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**Viktor Eszterhai:
Trump as the Reverse Nixon: Can China and Russia Be Separated?¹**

Executive Summary

- Nixon's 1972 opening successfully exploited the Sino-Soviet split based on three key factors: ideological rivalry between Russia and China, China's international isolation, and American foreign policy pragmatism.
- The Trump administration seeks to reinterpret this strategy, this time applying a "reverse" logic: It aims to pull Russia away from China.
- Notwithstanding the persistent presence of historical mistrust, economic disparities, and incongruences in strategic cultures, the partnership between the two countries is founded on more profound structural forces. These include a shared sense of threat, complementary capacities, and the common goal of building global influence.
- The Trump administration's objective is not a geopolitical breakthrough of the Nixonian scale but rather a partial distancing of Moscow from Beijing within a multipolar world order in which the U.S. does not have to compete with two great powers at once. A potential U.S.–Russia deal could contribute to strengthening the U.S. internally while constraining China's global expansion.

This paper explores the extent to which the foreign policy agenda of a potential second Trump administration might be regarded as a modern analogue to the geopolitical strategy of the Nixon era. A central focus is its stated objective of undermining the strategic alignment between China and Russia. The analysis is structured in two parts. First, it reconstructs the historical logic and enabling conditions of Nixon's diplomatic realignment. Second, it examines the structural constraints and competing interests that continue to shape the Sino-Russian relationship. Despite enduring elements of mistrust and asymmetry between the two powers, the geopolitical and economic structures underpinning their cooperation suggest that the full realization of a "reverse Nixon" strategy is unlikely to materialize under current international conditions. Rather than seeking a complete rupture, Washington appears to aim for a partial strategic distancing of Moscow from Beijing, positioning Russia as a semi-autonomous geopolitical actor within a multipolar world order. This recalibration would align with the broader strategic objectives of the Trump administration.

1. Introduction

At the outset of the second Trump administration, the repositioning of U.S.–Russia relations emerged as a central foreign policy priority. This initiative can be interpreted in a

variety of ways; however, one prevailing strategic interpretation holds that Washington's objective was not merely to reset bilateral ties but also to disrupt the increasingly close strategic partnership between China and Russia. Within American foreign policy discourse, this deepening cooperation—particularly in the nuclear, military, and energy domains—is increasingly perceived as a long-term structural challenge to the United States' global standing. This strategic approach bears a striking resemblance to the historical precedent of the early 1970s, when the United States, under President Richard Nixon, skillfully capitalized on the ideological and geopolitical tensions between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China. By establishing diplomatic relations with the latter, Washington effectively altered the global balance of power during the Cold War.² This historical analogy invites reflection on the feasibility of replicating such

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² SMITH, Benedict: [Trump accuses Zelensky of riding US 'grave train' and breaching 'rare earths' deal](#). Telegraph, 2025.02.20. [online, 2025.02.20.]

a geopolitical maneuver in the multipolar and increasingly complex international system of the 21st century—and, if deemed possible, on the specific conditions under which it might succeed.

The paper begins with a comprehensive examination of the geopolitical logic and historical context of the Nixon Doctrine, followed by an assessment of its potential applicability in the current international environment. It then provides a detailed analysis of the structural characteristics of the Sino-Russian partnership, highlighting both its internal vulnerabilities and the factors that sustain its strategic cohesion. The analysis concludes that while the Trump administration's outreach to Russia may have temporarily expanded Moscow's strategic room for maneuver, the deeper, institutionalized forms of Sino-Russian cooperation remain largely resistant to disruption by contemporary U.S. foreign policy. Accordingly, it appears unlikely that Washington will pursue a geopolitical maneuver analogous to the so-called "reverse Nixon" strategy. Rather, the primary objective of U.S. foreign policy seems to be the cultivation of a strategic balance in which Russia gradually loosens its ties with China and becomes more open to selective engagement with the United States. Such targeted negotiations between Washington and Moscow could help bolster the United States' global position and reduce the likelihood of simultaneous strategic competition with two major powers: nuclear-armed Russia and economically ascendant China.

2. Nixon's geopolitical strategy

During the presidency of Richard Nixon, and with the involvement of National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, the United States took a pivotal step in 1972 by establishing diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China. The primary objective of this strategic opening was not ideological rapprochement but the creation of a power counterbalance to the Soviet Union. By transforming the bipolar international order into a triangular configuration, this shift placed Moscow at a lasting strategic disadvantage while allowing the United States to cultivate more favorable relations with both Beijing and Moscow than the two could sustain with each other.³

Nixon's diplomatic pivot is widely regarded as one of the most significant achievements in the history of American foreign policy. However, its success was contingent upon the convergence of three key factors:

- The deepening Sino-Soviet rift, which culminated in minor armed border clashes in 1969 and stemmed from an ideological rivalry over leadership of the socialist world.
- The rise of U.S. foreign policy pragmatism, which gained momentum alongside the reassessment of the Vietnam War and the gradual erosion of the Cold War status quo.
- China's strategic imperative to break out of international isolation and to counterbalance the Soviet Union—even at the cost of entering into dialogue with its principal ideological adversary, the United States.

The geopolitical maneuver initiated by President Nixon skillfully capitalized on the divisions between the two communist powers, granting the United States a strategic advantage within the Cold War power structure through a calculated strategy of "triangulation."

3. The ambition to replicate the Nixonian geopolitical shift

This historical analogy invites the question of whether Trump's foreign policy reflected a conscious effort to revive a Nixon-style geopolitical maneuver. This line of inquiry is not entirely new; signs of such an intent were already evident during his first presidential term (2017–2021). Trump's consistent criticism of China was accompanied by a marked openness toward Russia. His strategy aimed to "draw Moscow out from under Beijing's shadow," thereby mitigating the strategic disadvantage the United States faced as a result of Sino-Russian cooperation. This approach manifested on multiple levels. Most notably, the trade war and Cold War-style rhetoric targeting China were conspicuously not directed at Russia. A particularly revealing initiative was the proposed G11 plan, which envisioned expanding the G7 by incorporating new members—chief among them, Russia—in an effort to reintegrate Moscow into the community of Western great powers.⁴

During the 2024 election campaign, Trump spoke with increasing candor about his strategic objectives regarding Russia and China. In a Fox News interview in April 2024, he stated: "*As a student of history, which*

³ KISSINGER, Henry: *On China*. Penguin Press, New York, 2011, 233–247.

⁴ DIETER, Heribert: [First summit of the anti-China coalition: Cornwall G7 highlights BRICS weakness](#). *SWP Comment*. 2021/36. 1–5.



*I am – and I’ve watched it all – the first thing you learn is you don’t want Russia and China to get together”.*⁵ In an October 31 conversation with Tucker Carlson, he remarked: *“I’m going to have to unite them, and I think I can do that too”.*⁶ Trump thus appears to have explicitly invoked the precedent of the Nixon era in advancing what could be described as a “reverse Nixon strategy”: rather than seeking an alliance with China against Russia, he aims to draw Moscow closer to Washington—at the expense of Beijing.

Based on the envisioned approach of a new Trump administration toward Russia, the foundations of a prospective cooperation could include the promise of great power recognition by the United States, the accommodation of Russian economic interests (for instance, through joint resource extraction), the maintenance of de facto Russian control over certain Ukrainian territories, and the potential unfreezing of Russian assets.⁷ This strategic vision is not foreign to the historical tradition of American foreign policy thinking. However, it raises a critical question: within the current international order—particularly in light of the structural characteristics of the Sino-Russian relationship—is such a geopolitical realignment feasible? Can a “reverse Nixon” model function within the great power dynamics of the early 21st century?

4. The Limits of the Sino-Russian Relationship

The Sino-Russian relationship is predominantly characterized in the scholarly literature as a pragmatic, interest-driven partnership. It is often described through the metaphor of a “marriage of convenience,” referring to a relationship sustained not by shared values or ideological consensus but by converging geopolitical and economic interests.⁸ As a result, this partnership may prove sensitive to changes in the international environment and could, in principle, unravel or be deliberately weakened through external intervention. It is, therefore, worth examining the factors along which the interests of the two countries may diverge. The first such factor is undoubtedly the historical legacy of mutual distrust. The bilateral relationship is deeply shaped by its historical inheritance, which continues to fuel strategic suspicion on both sides. Russia’s 18th- and 19th-century expansion into East Asia—resulting in significant territorial losses for China—remains a source of historical grievance in Chinese collective memory. During the Cold War, the initially fraternal relationship took a sharply divergent turn: following the 1969 border clashes, China came to regard the Soviet Union as its primary security threat. In this context, it was willing to move closer to the United States. Although Mikhail Gorbachev’s 1989 visit laid the groundwork for a new chapter in bilateral relations, memories of past rivalry and enduring strategic mistrust continue to shape the relationship—even in the wake of the 2022 declaration of a “no-limits” friendship.⁹

The two states’ respective conceptions of sovereignty and great power identity also hinder deeper integration. Both sides reject subordination to the other’s geopolitical interests, and a formal alliance—particularly in light of the prevailing economic and political asymmetry—would place Russia in a disadvantageous position. As a result, the relationship is marked by a conscious effort to preserve autonomy, which precludes the formation of institutionalized alliance structures. Instead, the two parties have committed themselves to a more flexible form of cooperation—namely, a “no-limits” strategic partnership. In order to avoid excessive mutual dependence, both seek to diversify their foreign relations: Russia has pursued closer ties with India, Vietnam, and other Asian actors, while China has aimed to broaden the geographic base of its energy imports.¹⁰ Although the two countries officially employ the rhetoric of a “no-limits friendship” in the context of their relationship, mutual trust remains far from complete. A telling example is the statement made by Lu Shaye, China’s Special Envoy for European

⁵ FOX News: [‘STUDENT OF HISTORY’: Trump ‘knows’ what happens when Russia and China get together](#). FOX News, [online, 2025.04.09.]

⁶ C-SPAN: [Former President Trump Campaigns with Tucker Carlson in Glendale, Arizona](#). C-SPAN, 2024.10.31. [online, 2025.04.09.]

⁷ [Outcomes of the United States and Russia Expert Groups On the Black Sea](#). The White House, 2025.03.25. [online, 2025.04.09.]

⁸ LO, Bobo: *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*. Chatham House – Brookings Institution Press, London – Washington D.C., 2008.; LUBINA, Michał: *Russia and China: A Political Marriage of Convenience – Stable and Successful*. Verlag Barbara Budrich, Leverkusen, 2017.

⁹ SNOW, Philip: *China and Russia: Four Centuries of Conflict and Concord*. Yale University Press, New Haven, 2023.

¹⁰ TRENIN, Dimitri: [From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente](#). Carnegie Moscow Center, 2015.04.09. [online, 2022.06.25.]



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Affairs, who expressed concern over the fact that the United States and Russia had conducted negotiations regarding Ukraine without including China, Europe, or Ukraine itself in the process.¹¹ Such diplomatic gestures indicate that competing interests persist within the Sino-Russian partnership and that, despite strategic cooperation, full coordination and mutual trust have yet to be established.

Economic asymmetry also constitutes a significant structural constraint. Even prior to the Russia–Ukraine war, the structure of economic cooperation was heavily tilted in favor of China. Following the 2022 invasion, this imbalance has only deepened. In 2024, China exported goods to Russia worth \$115.5 billion, while Russian exports to China amounted to \$129.3 billion. However, this apparent symmetry is misleading. At this level of trade, China has become by far Russia's most important trading partner, whereas Russia ranks only eighth among China's foreign trade partners.¹² Due to Western sanctions, Russia has been compelled to reorient its trade eastward, particularly toward China. Beijing, however, has integrated this cooperation into its broader global strategy — securing access to raw materials and energy supplies while simultaneously strengthening its influence across the Eurasian region. As a result of the war, Chinese companies have become virtually unrivaled in the Russian market, especially in the financial and technology sectors. Nevertheless, Russia continues to restrict Chinese involvement in strategically sensitive sectors such as energy and infrastructure development.¹³ The relationship has thus taken on an increasingly asymmetric character: while China has become a lifeline for Russia's economic survival, Beijing is increasingly leveraging this dependency to its advantage—whether in the form of favorable energy prices, infrastructure development projects (such as the revised route of the *Power of Siberia 2* pipeline), or strategic gains in geopolitical positioning.¹⁴

Significant differences can also be observed in the strategic cultures of the two countries. Russian foreign policy is characterized by the centrality of military power, whereas China tends to adopt a more defensive, long-term approach that prioritizes economic instruments over coercive means.¹⁵ This difference manifests not only in decision-making styles but also in the depth of strategic cooperation. While Moscow has repeatedly resorted to military solutions in its immediate neighborhood in recent years, China has not engaged in open armed conflict since 1979. Beijing's strategic restraint is further reinforced by its deep integration into the global economy, which serves to moderate its willingness to take foreign policy risks.¹⁶ Whereas Beijing's path to great power status is rooted in the continuation of its own modernization trajectory, for Moscow, this objective appears more attainable through the restoration of its former Soviet sphere of influence—even, if necessary, by coercive means.

There are, therefore, several factors that could, in principle, render the relationship between the two great powers susceptible to fragmentation. In its current situation, Russia has a strong interest in seeing the United States make concessions to facilitate an end to the war in Ukraine. This could offer Moscow an opportunity to partially restore its international prestige and great power status—an outcome that is also of key importance for maintaining domestic political legitimacy. A United States brokered settlement process could thus be advantageous for the Russian leadership. Possible avenues of economic cooperation—such as the export of energy resources to the European Union with American involvement—might also contribute to reducing Russia's dependence on China. However, none of this necessarily implies that Moscow would be willing to align itself with an anti-China coalition. Such a realignment would only become conceivable if there were a dramatic shift in the core interests underpinning its partnership with Beijing. The following section examines the key factors that continue to sustain the relationship between China and Russia.

¹¹ YEW, Lun Tian: [Lu Shaye: Chinese envoy who questioned Ukraine's sovereignty no stranger to controversy](#). Reuters, 2023.04.24. [online, 2025.04.09.]

¹² LI, Bingcun – YU, Xieyu: *China–Russia trade surged to new heights in 2024, driven by Western sanctions*. South China Morning Post, 2025.01.13. [online, 2025.04.09.]

¹³ BOGUSZ, Michał – JAKÓBOWSKI, Jakub – RODKIEWICZ, Witold: [OSW Report. The Beijing–Moscow Axis. The Foundations of an Asymmetric Alliance](#). Policy Commons, 2022. [online, 2022.06.22.]

¹⁴ PAO, Jeff: [Power of Siberia 2 to close deal – or re-route?](#). Asia Times, 2024.05.10. [online, 2025.04.09.]

¹⁵ ZHANG, Tiejun: Chinese strategic culture: Traditional and present features. *Comparative Strategy*, 21:2 (2002) 73–90.; ERMARTH, Fritz W.: Russian Strategic Culture in Flux: Back to the Future? In: JOHNSON, Jeannie L. – KARTER, Kerry M. – LARSON, Jeffrey A. (eds.): *Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009. 85–96.

¹⁶ SUN, Yun: [China's Strategic Assessment of Russia: More Complicated than You Think](#). War on the Rocks, 2022.03.09. [online, 2022.06.25.]



5. Forces of Convergence

The deepening of Sino-Russian relations into a strategic partnership over the past decades has been shaped by a range of factors. Foremost among these is the shared sense of threat. For the political elites of both countries, a defining perception is that the United States seeks to obstruct their rise. According to Moscow's and Beijing's long-standing view, Washington employs two primary instruments to contain them. First, it mobilizes regional allies to construct a strategic encirclement while simultaneously maintaining a substantial portion of its military capabilities in their immediate vicinity.¹⁷ Second, both the Russian and Chinese elites believe that the United States has a vested interest in destabilizing their regional environments. This perception is reinforced by the so-called "color revolutions," such as the 2003 Rose Revolution in Georgia, the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine, and the 2005 Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan.¹⁸ The shared sense of threat thus pushes Russia and China into each other's arms, enabling the consolidation of military and economic capacities that serve to prevent the United States—acting at the head of a broad coalition—from defeating them individually.

The Trump administration's offer is unlikely to alter this perception. If Russia were to turn against China as part of a Western coalition, what would prevent it from becoming the next target once that coalition had succeeded? Moreover, even if the Trump administration were genuinely committed to improving bilateral relations, can Moscow be certain that its successor would follow the same trajectory? One of Russia's core arguments for its war against Ukraine was that the West had violated its promises regarding NATO's eastward expansion. Would a reversal in the post-Trump period not amount to yet another breach of promise? Ultimately, Moscow's strategic objective remains the establishment of a multipolar world order. If Trump supports this vision, it would be acceptable to Russia. However, from Moscow's perspective, the defeat of China would signal a return to American global dominance—thus, breaking with Beijing would run counter to Russia's long-term strategic interests.

Geopolitically, Russia and China provide mutual strategic cover for one another. Historical experience demonstrates that the Soviet Union faced significant challenges when it had to simultaneously concentrate on defending its borders in both Europe and East Asia. The current Sino-Russian cooperation alleviates this geopolitical pressure and enables both countries to more effectively assert their interests within their respective regions—Russia in Eastern Europe and China in the Indo-Pacific. A lasting estrangement between the two would force them once again to devote substantial capacities to deterring one another, which is not in the primary interest of either party at present.

Another important factor is the balancing of capabilities. Russia, owing to its inherited nuclear arsenal and military assets from the Soviet Union, remains a global military power. Its military strength continues to shape the behavior of other states. China, by contrast, although now a dominant actor in the world economy, still primarily possesses regional power projection capabilities. In this sense, Chinese and Russian capacities complement each other, and together, they can counterbalance the United States' advantage in hard power. This complementarity has been evident during the Russia-Ukraine war, where China's economic and technological support has significantly mitigated the impact of Western sanctions. Russia could only forgo this support if the United States were both willing and able to assume China's current role. However, Russia's nuclear capability alone generates strategic competition with Washington, and even in the event of cooperation against China, Moscow could not simply "trade away" its nuclear deterrent—an asset that remains highly valuable in the eyes of Beijing.

Economic complementarity is also a key factor in the Sino-Russian relationship. Russia supplies China with raw materials—including crude oil and petroleum products, timber, ores, foodstuffs, and advanced defense technologies—while China provides Russia with technology, capital, and access to markets. China's primary exports consist of machinery, electronic equipment, vehicles, plastic goods, and textiles. Beijing's objective is to integrate Russia into its economic system as a kind of raw material reservoir, thereby securing access to strategically important commodities that are not controlled by Western powers. For its part, Moscow has traditionally sought to counterbalance its dependence on European markets through

¹⁷ GARVER, John W. – WANG, Fei-Ling: China's Anti-Encirclement Struggle. *Asian Security*, 6:3 (2010) 238–261.

¹⁸ WILSON, Jeanne L.: Coloured Revolutions: The View from Moscow and Beijing. *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, 25:2–3 (2009) 369–395.

closer economic ties with China.¹⁹ As a consequence of the Western sanctions imposed following the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Russia now faces the dual challenge of not only diversifying its economic relations but also counterbalancing China's growing dominance. Achieving this, however, can only occur gradually—for instance, through strengthened ties with the European Union, Japan, or other Asian countries. The United States lacks the economic capacity to fully replace China, even if it were able to influence the behavior of European partners. U.S. proposals for joint mineral extraction projects are more about redistributing market access and sidelining China than about establishing genuine partnership—since in this domain, Russia and the United States are more rivals than allies.

Finally, the socio-political systems of Russia and China also represent a point of convergence. Both states seek to offer an alternative to the dominant values and political model promoted by the United States.²⁰ Since the 2010s, both Russia and China have increasingly emphasized the need to reform the international order. This ambition has been supported by the development of institutional frameworks, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. In the eyes of the developing world—particularly the Global South—Russia and China are perceived as competent great powers: Moscow provides security, while Beijing offers economic opportunities. Despite the war in Ukraine, Russia has managed to maintain a degree of acceptance in the Global South; however, it remains uncertain whether this would persist in the event of a rupture with China. An open rivalry within shared spheres of influence—such as Central Asia—would significantly undermine Moscow's position, even in regions where Sino-Russian cooperation has thus far been based on tacit mutual understanding.

6. Conclusions

The geopolitical strategy of the Nixon era was successful within its historical context, but it cannot be replicated under the power realities of the 21st century. Above all, the strategic environment has changed fundamentally. In the 1970s, the two socialist great powers were already on the brink of armed conflict; there was no need to provoke a deeper rupture. Although there is still U.S. interest in undermining the Sino-Russian relationship, the current partnership is rooted in structural, long-term dynamics that the United States can influence—at best—by offering Moscow tactical advantages. The situation is further complicated by globalization. In the 1970s, the Soviet Union and the United States had virtually no meaningful economic relations, whereas today, China is one of America's most important economic partners. Its role in the global economy is incomparable to that of Russia, and any potential rupture or rivalry would entail consequences far different from those in the Cold War context. The Trump administration is almost certainly aware of the impracticality of a "reverse Nixon" strategy. Therefore, it does not seek to provoke a complete break between Beijing and Moscow. Instead, the partial detachment of Russia from China—transforming it into a more autonomous geopolitical pole—is entirely consistent with U.S. strategic interests. The new American objective is primarily internal consolidation ("Make America Great Again"), which is seen as essential for competing effectively with China.²¹

What specific objectives might a Trump administration pursue? Chief among them would be preventing the further deepening of Sino-Russian cooperation. A top priority could involve mitigating the joint nuclear threat, as counterbalancing both Russia's and China's rapidly expanding nuclear arsenals demands substantial American resources. In addition, emerging Russian-Chinese cooperation in the Arctic presents a security concern for Washington—the United States has an interest in limiting China's access to the region's resources. Partially restoring Russia's international prestige could also serve to prevent China from gaining disproportionate strength in the geopolitical vacuum created by the Western response to the invasion of Ukraine. Rebuilding Moscow's international status might allow it to begin diversifying its economic relations while also reinforcing regional balances vis-à-vis China—partly by diverting Beijing's strategic attention.

¹⁹ BOGUSZ, Michał – JAKÓBOWSKI, Jakub – RODKIEWICZ, Witold: [OSW Report. The Beijing–Moscow Axis. The Foundations of an Asymmetric Alliance](#). Policy Commons, 2022. [online, 2022.06.22.]

²⁰ YANG, Jiemian [杨洁勉]: [当前中美关系发展及其对俄罗斯欧亚地区的影响](#) – [Current development of US-China relations and its impact on Russia's Eurasian region]. 决策信息 [Decision Information], 2021. [online, 2022.06.25.]

²¹ CSIZMAZIA, Gábor – ESZTERHAI, Viktor – TÁRNOK, Balázs: [The Impact of Trump 2.0 on Europe's Position in the Transforming World Order](#). *John Lukacs Analyses on Global Affairs*, 2025/1. [online, 2025.04.09.]



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All of this could come at little or no cost to Washington and potentially even yield economic benefits. One such benefit might include facilitating an end to the Russia–Ukraine war, which, in the view of the Trump administration, unnecessarily depletes U.S. resources. Moreover, reentry into the Russian market and joint exploitation of Russian mineral resources could benefit American companies while also reducing U.S. economic dependence on China.

In this sense, loosening the Sino-Russian relationship fits organically into the Trump administration's foreign policy agenda—but it neither aims for nor is capable of executing a Nixon-style strategic realignment. The goal is not to "triangulate" bilateral relations but rather to shape Moscow into an autonomous pole within a multipolar international order.



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