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Transcript

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## CHINA IN THE WORLD PODCAST

Host: **Paul Haenle**

Guests: **Andrew Weiss, Paul Stronski,  
Alexander Gabuev**

Episode 80: What Would Closer U.S.-Russia  
Relations Mean for China?

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**Haenle Introduction:** Earlier today I was privileged to sit down with three of my great colleagues from the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Andrew Weiss, Alexander Gabuev, and Paul Stronski. We talked about Russia, especially Russian relations with China and with the United States under the new Trump administration. Andrew, Alex, and Paul are in Beijing this week for the fourth annual Carnegie Global Dialogue on Russia issues. This is a series of discussions we hold each year with scholars from across Carnegie's global network of centers to examine China's evolving foreign policy and international role. I spoke with our Carnegie panelists a day after the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center hosted a roundtable with Chinese experts where we explored issues in the United States-China-Russia relationship and got their reactions to those discussions. You'll hear our conversation following this introduction. Andrew Weiss is a vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He oversees Carnegie research in Washington and in Moscow on Russia and Eurasia. Andrew was previously the director for Russian, Ukrainian, and Eurasian affairs on the National Security Council staff under President Bill Clinton. Alex Gabuev is based in Moscow. He's a senior associate there and the chair of the Russia and the Asia Pacific program for the Carnegie Moscow Center. Alex previously served as a member of the editorial board of the Kommersant publishing house and served as deputy editor-in-chief of Kommersant-Vlast, which is one of Russia's most influential news weeklies. Paul Stronski is a senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia program. He's based in Washington D.C. and served on the National Security Council staff of President Obama as the director for Russia and Central Asia. He did that from the years 2012 to 2014. I hope you enjoy the conversation on this podcast and please leave us a rating on iTunes if you enjoy our podcast. Thanks for listening.

**Haenle:** Well thank you all for being here. It's great to have three of Carnegie's top experts on Russia here in Beijing at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center this week for our Carnegie Global Dialogue discussion on China-Russia-U.S. relations. We had some very interesting discussions yesterday with Chinese scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center about the future of the U.S.-Russia relationship under President Trump and the trajectory of China-Russia relations. So I wanted to talk about some of the things we discussed yesterday on the panel and get your reactions. Andrew Weiss let me start with you—of course Alex and Paul can jump in as well.

You and your colleagues, including Paul Stronski here, just completed a report on the future of U.S.-Russia relations looking back at the last 25 years of relations. It's a very important report. There was a task force chaired by Richard Armitage—if I understand it—and Senator Chris Murphy. In the report you talk about the breakdown in U.S.-Russian relations that we've witnessed as being a product of long standing disagreements about the fundamentals of each country's national security interests and policies. I wonder if you could start by talking to our listeners about what the major disagreements are in the U.S.-Russia relationship, what is the gap between how Moscow and Washington view and assess what has gone wrong in the relationship to cause the breakdown in relations.

**Weiss:** Well thanks for having us, Paul. I think the report tries to put the problems of the last couple years in perspective and to say that they are basically an accumulation of grievances and mistrust that's built up over time and then the effect of that is now being felt across the board. So the building blocks of the relationship have really been severely damaged and so it's going to take

a long time—irrespective of what the new administration is trying to do—to find a workable way forward. And so the punchline of the report is: the problems now are acute, the absence of trust is pervasive on both sides, and the risks and the dangers are also very widely dispersed. So the real challenge is how do you manage this relationship and avoid flashpoints and avoid sources of danger. We see these every day in the skies over Syria, you see this in the Black Sea, you see this with Russia's interference in the U.S. election. There's a lot of real serious danger and mistrust out there and the challenge for the new president is: How do you keep this thing from getting worse?

**Haenle:** You talk in the report—and I think it's very important part of the report—about the gap in the perspectives between Washington and Moscow on why there's been this breakdown in relations. Can you talk about what the gap is and why it's dangerous?

**Weiss:** Well I think with the Russian side of it we—since at least 2013, 2014—have seen an emboldened Russian approach to international affairs where sort of springing surprises, invading Ukraine, annexing Crimea, deploying military forces in Syria, interfering in the U.S. election, that's kind of a calling card of this much more risk-taking, emboldened Russian foreign policy. On the Russian side looking at the United States I think we see great allergy of the United States as a source of direct threat to the Russian regime, fear that the core goal of U.S. foreign policy is regime change in Russia, in a sense that U.S. unilateralism is a dangerous thing. Anything that one could do on the Russian side to interfere with that, to slow down the U.S. onslaught is seen as a net plus for Russia. And at the end of the day, having a dysfunctional, messy United States, which is discredited in the world, which has its core alliance relationships disrupted, that's also a net plus for Russia right now.

**Haenle:** Paul Stronski, Andrew just touched on some of the fundamentals, some of the basic challenges in the U.S.-Russia relationship. Now enter new president, Donald Trump. He has flirted with this notion during the campaign of sort of a grand bargain with Russia and his national security advisor was just relieved over problems with Russia. Can you talk about the situation as it exists today? How should President Trump approach relations with Russia and what's the prospect for being able to quickly or easily repair relations with Moscow?

**Stronski:** I mean I'm very skeptical of President Trump's ability to do this and I would just point out that his two predecessors, President George W. Bush and President Obama, both had their own resets with Russia and both of them—the first year or two they went perfectly fine—and then we ran into the same problems that Andrew was talking about. Whether there's differences over values, differences of just the general approach to the world, differences of opinion over Russia's role and the United States' role in Russia's immediate neighborhood, and those issues are still going to be there. President Obama's reset—I would say—were quite successful but then all of the easy stuff was done and there's not a whole lot left that is easy on the table. The same difficult issues, whether it's figuring out an actionable way—a real way—to collaborate on terrorism, those are the questions that I think the Trump administration is going to struggle with. I think he can come up with a grand bargain, but actually making that grand bargain work, and work in U.S. interests I think is unclear. He seems to want to focus on ISIS and terrorism in the Middle East, but the sheer difficulty of doing that...First, Russia is not fighting ISIS, so that is one problem, and two, the Obama administration since the Boston Marathon bombing has really tried to work with the Russians on counterterrorism. They just have different approaches [as] to how to do it and

the people who sort of have to implement this collaboration are the people in the military and security services and they are the people who trust each other the least, and so actually getting over that stumbling block was difficult for President Bush, it was difficult for President Obama, and I do not really see President Trump having much more success.

**Haenle:** Alex Gabuev, one of the real advantages for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace is having global centers around the world, including in Moscow. Alex, you are the resident “中国通”, or China hand at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

**Gabuev:** 差得远。

**Haenle:** Give us a sense for how the Russians are seeing this. Was there some hope at the beginning that Donald Trump and President Putin might be able to bring the relationship to a different point? Has there been a letdown, some sort of disappointment? Is the honeymoon period over as we've read in the Washington Post over the last few days? And then I'd also like to ask you about China-Russia. What is your sense of the China-Russian relationship at this point and how does that sort of play into any improvements in U.S.-Russia relations that might be able to be achieved?

**Gabuev:** First thing, I don't think there was any honeymoon at all, like there were propaganda figures were the official Russian talking heads on figure ORT which are really made for domestic consumption and the narrative looks like people wanted to discredit the U.S. election in showing that Trump is a really popular candidate and he was defeated by the establishment, you know by conspiracy between the established political figures and the media, and then Trump's victory was actually a surprise. So my reading of Russia's interference in the U.S. election was not to turn the elections in the favor of Trump but to send a message to Hillary Clinton because Putin believes deeply that Hillary was trying to influence his election in 2011. He personally and publicly blamed her for that. And just saying OK I don't have a lot of layers of influence in the United States because I don't have any soft power tools. RT has less viewers in Great Britain for example than the Welsh channel. So it's not really a powerful tool. But I have my hackers—it's asymmetrical warfare—I can send you a message that can inflict pain on you and you better don't mess with my next presidential election. So that's my reading on what's part of it, discrediting, inflicting pain, and then definitely Russian's overperformed but that was definitely not the most decisive factor, but it was one of the factors in the ingredients in this cocktail. So people are very careful and mindful. All sensible people in Moscow I talked to—including government figures—are more or less aware how much risk there is. The problem is that Hillary was so hated, people said they knew exactly what to expect, it's going to be Obama 2.0 but worse because Hillary's really ideological, she was there to say that the United States will not allow the Soviet Union to be resurrected, it will deny Russia's special sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. So Trump is something new, perhaps more risky but also more desirable. But Russia will be very careful in navigating this.

**Haenle:** So no illusions about Donald Trump and what that might mean for Russia. But let's just talk if we could, in terms of our final question here, for all three of you. We spent a lot of time yesterday at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center talking about this notion of the triangular dynamics

between the United States, China, and Russia, with each side looking to use their relationship with the other as leverage in their relationship with the other side. Does this dynamic—in your view—still exist between China, the United States, and Russia as it did in the early ‘70s with President Nixon and Henry Kissinger his national security advisor, or do the United States and Russia, can they gain any leverage from these relations to use toward the other party and if so, how has Trump impacted this calculus? Can he impact this calculus, if this dynamic exists? Let me turn to you Andrew at first to start.

**Weiss:** When I first started hearing this intimations out of planet Trump that the U.S.-Russia relationship could be used as a tool to deal with a rising China and then ultimately contain it, I thought this is so ludicrous and so unworkable that you keep hearing this themes—just as you hear this kind of Islamophobic stuff emanating out of the Trump administration, as well that Russia is a potential partner to manage the thread of Islamic terrorism. I think it does, you know, have kind of a purchase over what animates the new administration. I think that dog won’t hunt. I think it’s a faulty logic and a really simplistic idea of how the global order is going to be structured. I think for the Russians the relationship with China is really important, it’s part of what makes Russia great again, it’s what gives Russia clout on the international scene that it has a junior partnership with a rising China. So the idea that there’s a trade here to be done and Vladimir Putin is going to be seduced away from China’s embrace by this brash new American President, again, I think it’s just the height of silliness.

**Haenle:** Alex, and different perspectives from the Russia perspective, and can you talk a little bit what we heard from the Chinese scholars in terms of their views as whether or not a U.S.-Russia rapprochement—if it’s even in the cards—how that will affect China and Russia?

**Gabeuv:** I think Chinese experts and scholars were worried on the onset because there’s this sort of uncertainty and if you read the Russian public message about how enthusiastic Russia is about Trump, people were unsecure about whether Russia’s pivot to China is so stable. But right now I think these things have cooled down and people have realized that a) Russia is not going anywhere because confrontation with China is too costly. We’ve been there, done that, over ‘60s and ‘70s, and ‘80s, and it just costs you too much. And then there’s this natural partnership in areas like global governance, where Russia and China share a lot of interests and they don’t share these interests with the United States, and Russia’s assessment of risks in partnering with China after Crimea is much less because Russia has really looked carefully into those things. And then you have this personal chemistry between Putin and Xi, which is functioning and we don’t know what the personal relationship between Putin and Xi will be in the real world. Last point, yes the triangular relationship at the standplate of Kissingerian diplomacy might be relevant for some people, but I think there are so many new cards on the table including a rising India, Japan, and that’s so much more complex that you just cannot say that this triangle is going to define everything. I don’t think that’s a really relevant concept for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Haenle:** Paul Stronski, any different views on the triangular relationship?

**Stronski:** No, I sort of have very similar views. I do think President Putin wants to check American power and alone he has a difficult time doing that. But I think together with China it is a lot easier for him to go about defending Russian interests, pushing back at attempts to intervene in

the sovereignty of former soviet states, and the sovereignty of Russia. His belief that that is what is going on. So I would agree with both of them, I don't think there's all that much there and also I think there's disagreements inside the Trump administration over whether this is a reasonable and feasible policy. There's disagreements over how to engage Russia, there's disagreements over the importance of America's alliances with both NATO, Japan, and South Korea, and I think we are starting to see cabinet members, the vice president, break with some of what President Trump has said.

**Haenle:** Is this coming from President Trump himself, this notion of a grand bargain with Russia or does it come from some of his advisors?

**Stronski:** I think it probably comes from a combination of both, I think it's not necessarily the foreign policy advisors, but it's more of the ideological advisors, the ones he relied on to develop his campaign messages. The problem that he now faces is that these were very good campaign messages to help him get elected but how to actually turn that into policy and it's really quite difficult. The people he's been relying on so far in his close inner circle are not the foreign policy experts and they are clashing with people both within his own administration as well as people in congress, and that includes the Republican party in congress/in the senate with some establishment foreign policy figures in the senate. So I think it's very much still a work in progress and I think it's going to be a while before we get a real sense of what his policies towards Russia really are going to be and what his policies towards China are really going to be and I don't think that he will be able to do this triangulation very effectively.

**Haenle:** We couldn't have picked a better time to have the three of you out for the Carnegie Global Dialogue on U.S.-Russia-China relations. Thank you for coming out. My last question is going to be for Andrew. Andrew the last time you were in China was 1987, 30 years ago. What are your thoughts on China today? What do you see as the most striking differences?

**Weiss:** It's changed. You know, Russia is just a fraction of the influence on the global scene on the development of the global economy that China represents and it's the minute you get here it's just an overarching sense of expectation, of confidence, and significance of what's unfolded here over the last 30 years. It's truly one of the most amazing and most impressive global phenomena ever experienced.

**Haenle:** Well we hope we don't have to wait 30 years to get the three of you to come back again. Thank you very much for being here this week for the Carnegie Global Dialogue and for joining me on the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World podcast.

**Gabuev:** Thanks, Paul.

**Stronski/Weiss:** Thank you.

**Haenle:** Well thank you very much for spending time with us today. That's it for this edition of the Carnegie-Tsinghua China in the World podcast. I encourage you to explore our site and see the work of all of our scholars at the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center. Thank you for listening and be sure to tune in next time.