



Global Acupuncture vs. Global Surgery: How Russia and China Differ from the U.S.

First published on April 18, 2013 and January 29, 2013 as part of the [Voice of Russia's Expert's Panel](#). Although published separately, these two comments seem to me to fit well together.

Russian and American goals are not fundamentally in conflict. Both countries aspire to a version of global stability that would allow them to preserve their pre-eminent global standing. Russia, as a regional power, focuses on stability in and around the CIS, whereas the United States, as a global power, seeks a global settlement. Unlike during the Cold War era, however, there is no ideological disagreement over whether a new international system is preferable to the status quo. Both countries are status quo powers because they benefit from the current international order.

But the philosophical assumptions that undergird the pursuit of similar objectives can still differ dramatically. An insightful article published in China's influential *People's Daily* [in November 2011](#) argues that while America pursues the health of the international system through surgery, China prefers acupuncture and that this difference is rooted in cultural tradition.

Whereas America, and the West in general, believes that portions of the body afflicted by disease should be cut off to protect healthy organs from infection, the Chinese approach emphasizes the importance of restoring the entire body to health. Since surgical interventions disrupt the body's "qi" and prevent complete recovery, low-trauma, long-term treatment is preferred. Lest his meaning be lost on the reader, the author highlights that even "surgically precise" military intervention can make matters only worse. Instead, he says, "one should use the smallest possible external interference to activate internal capabilities, causing the situation to gradually improve from the inside out".

The increasingly apparent foreign policy alignment of Russia and China shows that both countries are more comfortable with the acupuncture approach to foreign policy. Indeed, America's insistence on treating various regions of the world "surgically" is one of the primary reasons for this new alignment. It is equally apparent that neither Russia nor China expects US foreign policy to change any time soon. Despite his noble electoral rhetoric, President Obama's foreign policy has essentially been a continuation of that of his predecessors. As a result, Chinese and Russian leaders have concluded that their disagreements with US strategy are culturally based, and probably permanent.

Which approach is more in touch with "global realities?" Impossible to say, since "global reality" is itself constantly being shaped by the actions of key participants. It is worth pointing out, however, that while the BRICS group is evidently an alignment of states designed to contain the

excesses of American power, it also seeks to preserve and support American power in regions where the latter is deemed to play a constructive role, such as Afghanistan.

The door to cooperation in the construction of a new global partnership is therefore open. But whether the future will be one of conflict or cooperation will depend largely on whether future American elites will recognize the benefits of a partnership based on equality and mutual restraint or whether they will reject the idea that America is like other nations and cling to the view of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright that "We are America; we are the indispensable nation. We stand tall and we see further than other countries into the future." (NBC's Today Show, 19 February 1998.)

Washington's focus is on short-term gains, not long-term strategies

This foreign policy conflict, along with others, is rooted in the unwillingness of the Western powers to see Russia and China play a greater role in the resolution of international conflict. In the "who is up" and "who is down" rhetoric that seems to dominate in Washington, the focus is on short-term gains, not long-term strategies. There is a perpetual rush to "do something," rather than to promote a comprehensive political settlement, which could take decades.

Russia's policy has been much more sensible. It has called for all groups to talk with each other without preconditions. Leading Western powers soon abandoned this course and decided to support one side in the conflict. It is not surprising they are now frustrated with the results. The solution, according to domestic critics, is to be more involved and to "do something" to end the tragedy. The fact that they have no clear idea of whom to support, how to help those whom they think they need to support to stabilize Syria, or any notion of what repercussion such a political change would have for the region, does not concern them in the least. Moral outrage simply replaces sound intellectual argument. They represent a strand in American politics that, in the words of noted international relations theorist Kenneth W. Thompson, seems irresistibly drawn to "an excess of hubris in putting means before ends, procedures ahead of purpose, and success above virtue."

An optimal strategy that involved Russia, China, and the West would require a shared vision of the future. Such a shared vision would, in turn, require a willingness to acknowledge the merits of opposing arguments and to moderate ambitions. Moderation of any sort, however, seems to be in short supply in Washington these days.