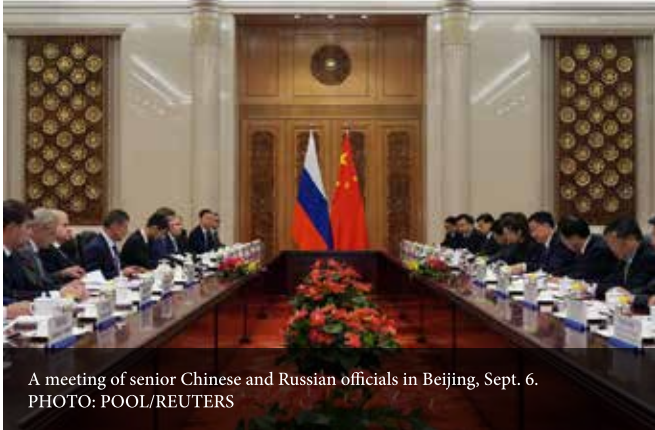


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A Sino-Russian Alliance? Don't Bet On It

Students in Beijing and Moscow want to keep their neighbor at arm's length. They also admire the U.S.



A meeting of senior Chinese and Russian officials in Beijing, Sept. 6.
PHOTO: POOL/REUTERS

Great-power competition” is increasingly a central concern in Washington foreign-policy circles. The 2017 U.S. National Security Strategy warns that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.” The era of great-power competition is all the more dangerous if America’s adversaries join forces. In a column this year, the Journal’s Walter Russell Mead described factors shaping cooperation between China and Russia. But do the Chinese and Russian people support greater cooperation against the U.S.?

Our research suggests the future elites of both countries, at least, are wary. In mid-2018 we conducted 21 focus groups of students—primarily undergraduates in their junior or senior years, but also a few graduate students—at the leading universities in Beijing and Moscow. We asked each to evaluate Russia, China and the U.S. as “great powers.” The students expressed disinterest, ambivalence or misgivings about Sino-Russian cooperation. Many believed China and Russia did not share sufficient values or interests to work together over the long term. We also found that most of the students in both countries saw much to respect or admire in the U.S.

The Chinese students had internalized Communist Party propaganda that China’s political system is a genuine democracy tailored to Chinese conditions. Consistent with the party’s “China Dream” campaign, students felt that the legitimacy of a particular political order depends on whether it can produce social and economic “development.”

This standard has inadvertently devalued Russia as a partner in their eyes. The Chinese students were unimpressed by their neighbor’s culture and society, in part because they did not view either as sources of significant national power. They also were skeptical that the Russian political system could modernize the economy and support Moscow’s return to great-power status.

By contrast, the students in Beijing identified the U.S. as the kind of dynamic, wealthy and influential country that China aspires to be. American culture, particularly movies, captivated the students: “America’s cultural influence is obvious in movies broadcast worldwide, for instance in Captain America and Black Panther,” one said. Others echoed this assessment of American soft power: “Culture is what makes [America] a superpower,” offered another participant. These sentiments were common across the Chinese focus groups despite ubiquitous Communist Party criticism of U.S. foreign policy and the American system. The students used the following terms most often to describe America: free, diverse, developed, strong, advanced, cultural, international, technology, individualism and rule of law.

Unlike their counterparts in Beijing, the students in Moscow often criticized their own government, expressing concern about the future of Russia. This pessimism underscores the deteriorating ability of state-controlled media to neutralize societal disapproval of the Kremlin and its policies—including its policy of closer ties to China. For many of the participants, China encompassed a “mysterious” world that was incompatible with dominant strands of Russian culture and identity.

Some Russian students also found China untrustworthy, in part because its regime is so authoritarian: “If we aren’t a democratic country in full measure, they are even more so,” one said. “That’s scary. You do not know what to expect from such a closed society.” A common worry was that in a partnership with China, Russia would be relegated to political, strategic and economic dependency. This could produce grievances and insecurities even worse than those associated with Russia’s relationship with the West, both in the past and the present.

Most Russian participants not only acknowledged American cultural and technological prowess but also respected the

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American political system. According to one student, “despite all the problems of the United States we’ve discussed, it all works, it all holds. And it’s been holding for a quite a long time.” For another student, “we deeply associate America with freedom.” The members of the focus groups also viewed the “American dream” as an authentic aspiration, not an anachronism or a legitimating narrative concocted by ruling elites.

It’s striking that the perspective most strongly shared across the groups in Beijing and Moscow was respect and often admiration for America. To be sure, both Chinese and Russian students criticized U.S. policies overseas and American domestic problems. Yet for the Chinese participants, America’s cultural and economic power stimulated intense interest and fascination. The Russian students were also drawn to the U.S. because of its Western identity and by the perceived importance of American political values and institutions.

The U.S. can strengthen these positive views and its soft power by adhering to its liberal-democratic principles. Such conduct will help blunt the narrative of the Russian and Chinese governments that America’s expression of universal values is a self-interested smokescreen. The U.S. must also avoid demonizing Russia and China as it grapples with the challenge of great-power competition. Otherwise, Washington risks stoking anti-American nationalism as well as support for Sino-Russian collaboration—even as a rising generation of elites prefers to stand apart.

Mr. Sherlock is a professor of political science at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, N.Y. Col. Gregory directs the Chinese Program and the Center for Languages, Cultures and Regional Studies at West Point.