



“East Rising, West Falling”: Not So Fast, History Suggests

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“East Rising, West Falling”: Not So Fast, History Suggests

US relations with China and Russia remain deeply problematic. Any hopes for change for the better under a Biden presidency were quickly dashed by the harsh Sino-US exchanges in Alaska in March and by the fallout from “Solar-Winds,” Moscow’s brazen hacking attempt.¹ No breakthroughs were expected or forthcoming at the US-Russia summit meeting in June, while celebrations of the Communist Party of China’s 100th anniversary in July reconfirmed Beijing’s strident foreign policy course. What’s more, Washington’s principal authoritarian rivals have been cooperating to mutual advantage. Summits between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin have been a hallmark of Sino-Russian diplomacy since 2013. It was telling that, right after the US-China encounter in Alaska, Foreign Ministers Wang and Lavrov met in Guilin, China to pointedly condemn Western “interference” in their internal affairs.²

The evolving Sino-Russian partnership has sparked much interest and growing concern among strategists. Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman have warned of Beijing and Moscow’s “dangerous convergence.”³ Christopher Walker and Jessica Ludwig paint an even starker portrait of Sino-Russian “sharp power”: by “preying upon the openness of democratic systems,” they write, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin are engaged in “making the world safe for

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autocracy.”⁴ Balkan Devlen has synthesized a wide swath of expert commentary to draw equally somber conclusions. According to Devlen, the regimes in Beijing and Moscow see “the very existence of functioning, prosperous liberal democracies” as threats to their rule; they are “increasingly” aligned on disinformation and influence operations; military cooperation is on the rise; and both “are convinced that shifts in global balance of power favour them and not the West.”⁵

This portrait of the Sino-Russian challenge is not inaccurate, but it is somewhat misleading. Beijing and Moscow are implacably opposed to many of the interests and values that Washington and its allies hold dear. They actively exploit the openness of Western societies to seek advantage in what they see as a Manichean struggle between East and West. But the motivations that drive this approach have to be placed in historical context. When the confronta-

This is not the first time Western developed democracies have been consigned to the dustbin of history

tion that increasingly dominates 21st-century world politics is framed in terms of its 20th century antecedents, the authoritarians in the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai appear less menacing, and their Western adversaries less disadvantaged, than the disquieting language of much contemporary analysis implies. The developed democracies of the West have been here before—this is not the first time their ideological adversaries have consigned them to the dustbin of history. The fact that the West has not only survived but thrived is

no guarantee of future success, but a fuller appreciation of the origins of the current stand-off with authoritarianism can provide encouraging perspective at a time when it appears to be badly needed.

A Distant Mirror?

A world that knew neither Twitter nor cyber threats would appear to be far removed from our own, yet dynamics that trace their roots back well over a century shed critical light on contemporary issues, particularly where China and Russia are concerned. The forces that led both countries to embrace communism make intelligible many of the drivers of East-West conflict today.⁶ Here I want to focus on the 21st century conceit that the West’s day is done, that the world’s squabbling, gridlocked democracies are inexorably yielding to their “active and purposeful” authoritarian counterparts.⁷ The concept is enshrined in Chinese Communist Party (CCP) doctrine at the highest levels, conveyed, as only Mandarin can, in the pithy four-character phrase “*dong*

sheng, xi jiang”: “East rising, West falling.”⁸ As analyst Balkan Devlen and others have rightly observed, this phrase speaks to the swagger that has marked Xi Jinping’s foreign policy since at least the 19th CCP Congress in the fall of 2017, which shows every sign of blooming into full-blown arrogance.

A brief review of the historical record demonstrates that such arrogance and any corresponding Western notions of inadequacy are deeply misplaced. Let’s begin with the Bolshevik coup in Russia in 1917, the act that gave birth to the world’s first Communist state and set the stage for the Cold War that followed. It is worth recalling that the driving premise of that foundational moment was that the “most advanced” powers of the day (which Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin listed as England, Germany, and France, with the United States nipping at their heels) were doomed to collapse. In accordance with Lenin’s *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916), the “certainty” of capitalism’s downfall would pave the way for the triumph of socialism in the West that would secure Lenin’s revolution in backward Russia.⁹ So deep was this conviction that in March 1919, at the height of the civil war that threatened to engulf his regime, Lenin prioritized the founding of the Communist International, an organization to inspire and direct the overthrow of capitalism by fledgling revolutionaries around the globe.¹⁰

Though such aspirations appear daft in retrospect, they did not at the time. As two students of the period remind us, it seemed to many that the then-vivid legacy of “total war” from 1914 to 1918 had “irredeemably undermined” the old order: “Capitalism, if not certified dead and buried, was in its final death throes.”¹¹ Hopes for world revolution had faded by the early 1920s, but Lenin’s Bolsheviks proved adept at adapting to this circumstance. As capitalism endured, Moscow combined traditional statecraft with “revolutionary” tools such as propaganda and agitation among foreign workers that aimed at eroding its adversaries from within. Such tactics reflected both ideological conviction and practical necessity. Encircled by the states of a more powerful and hostile West, Bolshevik Russia, in Sovietologist Adam Ulam’s phrase, “could not forego any weapon at her disposal.”¹² This early misreading of Western prospects and its tactical consequences have implications for our own time.

The belief that Western prospects were limited shaped Stalin’s diplomacy in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the period that marked the beginning of the Cold War. Most recent scholarship upholds the conclusion that political scientist William Taubman drew, without the benefit of archives, nearly forty years ago: Stalin’s hopes for cooperation with the West outlasted

The belief that Western prospects were limited shaped Stalin’s miscalculations

Washington's, though miscalculations on his part were decisive "in creating the all-out American hostility he had erroneously assumed to exist all along."¹³ All too aware of his country's war-ravaged weakness in 1945, Stalin was more cautious and defensive than many contemporary observers feared, but he took solace in predictions of "inter-capitalist contradictions" that ultimately proved untenable. His "crudely Marxist" mindset led him to believe that he could string his Western partners along and probe for weaknesses (in Iran and Turkey, for example), when in fact those actions triggered the US response—1947's "Truman Doctrine" and the Marshall Plan—that brought on the Cold War with a vengeance.¹⁴ Three years later, a misreading of the impact of Mao Zedong's success in China and prospects for US involvement led Stalin to endorse North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung's plans to reunify the Korean peninsula, paving the way for a tripling of the US defense budget and the birth of "the national security state."¹⁵ None of these missteps by the aging but still all-powerful Soviet leader can be said to have enhanced his country's security.

Four years after Stalin's death and the uneasy armistice in Korea, the Communist world's fortunes received a huge boost when the Soviet Union successfully launched the first-ever man-made satellite, *Sputnik*, on October 4, 1957. Though cooler heads (including, importantly, US President Dwight Eisenhower's) ultimately prevailed, the initial impact was profound: the notion that "Communist" education and engineering methods had bested American know-how occasioned "a deeply felt sense of national crisis" in the United States.¹⁶ Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was not shy about pressing his apparent advantage. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles told the National Security Council that "Soviet propaganda" linked the satellite launch to "the effectiveness of the Communist social system," while his deputy, Christian Herter, advised that initial reactions abroad were "pretty somber" and would require some effort to "counteract."¹⁷ But it fell to Khrushchev's then brother-in arms, Mao Zedong, to capture the moment most evocatively. "The East wind," Mao told a gathering of fellow Communist parties in Moscow the following month, could now be said to prevail over the "West wind."¹⁸

It is instructive to remind ourselves what this supposed turning point in East-West history actually wrought. Mao had been chafing for some time against what he saw as excessively cautious, self-interested, and even dangerous behavior on the part of his "elder brothers" in the Sino-Soviet alliance. Though not the decisive factor, the exuberance of *Sputnik* contributed to his belief that the pace of socialist achievement in China could and should be accelerated. Two months after trumpeting the "East wind," Mao launched the "Great Leap Forward," a bid to harness China's unparalleled labour resources to surpass both the United Kingdom and the United States in agriculture and industry. The result was unmitigated disaster, ushering in a man-made famine estimated to have cost forty

million lives. This debacle unfolded in tandem with the unravelling of Sino-Soviet relations, which by the early 1960s had degraded into a tense stand-off. Khrushchev continued to feed the West a steady diet of intimidation based on claims of socialist superiority. But though fears of “missile gaps” and a series of artificial crises over Berlin kept the United States and its allies on edge, once his most dangerous bluff was called in the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, Khrushchev’s own days were numbered. The Cold War outlook remained uncertain, but as Khrushchev fell victim to a bloodless coup and Mao geared up to launch his Cultural Revolution, the idea that the East wind was prevailing over the West wind was implausible.¹⁹

Khrushchev’s successors learned an important lesson from his tumultuous leadership: bluff and bluster are no substitute for hard power. Leonid Brezhnev, who assumed the top job following Khrushchev’s forced retirement in October 1964, oversaw an unprecedented build-up in both nuclear and conventional forces; Soviet defense spending increased by some 40 percent between 1965 and 1970.²⁰ These efforts were seemingly crowned in the early 1970s when a combination of the need to manage both Moscow’s newly achieved nuclear parity and a face-saving endgame in the war with Vietnam led US President Richard Nixon to embrace East-West détente.²¹ The impact on Soviet thinking cannot be overstated. For all their claims to superiority and the geopolitical fruits of their victory in World War II, Moscow’s policymakers labored under a perpetual sense of inferiority vis-à-vis the United States and its allies. Assertions that the future belonged to socialism coexisted with an awareness of capitalism’s enduring strengths and of the effort required for the Soviet Union to hold its own, let alone achieve equality, in its ongoing competition with the United States. This awareness is illustrated by the enthusiasm with which Soviet representatives embraced the agreement on “Basic Principles of Relations between the US and the USSR,” signed on the last day of the Brezhnev-Nixon Summit in Moscow in May 1972. What US negotiators saw as having “at most a symbolic value,”²² their counterparts viewed as “a formal acceptance by Nixon of the political equality of the Soviet Union and the United States.”²³

This proved to be yet another misreading of Western prospects. As détente’s troubled fortunes soon made clear, US policymakers in the 1970s had no intention of yielding their international predominance to an “equal” USSR. Yet Soviet policymakers and analysts had convinced themselves otherwise. Their optimism was rooted in the notion that the world was witnessing nothing less than a “fundamental restructuring” of international relations.²⁴ What subsequent developments would prove to be only a short-term waning of US influence after Vietnam and an accumulation of related domestic challenges, Kremlin analysts interpreted as a tectonic shift reflecting Washington’s acceptance of a more limited role for itself and the USSR’s status as its global equal. This acceptance

in turn was attributed by Moscow to a shift in favor of socialism of the “correlation of forces” (“sootnoshenie sil”), a concept that encompassed not only Moscow’s new military might but also a multitude of contemporary trends, from the impact on US Presidential power of Watergate to “revolutionary” currents in the Third World.²⁵ The upshot was a world transformed in which the Kremlin could have its cake and eat it too—détente with the West (with attendant recognition of post-1945 borders and Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, together with helpful imports of Western technology) and a free hand to support the Marxist-Leninist cause from Angola to the Horn of Africa.

That Soviet foreign policy managed to go so badly wrong in the 1970s is directly attributable to the structural shortcomings of Soviet authoritarianism.

**1970s Soviet
foreign policy went
badly wrong
because of authori-
tarianism’s struc-
tural shortcomings**

As historian Odd Arne Westad and others have shown, there was awareness within the system that all was not well with the Kremlin’s ambitious designs, that ever-deeper involvement in Third World conflicts might not serve Moscow’s interests, and that Washington might not stand idly by. But systemic pandering to an all-powerful leader (Brezhnev), whose declining health facilitated bureaucratic logrolling and an absence of internal debate, assured consensus in support of the policies that culminated in the woefully mis-

calculated December 1979 decision to invade Afghanistan.²⁶ Détente gave way to a “new Cold War,” the strains of which initially contributed to Gorbachev’s “new thinking” but ultimately were among the drivers of the Soviet Union’s collapse.²⁷

21st Century Challenges

Viewing China’s recent international policies through the lens of the USSR’s half-century attempt to secure recognition as the West’s equal in world affairs suggests several parallels that merit consideration, illuminating both the well-springs of Beijing’s approaches and the role therein of its partnership with Moscow. PRC State Counselor Yang Jiechi’s heated opening intervention in the US-China talks in Alaska in March 2021 provides a convenient window into the concepts driving what is formally known as “Xi Jinping thought on diplomacy.” Yang’s words bristled with confidence, describing a China en route to achieving its two “centenary” goals (marking, respectively, the hundredth anniversaries of the founding of the CCP and the PRC in 2021 and 2049) and looking

forward to “full modernization” by 2050. Yang condemned what he described as US efforts to exercise “long-arm jurisdiction ... through the use of force or financial hegemony,” calling instead “to build a new type of international relations, ensuring justice, fairness and mutual respect.” “The US,” Yang reminded his interlocutors, “does not represent the world,” and would do well, he suggested, to put its own house in order rather than take others to task on issues such as human rights.²⁸

Behind Yang’s prose stands an elaborate edifice of officially sanctioned thinking that purports to discern the principal trends of contemporary world politics and what they mean for China. Two “profound changes unseen in a century” anchor this thinking: the “rejuvenation” [*fixing*] of the Chinese nation and unprecedented “turmoil” [*bianju*] in the international system.²⁹ Though the latter is acknowledged to be fraught with challenges as well as opportunities, Xi Jinping proclaims that “time and momentum are both on [China’s] side” [*shi yu shi, duo zai women yi bian*].³⁰ This confident outlook helps to explain the robust new look in Chinese foreign policy that Yang Jiechi’s Alaska remarks epitomized. As Brookings Institute analyst Ryan Hass has shown, while Beijing as late as the spring of 2019 can be said to have sought “calibration and caution” in its approach to Sino-US relations, it has since become “less restrained in its actions at home and abroad.”³¹

Scholarship produced at the Central Party School and China’s leading universities paints an unvarnished picture of international change that frames Beijing’s new possibilities against the backdrop of a West in decline. China’s rise, readers of this literature are told, has shown the developing world that the “Western model” is no longer the “standard” path toward progress. What’s more, the Western-centric international order that emerged after World War II is “not suited” [*bu fu he*] to the trends driving contemporary change, which favor “democracy” and “equality,” not “hegemonism” and rule by the few. The latter approach, exemplified by the United States and its allies, is “on the wane” [*shuai luo*]; China, in the meantime, has moved steadily from the “fringes” of world politics to “center stage.”³² There is a thinly concealed triumphalism to this discourse. No educated Chinese reader needs to be reminded of the bitter history that lends such sweetness to China’s current moment in the sun. It has long been a cornerstone of the Party’s legitimacy to paint that history in the starkest terms, to portray the country’s sufferings at the hands of “imperialism,” from the first Opium War (1839–42) to the founding of the PRC in 1949, as China’s “century of humiliation” from which it was delivered by the Communist Party.³³ Yang Jiechi’s warning to America’s top diplomat that he did “not represent the world” speaks volumes about a country that feels it has won a degree of respect that is long overdue.

There are voices of caution to dampen the drumbeats of pride. Ryan Hass notes that Wang Jisi, the highly respected dean of US studies in China, “subtly” acknowledges that every untoward turn in world politics may not be the United States’ fault, while Shi Yinhong of Renmin University cautions about the limits of Beijing’s soft power and related challenges to capitalizing on a diminished US role.³⁴ Fudan University’s Zhang Jiadong has stated bluntly that the number of countries willing to follow the Chinese model of development is “very few.”³⁵ Yet there is a further, more nuanced indication of concern that the world may not be unfolding entirely in accordance with the CCP’s confident script. Yang Jiechi in Alaska explained the bluntness of his own remarks as a justified response to the unexpectedly “condescending” tone adopted by his American hosts. Yuan Peng, the director of one of Beijing’s leading think tanks (the Ministry of State Security-affiliated China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, or CICIR), picked up on this in a subsequent interview, when he lamented the United States’ “impoliteness,” which compelled a response.³⁶ Yuan went on to describe in an almost pleading tone how closer cooperation with China could benefit Washington both internationally and domestically, as if to say that the world has changed; you can’t talk to China like that anymore. Don’t you Americans get that?

But the fact is, Washington manages relations with China in accordance with its own understanding of US interests, not Beijing’s. Here lies a fascinating point of comparison with Soviet foreign policy: just as Brezhnev’s Kremlin churned out reams of analysis allegedly proving that world trends favored the USSR at the expense of the United States and its allies, the CCP’s extensive foreign policy apparatus has been marshaled to establish that “time and momentum are both on [China’s] side.” But repeating arguments does not make them true, even

when they are elaborately grounded in Xi Jinping Thought’s ever so compelling “scientific” refinements of “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” A key question for the future is this: will China’s policymakers be granted the capacity to confront and adapt constructively to the roadblocks that a still-viable West puts in their path, or is generational leadership change—as was the case in the USSR—the sole means by which China might eventually back away from its highly charged nationalistic agenda?

The deepening of Chinese authoritarianism is not an environment to encourage “new thinking”

The outlook in 2021 is not good. Every observable trendline points to the deepening, not lessening, of Chinese authoritarianism, while the “cult of personality” surrounding Xi Jinping approaches levels not seen since Mao’s day. This is not an

environment to encourage “new thinking.” It is an environment for doubling down on the argument that China is rising while the West is declining, for ensuring that the all-powerful man at the top is told what he wants to hear, while the propaganda apparatus drives home to the public that Xi and the CCP are realizing the long-cherished dream of Chinese greatness. Drawing parallels to the folly of the Brezhnev years is not to say that Xi’s China is doomed to follow the Soviet path to eventual collapse. It is to underline the deep dysfunction that churns beneath the surface of the so-called Chinese juggernaut and to suggest that, just as it was premature to discount the West’s staying power during the oil shocks and stagflation of the 1970s, we should not be too quick today to see “East rising, West falling” as the incontrovertible trend of the times.

Sino-Russian Relations

Whatever the West’s current trajectory, common cause in the face of the United States, its allies, and the post-1945 international order they made is a key catalyst of Sino-Russian partnership. Whether one adopts the somewhat alarmist lens I described at the outset of this essay or sees this duo more as an “axis of convenience” where challenging differences simmer not far below the surface,³⁷ the West as threatening “other” is unquestionably among the paramount considerations that bring the two sides together. Although times have changed and the power relations between Beijing and Moscow have more than reversed, their enduring preoccupation with a still-powerful West is an intriguing echo of the Sino-Soviet alliance that shaped world politics in the 1950s.³⁸ I would suggest that this line of analysis can be taken a step further, that reflection upon the 20th-century antecedents of contemporary Sino-Russian cooperation sheds light, not only on the drivers of that cooperation, but on the instruments of statecraft that the two 21st-century authoritarians employ.

It is helpful here to return to the observation Adam Ulam made some 50 years ago that fledgling Soviet Russia’s encirclement by vastly more powerful states meant that Moscow “could not forsake any weapon at her disposal.”³⁹ This helps to explain its early reliance on influence operations, what political scientist Thomas Rid has characterized as “a weapon of the weak.”⁴⁰ A similar logic informs the hacking, influence peddling, subversion, and associated aggressive behaviors that cause students of Sino-Russian partnership so much concern today.

Moscow and Beijing are world leaders in “sharp power” because soft power is not a realistic option

This is not to suggest that these two nuclear-armed great powers are “weak,” but it does point up a significant shortcoming compared to the West. Moscow and Beijing are world leaders in the realm of “sharp power” precisely because they have to be; the higher road of “soft power,” of values that actually have some universal appeal, is not a realistic option for regimes that are models, at best, of corruption and high-tech social controls. How different the threat about which Walker and Ludwig warn so alarmingly—Beijing’s and Moscow’s ability “to stifle and even censor views abroad that they dislike” and to “undermine ... independent democratic institutions”—appears when framed in this way.⁴¹ To be clear: China’s and Russia’s ruthless exercise of sharp power and related pernicious activity constitutes a serious security challenge that must be addressed. But their reliance on such measures is yet another marker of authoritarianism’s disadvantages in its ongoing contest with a democratic West.⁴²

The similarity of their governance models is itself both a driver and a limitation of Sino-Russian cooperation. The notion that each is standing tall in the face of a pernicious West contributes importantly to the popular legitimacy of Xi’s and Putin’s dictatorships. Though we should not expect to find the Kremlin formally adopting Xi Jinping Thought anytime soon, the tone and target of Moscow’s official pronouncements often parallel those coming out of Zhongnanhai. In his April 2021 speech to the Russian Federal Assembly, for example, Putin sounded much like Yang Jiechi in Alaska as he disparaged “certain actors’ brutal attempts to impose their will” and assured his listeners that Russia would “always find a way to defend” itself against those who adopt “a selfish and arrogant tone with us.”⁴³ Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has asserted that those who promote “their ideologized agenda aimed at maintaining their dominance by holding back the development of other countries” are “on the wrong side of history.”⁴⁴

Yet there is a mutual wariness that inhibits the prospect of a full-blown alliance. It is telling, for example, that China abstained rather than voting against the 2014 UN resolution that condemned Russia’s annexation of Crimea.⁴⁵ Though purportedly close partners in the exercise of “sharp power,” a recent study by the Carnegie Moscow Center shows that similarities in the two sides’ approaches on digital propaganda is more the result of independent Chinese learning from Russia’s example than any active cooperation.⁴⁶ Even the two sides’ defense cooperation, which one would expect to loom large in a geopolitical tandem of such standing, has been described as “more flash than bang.”⁴⁷

The fact that China and Russia are both authoritarian polities is ultimately a mixed blessing for their partnership. On one hand, dictators like Putin and Xi make logical bedfellows, facing no internal obstacles to their frequent summitry (at least before COVID-19) and protestations of close friendship. Analyst Alexander Gabuev has described the two sides’ ideological compatibility—the fact

that China, unlike the West, does not “impose any political models or conditions on Russia”—as a key factor reconciling Moscow to closer partnership after the souring of East-West relations in 2014.⁴⁸

At the same time, the staunch commitment to “sovereignty” that undergirds shared opposition to the West means that, as Angela Stent has put it, neither country “is interested in committing itself to an alliance that would limit its freedom of maneuver.”⁴⁹ Geopolitical considerations also push the relationship in contrary directions. The strong incentive to cooperate against a hostile West is tempered by growing asymmetry as Beijing advances and Moscow continues to stagnate as well as by nascent frictions on issues such as the Arctic and Central Asia.⁵⁰ In sum, both alarmists and proponents of the “convenience” school have plenty of fodder to support their views.

Where there is less room for debate, I suggest, is around the notion that having the wind in their sails is a key advantage for China and Russia as they push against the interests and values of a declining West. In important respects, this is simply the latest installment of a serial that has been running for at least a hundred years. From the days of Lenin through Khrushchev and Mao down to our own time, the West’s leading authoritarian challengers have been untiring in their evolving efforts to penetrate and undermine our societies, all the while proclaiming a vision of the future in which the deeply flawed model of capitalist democracy is doomed to capitulate. History has, to date, proven all of them wrong. We would do well to keep this in mind as we seek to distinguish the real from the imagined in assessments of the Sino-Russian challenge.

Lenin to Khrushchev to Mao to today have all proclaimed a deeply flawed model of capitalist democracy

How Many Feet Tall, Did You Say?

It bears emphasizing that none of the foregoing is intended to make light of the challenges the West has itself faced of late. To point out shortcomings in its authoritarian rivals and underline the West’s enduring advantages is not to deny that the United States and its allies have serious issues that need to be addressed. But efforts to do so will benefit from a clear-eyed understanding of those rivals’ weaknesses as well as their strengths, an understanding that the history reviewed in the preceding pages has sought to advance.

The perspective offered here is also intended to counter the “worst case” thinking that invariably informs much of the recent work on Sino-Russian

relations. Such thinking can in part be attributed to the prudence preached by a realist perspective on international affairs—in an anarchical “self-help” system, not erring on the side of caution can prove fatal.⁵¹ This is why Cold War historian Melvyn Leffler used the present tense when he observed that “American officials, like leaders everywhere, are prone to overdramatize their nation’s vulnerability and to exaggerate unfavourable developments in the international balance of power.”⁵² These words can certainly be said to apply to the current discourse on China and Russia. Less charitably, as one Washington insider recently pointed out to me, portraying the two more as “threatening,” rather than as challenged themselves, is a surer path to funding in the current environment. Again, to question the alarmist perspective is not to deny its validity, but merely to suggest that a fuller picture of Beijing’s and Moscow’s strengths and weaknesses yields a more reliable basis for future policies.

We can expect China to continue to propagate its self-serving vision for “a new type of international relations” in service of a “common destiny for mankind.” We can expect Russia to continue to aid and abet this vision, if more by deed than by word. And we can expect Beijing and Moscow to deploy every means at their disposal to push back against a Western-centric world order that neither believes fully advances their interests. But the global tide is no more turning against the West today than it was in Leonid Brezhnev’s, Mao’s, or Lenin’s time. The risks to the United States, to its allies, and to the world are indeed considerable. The West needs to be vigilant; it needs to get its own house in order. But it also needs to see its principal authoritarian rivals for what they are and frame the East-West dynamic in proper historical perspective. Reasoned concern, not alarm, is the order of the day. Reports of the West’s death have been exaggerated before. This fact should lend welcome confidence to efforts to manage Beijing and Moscow in the challenging days to come.

Notes

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