

論說

Sino-Russian Relations in the Trump Era: An Uneven Partnership

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On August 2, 2019, the United States blocked all lending to Russia from international financial institutions (IFIs), prohibited US banks from buying Russian sovereign bonds and limited lending to Russia. Additional restrictions on the US exports to Russia were introduced as well. Observers were surprised at the sanctions' timing "in the absence of new developments" and claimed it was "hard to defend such sanctions against a Russia largely void of any new foul play."¹⁾ Even so, the U.S. Senate, acting on behalf of vested interests in the U.S. petroleum industry, has intensified discussions about sanctioning the construction of the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline between Russia and Germany. Everyone understands that the only real motive behind such moves is the desire to "reduce [the] market share of Russian oil and gas in Europe, a market the U.S. would love to capture."²⁾

Less than a week after the new round of sanctions was announced, the US Ambassador to Russia Jon Huntsman tendered his resignation. The Ambassador's departure came on the heels of the earlier announced replacement of Fiona Hill, the National Security Council Senior Director for Europe and Russia. With these two moves, Trump's administration appeared visibly unable to recruit or retain talent in Russia-related jobs. Even as wild rotation of the U.S. top officials under Trump became his signature style, the loss of the two top experts on Russia politics within a

1) K. Rapoza, Russia's latest sanctions a year in the making but surprise everyone. Forbes.com, Aug 2, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2019/08/02/russias-latest-sanctions-a-year-in-the-making-but-surprises-everyone/#57391bd55de3>

2) Ibid.

space of few weeks shows certain disarray, if not complete lack of focus of the U.S. Russian policy.

Irrationality of sanctions accounts for a great deal of that disarray. Sanctions rarely, if ever, work, if changes in the government behaviour are taken as a measure of their effectiveness. Nonetheless, they are still being applied as one tool available to foreign governments that are intent to show displeasure with the activities of the government under sanctions. The well-know cases of sanctions show that the affected countries rarely change the behavior that presumably caused the sanctions in the first place. Russia itself, in the shape of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, was treated as a world market pariah for decades, while keeping its policies of “cold” confrontation with the West. Cuba has been under the U.S. sanctions throughout all of its postrevolutionary history; neither its goals nor policies have been changed as a result.

What sanctions do achieve is prompting the affected country’s search for new allies. Given the concrete balance of forces in the world, the only reasonable solution for Russia isolated from the West is to reorient its trade and finance to the East. Russia’s strategic partnership with China becomes especially important in this context.

Moreover, as China, too, finds itself on the receiving end of Trump’s trade war, both Beijing and Moscow feel the need to compensate the negative effects of the U.S. foreign economic policies on their respective economies. A new boost that the U.S. pressure gives to the Sino-Russian trade and economic cooperation cannot but reverberate through the whole spectrum of their bilateral relations. In order to understand the nature of these most recent developments better, it is important to evaluate the main stages in evolution of Sino-Russian relations after the end of Soviet communism.

Re-engagement in the nineties

The first phase in the development of Russo-Chinese relations was that of re-engagement. The two countries were coming to terms with the necessity of peaceful co-existence and resolution of the old-standing border disputes, non-interference in internal affairs, support of each other’s territorial integrity and re-engagement in

trade and human exchanges. This stage had lasted from the end of the Soviet Union and the acceptance by Russia of its international legal obligations until the signing in 1996 of a joint statement proclaiming the forging of a strategic partnership based on equality, mutual trust and coordination and oriented toward the 21st century. The partnership of “strategic coordination” that Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin inaugurated was an upgrade on the “constructive partnership”, announced two years prior, and ushered in a new mechanism of annual top-level meetings between the heads of state and heads of government of the two countries.

The second phase in the development of Sino-Russian ties saw significant increases in trade and foreign policy coordination. The deepening of the relations of strategic coordination and partnership propelled Russia’s arms sales to China and gave a new boost to cooperation in space, energy and nuclear industries. Russia was helping China to modernize its power plant, supplied equipment and provided services for coal power stations, while building two major uranium enrichment plants in Hanzhun and Lanzhou respectively. In 1998, a deal was signed to supply two Russian-made nuclear reactors for a power plant at Lianyungang. The weapons sales went up from \$1 billion to \$2 billion a year on average (Cohen 2001). By the turn of the century, Russia provided China with several modern attack helicopters, one hundred S-300 surface-to-air missiles, ten Il-76 transport aircraft, four Kilo-class submarines, two Sovremenny-class destroyers, hundreds of other missiles and missile launchers (Kan, Bolkcom, and O’Rourke 2001).

One of the main goals of China’s military modernization is modernization of its air force. Negotiations that had started in the late nineties led to significant sales of the Russian combat in the first half of the 2000s. Thus, Beijing acquired 76 Su-27SK fighter-ground attack aircraft and a co-production licence to build 200 more in China. About 95 of these aircraft had been actually produced by 2003 (RIA Novosti 2008). In 1999–2004, People’s Liberation Army had also procured 76 Su-30MKK and 24 Su-30MK2 fighters. Acquisition of these advanced multirole fighters has transformed PLA’s air force, “pushed PRC aviation industry technology to a new level” and changed the balance of military power in the Taiwan Strait: “since then, the cross-strait airpower balance has tended toward the PLAAF’s advantage for the first time since 1949” (Cheng 2012: 326).

Beijing and Moscow cooperated in the UN Security Council, where both denounced

NATO's bombardments of Yugoslavia and called for an immediate cessation of western military intervention in Kosovo. China joined Russia in opposition to NATO's enlargement eastward, which the Chinese perceived as a US-controlled process portending similar, unfavourable to the PRC, changes in the security situation in Asia Pacific (Trough 1999: 16-19). Both countries opposed US unilateralism and the tendency to use what later became known as "coalitions of the willing" in implementation of interventionist agendas that would fall short of approval by the United Nations. Beijing's White Paper on National Defense (1998) decried "hegemonism and power politics" as "the main source of threats to world peace" and pointedly criticized "the enlargement of military blocs and the strengthening of military alliances" as "factors of instability" (China 1998). The Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, in an obvious reference to the United States, stated that "no country should seek hegemony, engage in power politics or monopolize international affairs" (China-Russia 1997).

Both countries had protested US plans for the development of the national missile defence (NMD) and theatre missile defence (TMD) systems and unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty with Russia. Chinese diplomats argued that joint development of a TMD system by the USA and Japan would make the security situation in Asia-Pacific unpredictable. Beijing was genuinely alarmed with the prospect of having Taiwan included into the US-controlled TMD system and claimed that such a move would jeopardize China's plans for peaceful reunification. In response to the US building of the NMD system, China was prepared to "review its policies on various arms control, disarmament and nonproliferation issues" (Zukang 1999). Russia stopped participating in the START-II nuclear disarmament treaty and threatened to rearm existing single-warhead missiles with multiple warheads, redeploy tactical nuclear weapons and resurrect production of intermediate range ballistic nuclear missiles banned under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (Yakovlev 2000).

The early Putin period

In 2001, Jiang Zemin and Vladimir Putin signed a comprehensive Treaty of Good-

Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation. Joint aspirations to a multilateral world based on the classic formulas of sovereignty and non-interference into the internal affairs of sovereign states, as well as common challenges of dealing with the sole remaining superpower propelled unprecedented rapprochement that, among other things, helped to resolve a long-standing territorial dispute. By the end of 1999, the agreement was reached on all but two disputed border areas, and the demarcation of the remaining 98 percent of the border had been completed. The “big treaty” proclaimed that the contracting parties had no territorial claims against each another and committed them to abide by the status quo in those sectors which had not yet been agreed through consultations. The sides agreed to continue negotiations as to the status of the remaining two percent of the disputed territories, which included the Bolshoi Island on the river Argun and two islands near the regional centre of Khabarovsk.

The U.S. war on terror had a profound impact on the development of the Sino-Russian partnership. Both countries offered their sympathies to the US, but Russia went significantly further than China in collaborating with the American military in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Moscow was fast to extend overflight permissions, share intelligence, provide aid to the anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan’s north and encourage Central Asians to open up their military facilities and agree to the establishment of the US military bases in the region. Significantly for China, Putin backtracked on commitment to oppose the US plans for national missile defence: Russia’s response to the US unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty was muted. Chinese observers could not but notice a pronounced discrepancy in the impact that implementation of NMD and TMD in Asia Pacific would have, respectively, on Russia and China: while it would not be able to undermine Russia’s nuclear deterrence potential, it would effectively annul PRC’s strategic capabilities (Cheng 2004: 487–8).

Putin’s easy acquiescence to NMD in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks could not but be perceived in China as a breakup of the united opposition to the US plans. While Sino-Russian relations somewhat cooled as a result of this development, Russia’s intensified cooperation with the United States translated into a new quality of relations with NATO. The new NATO-Russia Council was created in the format of 20 equal participants, to replace the “19+1” formula of its predecessor, the Permanent

Joint Council. The signing of the 2002 Moscow Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions (SORT) committed both sides to two-thirds reduction in their strategic nuclear arsenals, which eased the burden of Russia's military expenditure. For some time, Russia seemed to be moving toward full partnership, if not formal membership, with Euro-Atlantic structures. Putin's famous "why not?" response to a question on potential NATO membership (BBC News 2000) reflected a mindset that at the time was not alien to a good part of Moscow's political elite. By the early 2002, Foreign Minister Ivanov had to dispel suggestions of Russia's siding with NATO in joint containment of a presumed "China threat" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2002).

The 2002–2003 period in Russo-Chinese relations was also difficult because of the controversies of economic character. The long-awaited breakthrough in the construction of the East Siberian oil pipeline Angarsk-Daqing failed to materialize in spite of a definitive agreement one year prior between Russia's Yukos, Transneft and China's CNPC companies. Instead, Transneft responded to intense lobbying from Japan and unveiled a new route from Angarsk to Russia's Far East port of Nakhodka, where oil was to be loaded on tankers for further transportation across Asia Pacific. Moscow attempted to downplay its renegeing on the agreement, arguing that it was not the case of preferring Japan to China or vice versa, but rather normal exercise of the country's right to pursue its own national interests (Losyukov 2003).

Routing the pipeline toward China promised long-term contracts and price stability, which would benefit the exporter if the world oil prices went down, but could be also detrimental if oil prices went up. On the other hand, ending the trunk with a terminus on the Pacific coast promised diversification and spot price flexibility. Tanker trade opened up access to export markets in Japan and South Korea, as well as China, Philippines, Singapore and other countries across the ocean. An oil terminal on Russia's Pacific coast was also preferred by the United States of America. The cost to pay was the inevitable worsening of the relations with China, potentially the largest importer of Russia's oil in Asia Pacific. Russians oscillated between the two competing proposals, eventually offering a compromise solution of the main line running to the east with a connector branching out south from Skovorodino across the Russo-Chinese border to Daqing.

The clash between ambitious plans of then-Yukos owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky for

a private pipeline to China and the Kremlin's vision of control over the export energy flows convinced Beijing of a certain lack of leadership on Russia's side. The May 2003 official visit to Moscow by Hu Jintao – his first official visit overseas as China's President – saw the leaders signing a "Joint Declaration" that reaffirmed China's interests in "big scale oil and natural gas projects" with Russia.³⁾ At the same time, Putin met with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in January and May of 2003 and had seriously entertained Japan's offer of financial support for the pipeline as well as oil exploration and social programs in eastern Siberia.

In October 2003, Khodorkovsky was arrested, and the earlier agreed-upon routing to China changed to Taishet-Nakhodka. The October 2004 meeting of two leaders in Beijing, although a landmark event in its own right, did not bring the assurances that Chinese desired. By the end of the year, Moscow still prioritized the "lateral" route to Nakhodka. It was not until the G8 Summit in July 2005 when Putin finally indicated that the supply of oil to China would be given priority (Hyodo 2006: 180).

The mature relationship stage

The next stage in the development of Sino-Russian relations started in 2004 with the signing of the supplementary agreement on the eastern part of the Russian-Chinese state border and the action plan on implementing the Treaty on Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation for 2005–2008. The agreement concluded negotiations on the interstate border that were going on since mid-sixties of the last century. Formal delimitation of the border was agreed upon three years later, and full demarcation completed by the end of 2008.

The action plan on implementing the "big treaty" for 2005–2008 became a model document for subsequent action plans for 2009–12 and 2013–16 respectively. In a truly comprehensive manner, the action plan envisioned collaboration in politics, economics, humanitarian sphere, military and defence, emergency management, justice and home affairs, and international relations. Politically, the heads of state committed themselves

3) William Ratliff, *Russia's Oil in America's Future: Policy, Pipelines, and Prospects*. Hoover Institution, September 1, 2003, <https://www.hoover.org/research/russias-oil-americas-future-policy-pipelines-and-prospects>

to the regular exchange of state visits annually. The mechanism of annual meetings of the heads of governments, in place since 1996, had been further concretized and developed. The inter-regional, interparliamentary, and inter-party ties were strengthened.

New targets for trade were announced, including increases in Russia's oil exports to China from 10 million tonnes in 2005 to 15 million tonnes annually starting in 2006. The emphasis was placed on trade in high value-added goods and cooperation in such industry sectors as machine building, ship building, atomic energy, communications, information technologies and aerospace industry. The trade turnover in 2001–2005 was growing 30 percent a year and more. In little more than 10 years, it increased 10 times, from less than 8 billion in 2000 to almost 80 billion dollars in 2011. Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Hu Jintao, meeting for the tenth anniversary of the friendship and cooperation treaty, agreed to increase bilateral trade further, to \$100 billion by 2015 and \$200 billion by 2020.

In the humanitarian sphere, the decision was reached to hold the Year of Russia in China in 2006 and the Year of China in Russia in 2007, to intensify student and youth exchanges, the teaching and learning of the Chinese language in Russia and of the Russian language in China. The national theme years promoted trade, investment, tourism, culture exchanges, and numerous visits by governmental delegations at all levels. Altogether the two countries had implemented near 600 various activities showcasing cooperation in areas ranging from politics and military affairs to science, education and health care. Dozens of business deals were concluded at trade and investment conferences and near 30 joint economic projects were launched. China pledged to increase its investment in Russia to 12 billion dollars by 2020. In addition to cultural events and national exhibitions, PRC's Ministry of Commerce and Russia's Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Trade jointly sponsored the first and second high-level Sino-Russian economic forums in Beijing and Moscow respectively. Since then, the mechanism of high-level economic forums has grown into an important fixture in the two countries' diplomatic calendar.

Humanitarian thrust of Russo-Chinese relations intensified with the announcement of 2009 as the Year of the Russian language in China, and 2010 – as the Year of the Chinese language in Russia. In the first year, 260 Russian language events took place in 22 provinces and municipalities of China. China launched a dedicated Russian TV

channel, created five new centres for Russian studies and set up four university-based programmes for student exchanges.

Next year, Russia hosted more than 200 activities related to the study and promotion of the Chinese language in culture, science, media, and education. These events were held in 23 Russian regions from Moscow to Vladivostok and included opening of the five new Confucius Institutes at Russian universities, adding to the already existing 12 Confucius Institutes.

In 2012–13, the two countries implemented yet another biennial initiative, holding the Year of Russian tourism in China and the Year of Chinese tourism in Russia respectively. The first year of the initiative saw 2.3 million Russians visiting China and close to a million of Chinese coming to Russia, 343,000 of them as tourists (Rosturizm 2014). The next year, there was a further 13 percent growth in the overall number of visits from China, while the number of Chinese tourists grew by 18 percent (China.com 2014).

The Sino-Russian trade exceeded US\$95 billion in 2014. China has become Russia's number one trading partner. The volume of direct trade settled in national currencies grew 2400% in four months: from \$52 million in July 2014 to \$1.2 billion in November 2014 (TV Zvezda 2014). Chinese direct investment has grown, too. In its continuing expansion into Russia, CNPC bought a 20 percent stake in the \$27 billion worth Yamal liquefied natural gas project and a 10 percent stake in Vankorneft, one of the most promising oil and gas fields in Eastern Siberia. An unprecedented \$270 billion deal committed Russia to the sale of 365 million tons of oil to China over 25 years, in addition to the earlier negotiated 300 million tons' supply.

The current period : an uneven partnership

The Ukraine crisis and the western sanctions that followed have sped up the process of Russia's "pivoting" to its eastern neighbour. Re-orientation away from the west is most pronounced in gas trade. After the first mammoth agreement, which envisions supplying China with 38 billion cubic metres of gas to China annually over the course of 30 years through the East-Route natural gas pipeline, the two countries signed the second deal, which adds 30 billion cubic meters of gas a year to China's western regions. The two deals together are valued at more than \$684 billion (Yep

2014). Xi Jinping advocated an Asian security arrangement that would include Russia and Iran but exclude the United States. Whether a new Sino-Russian alliance “aimed at further hamstringing the U.S.-led neoliberal order” (Green 2014) is possible or not became a hotly debated topic. The skeptics may well be right; a growing power disparity between the two countries stands in the way (Nye 2015). Even so, the potential of Russia’s bandwagoning with China should not be discounted. It is precisely in the realm of multilateral and regional politics where this potential is the greatest.

China’s importance for Russia is incomparable to Russia’s importance to China. While China is Russia’s largest trade partner, Russia is only the twelfth on the list of China’s major trade partners. Russia took about 2 percent of China’s total exports in 2018, comparing to more than 19 percent that the United States took. The bilateral trade’s volume, which reached \$100 billion in 2018, is 3.3 times less than that between China and Japan, or 3.1 times less than between China and South Korea.

Even more importantly, the structure of Sino-Russian trade, in spite of Russia’s best efforts in economic diplomacy, continued deteriorating on the Russian side. Soon after normalization of the Sino-Soviet relations, the share of machinery in the Russian trade with China was 40 percent. By the beginning of the second decade of this century, it dropped down to 1 percent. Russian exports to China predominantly feature raw materials such as oil, coal, timber and metals. Oil and other extractable resources accounted for 76 percent of Russian exports to China in 2018, while wood and paper products – for another 8 percent. Conversely, the share of technologically advanced manufactures, broadcasting equipment, electric machinery, computers, telephones, office machine part and the like, which was practically absent in the Chinese exports to Russia in 1980s, increased to more than 54 percent of their total value by 2017.⁴⁾ In foreign policy, a certain wariness still exists in the relations between the two states. Beijing could not have taken kindly to Russia’s Foreign Ministry confidential report, which, according to a version leaked to the press, stated that “we need to hold China to acting in concert with Russia in international forums, where they need our help more than we need theirs (Weir 2010). A similar mistrust of the

4) OEC, What does Russia import from China? (2017), https://oec.world/en/visualize/tree_map/hs92/import/rus/chn/show/2017/

neighbour was demonstrated once again in August 2012, when, in a thinly veiled reference to China, Medvedev called to defend Russia's Far East against "excessive expansion by bordering states" (Grove 2012). Putin's hopes to attract the Chinese capital for modernization of Russia's economy have been thwarted with the minuscule amount of Chinese foreign direct investment in Russia, which accounts for less than 1 percent of Russia's total inward FDI stock. Between 2014 and 2018, the volume of China's FDI stock in Russia had actually decreased from \$4.6 billion to \$4.4 billion.⁵⁾

With the new round of the U.S. sanctions imposed on Russia in August-September 2019 and the EU's decision to extend its own sanctions until June 2020, it is apparent that Russia's rapprochement with the West will not happen any time soon. Moscow's reorientation to Asia has been confirmed at the Bishkek summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Dushanbe summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in June 2019. Speaking at both forums, Putin called for cooperation that eschews "political or economic egoism," promotes equal partnership and mutual interests of the parties. Joint opposition to trade wars, economic sanctions and other "non-market methods" of competition between states in Russia's key message and a rallying point in its relations with its Asian neighbours.⁶⁾

In a show of solidarity with China, Putin accused the U.S. of applying unfair, aggressive methods of trade competition. Citing the U.S.-led campaign against the Chinese telecommunication firm Huawei, Putin warned of a possibility of trade wars leading to real wars. The Russian leader criticized the United States, characterizing its policies as those of "unbridled economic egoism."⁷⁾ On a personal level, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping developed close personal rapport. China's attention to Russia and Eurasia was reconfirmed immediately upon Xi Jinping's ascension to power. Just

5) Finanz.ru, Putin poprosil kitaitsev profinansirovat modernizatsiyu Rossii, 08.06.2018, <https://www.finanz.ru/novosti/aktsii/putin-poprosil-kitaycev-profinansirovat-modernizatsiyu-rossii-1026806313>

6) Putin prizval stroit evraziiskoe partnerstvo bez politicheskogo egoizma. RIA Novosti, 14.06.2019, <https://ria.ru/20190614/1555561265.html>: Putin: v ekonomike idut boi bez pravil, Banki.ru, 15.06.2019, <https://www.banki.ru/news/lenta/?id=10898729>

7) A. Ostroukh and K. Golubkova, Putin stands by China, criticises U.S., in trade, Huawei disputes, The Star Online, 07 June 2019, <https://www.thestar.com.my/news/world/2019/06/07/putin-says-us-push-for-dominance-is-a-recipe-for-trade-and-real-wars>

like his predecessor Hu Jintao, President Xi chose Russia for his first official visit abroad. The two leaders signed a joint statement on deepening what they called a comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation. It defined Sino-Russian relations as “relations of comprehensive and equal partnership, mutual trust, strategic cooperation, mutual support, common prosperity and lasting friendship” (President of Russia 2013). The leaders expressed their support to deepening of regional cooperation and called on all major powers to “rise above thinking in terms of zero-sum games and bloc politics”.

Their first summit pursued political, economic, and humanitarian agenda. Xi and Putin agreed to continue the newly formed tradition of Sino-Russian thematic years by holding reciprocal years of youth exchanges in 2014–15. They approved the action plan on implementing the friendship treaty for 2013–16 and set up new targets for the bilateral trade turnover. A decision was made to promote the use of national currencies in bilateral trade, credit and investment. The two sides designated several industrial sectors as priority areas for cooperation, and focused specifically on Russia’s growing role as China’s energy supplier. In leaders’ presence, CNPC and Gazprom signed the \$400 billion gas trade agreement. Other contracts dealt with oil supplies, cooperation in petroleum exploration, development, production and marketing, and Chinese oil majors’ participation in Sakhalin-3 offshore drilling project.

In 2014, Xi Jinping has once again made Russia his first foreign destination of a year to attend the Sochi Olympic Games’ opening ceremony – the first time ever China’s leader would go overseas for a major sports event. The key topics of the ensuing talks with Putin were increases in Russia’s oil and gas supplies, cooperation on Syria, and Russia’s participation in the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road – both initiatives aimed at the promotion of the Chinese trade interests in South and West Asia. In October 2014, China opened a \$24.5 billion currency swap line with Russia to promote bilateral trade and investment. Next month, the two countries’ presidents signed the second mega gas deal on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Beijing.

Sino-Russian trade contracted to \$90 billion in 2015 before rebounding to \$66 billion in 2016. The next year it increased by one-fifth, jumping to \$84 billion. The western sanctions against Russia solidified China’s significance as Russia’s main trading partner. By the end of 2018 statistical agencies in both countries reported that the

bilateral trade had passed the \$100 billion a year landmark that was originally envisaged for 2015.

Even so, celebrations in Russia have been muted by a sober realization of the fact of Russia's accelerating transformation into a resource appendage for the Asian giant. Russia is currently the main supplier of oil to China's energy-hungry economy. Other exports include iron ore and forest products, metals, produce of agriculture. Russian machine-building exports, already minuscule, had dropped by \$1.1 billion dollars, to \$2.9 billion, in 2018.⁸⁾

The high-tech that Russia can export to China consists almost exclusively of weaponry and dual-use jet engines, as well as machines for nuclear industry. Meanwhile, the Russian arms exporters have already had a number of opportunities to learn that People's Liberation Army is a rather unreliable customer. The typical tactics that PLA employs is signing a trade contract only to reverse-engineer the military technologies and hardware it purchases abroad. This does not bode well for Russia's keeping its position as China's arms supplier even in the narrow niche it currently enjoys.

Besides trade, unevenness of the relationship is best demonstrated by demography and the conspicuous lack of cooperation in some of the key areas of foreign policy. China's enormous demographic pressure on Russia's scarcely populated Far East remains a source of concern and breeds alarmist reactions in Eastern Siberia and the Russian Maritime provinces. The whole population of Russia's Far Eastern region is barely above 6 million people, while the three northern provinces of China bordering Russia's Far East are home to 110 million. Chinese official history textbooks depict all of eastern Siberia and most of western Siberia as "temporarily lost lands" of the Chinese empire.⁹⁾

Political cooperation in the UN Security Council has not been matched by Russia's support to Beijing's territorial claims in the East China Sea. China does not recognize independence of Russia-supported enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and is ambiguous on the question of Crimea. The incessant repetition of the formula

8) N. Tolstoukhova, *Sdelano v Rossii, kupleno v Kitae*, Rossijskaya gazeta, 11.02.2019, <https://rg.ru/2019/02/11/eksport-rossijskih-tovarov-v-kitaj-vpervye-za-13-let-prevysil-import.html>

9) *Kitaiskie shkolniki vosprinimayut Sibir kak vremennno utrachennuyu territoriyu Podnebesnoi*, *Izvestia*, 16 June 2006, <https://iz.ru/news/380031>

“relations of mutual trust” in official documents on both sides makes one wonder whether that trust is secure. All of this cannot but influence the two countries’ interaction in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and their implicitly competing visions of regionalism in Eurasia.

Leading Eurasia

Russia and China’s views on what constitute effective regional leadership differ. From the mid-2000s on, Beijing has been emphasizing economic cooperation as the main instrument of region building. Russia, being substantially weaker economically, stressed antiterrorist, political, security and military coordination which became traditional for the organization. Wen Jiabao’s offer of \$900 million preferential credit to Central Asian states during the 2005 premiers’ summit was perceived in Moscow as an attempt to “buy” allegiances of Russia’s traditional allies. Russia countered by pressing for less asymmetrical forms of multilateral economic cooperation, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s (SCO) Development Fund and Interbank Consortium.

These attempts to resist China’s growing penetration of what Russia has traditionally considered as its back yard have not lasted long, however. The power disparity between the two countries is too great to mount an effective challenge, let alone a working containment strategy, that could limit China’s advances into Russia’s historic sphere of influence. Perhaps the most important in this regard is the lack of resolve on the part of the Russian elites, as observed in Moscow’s increasingly obvious acquiescence to the position of a regional power with limited global ambitions, as contrasted to China’s growing global appetites. Nowhere can this be seen more clearly than in the contrast between the Russian plans for the Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese grandiose framework of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

The Belt and Road Initiative, as unveiled by Xi Jinping during his Central Asian tour and the official visit to Indonesia in the fall of 2013, is a predominantly global strategy that seeks to integrate a number of regionalist projects. In Xi’s own words, the strategy’s goal is to “defend and develop an open world economy, jointly create an environment good for opening-up and development, and push for a just, reasonable and transparent international trade and investment system so that production

materials can circulate in an orderly way, be allocated with high efficiency and markets are deeply integrated.”¹⁰⁾ China emphasizes harmonization of policies and policy connectivity, synergy between several international and regional development projects, coordination with the Eurasian Economic Union and ASEAN, and complementarity of its plans with developmental plans of its partners.

By contrast, Russia’s objectives with respect to the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are much more limited in scope. According to Vladimir Putin, the participants “regard the EAEU as a major regional integration organisation that is promoting the economic alignment of the five member states and their sustainable development towards the increased prosperity of [their] peoples.”¹¹⁾ Since the formal institutionalization of the EAEU in 2015, Russia has abandoned all plans it might have had for independent leadership of the former Soviet region. Instead, the attention is being refocused on the Asia-Pacific region and the opportunities the EAEU might have with some of the less developed countries in Africa and Latin America. Moscow hopes that Russia’s relatively dignified role in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation can be preserved and used to amplify its voice in negotiations with China. The main direction of these efforts is to keep the EAEU relevant, rather than independent or semi-independent from the PRC’s “peaceful rise” strategy. In the space of few years, the “idea of greater Eurasian partnership” that the Russian elites promoted for near two decades has been reshaped as “the alignment of integration within the EAEU with China’s Belt and Road Initiative.”¹²⁾ The hope that the agreement on the EAEU’s cooperation with China will give a boost to regional development in the post-Soviet space may well be realized in the foreseeable future. However, even under the best case scenario contradictions between the Russian and the Chinese interests in Central Asia will remain. Beijing and Moscow differ in their assessment of the readiness of Central Asian states for more advanced forms of economic integration.

10) J. Cai, “Xi Jinping rolls out global welcome mat for new Silk Road grand plan,” South China Morning Post, 14 May 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2094248/xi-jinping-pledges-us113-billion-he-woos-world-board>

11) Message from President of Russia to heads of Eurasian Economic Union member states. President of Russia, January 18, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/56663>

12) V. Putin, Speech at the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council meeting in expanded format. President of Russia, October 1, 2019, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61682>

The Chinese government has long been lobbying for the establishment of the SCO free trade zone, while Russia together with its Central Asian partners has long opposed the idea. In Russia's view, bilateral economic cooperation and cooperation on ad-hoc basis could be preferable to the full-blown economic integration. According to Moscow, such an integration under China's tutelage might even be detrimental because of huge disparities between the SCO member states.

China prefers to lead the region with money, while Russia – with the political-military muscle. For some time it looked like Russia had a chance to succeed in turning the SCO toward the more broadly based geopolitical and security agenda. The chance was thwarted by Russia's annexation of Crimea and the adverse reaction to it in the region. At present, Russia's leadership of security cooperation in Central Asia may no longer be seen as guaranteed or without a challenge. On the other hand, there is little doubt that China's interest in adequate protection of its economic assets abroad grows in direct proportion to the accumulated volume of those assets. The more Beijing invests in new oil and gas pipelines, roads and infrastructure in Eurasia, the more it is willing to safeguard its investments from any local revolution, riot or disruption that might jeopardize them. China's leading of joint antiterrorism and military exercises with Central Asian states, with or without Russia's participation, attests to that willingness.

While China is not opposed to military collaboration with individual countries of the region, it shies away from institutionalization of long-term multilateral cooperation with the Russia-led security-oriented entities. Beijing is resolutely opposed to all attempts by Moscow to transform the SCO into a political-military alliance. According to China's view, SCO should be regarded as "a new model of regional cooperation, rather than an alliance" (Xinhua 2012).

Beijing is interested in boosting trade and investment with all countries of the Eurasian Union on the bilateral basis, while also improving multilateral channels of interaction not tied to any single institution or even umbrella organization. The end objective is linking the Eurasia space fully to China's sphere of economic influence, which will also affect regional geopolitics. Meanwhile, the traditional division of responsibilities, with China leading economic development projects and Russia spearheading political and security dimensions of cooperation, already fades away as China shows increasing military prowess and capabilities.

The areas of tension exist not only in the implicit competition of the two powers in Central Asia, but also in the continuing imbalance between the political and economic aspects of their cooperation. China's demographic and economic pressure on Russia's Far East represents a serious security challenge in its own right. Beijing's refusal to extend recognition to Russia-propped statelets of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and an even colder reception of Russia's annexation of Crimea pour cold shower on the idea of the Putin-Xi "bromance."¹³⁾ In turn, Moscow does not support PRC's territorial claims in South and East China seas, drives a hard bargain in negotiations on the price of natural gas exports, woos Japan and Vietnam behind China's back and tries to use China as a diplomatic backup for its initiatives globally, even when Beijing has little or no direct interest in the subject. As a perceptive analyst notes, both countries use "coercive strategies in their pursuit of regional leadership – from Asia to the Middle East to Africa and Latin America."¹⁴⁾ Consequently, the success of one's plans comes at the other's expense.

All of this speaks to a relationship substantially more circumspect than its official representations. Russia's increased assertiveness in the near abroad cannot but worry Beijing. Putin's promotion of the pro-Russian separatism in the neighbouring countries implicitly undermines China's efforts to contain separatists in Tibet, Xinxiang and, most importantly, Taiwan. Russia's flexing its military muscles in Transcaucasia, Ukraine and Central Asia increases business risks and may well undermine Chinese economic interests in those areas. Moreover, it contradicts the original *raison d'être* of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: to fight terrorism, separatism and extremism.

While China and Russia do cooperate bilaterally, they still have to establish a proper long-term division of responsibilities and leadership roles inside a network of bilateral, trilateral and multilateral processes that constitute the ongoing regionalist

13) R. Mathieson and A. Halpin, "Putin-Xi Bromance Blossoms Under Trump Tests." Bloomberg, June 7, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-07/putin-xi-bromance-blossoms-under-trump-tests>

14) C. Huang, "Forget the Xi-Putin bromance, the US-UK special relationship is more special than the China-Russia one." South China Morning Post, 16 June 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/opinion/article/3014607/forget-xi-putin-bromance-us-uk-special-relationship-more-special>

transformation of the postcommunist Eurasia. For as long as the two countries cannot agree on a meaningful division of responsibilities within the SCO, the SCO “engine” will continue stalling. This will undoubtedly affect not only the SCO itself, but also the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. Bandwagoning on China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) then becomes the best strategy to ensure survival of Russia’s own regionalist projects in the former Soviet space.

Impact on Central Asia and the Caucasus

The jockeying for regional leadership and an implicit tug-of-war between China and Russia influences development in Central Asian and Transcaucasian states. According to a number of experts, Russia’s influence in Central Asia is on decline (Malashenko 2013). Russia attempts to compensate by building up its military presence in the area; however, it loses strongly to China in terms of economic and financial engagement, and to Turkey – in soft power projection. The Central Asians have learned to balance between the major powers with stakes in the region, playing not only Russia against China and vice versa, but also Russia against the United States, Turkey, European Union, Saudi Arabia, India and other countries further afield. The multi-vector foreign policy that all these states embrace implies non-attachment to any single point of power in today’s world and the selective engagement with all of them as necessary.

In terms of trade, China has been actively squeezing Russia out of Central Asia and the Caucasus. While Russia is still Kazakhstan’s main trading partner, China is the growing number two. In Kyrgyzstan, the situation is in reverse: Russia is trailing China on the list of the country’s top trading partners. The balance of trade is not favourable to the small Central Asian country: Kyrgyzstan’s debt to China already exceeds 30 percent of its GDP. For Tajikistan, Russia is number one, China is number three; for Uzbekistan, China is number one, Russia is number two. At present, Russian economy is still the dominant force in the region; however, the situation is rapidly changing.

The Central Asian states’ participation in Belt and Road Initiative allows them to balance between Russia and China without throwing their lot unequivocally with one of these powers. China’s current BRI investments are estimated to be \$575 billion

dollars. Out of those, near \$305 billion have been invested in Central Asia, in such sectors as transport, communication, energy infrastructure, finance, technology transfer and trade. Kazakhstan's five year (2015–19) economic development program Nurly Zhol (Bright Path) is fully linked to various BRI projects. Uzbekistan is one of the early original supporters of the “One Belt, One Road” vision, is a regular participant of the China-Central Asia Cooperation Forum and will also rely on BRI for implementation of its New Strategy of Development (2017-2021).¹⁵⁾ Kyrgyzstan relies on China's investments as much as on the Russian participation in the country's economy. Turkmenistan is the largest natural gas supplier to PRC, and, with the opening of the Galkynysh gas field – the world's second largest – for production, is set to retain this position in the future.

Central Asian nations maneuver between Moscow and Beijing, and became apt at using multilateral institutions to amplify their voices and strengthen their positions vis-à-vis the two great powers. The SCO chairmanship is rotated among its member states, thus giving the Central Asians an opportunity to preside over one of the largest regional integration entities in the world. For smaller members, the SCO serves as a school of leadership and a gateway to big international politics.

The Sino-Russian competition within the SCO core opens space for genuine multivectorism in foreign policies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Potentially, the SCO may lead in the development of mutually beneficial ties with other regional organizations. However, it is also clear that the SCO, just as other China-led multilateral institutions, represents an objective alternative to the Russia-centred integration projects in the region. The more successful Central Asians become at participating in various international organizations not created by Russia the less interested they may be in yielding to Russia's leadership in the Eurasian Economic Union.

To the Central Asian states, Russia's policies in the region may appear inconsistent, if not incoherent, in comparison to a more steady approach taken by China. Russia has failed in transforming the SCO into a political-military alliance of sorts – an idea

15) I. Qoraboyev, “The Belt and Road Initiative and Uzbekistan's New Strategy of Development: Sustainability of mutual relevance and positive dynamics,” *Uzbek Journal of Legal Studies*, Vol. 2 (2018). Available at http://ujols.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Qoraboyev_UzbekistanBRI_UJOLS2018.pdf

that was strongly opposed by China, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Without a functioning military arm, the SCO's avowed goals of combating extremism, terrorism and separatism remain essentially unsupported. The SCO's Regional Counter-Terrorism Structure (RCTS) lacks necessary resources and serves at best as a coordinating mechanism for the appropriate national authorities of the member states. Russia's establishment of rapid reaction forces on the basis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) that Russia leads can be seen as implicitly encroaching on the SCO's turf and diluting its original mandate.

At the same time, Russia does not help much in bringing out the SCO's developmental potential. Moscow cannot compete with Beijing in the sheer amount of investments that China has already supplied to the region. According to the Eurasian Development Bank, the volume of the Chinese accumulated investment in Kazakhstan is more than two times the volume of Russian investment in the country. The disparity between the two countries' investments is even more pronounced in the case of Uzbekistan. In the future, the investment gap separating Russia from China can only widen to Russia's detriment.

It is obvious that Russia has miscalculated its ability to manage the SCO and turn it into an instrument of control over the terms of China's entry into Central Asia. Rather than stalling the Chinese expansion, the SCO serves to promote it. Russia is unable to match the Chinese financial contributions and loses ground to China in the volume of bilateral trade it conducts with other states in the region. It seems reasonable to conclude that whatever new multilateral institutions may emerge in Central Asia in the near future they will all serve Beijing's plans and visions of a desired regional order.

Conclusion

The Sino-Russian relations demonstrate an uneven pattern of development. In spite of all the pressure that the Trump foreign and foreign economic policies have brought to bear on both Russia and China, the two countries proved incapable of resolving most serious contradictions that plague their ostensibly amicable relationship. This relates not only to Sino-Russian jockeying for influence in Central Asia and elsewhere but also to their lack of coordination of foreign policies and the

reluctance to support each other's pet projects, such as Russia's incorporation of Crimea or PRC's designs on South China Sea.

Bilateral success stories and accomplishments notwithstanding, Russia could not succeed in making China change its trade policies or preferences with regard to Russia's exports. Given the actual structure of trade, where mineral products constitute 76 percent of all Russian exports (68 percent in 2017), while the share of equipment went down from 6-7 percent in 2017 to slightly more than 3 percent in 2018, Russia's position as a resource appendage for China is getting entrenched. Meanwhile, near 58 percent of China's exports to Russia are taken by machinery, vehicles, industrial and transport equipment.¹⁶⁾ This structure of bilateral trade is well known to the scholars of dependency theory and cannot but be characterized as neocolonial in nature.

With regards to Sino-Russian interaction in the greater Eurasia region, situation is more complex. Both the impact of China's Belt and Road Initiative and the impact of the EAEU on regional developments in Central Eurasia is manifold and non-trivial. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, although it has somewhat faded in importance with China refocusing on BRI since 2015, is still a relevant actor and may play a useful coordinating role for multilateral implementation of China-led initiatives. In spite of many a criticism levied against it, the SCO did help in resolution of China's long-standing border disputes with Russia and the Central Asian states. In just a few years, it had developed a geopolitical presence attractive enough to entice membership inquiries from India, Pakistan, Iran, and Turkey. The SCO's creation and evolution allowed advancing Russian-Chinese relations beyond mere bilateralism, and in the process brought them to a qualitatively new level of "comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction," a de facto political and economic, although not military, alliance. The SCO served as a model for Russia's vision of Greater Eurasia that enables both China's peaceful rise and Russia's transitioning into a postimperial phase of development. Productive interaction between the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and the Chinese BRI is a key part of the model.

16) Torgovlia mezhdru Rossiei I Kitaem v 2018 g. Vneshniaya torgovlia Rossii, 9 February 2019, <https://russian-trade.com/reports-and-reviews/2019-02/torgovlya-mezhdru-rossiey-i-kitaem-v-2018-g/>

Sino-Russian relations still have to go some ways to overcome mistrust and put common interests above the narrowly construed national priorities. If lingering tensions and mistrust will get subdued, the central Eurasia stands a chance to evolve into a new political and economic hub of global significance. However, for this to happen, both Russia and China should change. The Russian leadership must focus on political and economic reforms to overcome the resource capitalism pattern of development that the current elite has been pursuing. China must resolve its current dispute with the United States of America and substantially raise the domestic market capacity by growing the middle class and improving the living conditions of its working population. Even more importantly, it must democratize to prove itself a reliable international partner. On both the Russian and the Chinese sides, the tasks are daunting. And yet, the payback is huge: these tasks' successful resolution will reverberate globally and well beyond the so-called Trump era of the world politics.

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