



## Trump's Russia pivot keeps China guessing on Ukraine



Since taking office last month, the US president has sought to unravel three years of Western opposition to the invasion of Ukraine. US President Donald Trump's abrupt pivot to Russia will remould Moscow's ties with China but is unlikely to prise apart its flourishing partnership with Beijing, analysts say.

Since taking office last month, the US president has sought to unravel three years of Western opposition to the invasion of Ukraine, sidelining Kyiv and European allies while pushing a deal to end the war on terms purportedly favourable to Moscow. These overtures will have repercussions for China too, which has drawn Russia deeper into its orbit as its northern neighbour has endured economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation from the West.

Russian "dependence on China will automatically be mitigated" once it improves its international standing, said Yun Sun from the US-based Stimson Center, a non-partisan think tank. Russia traditionally is known for diplomatic manoeuvre and strategic manipulation. It was deprived of that space and ability during the Ukraine war, but once Russia improves relations with the US, the space will open up," she said.

Beijing has presented itself as neutral in the Ukraine conflict, urging peace talks while refusing to condemn the invasion and boosting economic, military and political ties with Moscow. That stance was criticised by the previous US administration and Kyiv's other allies, who urged Beijing to take a more active role and use its influence over Russia to end the war. Trump's taking the lead on talks with his counterpart Vladimir Putin has -- at least for the moment -- taken that focus off Beijing as a potential mediator. 'Reverse Nixon'? Trump's about-face has drawn comparisons with another historic act of high-wire diplomacy, with some foreign policy experts dubbing the move a "reverse Nixon" moment.

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In 1972, then-US president Richard Nixon paid a shock visit to China, paving the way towards full diplomatic recognition and gaining leverage over a wrong-footed Soviet Union. By that same logic, a shock rapprochement between Trump and Putin could achieve the opposite, bringing Russia in from the cold while undermining its bond with Beijing. But the apparent parallels are a "misreading of history", said Elizabeth Wishnick from Columbian University's Weatherhead East Asian Institute.

In Nixon's time, China was "weak, isolated" and fearful of war with the Soviet Union. These days it is a global power with a huge economy and military, and has strong ties with Moscow. Alexander Gabuev, director of the Berlin-based Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, said Russia "will definitely portray to Trump that they want to have space and distance from China... and not to be China's

junior partner".

However, Moscow sees the Chinese leadership as a consistent "towering presence", in contrast to Trump at the whim of the US election cycle, he told AFP. "Why would they rock the boat with China, given their increased dependency, overlapping economic structures, and strategic interests to dislodge the United States as a global hegemon?" he added. Sun, of the Stimson Center, agreed that the United States would be unable to "'break' the Russia-China relationship, which has endogenous logic and strength". But Washington is able to tamper with the quality and the level of cooperation within that relationship," she said.

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