By Peter Zeihan

Since the Soviet fall, Russian generals, intelligence chiefs and foreign policy personnel have often waxed philosophic about the inevitability of a global alliance to hem in U.S. power -- often using the rhetoric of a "multipolar world." Central in all of these plans has been not only the implied leadership of Russia, but the implied presence of China. At first glance, the two seem natural partners. China has a booming manufacturing economy, while Russia boasts growing exports of raw materials. But a closer look at the geography of the two paints a very different picture, while the history of the two tells an extraordinarily different story. If anything, it is no small miracle that the two have never found themselves facing each other in a brutal war.

A Hostile Geography

Russia east of the Urals and the Chinese interior are empty, forbidding places. Nearly all of Russia's population is hard up on its western border, while China's is in snug against its eastern and southern coasts. There is an ocean's worth of nothing between them. But while ships can ply the actual ocean cheaply, potentially boosting economic activity, trade between Russia and China does not come easy. Moscow and Beijing are farther apart than Washington and London, and the cost of building meaningful infrastructure between the two would run in the hundreds of billions. With the exception of some resource development and sales in the border region, integration between the two simply does not make economic sense.

Yet, distance aside, there are no real barriers between the two. Southwestern Siberia is a long stretch of flatness that flows seamlessly into the steppes of Central Asia and the highlands of western China. This open expanse is the eastern end of the old Silk Road -- proof that luxury trade is often feasible where more conventional trade simply cannot pay the transport bill. But where caravans bearing spice and silk can pass, so can armies bearing less desirable "goods and services."

Ominously for Russia, there is little to separate the Russian Far East -- where most of the Russian population east of the Urals resides -- from Manchuria. And not only is there a 15:1 population imbalance here in favor of the Chinese (and not only has Beijing quietly encouraged Chinese immigration across its border with Russia since the Soviet breakup), but the Russian Far East is blocked from easy access to the rest of Russia by the towering mountains surrounding Lake Baikal. So while the two parts of Russia have minimal barriers separating them from China, they do have barriers separating them from each other. Russia can thus only hold its Far East so long as China lacks the desire to take it.

Geography also drives the two in different directions for economic reasons. For the same reason that trade between the two is unlikely, developing Russia would be an intimidating task. Unlike China or the United States, Russia's rivers for the most part do not interconnect, and none of the major rivers go anywhere useful. Russia has loads of coastline, but nowhere does

coast meld with population centers and ice-free ocean access. The best the country has is remote Murmansk.

So Russia's development -- doubly so east of the Urals -- largely mirrors Africa's: limited infrastructure primarily concerned with exploiting mineral deposits. Anything more holistic is simply too expensive to justify.

In contrast, China boasts substantial populations along its warm coasts. This access to transport allows China to industrialize more readily than Russia, but China shares easily crossed land borders with no natural trading partner. Its only serious option for international trade lies in maritime shipping. Yet, because land transport is "merely" difficult and not impossible, China must dedicate resources to a land-based military. This makes China militarily both vulnerable to -- yet economically dependent upon -- sea powers, both for access to raw materials and to ship its goods to market. The dominant naval power of today is not land-centric Russia, but the United States. To be economically successful China must at least have a civil and neutral relationship with the $14-trillion-economy-wielding and 11-aircraft-carrier-strike-group-toting United States. Russia barely even enters into China's economic equation.

And the way Russia does figure into that equation -- Central Asia -- is not a positive, because there is an additional complication.

Natural gas produced in the Central Asian states until recently was part and parcel of overall Soviet production. Since those states' infrastructure ran exclusively north into Russia, Moscow could count on this captive output to sign European supply contracts at a pittance. The Kremlin then uses those contracts as an anvil over Europe to extract political concessions.

"China" has been around a long time, but the borders of today represent the largest that the Chinese state has ever been. To prevent its outer provinces from breaking away (as they have many times in China's past), one of Beijing's geopolitical imperatives is to lash those provinces to the center as firmly as possible. Beijing has done this in two ways. First, it has stocked these outlying regions with Han Chinese to dilute the identity of the indigenous populations and culturally lash the regions to the center. Second, it has physically and economically lashed them to the center via building loads of infrastructure. So, in the past 15 years, China has engaged in a flurry of road, pipeline and rail construction to places such as Tibet and Xinjiang.

Merge these two seemingly minor details and it suddenly becomes clear that much of the mineral and energy riches of formerly Soviet Central Asia -- resources that Russia must have to maintain its energy leverage over Europe -- are now just as close to China's infrastructure network as they are to Russia's. And obtaining those resources is one of the few possible means China has of mitigating its vulnerability to U.S. naval power.

All that is needed are some pieces of connecting infrastructure to allow those resources to flow east to China instead of north to Russia. Those connections -- road, pipe and rail -- are already under construction. The Russians suddenly have some very active competition in a region they have thought of as their exclusive playground, not to mention a potential highway to Russia

proper, for the past quarter millennia. Control of Central Asia is now a strategic imperative for both.

A Cold History

The history of the two powers -- rarely warm, oftentimes bitter -- meshes well with the characteristics of the region's geography.

From the Chinese point of view, Russia is a relative newcomer to Asia, having started claiming territory east of the Urals only in the late 1500s, and having spent most of its blood, sweat and tears in the region in Central Asia rather than the Far East. Russian efforts in the Far East amounted to little more than a string of small outposts even when Moscow began claiming Pacific territory in the late 1700s. Still, by 1700, Russian strength was climbing while Chinese power was waning under the onslaught of European colonialism, enabling a still-militarily weak Russian force to begin occupying chunks of northeastern China. With a bit of bluff and guile, Russia formally annexed what is now Amur province from Qing China in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun, and shortly thereafter the Chinese-Russian border of today was established.

China attempted to resist even after Aigun -- lumping the document with the other "unequal treaties" that weakened Chinese sovereignty and territorial integrity -- and indeed the Russians had more or less swindled China out of a million square miles of territory. But Beijing simply had too many other issues going on to mount a serious resistance (the Opium Wars come to mind). Once the Trans-Siberian Railway was completed early in the 20th century, Russia was able to back up its claims with troops, and the issue definitively moved to the back burner -- especially as the rising colonial aspirations of Japan occupied more attention than China had to spare.

The bilateral relationship warmed somewhat after the end of World War II, with Russian energy and weapons critical to Mao's consolidation of power (although notably, Stalin originally backed Mao's rival, Chiang Kai-shek). But this camaraderie was not to last. Stalin did everything he could first to egg on the North Korean government to invade South Korea, and then to nudge the Chinese into backing the North Koreans against the U.S.-led U.N. counterattack. But while the USSR provided weapons to China in the Korean War, Moscow never sent troops -- and when the war ended, Stalin had the temerity to submit a bill to Bejing for services rendered.

Sino-Soviet relations never really improved after that. As part of Cold War maneuvers, Russia allied with India and North Vietnam, both longtime Chinese rivals. Therein lay the groundwork of a U.S.-Chinese rapprochement, and rapid-fire events quickly drove the Chinese and Soviets apart. The United States and China both backed Pakistan in the Indo-Pakistani wars. Some 60,000 Uighurs -- a Muslim minority that the Chinese still fear hold separatist aspirations -- fled across the Soviet border in 1962. In 1965, the Chinese energy industry matured to the point that Soviet oil was no longer required to keep the Chinese economy afloat. Later, Washington turned a blind eye to the horrors of the Chinese-bankrolled Khmer Rouge in Cambodia to destabilize Soviet-backed Vietnam. When all was said and done, the Soviet Union faced a foe to its south every bit as implacable as those on its western and eastern flanks.

But the seminal event that made the Sino-Soviet split inevitable was a series of military clashes in the summer of 1969 over some riverine islands in the Amur.

Today

China and Russia are anything but natural partners. While their economic interests may seem complementary, geography dictates that their actual connections will be sharply limited. Moreover, in their roles of resource provider versus producer, they actually have a commercial relationship analogous to that of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries versus the United States -- with all the angst and distrust that suggests.

Strategically, the two tend to swim in different pools, but they still share a borderland. Borderlands -- where one great state flows into another -- are dangerous places, as their precise locations ebb and flow with the geopolitical tides. And the only thing more likely to generate borderland friction than when one side is strong and the other weak is when both sides are strong. Currently, both China and Russia are becoming more powerful simultaneously, creating ample likelihood that the two will slide toward confrontation in regions of overlapping interest.

So why Stratfor's interest in the topic? The primary reason the United States is the most powerful state in the international system is that it faces no challengers on its continent. (Canada is de facto integrated into the United States, and Mexico -- even were it stable and rich -- would still be separated from the United States by a sizable desert.) This allows the United States to develop in peace and focus its efforts on projecting its power outward rather than defending itself. For the United States to be threatened, a continental-sized power or coalition of similar or greater size would need to arise. So long as China and Russia remain at odds, the United States does not have to work very hard to maintain its position.

Which brings us back to the island battles that cemented the Sino-Soviet split: Russia is giving them back.

On July 21, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put Russia's final signature -- in a deal already signed and ratified by both sides -- to a deal that commits Russia to the imminent removal of its forces from 67 square miles of territory on a series of Amur riverine islands. The Russians call them Tarabarov and Bolshoi Ussuriysky, the Chinese call them Yinlong Dao and Heixiazi Dao. These are two of the islands over which the Chinese and Soviets battled in 1969, formalizing the Sino-Soviet split. The final pullout of Russian forces is expected within a month.

When two states enter into alliance, the first thing they must do is stop treating each other as foes. There is a bit of wiggle room if the two states do not border each other as the United States and Soviet Union did not during World War II. But in cases of a shared land border, it is devilishly difficult to believe that those on the other side of the line have your back if they are still gunning for a piece of your backyard. If China and Russia are going to stand together against the United States -- or really, anyone -- in any way, shape or form, the first thing they have to do is stop standing against each other. And that is just about to happen.

There are still plenty of reasons to doubt the durability of this development. In terms of modern warfare, the islands are strategic irrelevancies, so their surrender is not exactly a huge gesture of trust. Achieving any semblance of economic integration between the two powers still would be more trouble and expensive than it would be worth, making any deepening of the bilateral relationship difficult. Russia's demographic slide instills a perfectly logical paranoia in the Kremlin; Russians are outnumbered 7 to 1 by their "partner" in terms of population and 3 to 1 in terms of economic size -- something that Russian pride will find far harder to accept than merely handing over some islands. There is no substitute to the American market for China. Period. Sharing Central Asia is simply impossible because both sides need the same resources to achieve and maintain their strategic aims. And neither power has a particularly sterling reputation when it comes to confidence building.

Yet while Moscow is known for many, many things, sacrificing territory -- especially territory over which blood has been shed -- is not on that list. Swallowing some pride to raise the prospect of a Chinese-Russian alliance is something that should not pass unnoticed. Burying the hatchet in the islands of the Amur is the first step on the improbable road to a warmer bilateral relationship, and raises the possibility of a coalition of forces with the geographic foundation necessary to challenge the United States at its very core.

Such a Chinese-Russian alliance remains neither natural nor likely. But, with the territory handover, it has just become something that it was not a week ago: possible.