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The Coming Wars

Bruno Maçães explores the frontlines of the future.

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin, left, talks with China's President Xi Jinping in Beijing | Greg Baker/AFP via Getty Images

THE COMING WARS

Russia to China: Together we can rule the world

Only Europe can prevent an Eastern bloc.

By **BRUNO MAÇÃES** | 2/17/19, 6:00 AM CET | Updated 2/18/19, 10:28 AM CET

Europe's obsession with Russia is unrequited. Moscow just isn't interested in the Continent anymore.

It doesn't care about European integration, or moving toward Europe. But neither is it interested in Europe's predicted disintegration, or in pulling countries away from the West and closer to its way of thinking.

In the halls of the Kremlin these days, it's all about China — and whether or not Moscow can convince Beijing to form an alliance against the West.

Russia's obsession with a potential alliance with China was already obvious at the Valdai Discussion Club, an annual gathering of Russia's biggest foreign policy minds, in 2017.

At their next meeting, late last year, the idea seemed to move from the speculative to something Russia wants to realize. And soon.

“ Russia’s view of China has shifted significantly over the past five years.

Every Russian speech — from obscure academics to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Russian President Vladimir Putin himself — played that note and no other. There was even a new sense of desperation in the air.

As Sergey Karaganov, a former adviser to Putin, explained to me at breakfast, now everything must be about China.



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Russia’s view of China has shifted significantly over the past five years. Moscow has abandoned any hope that the Chinese economy is an example it might emulate. Instead, foreign policy experts now talk of how Russia can use China to further its geopolitical goals.

There was no doubt at Valdai that China knows how to do economic growth, and that Russia does not. Russia’s elite — always so ready to resist any sign of Western hegemony — have no problem admitting China’s economic superiority. Their acceptance reminded me of the way Britain gave way to the United States as the world’s dominant economic power.



In the halls of the Kremlin these days, it's all about China | Andreas Rentz/Getty Images

Seen from Moscow, there is no resistance left to a new alliance led by China. And now that Washington has imposed tariffs on Chinese exports, Russia hopes China will finally understand that its problem is Washington, not Moscow.

In the past, the possibility of an alliance between the two countries had been hampered by China's reluctance to jeopardize its relations with the U.S. But now that it has already become a target, perhaps it will grow bolder. Every speaker at Valdai tried to push China in that direction.

When Putin finished a fireside chat with policymakers — a set-piece of the conference, where he fields softball questions from the audience — he made a gesture to leave the room, but then quickly rushed back to grab Yang Jiechi, a former Chinese foreign minister and arguably the main architect of the country's foreign policy. He insisted on walking out with Yang by his side, to the obvious delight of his Chinese guest.

But what happens now? Can Russia and China really be friends, and for how long?

The thing to remember is that both countries are obsessed with overturning the American-led global order. They may have a long history of geopolitical rivalry — one that is sure to return once their goal is achieved and new poles emerge, pitting them against each other.

But they'll cross that bridge when they get there, maybe in another 20 years or so. For now, Russia and China are essentially on the same side.

“ For the moment, Chinese prudence remains the great obstacle to the new alliance. And Russians know this.

This alliance, if it becomes concrete, would overturn how we do global politics. Imagine an international crisis in which Russia and China suddenly emerge as a single bloc. The impact would be considerable, and to some extent unpredictable: Psychologically, in the mind of the West, it would combine the fear associated with Russia with the apparent invulnerability of China. Washington would feel under attack; Europe, intimidated and unsettled.

The old Continent would also face the threat of a split between Western Europe and the nations of Central and Eastern Europe, which could turn their focus east under the influence of a cash-happy China ready to invest in the region.

It would be an entirely new world, and it's one that is coming closer to becoming reality.

For the moment, Chinese prudence remains the great obstacle to the new alliance. And Russians know this.



Sergey Karaganov, a former adviser to Vladimir Putin | Soeren Stache/AFP via Getty Images

I met Karaganov again at a meeting with Chinese officials and think tankers in Beijing a few weeks ago. There, a number of Chinese participants said they doubted Russia's assertions that the world is in the midst of a new Cold War.

Karaganov dedicated himself to convincing them otherwise, arguing with increasing passion that China is deluding itself if it thinks issues between Beijing and Washington can be conveniently resolved to the benefit of both sides.

If Beijing places its bets on peace and cooperation, the great Chinese adventure will come to an end, and China will have to live in the shadow of the U.S. for another generation — perhaps forever, Karaganov said. Chinese authorities, he argued, have no more than five years to make a decision.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House rule, so unfortunately, I cannot report on what the response from the Chinese side was; only Karaganov allowed me to relay his words.



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But from my own separate conversations, Chinese officials appear to agree the clock is ticking. They're just not yet convinced they should choose war — even a Cold War.

But if China has a word on whether we see the creation of an Eastern bloc, so does Europe.

European markets and European technology are critical resources for China. More and more, Chinese authorities know what to expect from America, and they know all too well what to expect from Russia. But Europe is a different matter. Beijing will hesitate to push it away, and will wait for Europeans to make up their minds.

We can keep them waiting. We can keep them pondering. In a dangerous world, Europe is the holder of the balance.

Bruno Maçães, a former Europe minister for Portugal, is a senior adviser at Flint Global in London and a nonresident senior fellow at the Hudson Institute in Washington. His book "The Dawn of Eurasia" was published by Penguin last year.

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