

Russia and China: Frenemies?  
Posted On:December 31, 1969

We are so fixed on what Russia is doing to Ukraine that we are not watching China. American policy has often been wrong about the relationship between Russia and China. During the Vietnam War, we thought that all Communists were the same, and missed an opportunity to divide Russia from China.

Now we obsess on China's seeming backing of Russia's genocidal behavior. China has publicly objected to Russia's violation of an independent neighboring country, hypocritically not mentioning their own objection to Taiwan's independent democracy. They do not recognize Taiwan's independence just as Russia refuses to recognize Ukraine as an independent democratic state. Nonetheless, China has criticized Russia's war on Ukraine.

China does not like unrest---a long-time Chinese policy. Russia, however, is promoting unrest as a matter of policy in its attempt to discredit democracy.

China's and Russia's leaders met recently and seemed friendly. They are not friends, however. They are frenemies, friendly seeming enemies. They are also not equal threats to world peace. Russia likes to think it is an equal world power to China, but except for its geographic size, there is no comparison. Russia has an economy the size of Italy's, whereas China's economy is second only to the US.

Why, then, is China obsessed with Russia? Why are so many scholarly papers and books published in China focused on the collapse of the Soviet Union? What frightens these two dictatorships so much? Both are afraid of popular uprising that could overthrow their holds on power and dread the consequences---which could be their deaths.

Western scholars have weighed in on the collapse of the USSR too. Their consensus is that the Cold War put stress on the Communist economy without stress on that of the US. We spent them to death, perhaps. But the final collapse came with the terrible nuclear catastrophe in Chernobyl (when Ukraine was part of the USSR). The Soviets tried to hide the disaster, caused by very bad management, and might have gotten away with it, except that the radioactive cloud reached Sweden, where it went public.

This was the last straw for Russians, who suffered so long from the total control of news by the state. At the same time, the unnecessary Afghan war ended with Soviet withdrawal and brought the veterans home addicted to drugs.

Chinese analysts have another reason for the fall of the USSR: the loosening of total control by Khrushchev and Gorbachev. They see the problem as Khrushchev acknowledging Stalin's murderous reign, including the gulags, concentration camps, in Siberia. For China, it is policy to never reveal, never apologize.

Then, Gorbachev committed the ultimate sin of dictatorships: "Glasnost" (opening information to provide the public and world with truth). For western historians, these two men were admirable and honest. For China, they were traitors to Marxism.

Today, as Russia and China pretend to be friends, another issue has surfaced. China is running out of water. The great east-west rivers, such as the Yellow River, are both overused and polluted, and climate change has not only worsened the encroaching desertification (the Gobi Desert is growing), but these rivers are no longer reaching the Pacific Ocean.

Many historians ignore geography, to their cost. The water crisis has pushed Chinese farmers into Siberia, Russia's territory, where there is plenty of water. Russia's great size, eleven time zones, does not protect them from their plummeting population. Russia would never win a war with China (or with NATO).

Russia's long history of bad governance has made the problem worse. Siberia, all the way to the Pacific, is becoming alienated from Putin's dictatorship. Hundreds of cities have demonstrated against the governors Putin has put in charge, and against Putin's determination to prevent an honest election from removing him. He can silence the free press for a while, but he will be unseated.

Meanwhile, China's heavy-handed policy of locking up cities with COVID outbreaks is endangering President Xi. China's deal with its citizens: middle class life style without democratic governance, is in trouble. Chinese economy is taking a hit from Xi's COVID lockdowns.

Trouble ahead.

680 words

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