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China and Russia push back against the US

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The announcement of [closer Russian-Chinese military co-operation](#) is a striking sign of how geo-political competition is hotting up – as both Russia and China look to push back against a US-dominated world.

Russia, in the midst of the [crisis in Ukraine](#), is eager to show that it has alternatives to the West and a powerful new ally in China. China also has a strong motivation to push back against America. The Chinese greatly resent America's much-ballyhooed "pivot to Asia" – which includes stationing 60 per cent of the US navy in the Pacific. One of China's weaknesses in the contest with the US for dominance in the Asia-Pacific is that it has few clear allies in the region. By contrast, America has defence treaties with Japan and South Korea, and close ties with several South-East Asian nations. However, by getting closer to the Russians, the Chinese potentially set up a powerful nascent alliance of their own.

It is yet to be seen how much substance there are to these ties. But two of the announcements made by the Russian defence minister, Sergei Shoigu, are particularly eye-catching. First, his statement that Russia and China are intent on forming a "collective regional security system" suggests that this is potentially a very ambitious arrangement – that might go far beyond the occasional joint naval exercise. "Collective security" arrangements imply a Nato-like commitment to collective self-defence. Second, the suggestion that China and Russia will hold joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean next year is also slightly mind-boggling. If we see the Chinese navy on patrol in the Med, it really will feel like a new world.

The attractions for the Chinese and Russians of all this – however – are clear. They both deeply resent America's global military reach. The fact that the US navy patrols

off the Chinese coast, while Nato-nations are up against the Russian border is a source of grievance. By beginning to hold naval exercises in the West's backyard (although not quite the Caribbean, yet), the Russians and Chinese seem to be engaging in a very deliberate exercise in push-back.

But it is premature to say that a Russia-China bloc is emerging that is now in a full-on confrontation with the West. On the contrary, China seems to be skilfully playing both sides. It is interesting that this tilt to Russia comes just a week after a relatively warm and productive summit between the US and Chinese presidents – that resulted in an important [agreement on climate change](#).

It is clear that Russia and China share some common resentments about the US. Specifically, both feel bitter about America's refusal to grant them dominance of their own neighbourhoods. Both feel internally threatened by US democracy promotion – hence the Russian defence minister's angry references to America's promotion of “colour revolutions”. Both nations dislike US interventionism and the idea of a unipolar world, which is why they are spending a lot of money on weapons to try and close the military gap.

But Russia is much weaker than China. Its economy is [in bad shape](#), and Russia's relationship with the US is now so bad, that – unlike China – it no longer has an American option. As a result, Russia had to accept [a disadvantageous gas price](#) in the energy deal it negotiated with China in May. China is also now pressing Russia to sell it high-tech weaponry that the Russians formerly withheld.

What is more, Russia still has deep misgivings about the long-term implications of China's rise. Russia's Far East is resource-rich, under-populated and large parts of it were colonised from China in the nineteenth century. The Russian-Chinese rapprochement is certainly something to watch in the short term. In the long run, it could yet sour.

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