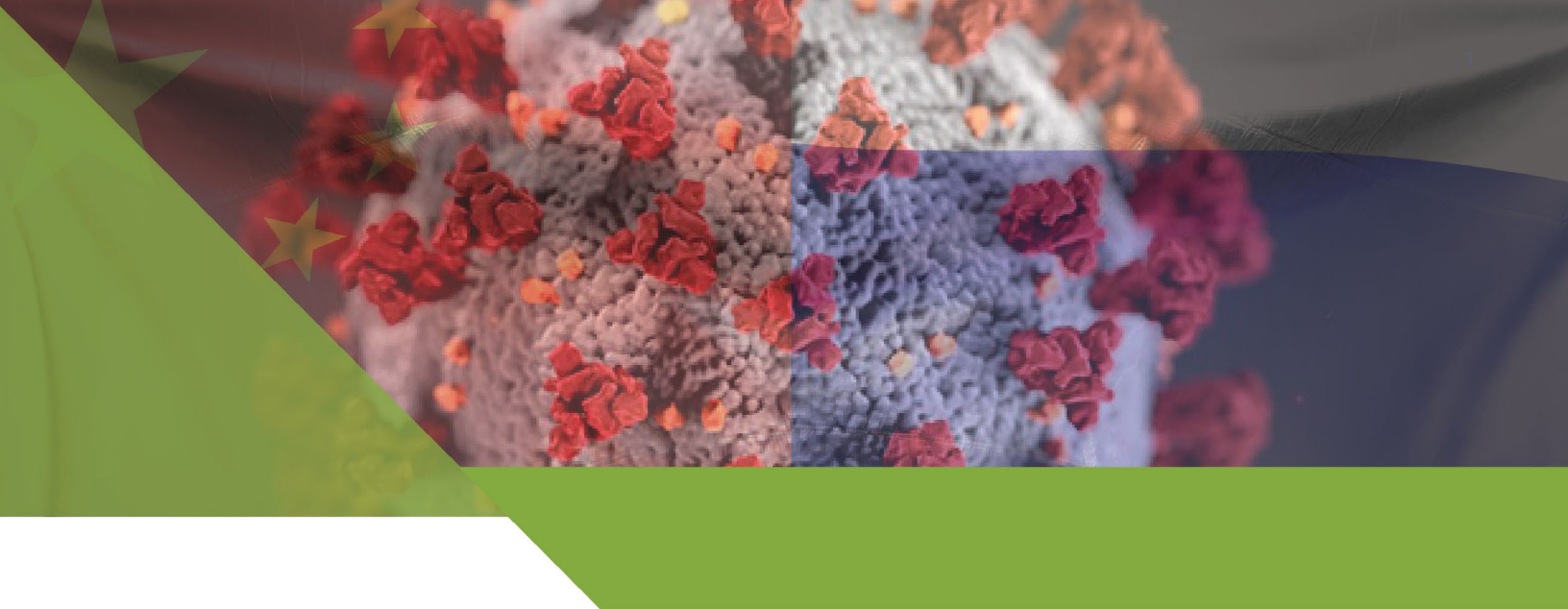


EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

Wikistrat's COVID-19 Webinar Series
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BACKGROUND

The global spread of COVID-19 is impacting many existing assumptions and relationships in global politics, particularly regarding China and its foreign relations. Adam Hoffman from Wikistrat interviewed political-military analyst Dr. Richard Weitz to discuss the impact of the global epidemic on Russia-China relations and the implications of those relations for the US and Europe in the context of COVID-19.



Dr. Richard Weitz

Dr. Richard Weitz is senior fellow and director of the Center for Political-Military Analysis at Hudson Institute. His current research includes regional security developments relating to Europe, Eurasia, and East Asia, as well as US foreign and defense policies.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

COVID-19 as a showdown between autocracies and democracies: The Western democracies initially criticized the Chinese government for its response, but now the number of deaths and spread of the virus has been even worse in some European countries than in China, and the US looks to be headed in that direction as well. This could weaken Western democracies' competitive image in other countries. Authoritarian states will strive to validate the argument that authoritarian governments can deal with crises like this one more effectively than democracies.

COVID-19 is unlikely to cause a significant shift in the Sino-Russian challenge to the United States: The main challenge to the US lies not so much with regard to the present situation, as the pandemic is unlikely to significantly change the Russian-Chinese challenge to the US. But the scenario will become trickier for Americans in the future, in the event that Moscow and Beijing move to integrate their militaries closer together to become a genuine alliance with a mutual defense treaty.

Russia Today (RT) and CGTN go hand in hand: Both Russia and China are trying to take advantage of the crisis to criticize the Western response. Russian social media initially criticized Beijing's failure to notify people around the world about what was happening and for its poor response. But then the official broadcast media supported the Chinese messaging that the strong Chinese authoritarian system effectively responded to the crisis, implying that Russia will do the same.

COVID-19 is a highly volatile situation that is still unfolding: A big wildcard here is the fact that the virus is starting to spread within Russia itself. If Russia follows the path of many European countries with a growing number of many coronavirus cases, the Russians could look more inwardly and this, along with a weakened Russian economy, could weaken Russia as a potential partner to the Chinese. The same could happen regarding China's attractiveness for Russians if the Chinese authorities mistakenly relax controls too early and the virus subsequently rebounds there.

LIVE WEBINAR: FULL TRANSCRIPT

Wikistrat: How do you think this epidemic will impact the Russo-Chinese relationship?

Weitz: In the short term, the impact is primarily economic and social. I think we're seeing, and have seen, a cutback in economic activity in China, a closing of the borders between Russia and China for much humanitarian, commercial, and other traffic. Russian airlines stopped servicing China and the Russian authorities closed the border and reduced the number of airports through which people from China could enter Russia. They also suspended many types of entry visas. About a third of the tourists to Russia last year, between 1.5 and two million, came from China, and that flow has, of course, shrunk because of the visa measures and other complications.

There are also reduced Russian exports to China because of the cutback in Chinese economic activity. Of course, this is happening between many other countries and China, so that should not place Russia in any special condition. Moreover, a lot of these contractions should be reversible: as soon as the visa and border restrictions will be relaxed, the number of people exchanges should grow.

The current slowdown will probably prevent the two countries from realizing their goal of \$200 billion in cross-trade exchanges by 2024, but maybe it'll occur a few years later. Furthermore, some projects have been frozen. Most notably, a bridge recently constructed across the Amur

River separating the two countries has remained unused due to the closures, but that, presumably, can reopen and used at any point.

At the political level, there's not been a major change in their relationship. We don't see the mutual accusations characterizing, for example, Sino-American relations on who's to blame for the crisis, the possible origins of the virus, and so on. The Russian government has not criticized China formally for any of its actions, and vice versa. There was an isolated case of Chinese criticism of some of the Russian measures. The Chinese Embassy in Russia protested the way some Chinese were being discriminated against in Moscow. But, they quickly backed down from public declarations, claiming it had all been a misunderstanding. In contrast, the Chinese harshly criticized the US for banning international travel from China into the United States.

Wikistrat: How do you think the Sino-Russian relationship will evolve as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, looking at it beyond the short term?

Weitz: As I said, the pandemic will delay the growth of their economic and social ties for a while. Yet, the narrative has changed in a way that could be favorable for strengthening ties. The official Russian media has picked up the Chinese messaging that the strong Chinese authoritarian system responded effectively to the crisis, which might imply that Russia's string government will do the same. They are both trying to take

advantage of the crisis to criticize the Western response. So far, Russian criticisms have focused on the European governments, rather than Washington, but that may change.

Tensions between the US and some of its close European allies over the crisis could help Russia and China develop ties with Europe. The Europeans have generally been siding with the US in its recent criticism of Chinese economic and security policies. For example, at the NATO Summit and the Munich Security Conference, they criticized Russia and China for their arms control and regional policies. Due to recent transatlantic tensions, that alignment may slacken, though it's a bit too early to tell. Much depends on how things progress, on whether the US and Europe continue to struggle in their response to this crisis, which provides some openings for Russia and China. The two governments have tried to leverage this situation by sending aid to various countries in Europe, the US, Africa, and so on. They will see some gains in attracting some countries. For example, Iran is now moving closer to Russia and China as its economic ties with other countries wither.

A big wildcard here is the fact that the virus is starting to spread within Russia itself. If Russia follows the path of the European countries with an increase in cases, that will cause the Russians to look more inward, and this will weaken Russia as a potential partner for China. The same could happen for Russians, should the Chinese mistakenly relax controls too early and the virus subsequently rebound there. They might also suffer from contagion from abroad, or similar setbacks, that lead the Chinese and Russians to slacken their bilateral cooperation. Everything is very much in a state of play. Forecasts are difficult here.

Wikistrat: In your opinion, what would the likely implications of such developments in Sino-Russian relations be for the US and Europe?

Weitz: The Western democracies initially criticized the Chinese authorities for their response, but now the number of deaths and spread of the virus has been even worse in some European countries than in China, and the US looks to be headed in that direction as well. This could weaken the Western democracies' competitive image in other countries, or among their own people, in comparison with the Chinese model. Authoritarian countries could receive validation of the argument that authoritarian governments can deal with crises like this one more effectively than the democracies. That could weaken their global image of Western powers.

Furthermore, the crisis may disrupt Western defense spending: European defense spending has always been very fragile, and the pandemic could undermine resources that they could put into NATO measures against Russia, or for sending warships to the South China Sea, among other things.

Wikistrat: Do you believe other countries are seeking to join the Sino-Russian partnership in this context, as a result of the COVID-19 crisis?

Weitz: I don't see any major changes yet. As I said, a country like Iran is probably moving a little closer, or at least becoming more economically dependent on Russia and China, as its ties with other Middle Eastern countries are being scaled back with travel bans and other measures. North Korea could go the opposite way; they seem to be doubling down on isolationism, and they don't want to import the virus from China or Russia. But we're seeing mixed signals here with regards to Venezuela, with the Russian energy giant Rosneft recently announcing it was abandoning its commercial ties to reduce its exposure to US sanctions. However, Russia and China don't have genuinely close foreign partners.

Greater changes may occur over time if the Western democracies perform poorly in handling the crisis, or if this pandemic pushes their focus

inward. Other countries may feel it's prudent to move closer to Russia or China, or there may be sways in their public opinion to benefit Moscow and Beijing. Perhaps some Southeast Asian countries or European countries will decide that it's better to distance themselves a bit from the Western powers. Hungarians are always a possibility there, as well as Serbians. So far, however, the crisis has not had much impact. The main impact has been on the economic and social bilateral ties between Moscow and Beijing. With regards to third countries, not so much, except for how the crisis may aid Russian-Chinese propaganda.

Wikistrat: What do you think are the main challenges that this evolving relationship, also in the context of COVID-19, poses to the US?

Weitz: The virus hasn't really changed anything in this regard. The main challenge lies not so much with regards to what they're presently doing, though there are some areas where they can interfere to the detriment of US interests. Consider their double vetoes in the UN Security Council, for example. Russian arms sales to China have helped empower the People's Liberation Army and now there is increased defense cooperation. These bilateral military ties will be slowed a bit; for example, they won't be doing major joint exercises for a while. There will be contractions in trade volumes. But their relations are not fundamentally changing. We have been witnessing intensified public relations efforts to blame the US as a possible cause of the virus or, more commonly, fostering criticism of the Western response. But we've seen that type of disinformation campaign in other areas as well, so that will continue.

The Sino-Russian challenge to the United States could become tougher in the future if, for example, Moscow and Beijing move to integrate their militaries closer to become a genuine alliance, with a mutual defense treaty or integrated command structure like NATO. If Russians become more sucked into China's economic orbit, they might drag in the rest of Central Asia with them.

Nonetheless, there are still wild cards; for example, to what effect the COVID-19 crisis will adversely, or disproportionately, hurt one of the three countries—Russia, China, or the United States—more than the others. Initially, it looked like China exclusively was going to be weakened by the crisis. More recently, some have come to speculate it could be the US could be more seriously affected. But Russia itself seems to be seeing an uptick in crises and must manage the global collapse of oil and gas prices. If the virus weakens the Russians or forces them to turn inward, that could, in turn, debilitate the Sino-Russian alliance, or make Russia a less valuable partner for China in the future.

Wikistrat: Thank you so much for your time and your valuable insights.



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