



CARNEGIE-TSINGHUA
CENTER FOR GLOBAL POLICY

Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guest: **Dmitri Trenin**

Episode 49: China-Russia Relations after Ukraine
May 26, 2015

Haenle: You are listening to the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, China in the World podcast: a series of conversations with Chinese and international experts on China’s foreign policy, China’s international role, and China’s relations with the world, brought to you from the Carnegie—Tsinghua Center located here in Beijing. I’m Paul Haenle, the director of the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center, and I’ll be your host.

Today, I’ll be speaking with my Carnegie colleague, Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie-Moscow Center. Listeners may recall that about one year ago, Dmitri and I did a podcast where Dmitri talked about the crisis in Ukraine—that was back in February 2014. The difference today is that Dmitri is here with me in Beijing, and we can pick up our conversations, not necessarily where they left off, but after a year’s gone by. Welcome, Dmitri, and thank you for joining our podcast again today.

Trenin: Glad to be here, Paul. Thank you so much.

Haenle: Like I said, Dmitri is the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center; he’s been with the center since its inception in 1994. He served in the Soviet and Russian armed forces from 1972 to 1993 and taught in the war studies department of the Military Institute from 1986 to 1993. He is one of the leading voices helping the international community better understand the Russian perspective on a range of issues including the current crisis in Ukraine and evolving Russian foreign policy.

Last time, Dmitri, you were on the podcast, we spoke about the Ukraine crisis as it was unfolding. We’re now, as I said, more than a year later, and I want to pick up on that conversation and talk about the impact of the Ukraine crisis on Russia’s relations with China and on the global order.

Over lunch this afternoon, you and I talked about an improving China-Russia relationship. On May 9 of this year, Russia celebrated the 70th anniversary of World War II—the end of World War II—with a military parade, and for the first time that military parade included a unit of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army. Chinese President Xi Jinping was the most prominent foreign dignitary to attend.

I want to start out by asking you, in your view, what did President Xi’s attendance, in stark contrast, of course, to the decisions of Western leaders to stay away from the parade in protest of Russia’s involvement in Ukraine? What did Xi’s attendance say about the current state of China-Russia relations, and what should we be thinking about in that context?

Trenin: Well, first of all, I would say that President Xi was not just the most prominent figure in Moscow at that victory parade, but he was in a category of his own among foreign leaders. President Putin spent almost the entire time of the parade talking with President Xi, and that was prominently broadcasted by Russian television. Now, to give a very short answer to your question, I would say it basically shows that the relationship with China has become as important to Russia as the relationship with the United States. But, of course, the quality of the relationship is different, and the tonality of the relationship is vastly different.

I would say that for China, the Russian relationship is also increasingly important, not nearly as much as the other way around. But, as a part of China’s more proactive foreign policy, the Russian relationship is getting a higher value than it used to have. And, I think that the pictures from the Moscow parade basically illustrate that.

Haenle: In the mid-90s, China and Russia, on an economic scale, in terms of their economic strength, were pretty much on par. Fast forward to today, China's economy is four times the size of Russia's economy, in many ways the dynamics of that relationship between Russia and China have changed, and this must create some tension that Russian leaders need to reconcile in terms of its current relationship today. Is that something that holds back the relationship from becoming something more strategically significant?

Trenin: Well, I think it holds up the relationship in various ways. There is clearly an appreciation of China having become stronger than Russia in some very important areas, starting perhaps with the economic area, and the Russians have recognized that. I think that they have internalized that. And I think what you're seeing is Russia adjusting, or readjusting itself, to something that Russians have never known from their own experience with China, something that they've only learned from books on history: a China that is stronger than Russia. Because almost since the time that the Chinese and the Russians came face-to-face for the first time in the 17th century, Russia had been on the way up, and China had been on the way down, more or less. And then, of course, during the 20th century the Russians dominated the relationship in various ways.

Well, I think that the Russians basically do not see themselves in competition with the Chinese. This is the difference between the Russia today and the Soviet Union of the 20th century, when the Soviet Union competed against the United States. Russians today do not compete against China. They basically know the competition in terms of GDP has long been won by the Chinese.

But, the Russians are trying to protect themselves against too much Chinese influence. A good illustration of that is the bridge across the Almo River which should link the two countries. The Chinese part of the bridge is finished; the Russian part of the bridge is missing. The Russians don't feel confident enough at this point. Of course, there are many reasons. But, I think the psychological background for all those many reasons is that the Russians don't feel that they are very confident vis-à-vis the Chinese. They still fear massive Chinese presence, which is now lacking, which is absent in far eastern Siberia, but potentially they are apprehensive of it.

Haenle: You hear a lot of talk that the U.S.-China relationship has a great degree of mistrust, and I have heard a lot of people say that one bilateral relationship that has more mistrust than the U.S.-China relationship is the China-Russia relationship. How would you respond to that?

Trenin: Well, I don't know. I think that there is a fair amount of mistrust between the Russians and the Chinese. But, I would also say that, historically, the relationship was pretty good and pretty close among ordinary people, primarily in the 1950s, when there was a lot of economic exchange between the two countries when the Soviet Union was doing a lot to help communist China economically and militarily.

Today, what is absent, I think, is this visceral fear of China. There are protective things, like not building a part of the bridge and other things of that nature. There is a certain barrier for technology and military technology transfers to China from Russia, which is now being lowered, but which is still higher than, let's say, the barrier for foreign military transfers to, say, India. There are a few other things, but I would say that today it is very much a state-to-state relationship still, and that the highest level—we talked about Putin and Xi—I think that the amount of empathy between those two individuals is almost phenomenal. It's very different from the relationship that, say, Putin had with Hu Jintao or Jiang Zemin, or Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin. And this is the

relationship that counts in the state-to-state relations. That relationship is characterized by growing understanding, and I would say, a degree of mutual trust.

Haenle: So, let me ask more on this, because I think there is a lot of interest out there in terms of what are the things that you think have led to this close relationship between the two leaders, Xi Jinping and President Putin? What is it that brings them together, what is it that allows them to have this better relationship than leaders between China and Russia have had before?

Trenin: Part of it is personal, but the most important part is chemistry, and we can talk about that at length, but I don't think that it's the most important part of it. I think the more important part of it is that both leaders are eager to learn something from the other side to make their countries stronger.

For Putin, it's China's economic achievements. Russia has not been able to come up with a model or a sustainable economic development in the 15 years of Putin being in power, so he thinks he can learn something from China, and not only him, a lot of others, in the Russian leadership also, in the economic wing of the government.

The Chinese look at Russia's authoritarianism, which has important elements that make that authoritarianism more sustainable. And, that is the institution of elections, the freedom of speech, although it does not extend to, let's say, political freedom in the fullest sense of the word. These make the leadership of Russia much better able to predict various social, economic, and other upheavals that may happen. The Chinese were looking at Gorbachev's Soviet Union with the purpose of learning the things that they should not be doing. So, *Perestroika* was a catastrophe—*catastroika*, as some people called it in the Soviet Union. But, they are looking at Putin's Russia as a country that has found a way to, under very different and difficult circumstances, protect the authoritarian system with democratic institutions that make it stronger and much more difficult to topple. That I think brings them together. I think that they have, broadly speaking, very similar world views.

Haenle: Say a little bit about that with respect to the United States. How does each of their views vis-à-vis the United States—is there obviously something that they share?

Trenin: I think that for China, the United States domination is something that should be on the way out. This domination is something that the Chinese do not accept, really. The idea of a multi-polar world was born in China, and they have been sticking with that idea for 20-plus years. They have a different approach toward the United States, they have benefited from the U.S.-dominated world. You may say that they benefitted from U.S. domination more than many other countries.

For the Russians, U.S. domination is intolerable for very different reasons. The Russians have not managed to benefit very much in the post-Cold War era, economically. The Russians still reel from the way the Cold War ended and what followed the end of Cold War. They hope to be, and Putin personally, hoped to be embraced by the West. They hoped that Russia would be fully integrated into the Western structures, would become a Western country, the second most important Western country after the United States—that was, more or less, the ambition, and that ambition was never realized. So, they see the United States as a country that dominates the world that does not answer Russia's national interest very much. And, that calls for a very different kind of strategy toward the U.S. But at the level of resentment of U.S. domination and of particular U.S. policies, Mr. Putin and Mr. Xi, I think, see eye-to-eye.

Haenle: So what I hear you saying, and what I have seen in your writing, and you've written quite a bit about this as of late, is that despite many who say that the improving Russia-China relationship is more really of a marriage of convenience, you believe that based on the Ukraine crisis and the economic sanctions that were levied against Russia by the West following the Ukraine crisis, that this is turning into more of a partnership between Beijing and Moscow, and that potentially there are real implications of this for the United States and the U.S. leadership on the world stage.

Trenin: That's exactly right. That's what I think. I'd believe it that it'd be too complacent to continue to understand the Russia-China relationship in terms of a marriage of convenience, or an axis of convenience. It's much more than that. It's a partnership that I think is even becoming more than a partnership. In my recent articles, I called it an entente. I haven't found a better word to describe it. But it is based on some shared views about the most important things, politically. And I think that's the way to characterize it. It's not an alliance; it's not a bloc, really. But, it's something which is, I think, an increasingly close relationship.

I believe that the Russians, having been robbed of the chance to play, to hold a balance between their Asian policies and their Western policies, have now shifted very clearly toward Asia, toward China. Not so much out of conviction, not by design, but because the result of the Ukraine crisis, which you mentioned, was not only a confrontation with the United States that the Russians would have probably been able to live with, but a real breakdown of Russia's all-important relationship with Europe. And within Europe, of Russia's premier relationship with Germany. It was the Germany-Russia relationship after the Cold War that was a mainstay of stability in Europe. And, that was the main connection of Russia to the West—through Germany, more than through any other country that Russia linked to the West. Now that relationship is badly broken, not to be restored anytime soon.

Although, despite the sanctions, much of Russia's trade—50% of it—is with Western Europe. China, although it is the largest trading partner for Russia, only accounts for about one sixth of Russia-Europe trade. Still, the relationship with the Chinese is becoming closer, and it's taking new forms such as an energy relationship that includes Chinese access to Russia's natural resources—which China did not enjoy before. Western companies could be allowed access to the natural resources of Russia, but Chinese companies, because they were state-run, because they were seen as an arm of the Chinese state, were barred from coming close to that. Now that bar has been at least partially withdrawn. China's infrastructure projects, in particular those dealing with the Silk Road Economic Belt, are now being accepted as a part of a joint development project for Siberian central Asia.

The expectation of many in the West of Sino-Russian friction, rivalry, even conflict, over central Asia, I think is far-fetched. Both countries, for different reasons, are interested in a more harmonious relationship, and certainly not interested in a clash that would make both countries weaker, vis-à-vis their most serious rival. Certainly, Russia would be made much weaker than China if there were a clash, but China would not benefit at all from it. So, I would expect Russia and China to make mutual concessions, as they integrate the Silk Road Economic Belt project with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union.

Haenle: Despite this being, this sort of Russia's traditional backyards, sphere of influence, you anticipate that this will go smoothly?

Trenin: I'd anticipate that it'd be a harmonious relationship. First of all, I believe that the idea of Central Asia as Russia's zone of influence is dated. The countries of central Asia have managed to essentially take a very autonomous stance vis-à-vis Moscow. I cannot name a single country in the region that Moscow could say "it's in my pocket," not a single one. The Chinese are massively present, economically, in all central Asian countries, easing out Russia's economic presence there. But, Russia still plays an important role of a security protector for central Asian states, and the Chinese may recognize Russia's political and military role, security role in the region, even as Russia would recognize an enhanced economic role for China in the same region. So, mutual concessions, which would not turn central Asia into a condominium because, I think, that the countries in the region have managed to play China off Russia actually use the connection to both countries to their own benefit pretty well. I believe that central Asia is more likely to be an area of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, and less of an area of confrontation.

Haenle: Interesting. Let me ask a final question regarding movement by China, Russia, and other non-Western countries to build new international institutions, international structures of their own: Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the BRICS Development Bank, or the New Development Bank, and the latest, the Chinese initiative of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank. How are these related to—or are they related to at all—China-Russia improving relations, and how do you see these playing out as you talked about the global order?

Trenin: Well, I think that since both countries, China and Russia, have an interest in lesser U.S. dominance and in more multi-polarity. And, since those two countries are among the, perhaps—I would say that with India they are the three most important players, with Brazil the four most important players, economically, in the non-Western world. China and Russia are also the two most important military players in the non-Western world. I think this connection, China and Russia, could serve as a catalyst for non-Western institutions in which China will probably play the role of the economic power. And, the Russians, I think, will attempt to play the role of a spokesman of military power which, in terms of military technology, Russia is still pretty far ahead of China in, in a number of areas. So, I think that they can play somewhat different roles, but together, this connection could lead to a more consolidated, non-Western community within the global community that would promote multi-polarity a couple of steps farther.

Haenle: Always fascinating to talk to you. Thank you very much, Dmitri, for joining our podcast again today. Perhaps our third podcast can take place in Moscow on one of my future trips.

Trenin: Thank you very much, Paul, and you're certainly very welcome in Moscow.

Haenle: Thank you. That's it for this edition of Carnegie–Tsinghua China in the World podcast. If you'd like to read Dmitri's analysis and updates on the crisis in Ukraine and on improving China-Russia relations, I encourage you to explore the Carnegie Moscow Center's website at www.carnegie.ru, and follow Dmitri on Twitter where he's very active at @DmitriTrenin. Thanks for listening, and be sure to tune in next time.