



Prestige Matters: Chinese and Russian Status Concerns and U.S. Foreign Policy

BOTTOM LINES

- China and Russia are more likely to contribute to global governance when they believe that doing so will enhance their prestige.
- Real cooperation with China and Russia requires that both states maintain their distinctive identities without being required to adopt Western democratic reforms.
- Policymakers should place greater emphasis on status-enhancing actions through, for example, creating strategic dialogues, building strategic partnerships, and constructing new institutions on issues such as regional development and energy security, rather than rely on conventional strategies of containment, integration, and engagement.

By Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko

PRESTIGE MATTERS

Chinese and Russian cooperation is critical in dealing with key issues such as curbing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, controlling terrorism, rebuilding Afghanistan and Iraq, and maintaining stable energy supplies. Among rising powers, China and Russia pose problems more difficult and complex than those of other states because, as states that are neither U.S. allies nor Western-style democracies, they are outsiders that do not always accept the rules of the liberal “core” of the international system. As a result, conventional prescriptions for enhancing world order (e.g., admission to international institutions, promotion of liberal democratic norms, and encouragement of economic interdependence) are at best only partially relevant to securing Beijing’s and Moscow’s contribution to global governance.

The authors recommend an alternative approach based on a greater appreciation of China’s and Russia’s quest for distinctive identities and their heightened international prestige concerns. Chinese and Rus-

sian behavior since the beginning of the twenty-first century suggests that the desire for increased international status can motivate both countries to take on more responsibility for global governance.

BEIJING’S AND MOSCOW’S SEARCH FOR STATUS

China’s and Russia’s concerns for recognition and status, always central to their historic identities, were intensified by the end of the Cold War. China has long sought to restore its great power standing after a “century of humiliation” beginning with the Opium War (1839–1842), and Russia has been preoccupied with great power status regardless of whether it had the material wherewithal. In the 1990s, both states experienced major blows to their prestige, as China’s rulers were viewed by the West as being “on the wrong side of history” and Russia’s leadership was dismissed as unstable, corrupt, and incompetent. President Bill Clinton’s administration made China’s and Russia’s admission to prestigious institutions such as the World Trade Organization, North Atlantic Treaty Or-

ganization (NATO), and the Group of Seven (G-7) conditional on greater progress toward liberal democracy and free markets. Frustrated by their continued exclusion, despite having enacted domestic reforms, both states tried to compete for prestige with the United States and its partners. China's provocative missile tests in the Taiwan Strait aroused fears in Asia, however, and Russia's diplomatic balancing could not attract partners to an anti-U.S. diplomatic alliance.

Recognizing that their desire for improved status had not been attained and that the U.S.-dominated status hierarchy was secure, China and Russia adopted more innovative strategies for acquiring prestige that did not challenge the United States. China became a strategic partner with all major poles of the international system, participating in multilateral organizations (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Association for Southeast Asian Nations Plus Three), sponsoring six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear program, proposing a new free trade area with Southeast Asia, and after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, supporting U.S. counterterrorism efforts. President George W. Bush showed appreciation for China's constructive behavior by holding formal summits with Chinese leaders and by inaugurating "strategic dialogues" between high-level U.S. and Chinese officials.

Russian President Vladimir Putin seized the opportunity provided by the September 11 terrorist attacks to reframe Russia's identity as an equal, special partner with the United States in the war on terror. Russia's cooperation with the United States was both valuable and extensive, including sharing political and military intelligence, allowing U.S. planes to fly over Russian territory, acquiescing to U.S. military bases in Central Asia, and providing a liaison with an anti-Taliban force in Afghanistan, the Northern Alliance. Putin showed that the geopolitical rivalry with the United States was over by withdrawing from a large Russian electronic intelligence-gathering base in Cuba and a naval base in Vietnam; reacting calmly to the U.S. withdrawal from the Antiballistic Missile treaty and the admission of the Baltic states to NATO; and accepting a Strategic

Arms Reduction Treaty that allowed the United States to store dismantled warheads.

The U.S.-Russian strategic partnership did not last long, however. The Bush administration was unwilling to treat Russia as a partner, much less as an equal. A major irritant among members of Russian political circles was the U.S. failure to graduate Russia from the Cold War-era Jackson-Vanik amendment, which prevents normal trading relations with a state that restricts emigration. The United States showed indifference to Russia's status concerns by invading Iraq, a former Soviet client, without consulting with Moscow; supporting "color" revolutions in neighboring countries that were regarded as humiliating interference in Russia's sphere of influence; and publicly criticizing Putin's domestic policies as "backsliding" from democracy. Russia's desire to assert its comeback on the world stage, as well as to proclaim a sphere of "privileged interest" in the post-Soviet space, were evident in its August 2008 incursion into Georgia. President Barack Obama's adoption of more respectful policies toward Russia has elicited a more cooperative attitude by Russian President Dmitri Medvedev toward curbing Iran's nuclear program and allowing U.S. cargo flights in Russian air space to supply NATO's military effort in Afghanistan.

THE STRATEGY OF STATUS ENHANCEMENT

China and Russia are more likely to engage in constructive status-seeking behavior if the United States finds ways to recognize their international status and distinctive identities. For example, strategic dialogues, formal summits, and strategic partnerships can help to establish issue agendas for future collaboration and symbolize that states are political equals. Engagement through trade and investment does not resolve conflicting political goals.

Integration into Western, value-based institutions such as NATO or the G-8 is impractical for aspiring great powers such as China and Russia that want to maintain their distinctive national and cultural iden-

tities rather than emulate the established states. Instead of the “Washington Consensus” on neoliberal economic principles espoused by Western financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), China promotes the “Beijing Consensus,” advocating adaptation of economic policies to national conditions. Similarly, Putin’s team has promoted the concept of “sovereign democracy,” arguing that there is more than one definition of democracy and that Russia is following the way best suited to its history and culture.

A status enhancement strategy is also superior to a neocontainment policy of imposing ideological criteria for participation in global governance, as reflected in recent calls for a Concert of Democracies that would exclude China and Russia. Such simplistic Wilsonianism is self-defeating because Russia and China would respond by withdrawing cooperation on key issues or by engaging in spoiler behavior.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Consultation (such as senior-level strategic dialogues) on issues affecting China’s and Russia’s interests should be expanded and institutionalized. China and Russia should be encouraged to take greater responsibility in return for sharing leadership roles. For example, the United States could join with China and Russia in a

working group on energy security. There could be a consortium on promoting economic development in Central Asia. Chinese and Russian institutional initiatives (such as President Medvedev’s recent proposal for new European security institutions) deserve serious consideration and a positive response from the West. Russia is outside the main European security structures, NATO and the European Union, and an overarching security treaty on the model of the 1975 Helsinki accords would treat Russia as an equal partner with Europe and the United States.

The United States should refrain from actions that undermine China’s and Russia’s prestige. China is more likely to revalue the renminbi out of self-interest—to reduce its export dependence and to fight inflation—than to comply with humiliating demands from the U.S. Congress or the IMF. Similarly, the United States should avoid antagonizing Russia by further enlarging NATO to include other states in Russia’s area of historic interest.

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