014 (right at the end of the period of high oil prices), such emphasis appeared justified, and the agreement on exporting to China of 38 billion m\(^3\) of natural gas for 30 years was hailed as a “$400 billion deal.”\(^{17}\) In hindsight, it is interesting to note that Beijing did not try to take the maximum advantage of Moscow’s desperate need to conclude that deal in order to establish for fact the upgrade in bilateral relations. Chinese negotiators accepted some provisions that Gazprom had insisted upon through years of hard bargaining, such as the calculation of gas value based on oil price. What the Chinese parties to the contract refused to provide was any sort of prepayment or a low-rate loan, so the commercial risks related to the construction of the 3,200-km-long Sila Sibiri (Power of Siberia) pipeline and the development of two “green fields” (Kovyktka and Chayanda) were entirely on the Gazprom’s books (Chow, 2015).

Overall, the mid-2014 upgrade of the China–Russia relations was successful in demonstrating that the partnership was lifted up to a new level. That presidential deal-making did not bridge their political differences, either on the war in Ukraine or regarding interactions with the United States, and its petro-economic foundation was far weaker than it appeared.

### 3 | THE PLATEAU DISRUPTED BY THE “RUSSIA-GATE”

As its confrontation with the West was getting more rigid in 2015–2016, Russia sought to achieve a further upgrade in its strategic partnership with China, but this goal proved to be elusive. There was no shortage of affirmative statements at the many high-level meetings, but those could not quite cover up the fact that the bilateral trade, which the two presidents solemnly promised to expand, actually contracted by about a third (Gabuev, 2015). The sharp decline of oil price delivered a severe blow to the plans for implementation of the 2014 gas contract, and Gazprom had to request a postponement of the first delivery from 2019 into indefinite

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\(^{13}\)A thorough analysis of this proposition can be found in Hao (2015).

\(^{14}\)That initial response is examined in Li and Xu (2014).

\(^{15}\)A useful reflection on that visit is Kun (2015); see also Wertime (2015).

\(^{16}\)One competent Russian opinion is Golovin (2015).

\(^{17}\)A characteristically upbeat Russian assessment is Grivach (2014).
future. Putin tried to negotiate the second gas deal on delivering large volumes to Xinjian from Yamal through the Altai pipeline, but the offer was politely turned down (Sharkov, 2016). Instead, Beijing agreed to enter into the struggling Yamal-LNG project, but that deal was driven not by the interest in receiving insignificant volumes of gas from the Arctic but by Xi Jinping’s interest in doing Putin a big favour by rescuing a project executed by his cronies.19

Seeking to compensate the diminishing role of the gas business, Moscow added a new dimension to the upgraded strategic partnership: export of its most modern weapon systems. Two important contracts on producing for China the long-range S-400 surface-to-air missiles and the Su-35 fighters (only 24 aircraft) were signed in early 2016 after long bargaining.20 The Russian top brass harboured concerns about the massive superiority of Chinese conventional forces in the Far Eastern theatre and about the military reform in China, accelerated since 2015.21 They were overruled because the key consideration in the Kremlin was that the proto-alliance had to be prove solid by the demonstrated readiness to contribute to modernization of the armed forces of the indispensable partner.

The Chinese authorities sought to ease Russian concerns by reassurances in the absence of any territorial claims, but it was not lost on Moscow that they also employed the discourse on rejection of historical injustice of the “unequal treaties,” including the Aigun Treaty (1858) with Russia (Denisov, 2015). Indignation against these injustices runs deep in the not entirely controllable public opinion in China, and the installation of granite markers on the newly demarcated border near the city of Hunchun provoked an explosion of protests in the Chinese social networks against accepting this “colonial” border (Yu, 2015). Xi Jinping opted to visit the Heixiazi island (Bolshoi Ussuriisky, transferred to Chinese control in October 2008) close to Khabarovsk and extolled the prospects of cross-border ties (Xuezhen, 2016). He was careful to avoid any controversial issues but still reminded about the need to increase readiness and capabilities of the border troops (Wood, 2016). Economic and social problems in China’s “rust belt” in the north-east are generating more tensions than incentives for expanding contacts with the Russian chronically depressed Far East.22 By the start of 2017, it had become clear that no amount of high-level bonhomie could stimulate an inflow of Chinese investments that were eagerly awaited in Vladivostok (Zuenko, 2017).

The progressive weakness of the economic foundation of the pseudo-alliance increased Russia’s leadership eagerness to convert its proactive policy in the Middle East into an asset in the relationship with China. The military intervention into the Syrian civil war launched in late September 2015 had so many aims and drivers that it could be described as overdetermined.23 What is relevant here, however, is the implicit desire to use this high-risk enterprise for proving to China Russia’s value as a strategic partner. It is hardly a coincidence that Putin made the final decision on the Syrian endeavour immediately after returning from Beijing, where he attended the V-day military parade and found the need to demonstrate that Russia had an advantage in the readiness to project power.24 China’s leadership was probably

18 Gazprom insisted that the label “$400 billion deal” remained relevant but then had to admit that there was no protection mechanism against the price drop so the real value came down closer to $250 billion (Krutikhin, 2016).

19 This point was explicitly made by Gabuev (2016a).

20 These contracts are competently described in Kashin (2017) and Kashin (2016).

21 Russian assessments of Chinese military reform are presented in Kokoshin (2016).

22 One informed Russian assessment is Zuenko (2016).

23 This point is elaborated in Baev (2016b).

24 Good impression of the Beijing show could be gained from Hunt, Jiang, and Ripley (2015).
impressed with that swift intervention but also aware of the negative impact on Russia’s international standing, particularly from the cruel siege of Aleppo, and so was only moderately supportive to Moscow’s efforts at prompting the al-Assad regime (Pauley, 2018). The key concern for Beijing has always been the security of oil supplies from the Gulf, so it treads carefully in the matters pertaining to the evolving conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. One calculated step in building up its presence in the immediate vicinity of the Yemen war zone was the construction of a military base in Djibouti. This experimental project has required careful low-profile cooperation with the United States and France, but Russia has no strategic reach to this conflict-rich area.25

All these fast conflict developments and slow diplomatic dances had kept the China–Russia pseudo-alliance on an even plateau up until the autumn 2016, when the U.S. elections campaign propelled the two partners in different directions. Beijing maintained politically correct neutrality but implicitly indicated that it would have much preferred Hillary Clinton to become the next president, if only because predictability was a quality of leadership that China valued above much else (Carter, 2016).26 Moscow not only strongly preferred Donald Trump to win but also executed a complex clandestine campaign of interference in the course of elections in order to pave the way for his victory. The full extent of this unprecedented virtual attack is yet to be uncovered (and maybe never will), but one thing is certain: It was successful beyond expectations.27 There is no need to examine here the steadily accumulating evidence or to assess the impact factor of different channels of influence; there is, nevertheless, one aspect that is relevant for this analysis. For many years, China was seen as the main cyber threat to the United States and the major source of hacking and virtual theft of classified data. This problem was directly addressed during Xi Jinping’s visit to the United States in September 2015—and the results of the agreement were tangible and substantial.28 Russia made a claim for the newly vacant place of the U.S. main cyber adversary having neither experience in, nor capabilities for executing operations in this domain, so its multiple and not always coordinated attacks were in most cases traced back—and are duly punished.

The scale of damage to the Russia–U.S. relations from this gross violation of the norms of acceptable international espionage/corruption is extra large and growing, but there is also a significant negative impact on the Russia–China relations. Their pseudo-alliance is based on the premise of collective rejection of, and resistance to the U.S. “hegemonism,” substantiated in joint efforts at reconfiguring the U.S.-dominated world order, but Russia’s actions went way beyond these loose propositions.29 Beijing had every reason to disagree with the aims of Moscow’s bold breach of the U.S. sovereignty and disapprove the means of implementing these aims, and so has quite reasonably opted to stay clear of the fast-developing conflict.

25 A useful evaluation of this project is Fei (2017); one noteworthy Russian perspective is Boguslavsky (2017).
26 The Pew Research Center data showed that 37% of respondents in China viewed Clinton favourably, and only 22% approved of Trump; see Wike and Stokes (2016).
27 One solid conclusion is outlined in Dennis and John (2018).
28 For an initial assessment, see Lewis (2015); for an evaluation of the results, see “Chinese cyber attacks…” (2016).
29 These premises are elaborated in Ivanov (2018).
THE DECLINE EMPHASIZED BY ONE NUCLEAR MAVERICK

Exuberant expectations in Moscow at the start of 2017 regarding the prospect of a fast improvement of relations with the United States had an implicit but important digression concerning China. In the big geopolitical picture of a multipolar world, as painted in Moscow with rather erratic brushstrokes, a key feature is the inevitable growth of contradictions between the United States and China leading to an inescapable conflict between the declining and the rising power (Zakvasin & Shlyakhtina, 2016). This proposition is in fact not that different from the theoretical argument of the U.S. “neo-realists,” among which John J. Mearsheimer stands out. What made a difference at the start of Donald Trump’s “era” was the calculation in Moscow that Putin’s presumed ability to develop special relations with the new U.S. leader would make it possible for Russia to engage in this imagined macroconflict not as China’s ally but as a key “independent” that could enjoy the freedom of manoeuvring between the protagonists locked in confrontation.

China had reasons to worry about Trump’s intentions to launch a trade war—and also took notice of the recommendations of some renowned U.S. experts, such as Edward Luttwak, to “play Russia against China.” These worries largely dissipated after the remarkably easy-going first meeting between Trump and Xi Jinping in Mar-a-Lago in April 2017 (Gabuev, 2017). The Chinese leader was probably not amused by the surprise of the U.S. missile strike in Syria delivered to him together with a “beautiful piece of chocolate cake,” but he opted to swallow both (Phillips, 2017). What was of crucial importance for him was the confirmation of a desperate U.S. need in China’s cooperation in managing the crisis driven by the fast advances of the North Korean nuclear and missile programmes. In the following months, the spectre of a trade war appeared in the White House situation room more than a few times, but each time it was invariably expelled by the imperative to secure a new increase in Chinese pressure on the maverick North Korean dictator. Beijing showed greater readiness to curtail its economic ties with North Korea than most experts in Washington had expected; it also proved time and again the ability to “deliver” Moscow, which was not favourably inclined to economic sanctions (Wuthnow, 2017). It is not clear how exactly this mechanism worked, but Beijing clearly did not bother to offer Moscow any economic incentives, so that the volume of trade and investment remained disappointing.

In parallel with the escalation of the North Korean crisis, the U.S.–Russia relations continued to deteriorate, clearly against Trump’s personal preferences, as he went a rather odd extra mile seeking to create good chemistry with Putin at their meeting during the G20 summit in Hamburg (Gregory, 2017). He was not able, however, to continue this peculiar dialogue at the November 2017 APEC summit in Da Nang, Vietnam, and had to cancel the backstage meeting with Putin, to much dismay in the Kremlin (Koleshikov, 2017). The July 2018, Helsinki summit

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30 A sharp review of the updated edition of Mearsheimer’s opus magnum *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2014) is Etzioni (2015).
31 An example of such wishful calculations is Kislyakov (2017).
32 This was one of the suggestions in “Six out-of-the-box ideas for Trump” (2017); for a sound counter-argument, see Stokes (2017).
33 On the stagnant economic ties, which, however, have shown some growth in 2018, see Spivak (2017).
signified a major public relations disaster for Trump, who mentioned an intention to discuss relations with China, but apparently never quite got to that.34

What is relevant here in this developing story is that China has not made a slightest gesture in support of its partner in distress and opted to stay clear from the sequence of diplomatic rows, economic blows, and demonstrations of military resolve produced by Washington and Moscow (Heng, 2017). As Trump reluctantly signed into law the package of punishing measures assembled by the U.S. Congress, Beijing made sure that its trade and investment ties with Russia were not in violation of the new sanctions.35 Putin was eager to make the case of the U.S. disregard of international law and the U.S. obsession with “Russo-phobia” from every available international rostrum, but Xi Jinping took care to erase any sign of this conflict from the documents approved at the BRICS summit in Xiamen in September 2017.36 The July 2018 BRICS summit in Johannesburg, South Africa, followed the same mode. Xi Jinping did not mention of Russia once in his lengthy speech at the CPC XIX Congress, though his words that “no country can afford to retreat into self-isolation” contained a message to the Kremlin, which was hardly inclined to take it to the heart (Shepherd & Qui, 2017).

Russia tried—and had to try very hard—to turn the spiralling North Korean crisis into an opportunity for re-establishing its credentials as a responsible “great power,” which would be able to make a difference, but failed to deliver any meaningful contribution either in the escalation phase or in the run-up to and the aftermath of the Singapore summit. Putin argued persistently that sanctions would not work and this argument is not without reason, but it was too obvious for all parties involved that he was making the case primarily about the sanctions regime against Russia (Thoburn, 2017). Each time the proposition on introducing tighter sanctions on North Korea was placed on the UN Security Council table, Putin had to swallow his argument and follow China’s lead in deciding which trade and financial ties should be squeezed on a particular step on the ladder of escalation.

The North Korean crisis certainly has direct security implications for Russia, not least due to the fact that the Punggye-ri nuclear test site is closer to Vladivostok than to Pyongyang. Moscow, nevertheless, had to abstain from building up its military grouping in the Far East and has had few options to play with military force, which often is its instrument of choice. Russian military exercises in the region have remained modest, and a propaganda spin was put only on joint naval exercises with China (Blanchard & Shin, 2017). No upgrade of the early warning system, which supplied embarrassingly unreliable data on the missile launches, has been ordered, and no deployment of the much advertised S-400 surface-to-air missile systems has happened for the necessary protection of Vladivostok.37 This unusual self-restraint was caused primarily by the political stance of “principled” opposition to the deployment of the U.S. missile defence system (known as THAAD) in South Korea. Russia has no particular reasons to worry about these radars and interceptors, but a part of China’s strategic capabilities comes within the range of this system, and Moscow had to follow Beijing’s course on decrying the THAAD as “destabilizing” (Dawei, 2017). It is characteristic that China has moved to resolve the crisis in relations with South Korea caused by the THAAD deployment without any engagement of or consultations with Russia (Easley, 2017).

The demonstrated inability to play any meaningful role in managing the crisis that presents a direct security threat to Russia’s homeland is not just humiliating for Putin’s pretences for a

34 One of better informed opinions is McFaul (2018).
35 The execution of this law came only in April 2018; see Foy and Sheppard (2018).
36 Official praise of BRICS is soberly downplayed in Skosyrev (2017).
37 One competent and informed Russian analysis is Dvorkin (2017).
It is difficult to assert with any confidence how upset Putin really was with every step along the track of collective action against defiant Kim Jong-un charted by Xi Jinping and how he feels about the pressure turning into encouragement, but his humiliation from being taken for granted in the decision-making coordinated between China and the United States has been definitely building up. Instead of enjoying the freedom of manoeuvre in the situation of growing U.S.–China tensions, Moscow has found itself on the receiving end of the outrage in Washington caused by the steadily progressing investigation of Russian corrupt “connections,” whereas Beijing has remained conveniently unconcerned about this affair.

The presidential pseudo-alliance has morphed into a one-sided Russian dependency upon indifferent China and is set to experience further challenges, as the two parties proceed along uncertain but clearly diverging courses. The evolving North Korean crisis is by no means resolved and could deliver more impact on this damaged partnership. Beijing cannot count on the implementation of its preferred option of carefully managed de-escalation and has to prepare for possible suboptimal and entirely undesirable outcomes, including the sudden collapse of the dictatorial regime. Chinese strategic planning is unfathomable, but one glimpse into it could be gained from an essay published by Jia Qingguo (2017), professor of the Peking University. He outlines with rare frankness a range of near-catastrophic scenarios and makes an

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38 This difference is well captured in Kramer (2017).
39 On the Russian obsession with the status issue, see Gabuev (2016b).
40 On indifferent reaction in Moscow to the Singapore summit, see Cheang (2018).
argument for the need for Beijing to engage in coordination of possible responses with the United States and South Korea, leaving Russia entirely out of his analysis. This view may be unauthorized, but it is rather typical in the latter respect—there is hardly any point for Beijing to cut Moscow into this emergency planning.

The need to establish an effective containment of young Kim's maverick behaviour has brought China and the United States together to the degree that neither party thought possible. It remains, nevertheless, entirely possible that a breakdown of the Trump–Kim “bromance” would generate a need in unilateral strengthening of this containment, including the re-deployment to South Korea of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons. Every military countermeasure that Washington could deem necessary is set to be perceived by Beijing as disproportional, leading potentially to a collapse of the transactional rapprochement. Even in such failure of crisis management, however, there will be few incentives for Beijing to invite Moscow to make a contribution to restoring a useful balance of forces.

It is characteristic in this respect that Russian analysts constructing scenarios for security shifts in the East Asia also take the U.S.–China relations for a key variable leaving the Russia factor completely out (Kortunov, 2018). The possibility of a major deterioration of these relations is significant, and a series of trade wars may lead to a major security crisis. It is striking in this regard that President Trump has proceeded with unleashing a trade war immediately after the Singapore summit, perhaps suspecting that the net result of this impromptu tête-a-tête was not exactly in his favour (Roy, 2018). China braces for a hard and unfair economic struggle, but a further upgrade of the pseudo-alliance with Russia would hardly add much, or indeed anything at all to its competitive power (Weilai, 2018).

China's self-confidence of a rising power comes from the achievement of 35 years of strong growth, which makes ensuring the continuation of this phenomenon into a fundamental proposition in its foreign policy—and determines the sceptical perception in Beijing of Russia’s readiness to sacrifice growth and modernization for the sake of regime stability. Putin’s propensity to using military force as the political instrument of choice is seen by the Chinese leadership as dangerous revisionism from the position of weakness, which works cross-purpose with China's carefully calculated revisionism from the position of strength. Partnership is increasingly used for deterring this irresponsible Russian behaviour, and this Chinese restraint is recognized in Moscow as a handicap that denies it the only competitive advantage it has in the deepening and dangerous confrontation with the West. Instead of a cordial arrangement for complementary efforts at cutting short the U.S. dominance, the China–Russia pseudo-alliance has turned into a mutually irritating duress, in which Beijing seeks to prevent Moscow from spoiling its difficult deal making with Washington, and Moscow resents the short leash—and needs to escape from the path of a designated loser.

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41On deep nuclear-political disagreements in South Korea, see “Conservatives to push harder ...” (2017).
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