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Transcript

CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

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Episode 64: View from Moscow: China's
Westward March

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Haenle: I'm here with my Carnegie colleague Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie–Moscow Center who is in Beijing this week for the third annual Carnegie Global Annual Dialogue here in Beijing, China. Listeners will remember Dmitri as this is his third time on the Carnegie–Tsinghua podcast. That's a record by the way. I spoke with him by phone to understand the Russian perspective on the Ukraine crisis, that was back in march 2014 and then also at the old Carnegie–Tsinghua Center office here in May of 2015 you, and I talked about China-Russian relations after the Ukraine crisis, so welcome back.

Trenin: Well, thank you, glad to be on the program.

Haenle: Dmitri, yesterday we had a roundtable at the Carnegie–Tsinghua Center with Chinese experts on Russia, and you made the case that China's westward march across Eurasia is reshaping Eurasia and other parts of the globe. I'm just going to ask you how so? How do you see that happening, and what are the consequences both for the region and for Russia?

Trenin: Well, if you look at Eurasia as this grand continent stretching all the way from East Asia to the British Isles, you will see that the dynamic in the last 800 years for integrating that continent usually came from the west, usually was pioneered by this or that European nation. Well, it was not the case 800 years ago when the Mongols integrated Eurasia coming from the east. Well, we see a very different phenomenon now, a phenomenon centered in East Asia. You see China through its economic expansion moving more and more westward and now with the One Belt One Road program, initiative, no matter how you call it, this has become more structured, and this has become more purpose-oriented. And I see this as transformative also in terms of China's own foreign policy. Prior to this, China's foreign policy was largely about economic issues. But now, I would make the case, this westward march is more than geo-economics; it brings geopolitics, it brings a strategic dimension to China's foreign policy which was not there before and which I don't think is there yet but that's where we're going. And I think this is tremendously important for the future of China's neighbors, for the future of the countries who think of China as a distant country. Say you look at China from London or from Paris or Berlin, it's way out there; but [we now have this movement of] Chinese coming to Europe whereas Europe in the past used to come to China.

Haenle: So, we're looking more at an active China and a stronger China, both in terms of, as you say, geo-economic power but also geopolitical, certainly in the future. And yesterday, you said that China-Russia relations have also undergone a change in the nature and stature in terms of the power balance, and have reached what you call the "new normal."

Trenin: The China-Russia relationship got normalized at the end of the Cold War. In fact the Soviet Union and China were engaged in a cold war of their own. Since then, the relationship has been friendly, good neighborly, based increasingly on partnership. But again I would say two things: one, the quality of the relationship has changed and it's more than partnership. It's less than an alliance, but clearly more than partnership and I call this "entente" for lack of a better word. I don't think it will evolve into a partnership but it's much closer than it was even a couple of years ago. Also, as a result of Russia's rupture with the west and Russia's separation from Europe or alienation from Europe, which is of monumental importance to Russia's foreign policy. And I would add also that for the first time in 200 years—200 plus years—since China and Russia

first came into direct contact, the relationship is tilted in China's favor; the balance within the relationship, the structure of the relationship has changed and keeps changing. China is more and more the senior partner or the bigger power in that relationship, and this carries very serious implications. First of all, the Russians need to learn to live and cooperate with a strong China and an active China. And second of all, it will be difficult for the Russians and yet essential to them to structure the relationship in such a way that China does not become Russia's overlord. Russia cannot accept anyone above them. It's just physically, mentally they cannot accept someone sitting on top of them. And yet China is bigger, and how do you square the circle? How do you structure an equal relationship between unequal partners? That's Russia's task.

Haenle: So you talk a lot about the Chinese factors that are changing and how that's affecting Eurasia but also Russia-China relations. What are the Russian considerations with respect to China? And why, then, do you argue that as China expands westward, Russia is expanding more eastward?

Trenin: Well, as China is moving westward, Russia is looking more toward the east. There are two reasons for that. One reason is essentially geo-economic—geopolitical—that is mostly focused on Russia's own eastern or Asian territories, all the way east of the Urals. You have a situation—untenable in the long-term—where Russia's most depressed regions are in the far East. They're physically in contact—touching physically—on the world's most dynamic region, i.e. China. So you need to do something about that. That's one thing. The other thing is that after the Ukraine crisis, China has remained the only major power that still has normal relations with Russia. Relationships with the United States, Europe, Japan, other countries, Canada, Australia, have all been damaged or broken as a result of the Ukraine crisis. China stands out, so there's a compelling reason for the Russians to reach out to China and to try to get the things that the Russians, such as technology, investment and others, that they used to get from the West, but that they cannot get from the West now, they want to try to get that from China.

Haenle: So do you see a shift basically in the overall foreign policy concept in Russia, where previously there was a real emphasis on wanting to integrate with Europe, and is there now a greater focus on Asia?

Trenin: I think so; this is more out of necessity than out of choice. Russia has had two foreign policy concepts. One, integrating itself into the West. Now the alternative to that during the past 25 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union has been integrating former Soviet republics—former soviet borderlands—with Russia or into Russia. Now both of those concepts are inoperable right now as a result of the Ukraine crisis. So you could say they both crashed in Ukraine. So they need to find a way to both position themselves in this new world, given the current relationships which will be there for some time—with the west, with their neighbors—and to find the right position vis-à-vis China. If you like there was a Plan A that failed, a Plan B that failed, now they have to come up with Plan C. Now Plan C cannot be China, it cannot be about China only, but China will have to play a major role in all that. But early Russia illusions about China substituting for the United States and Europe in Russia's foreign policy, in Russia's geo-economic strategy—they have been very quickly revealed as illusionary, and it's a good thing, basically that the Russians fairly early on could see that, for example, borrowing a lot of money from China, you

cannot do that. It's an illusion. You have to think again, and this has produced a modicum of realism in Russia's general approach to China.

Haenle: And on the China-Russia relationship, the last piece I want to ask about is the United States, and how does the United States [play a role in all this?] You've talked about China's evolution and how that's changing the nature of the relationship with Russia, you've talked about developments with respect to Russia and how that's affecting it; how does the United States figure into this?

Trenin: Well, the United States has been the dominant power in the world and the guarantor of the global order in the post-Cold War period. Now to a large extent, this continues to this day and will continue as long as I can see. But, something has changed. The two things that have changed [are thus.] there is a challenge that China presents to this order and to the U.S. dominance. China, through its rise, through its expansion, geo-economic and potentially geopolitical—it changes the situation in a most serious way. Russia has challenged that order in a different way, in a very in-your-face move, in a very blatant move in Ukraine where it defended its national security interests, as the Kremlin formulates it. They saw it as a U.S. political invasion into the Russian sphere of influence, Russian geopolitical space, whatever. And then they inserted the Russian military into the heart of the Middle East in Syria and, thus, they undercut the de-facto U.S. monopoly on the use of force globally and this was another attack, if you like, on the U.S. dominated, U.S. supported global order.

But, if you look at China and Russia, you will see that the trend where major powers want to be surrounded by, call it spheres of influence, call it spheres of conflict, whatever you want to call it. You look at Ukraine from Moscow, you look at the South China Sea from Beijing, you look at these things and you look at the moves, the very different moves by Russia in its neighborhood and by China in its neighborhood, and you see that both powers want to expand its wiggle-room. This comes naturally at the expense of the order so far dominated and guaranteed by the United States. So you see the global power retrenching a little bit and the regional or, call it, major powers in Eurasia expanding or seeking to expand their zones of influence. This leads to a major rearrangement of forces in Eurasia and globally. So I think that this leaves you thinking again about the triangular dynamic among Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Very different from what the situation was during the Cold War, and yet you still have those three main actors, and possibly in the distant future maybe Delhi coming to compete more and more intensely about the world order and about the geopolitics of this grand region which is Eurasia.

Haenle: You don't see an overt expression of support from Russia, for example, with respect to China's claims in the South China Sea, or you don't see it the other way from China over Russia's sphere of influence over Ukraine. Is there a sort of wink-wink-nod-nod, we won't get involved in what sphere of influence you want and you don't get involved in ours?

Trenin: Well I call the relationship an entente not an alliance, which means that there is no obligatory support that the other party should extend to your moves wherever. So I think the understanding, and that's the essence of this entente, the understanding between China and Russia is that we aren't going to form a rigid alliance, there will be no hierarchy in our relationship, which is fine for the Russians, you are not expected to support each and every move that we are making, and we will not be giving support to each and every move you are making but there is an

understanding that neither side will undercut the other, or block, or object in their respective, call it spheres of interests of vitally important issues. So that's the beauty I think of the relationship that makes it, I believe more stable than an alliance would have been.

Haenle: Getting closer, but not too close.

Trenin: Exactly.

Haenle: So we've been talking about some pretty fascinating stuff, and I appreciate your insights. We'll move away from something so lofty and heady, and I wanted to ask you about the 2016 presidential campaign, where Russia has featured prominently. But I wanted to ask you about something that you might not expect. The current front-runner on the Republican side, to many people it's a great surprise, is Donald Trump. He and president Putin have expressed mutual admiration for each other. Putin called Trump a brilliant and talented leader after Trump said he would probably get along well with Putin. What do you make of this? What do Russians make of this apparent Trump-Putin bromance?

Trenin: Well, I think two things. One is that Russians appreciate Putin for being a straight-talker. He doesn't have to look over his shoulder, also because there is no one, and no one above him. He can speak his mind freely and he is the master of his world because he is the master of the country. And I think a lot of Russians have become very tired of the usual talk of western politicians, which is all about political correctness.

Haenle: You say Russians are growing tired?

Trenin: Russians. Especially when those people come to them and preach things and say things...

Haenle: And that's what many Americans are saying too, that they're growing tired of the political correctness of American politics.

Trenin: Well, I think that the difference between Russian politicians and a lot of Western politicians is that in Russia, you tend to err on the side of cynicism. In so many Western countries, you tend to err on the side of hypocrisy. The political system in the West makes you say politically correct things, which are often hypocritical. In Russia, because the system is not democratic and if you exercise an important role in the system you can say whatever, you often say cynical things. And I think they appreciate Trump for saying things openly and sincerely. And the second thing that I believe that they appreciate is that Trump isn't a real Western politician who doesn't say anything good about Russia and Putin. You cannot simply ignore it; you have to reciprocate it in some form.

Haenle: Well, it's fascinating and we'll see what will happen. It should be a very interesting several months leading up to November, and we'll have much more to talk about in that regard and much more to talk about on China-Russia relations. So, thank you very much Dmitri for coming back, hope to have you for a fourth time on the Carnegie-Tsinghua podcast.

Trenin: Thank you so much Paul, thank you. It's always a pleasure to be a guest here.

Haenle: Thank you.