

The irony deepens

By Bunn Nagara



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left and Chinese President Xi Jinping

IN worsening the climate for a colossal trade war between the world's two biggest economies, the US slapped new sanctions on China three days ago.

The ostensible offence: China's purchase of Russian combat aircraft last year and surface-to-air missiles this year, in violation of sweeping US sanctions against Russia.

Specifically, the new sanctions are levelled at the Chinese military's Equipment Development Department for buying hardware from Russia's main arms exporter, Rosoboronexport.

It was a standard transaction between two trading nations, except for the "extra-territorial" US sanctions targeting any country (China) that dares trade with one (Russia) being punished by Washington.

US policy analysts are debating whether the move was actually aimed at China or Russia. Technicalities aside, it still has the effect of targeting both countries, plus driving Beijing and Moscow closer and at variance to the US.

What was evident before has now become blindingly obvious – US policy confusion has unwittingly strengthened a working alliance between China and Russia, with Turkey, Syria and Iran in the supporting cast.

Such an alliance need not be inimical to US or generally Western interests. Much depends on how these non-Western countries and their interests are perceived and treated.

On present form, however, the US is making clear that its own interests and theirs are incompatible – while strengthening their shared interests at the same time.

US policy confusion stems from the Washington policy establishment's attempt to sideline or neuter, if not impeach, President Trump. At root, it is a matter of the Deep State versus Trump's White House.

Unlike all previous US Presidents, Trump wants to befriend and work with fellow strongman President Putin of Russia. That threatens a Cold War mindset in Washington that has profited for decades in the trillion-dollar US arms industry.

However, it is no longer just a simple conflict but one compounded by different strategies even in achieving the same goal. The policy establishment wants to arrest the growing China-Russia alliance, but cannot agree on any single workable way to do so.

One tendency, with the likes of Henry Kissinger, wants closer US-China ties to head off a solidifying China-Russia alliance. But the current trade war mentality has practically put paid to that.

Another strand, with the likes of Steve Bannon, prefers closer US-Russia ties to stymie the non-Western alliance. But that is being confronted by a military-industrial complex bred on Russophobia.

A third element, hardly identifiable, has no strategy and does not really know what to do. It is similar to yet distinct from Trump himself, who has little understanding of how actions can have implications and consequences.

The anti-Russia element insists on accusing Russia of interfering with the 2016 presidential election despite a continuing lack of credible evidence, and in spite of investigators' admissions that any interference did not amount to clinching the vote for Trump.

It has nonetheless led to sanctions in Congress targeting Russian companies like Rosoboronexport and anyone anywhere doing business with them. It also serves to discredit Trump in response to his spurning of US interests embodied in international agreements and traditional alliances.

And thus the China-Russia alliance grows apace, ironically the single biggest beneficiary of US policies aimed against them. US analysts have played down the prospect of an alliance by citing traditional Russian-Chinese differences, but that now looks like complacency.

The alliance began during the Obama administration when it unthinkingly targeted Beijing and Moscow at the same time. When Trump took over, the process accelerated as policymaking became more confused and confounded.

Any mutual praise made public between Trump and Putin cannot match that between Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping. If Trump or his advisers had any real hopes the "Russia strategy" would work, those hopes should have been dashed by June this year.

Observers note how Xi and Putin have spent more time with each other than with any other foreign counterpart. Putin himself acknowledged that he feels closer to Xi than any other leader.

In 2013 Putin celebrated his birthday with Xi over sausages and vodka, and the relationship has since grown stronger. This year Xi presented Putin with China's first friendship medal upon his state visit to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation conference, initiated jointly by China and Russia.

Meanwhile, Russia-Turkey ties are also growing as a result of Western pressure on each for different reasons.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is adamant that the purchase of Russia's long-range S-400 missile system is a closed matter, despite Western censure over the deal given Turkey's membership of Nato. The censure instead drew Turkey and Russia even closer.

A sanctions-targeted Russia is also keen to sell oil and gas that Turkey needs. Last month the US announced tariffs on Turkish goods and delayed delivery of F-35 fighter aircraft, thereby boosting the Turkish-Russian relationship.

Syria now bears witness to the spreading non-Western alliance. Although Turkey differs with Russia and Iran by supporting armed groups fighting the Syrian government, they are united in rejecting US intervention there.

Early this month the leaders of the three countries met in Teheran to discuss the future of war-torn Syria. Their efforts have still to bear fruit, but already amount to more than any Western initiative.

US analysts have again discounted any non-Western alliance arising in Syria owing to the mutual differences among the countries concerned. That is now looking like another miscalculation.

Again the US leadership is in two minds, this time over Syria. The Washington policy establishment wants to entrench and extend US influence in the country and the region, but Trump wants to pull out combat forces soonest possible.

The Western alliance wants continued bombardment of Syria to be rid of Da'esh militants and President Bashar Assad. In April Trump was persuaded to delay the pullout, so US intervention remains without being committed or decisive.

Favourable conditions exist for a non-Western political alliance flourishing in post-conflict Syria. Still, such prospects are surpassed by the huge strides made in China-Russia relations, thanks to clueless US policies. On September 11, Xi arrived in Vladivostok to attend the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) hosted by Russia. It was the third meeting between Xi and Putin this year, and the first for Xi at the EEF.

That was interpreted as a sign of their growing relations, with Xi noting that their countries had "identical positions on international matters." But that was not all.

This year's EEF coincided with Russia's huge Vostok military exercise, to which China contributed 3,200 troops, its largest contingent abroad. Russia participated with 80 warships, 1,000 aircraft, 36,000 tanks and 300,000 troops.

The ambitious weeklong manoeuvres were the biggest in Russia's post-Soviet era, covering vast stretches of Siberia and the Russian Far East to the Arctic and its Pacific coast.

Significantly, this was also Russia's biggest military exercise engaging China as a partner. So where did their supposed "mutual differences" for US analysts go?

The US began by calling China and Russia its "strategic competitors," which resulted in both countries forging a "strategic partnership" with each other. This time, Putin treated Xi to pancakes with caviar and vodka.

When Western commentators found the scale of the exercises unprecedented, Moscow announced that they would from now become routine.

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