

The Russia–China Partnership Remains Strong, Despite America

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Russia and China recently vetoed a draft UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution backed by the Western powers to sanction Syria over its chemical weapons use. As the first action by the Trump administration in the Security Council, this calls into question the administration's ability to mend ties with Russia and simultaneously to sideline China. While there is a precedent for Russia and China to veto resolutions related to Syria since 2011, this resolution breaks with a plan developed by the Russians and Americans in 2013 to rid Syria of chemical weapons. The most recent joint Russian-Chinese veto indicates that they will remain united, pitted against the West.

Then candidate and now president Donald Trump has consistently praised Russia and demeaned China. Some analysts have suggested he is playing a reverse Nixon "China card"—that is, the U.S. will strengthen its relations with Russia to the detriment of China. Likewise, President Trump's questioning the agility and purpose of NATO and the EU, and the sense of continuing sanctions on Russia, may be a means to weaken China's growing presence in Russia. President-elect Trump's phone call with the Taiwanese president Tsai Ing-wen, followed by the nomination of Russia-friendly Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, heightened concerns in Beijing over China's potential marginalization.

However, the latest UNSC vote confirmed that the Russia-China partnership is as strong as ever. Along with Bolivia, they vetoed a measure proposed by the Western allies to sanction 21 Syrian individuals, companies, and organizations for using chemical weapons in Syria and to tighten export controls on components of chemical weapons. The draft resolution text notes recent reports by the Joint Investigative Mechanism of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), established by the UNSC, which identify actors involved in several cases of chemical weapons detected in Syria since 2014–15. Moreover, Western governments have accused the Assad regime of conducting illegal chlorine attacks in 2014–15, violating the Chemical Weapons Convention, which Syria signed in 2013.

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Their veto arguably undermines the most successful diplomatic U.S.-Russian effort on Syria. In 2013, Secretary of State John F. Kerry suggested that, in exchange for placing its chemical weapons under international control, Syria could avert a U.S. military attack. Support was growing in the U.S. and Europe to strike Syrian military targets in retaliation for a gas attack that killed 1,400 civilians. Syria immediately agreed, and Russia played a leading role in working with the U.S. to create a framework to monitor and verify the dismantlement of Syria's chemical weapons, enshrined in UNSC Resolution 2118 (2013), which was unanimously adopted.

This was the sixth time that Russia and China have jointly vetoed a resolution on Syria that was backed by the Western allies. Throughout the statements issued by the Russian and Chinese representatives to the UNSC in addressing the Syrian crisis since 2011, this phrase appears frequently: The international community should fully respect Syria's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity. Sanctions on Syria or the threat of use of force under Chapter VII have consistently been dismissed by Russia and China as not in compliance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principle of noninterference in the international affairs of states.

In the course of the discussions on the latest draft resolution, Russian government officials told the press that the charges against Syria were one-sided, lacked evidence, and would interfere with ongoing Syrian peace talks sponsored by Russia in Astana, Kazakhstan. At the UNSC meeting, deputy permanent representative to the UN, Vladimir Safronkov accused the Joint Investigative Mechanism under the OPCW of using suspicious sources in support of regime change in Damascus. The Chinese permanent representative to the UN, Liu Jieyi, had a more measured response, saying that while China advocates for the Joint Investigative Mechanism to continue to gather evidence and for the punishment of the perpetrators, time is needed for the peace talks to take their course.

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The trading of barbs between the representatives of the U.S. and Russia at the Security Council echo the early years of arguments over Saddam Hussein's alleged hiding of weapons of mass destruction that led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. More evidence of conflict with Russia is found in the statements made by U.S. ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley blaming Russia for the recent escalation in violence in eastern Ukraine and affirming an Obama administration policy of returning Crimea to Ukraine.

Meanwhile, Russia and China have increased their joint activity since President Trump took office. They recently announced plans to hold their second missile defense drill later this year. China's State Administration of Foreign Exchange announced closer cooperation between the commercial banks of the two countries, expanding trade and economic ties. They also remain jointly opposed to U.S. support for the installation of a anti-missile defense system in South Korea, despite escalating tensions on the peninsula. These closer military and economic ties between the two powers, combined with their latest UNSC resolution joint veto point to a growing partnership between Russia and China, as I have written about here, despite the new American administration's plans.

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