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Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, and President of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping shake hands during the 9th BRICS Summit on Sept. 4, 2017 in Xiamen, China.

TRACKING AN ALLIANCE

Professors illuminate six decades of Sino-Soviet relations to help predict future patterns.

BY MARY ANN KURKER

Scholars visiting the archives in Moscow must follow the Kremlin's strict rules. Permission must be granted in advance, and Russian authorities decide which documents are released. Cameras and scanners are forbidden. Photocopies are nearly impossible to obtain.

With only pen and paper, Kiril Tochkov made a startling discovery. "For a month and a half, I was writing like the medieval monk that was copying the Bible," said the associate professor of economics, who scoured historic documents for his research on Sino-Russian relations with Carrie Liu Currier, associate professor of political science

and director of Asian Studies.

Tochkov uncovered secret communications that illuminate the fragile relationship between Russia and neighboring China. In the 1950s and '60s, Soviet diplomats in Beijing were listening to every speech given by Chinese leaders. They expected to hear some gratitude for Soviet efforts that helped launch



“THERE’S BEEN A LOT OF INCREASING INTEREST IN ASIA ... AND IN THE DEVELOPING CHINESE ECONOMY AND THE IMPLICATIONS THAT WOULD HAVE IN THE UNITED STATES.”

Carrie Liu Currier, associate professor of political science and director of Asian Studies

industrialization and modernize the People’s Republic of China.

“The Soviet ambassador or Soviet diplomat would count how many times he heard ‘thank you’ to the Soviet Union for economic help,” Tochkov said. “For example, he would say that ‘In a speech that lasted for 40 minutes, the Chinese leader mentioned the Soviet Union only three times,’ or, ‘He would not mention the economic help we provided at all.’”

A snub was relayed back to the Soviet Foreign Ministry, Tochkov said. “They said it is very sad that our Chinese comrades were not expressing enough or sufficiently often enough the economic help that the Soviet Union was providing.”

The sensitivity shown by the Soviets was “constant, appearing in almost every document” from that era, he added. “That is an indication that there was a worsening [relationship] between the two countries.”

FICKLE FRIENDSHIP

A new research initiative at TCU explores the ever-changing relationship between Russia and China — two superpowers with growing muscle in the global economy and world affairs.

“It’s not the kind of alliance that we often see from a Western point of view,” Currier said. “Both [China and Russia]

have a history of distrust with each other, and the marriage of interests is temporary. It could change in the next two or three years, and that would not be surprising.”

What distinguishes the TCU project is the extensive analysis of both the political and economic ideologies in China and Russia over the past six decades (1950-2010).

Currier’s expertise in Chinese foreign policy, combined with Tochkov’s in Asian economics, provides for a deeper analysis of the Sino-Russian partnership than is found in current literature. “We’re examining 60 years of history to give us a sense of how they align politically and economically,” Currier said. “The past helps us inform the future.”

The two professors theorize that changes in Sino-Russian relations mirror the degree to which the two countries are in sync — not just on the economic front, but in political ideology as well. Discord in both areas has triggered years of animosity or serious conflicts bordering on war.

Times of friendship and cooperation are marked by harmony in political and economic views — as today’s partnership reflects. “Right now, the political and economic ideologies in Russia and China are aligned,” Tochkov said. “Both have more or less authoritarian political systems coupled with a state-capitalist economic model, which suggests that the partnership between them is strengthening.”

LESSONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

Historical patterns will be used to create a novel analytical model that could predict the course of Sino-Russian relations, Tochkov and Currier said. Such a model could shed light on the interplay between political and economic ideologies, and also gauge the “border effects” that impact trade.

“These give us an idea about the costs involved when goods cross the border and represent the actual hurdles in the trade and investment relations,” Tochkov said.

Today, the border effects between China and Russia are relatively high,

meaning the official policy of close ties has not yet reached the ground.

“We see Presidents [Vladimir] Putin and Xi [Jinping] shaking hands and signing a bunch of treaties, but Chinese goods entering Russia still face logistic and bureaucratic obstacles at the border,” Tochkov said. “We can argue that the strategic partnership at the macro level translates into deeper economic integration between the two countries only if these border effects decline in the near future.”

Changes in the intensity of the Sino-Russian partnership will have immediate implications for Northeast and Central Asia, where the two countries are deeply involved, he noted.

BOOMING INTEREST

TCU faculty members hope their new Sino-Russian research will elevate the university’s Asian Studies program and further the boom in enrollment.

“There’s been a lot of increasing interest in Asia across the country, and in the developing Chinese economy and the implications that would have in the United States — as well as for the global economy,” Currier said. “When I first took over the program [in 2006], we had six students and had to recruit really hard. Now we have no problem maintaining 16 to 20 students for an interdisciplinary minor.”

The enrollment surge is a reflection of the changing tide, Currier said, “realizing that to do business globally, you have to know something about China.”

Currier and Tochkov plan to integrate their research into the classroom, with students participating in the empirical analysis.

“One of the great things about TCU is that when the faculty has an active research agenda, students get the full extent of that,” Currier said. “As we conduct the research, they actually learn about the process, the difficulties, and the political and economic challenges of doing this kind of research in these countries.”



FRIENDSHIP, CONFLICT AND CONSEQUENCES

A Q&A with Carrie Liu Currier and Kiril Tochkov

What impact could the partnership between China and Russia have on the United States and its interests abroad?

TOCHKOV: During the past 70 years, China and Russia have emerged as the key competitors of the United States on the world stage. During the Cold War, the two countries, and especially their alliance, represented a major military and ideological threat to America and its global strategic interests. Since the 1990s, the geopolitical rivalry has been complemented by economic concerns as globalization deepened trade and investment ties. China has turned gradually into an economic superpower that dominates manufacturing and trade, while an increasingly authoritarian Russia has been trying to revive its military might through involvement in conflicts around the world.

Currently, we are standing at the threshold of a new era marked by a growing clash between the U.S. and the strategic alliance of Russia and China. Trade with China is often blamed for the loss of manufacturing jobs and the increase in the income inequality in the U.S. Russia has emerged again as one of the main geostrategic threats to the U.S. in a new version of the Cold War.

A deeper understanding of the relations between China and Russia will allow policymakers to devise strategies in containing the rivalry with these two countries from turning into trade wars and military clashes that would be detrimental to the U.S. and its partners around the world.

Is the current Sino-Russian partnership a temporary marriage of two countries seeking to strengthen their global influence or a fundamental shift in world power?

CURRIER: With Russia and China it is always a temporary relationship. They each are interested in preserving domestic

stability in their own countries, and their approach to foreign policy is one that clearly reflects their own changing self-interest. ... In many respects, the things they have in common involve a distrust of the United States and dislike for U.S. policies/intervention abroad. The real threat the Sino-Russian alliance poses is a sense of growing economic strength independent of the West and a counterbalancing force to Western interests globally.

What are some of the key differences in what China and Russia want from each other?

TOCHKOV: China remains fixated on economic issues and is interested in expanding its trade with and investment in Russia. In contrast, the Russian government has been preoccupied with national security concerns and has been keen on restoring its global clout on the international stage at the expense of reforming its domestic economy and making it more competitive. Despite a slowdown, China's economy continues to grow, creating demand for natural resources. Russia has not been able to diversify its economy, which still largely depends on exports of oil, gas and natural resources. Western economic sanctions and the steep decline in oil prices have devastated the Russian economy, compelling the government to seek alternative markets in East Asia and to offer major concessions in negotiations with China.

What challenges could undermine the current Sino-Russian alliance?

CURRIER: The Chinese ultimately have no true allies, and the greatest concerns for Chinese leaders are maintaining economic stability. It is possible that Russia and China can find themselves at odds economically, as there are already commercial challenges in border regions. And there is growing

concern in Russia [and globally] with regard to how the Chinese do business and the massive influx of goods coming from China. When push comes to shove, both states know the partnership is volatile.

TOCHKOV: The lack of trust between the two countries is a major stumbling block for deepening economic ties. China has the financial funds, the labor and the technical know-how to foster economic development in Russia, especially in the economically depressed regions of Eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East. However, the Russian government is very reluctant to encourage such cooperation because it does not want to turn Russia into a cheap supplier of commodities to China.

In addition, Russians are fearful that China can establish its economic dominance in border regions that have been traditionally part of the Chinese empire. As a result, Chinese workers and companies are facing various hurdles when trying to do business in Russia.

— Mary Ann Kurker



Kiril Tochkov, associate professor of economics, and Carrie Liu Currier, associate professor of political science and director of Asian Studies, examine the delicate relations between Russia and China.

CAROLYN CRUZ

COOPERATION AND CONFLICT THROUGH THE YEARS

From friendship to the brink of war, the partnership between China and Russia has always been fickle. A research project examines how cooperation between the countries hinges on their economic and political views being in sync. TCU experts in political science and economics joined forces to analyze five distinct periods in Sino-Russian relations over six decades (1950-2010).

1950s:

FAST FRIENDS

China quickly aligns itself with the Soviet Union on the heels of the Chinese Revolution. The birth of the Chinese communist state is in near-perfect alignment with Russian political and economic ideologies:

- Both countries strive for an ideal communist society, adopting the principles of Marxism and Leninism.
- State economies in China and Russia operate without free-market mechanisms.
- Mutual economic help and intensive cultural exchanges mark the era. Russia sends tens of thousands of Soviet engineers and technicians to build China's infrastructure and promote industrialization. In a massive influx, Chinese students arrive in the Soviet Union.
- The friendship begins to crumble in the late 1950s as China's leadership becomes frustrated with the slow pace of industrialization and starts the Great Leap Forward to elevate its economy. Russia is at odds with this and envisions gradual growth through five-year plans.

1960-1984:

THE BIG CHILL

Mutual mistrust and a fiery ideological rift lead to a bloody border conflict:

- Russia is at a standoff over China's desire to expand into a huge communist economy — mobilizing millions of people in a short time.
- The rift prompts Soviet engineers and technicians to pull out of China in 1960, leaving many joint projects unfinished.
- A territorial dispute over Zhenbao Island, on the far eastern border of Russia and China, leads to military conflict in 1969. Hundreds of soldiers on both sides of the border are killed.



The mutual embrace of communism was not enough to sustain political relations between China and Russia during the Cold War.



Chinese leader Mao Tse-tung, left, and Nikita Khrushchev visit during the Russian leader's 1958 trip to Peking (Beijing).

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Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, present the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle to Chinese President Xi Jinping on July 4, 2017, at the Kremlin in Moscow.

1985-1991:

ARM'S LENGTH

Cooperation is gradually restored as a Russian reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev, tries to mend relations with China:

- After years of inefficiencies, Chinese and Soviet leaders realize the need for deep economic reforms. They create new economies based on market principles, while still holding a monopoly on power.
- In 1985, Gorbachev's Soviet reforms foster a stronger alignment with China, in both political and economic ideologies.
- The breakdown of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the emergence of Russia, where the communist party was banned, introduce new frictions between the two countries.

1992-1999:

CLASH OF THE TITANS

Economic ideologies are in sync but political ideologies clash, preventing China and Russia from restoring close ties:

- Both countries advance their market-based economies. China is becoming a global supplier of cheap goods, while Russia is struggling to reform its local industry and retain global economic clout.
- Despite harmony in market ideologies, the gap widens on the political front. Russia is interested in Western reforms, while China clings to communism.
- The transition toward a democratic society in Russia clashes with the brutal suppression of dissent in China.

2000s:

CLOSE COMRADES

The partnership between China and Russia reaches new heights. United by a mutual appreciation for strong leadership, they defend their national interests while challenging Western dominance. China and Russia also share a new model of state capitalism with limited political freedoms:

- China is not critical of either Russia's aggression in Syria or Russia's annexation of Crimea in Ukraine — two moves sharply condemned by other world leaders.
- As Western sanctions over its actions in Ukraine unfold, Russia turns to China to ensure a market for its hydrocarbon exports. Both countries agree to build a natural-gas pipeline for Russian crude oil into China and the first bridge connecting their borders.
- Russian President Vladimir Putin reverses many of the reforms of the 1990s and introduces his system of "managed democracy" in Russia, with a greater role for the state in economic matters.
- The two countries deepen their economic and political ties and join the elite club of emerging economies known as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa).

RUSSIAN INTERNATIONAL NEWS AGENCY (RIA NOVOSTI)



Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1990.



SOURCES: Interviews with Kiril Tochkov, associate professor of economics, and Carrie Liu Currier, associate professor of political science and director of Asian Studies at TCU. "Ideology and the Turbulent Nature of the Strategic Partnership Between China and Russia: An Interdisciplinary Perspective," grant application by Tochkov and Currier.