

IMPLICATIONS OF CHINA'S RISE FOR RUSSIA IN THE CONTEXT OF EAST-WEST TENSIONS: A PARTNER IN AN ANTI-WESTERN AGENDA OR A THREAT FOR MOSCOW'S REGIONAL INFLUENCE?

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<p>Article history:</p> <p><i>Received:</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">8 November 2016</p> <p><i>Accepted:</i></p> <p style="text-align: right;">1 February 2017</p>	<p>Abstract: This article examines the widely held presumption that in the light of the recent uptick in tension between Russia and the West, a Russian-Chinese alliance has emerged to challenge the United States and its allies. The essay will inquire whether Beijing can truly be regarded as a Russian ally or whether China's rise rather represents a threat to vested Russian interests. Analysis of Sino-Russian policy on a global level will be followed by an examination of their interplay on a more regional level, particularly in Central Asia.</p>
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Introduction

The East Asian and Central Asian regional subsystems are in economic and security terms heavily defined by relations between Russia, China and the United States. It is their interplay that will inevitably shape the order of the region. Smaller players try to navigate within this triangle according to their interests. In the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis and the dramatic cool-down of its relations with the West, Russia has formulated an anti-Western vision in its foreign policy that includes a shift to Asia. China seems to be the obvious partner in pursuing this new Russian policy orientation. At the very same time, China's rise in economic but also in military terms preoccupies world politics for quite some time as this new powerhouse has the potential to fundamentally reshape the way the international system works. This paper will thus

inquire what China's rise means for Russia. Has Moscow gained a powerful ally in challenging the West or is the new China more of a threat to Moscow's traction over the economic and security subsystem in East and Central Asia?

The Global Level

At first, the Russo-Chinese relationship on the global level requires brief consideration as it is here that the common theme of opposing Western interventionism should be mostly visible. And indeed, in the voting patterns in the United Nations Security Council, a certain commonality can be observed – in recent years especially on Syria¹ or when both countries

¹ United Nations. Security Council – Veto List. Mode of Access: <http://research.un.org/en/docs/sc/quick>

decided to abstain from a Security Council vote on Resolution 1973 on the situation in Libya after the Arab Spring. Furthermore, China and Russia are both strongly opposing colour revolutions and US missile defence plans.² All these common features give strong impetus to the notion of multi-polarity that Russia has been pushing for some time. Leaving aside the fact that China has refused to enter into any alliances since the end of the 1960 Sino-Soviet treaty,³ together, the two powers could credibly oppose – even block US unilateralism and amass enough political, economic and military capability to even outshine Washington. In this field, however, there is a difference in interpretation between Beijing and Moscow. While Russia is pursuing multi-polarity as a tool to actively push back against US worldwide influence, China perceives the model more cooperatively with a clear stress on peaceful conflict settlement. At the same time, China does not only see the defining poles in the concept as represented by the US, China and Russia, but Beijing also includes the European Union and the Third World.⁴ Thus, the mentioned commonalities have their limits. This can be observed most notably in the cases of the Georgian war of 2008 and the Russian intervention in Crimea 5 years later. In both cases, not only China but many other “traditional” Russian allies withheld support for actions that Russia considered defensive.⁵ It seems

obvious that in these cases, Russia deliberately breached sovereignty of neighbouring states in what it perceived as necessary defence while many international actors took it as a sign of a resurgent and assertive Russian policy. Thus, one can conclude that Russia and China do cooperate fruitfully on the international stage, as long as their direct and vital interest is not concerned in a way that would require the breach of the common theme of sovereignty. China does thus not fully subscribe to Russia’s view of the world, but its behaviour is predictable. Importantly, there is a danger for Russia to be substantially overshadowed by China on the global stage as the latter becomes a global power. While for now, Russia is certainly as the more active partner of the two when it comes to vocally articulating anti-Western positions, it could soon be China that takes the de facto lead as its resources outshine Russia’s so obviously. In such an asymmetrical situation, the junior role in the relationship is bound to be a source of further discomfort for Moscow.

The East Asia and Central Asia Regional Subsystems

Having considered the global implications of China’s rise for Russia, this chapter will focus on what this new constellation means in the context of the regional subsystem of Central Asia or – more broadly – East Asia.

First, China’s rise offers the potential to practically eliminate potential US influence in Central Asia, as both Beijing and Moscow

² Duchâtel, Mathieu. China and Russia: Towards an Alliance Treaty? In: *China and Russia. Gaming the West?* European Council on Foreign Relations, 02 November 2016, p. 3. Mode of Access: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_%28002%29.pdf

³ Godement, Francois. Introduction. In: *China and Russia. Gaming the West?* European Council on Foreign Relations, 02 November 2016, p. 2. Mode of Access: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_%28002%29.pdf

⁴ Hughes, Christopher. Nationalism and Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: implications for Southeast Asia // *The Pacific Review*, 2005, No. 18(1), pp. 132-133.

⁵ See: Blank, Stephen J. Georgia: The War Russia Lost // *Military Review*. Nov-Dec 2008, pp. 42-45; Bowker, Mike. The War in Georgia and the Western Response // *Central Asian Survey*, 2011,

No. 30(2), pp. 198, 208; King, Charles. The Five-Day War. Managing Moscow After the Georgia Crisis // *Foreign Affairs*, 01 November 2008. Mode of Access: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/2008-11-01/five-day-war>; Redman, Nicholas. Russia’s Breaking Point // *Survival*, 2014, No. 56(2), p. 243; Vieira, Guedes; Vysotskaya, Alena. Ukraine’s Crisis and Russia’s Closest Allies: A Reinforced Intra-Alliance Security Dilemma at Work // *The International Spectator*, 2014, No. 49(4), pp. 97-111; Gabuev, Alexander. A “Soft Alliance”? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis / European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2015, p. 7. Mode of Access: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

both seek this goal with particular zeal.⁶ Their cooperation already helped remove US bases from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁷ Eying towards Mackinder's heartland theory, it has been suggested that a Russian-Chinese landmass alliance could balance US domination at sea.⁸ In East Asia, however, the United States will continue to be present as a regional power as a whole number of states are close US allies and rely on US support. Second, Russia stands to gain from enhanced cooperation in regional fora in which China plays an important role like ASEAN or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Common interests include the fight against terrorism, separatism, drug-trafficking and other issues.⁹ Also, China's rise has the paradoxical benefits of enhancing Russia's standing in the region as it is the main balancing power to Beijing. Especially in Moscow's relations with smaller Asian states is this trend visible.¹⁰ Another crucially important

point is that China's economic rise could serve as an important capital source for cooperatively developing the Russian Far East in economic terms.¹¹ As Russia is one of the crucial main players in the Arctic region that is to become hugely important for a trading nation like China, Moscow has a number of good cards to play.

However, China's rise in the regional context also offers a few problematic implications from Moscow's point of view. The first is the historic instability that arises when great powers rise to (potentially) replace or complement existing ones. This has been the case with Spain vs. Great Britain in the 17th and 18th century, the rising France in the 17th and 18th century, German-French competition culminating in 1870 or even the German-British rivalry around 1900. This by no means makes some sort of conflict with the United States inevitable. However, it cannot be denied that tensions are rising within the region on in a number of ways, from contested islands and resources, to historical problems between Japan and China or the complex issue of Taiwan. Accidental escalation and Sino-American conflict cannot be in Russia's interest. This would bind Chinese capital and, among other things, would hinder its economic growth from which Russia hopes to profit in the role of an energy supplier. In such a conflict scenario, Russia might indeed stand to gain some status in Central Asia in the short-term. In the mid- to long-term, however, a significant bloodletting of such an economically and politically important partner would without a doubt harm Moscow's interests.¹²

A second problematic notion is that Russia could soon find itself in a quite awkward position – working towards trust and

⁶ See: Troitskiy, Mikhail. A Russian Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In: *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. May 2007, SIPRI Policy Paper, No. 17, p. 37. Mode of Access: http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=338; 李兴、(俄)阿·沃斯克列先斯基编著:《亚欧中心跨区域发展体制机制研究》,北京:九州出版社,2016年。[А.Д. Воскресенский, Ли Син (ред.) Механизмы трансрегионального развития Центральной Евразии: исследование и прогнозы / Под ред. Ли Сина и А.Д.Воскресенского. Пекин: Цзючжоу Пресс, 2016. 495 с. (на китайском языке)].

⁷ Gabuev, Alexander. A "Soft Alliance"? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis / European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2015, p. 7. Mode of Access: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

⁸ Godement, Francois. Introduction. In: *China and Russia. Gaming the West?* / European Council on Foreign Relations, 02 November 2016, p. 2. Mode of Access: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_%28002%29.pdf.

⁹ Troitskiy, Mikhail. A Russian Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In: *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. May 2007, SIPRI Policy Paper, No. 17, p. 38. Mode of Access: http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=338

¹⁰ Rangsimaporn, Paradorn. Russian Perceptions and Policies in a Multipolar East Asia under

Yeltsin and Putin // *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, 2009, No. 9, pp. 207-244.

¹¹ Koldunova, Ekaterina and Das Kundu, Nivedita. Russia's Role in the SCO and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities / Valdai Discussion Club, 15 January 2015, p. 43. Mode of Access: http://valdaiclub.com/publications/reports/russia_s_role_in_the_sco_and_central_asia_challenges_and_opportunities/

¹² Gabuev, Alexander. A "Soft Alliance"? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis / European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2015, p. 7. Mode of Access: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

a sustainably good relationship with China while at the same time appearing as a “strategic competitor” for China through Moscow’s reinvigorated ties with partners like Vietnam, to whom Moscow has recently delivered substantial amounts of weaponry.¹³

In Central Asia itself, China’s interests are mainly informed by its relatively new role as economic powerhouse and rising star in world politics. It would like to become a major economic player in the energy-rich Central Asian region and use the SCO to do so.¹⁴ Therefore, China continuously pushes for an economic compartment within the SCO¹⁵ – which Russia opposes in order to preserve its traditional dominance.¹⁶ China would like the SCO to become a fully-fledged and deeper integrated regional organisation covering a number of key areas that go beyond security. This new aspect of Chinese regional influence has negative implications for Moscow, as it views the region as its historic and legitimate sphere of influence – symbolised through numerous arrangements like the CSTO for military cooperation or the EEU for economic questions.¹⁷ Therefore, it is Russia’s goal to limit

China’s influence in Central Asia, while reaping the benefits of closer cooperation where it sees fit, for example in obtaining financial resources in the absence of Western credit.¹⁸ Also, Russia would like to become China’s primary supplier of energy which is why China’s drive to Central Asia might diversify Beijing’s supply options – again, to the detriment of Moscow.¹⁹ At the same time, it is clear that European markets remain irreplaceable for Russia even in the medium term, as Gazprom currently sells 150 bcm annually to Europe and only 1 bcm to China.²⁰ An incident in 2011, when China insisted on changing an already signed agreement to gain a price reduction for oil delivered via the Skovorodino-Mohe pipeline, furthermore sets a troubling precedent.²¹

Conclusion

The guiding question of this short essay is whether a rising China represents an ally for Moscow in pursuing an anti-Western agenda or if Beijing is rather a threat to Moscow’s influence in Central and East Asia. It turns out that the answer to both alternatives is yes, with some reservations. On the global stage, Russia can usually count on China when it comes to opposing what both perceive as Western unilateralism and interventionism. However, given possible precedents for its own regions with separatist tendencies, China does not

¹³ Sheldon-Duplaix, Alexandre. Russia’s Military Strategy: China’s Partner, Model, or Competitor? In: *China and Russia. Gaming the West?* / European Council on Foreign Relations, 02 November 2016, p. 6. Mode of Access: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_%28002%29.pdf

¹⁴ Song, Weiqing. Interests, Power and China’s Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) // *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2014, No. 23(85), pp. 88, 95.

¹⁵ Koldunova, Ekaterina; Das Kundu, Nivedita. Russia’s Role in the SCO and Central Asia: Challenges and Opportunities / Valdai Discussion Club, 15 January 2015, pp. 34, 41. Mode of Access: http://valdaiclub.com/publications/reports/russia_s_role_in_the_sco_and_central_asia_challenges_and_opportunities/

¹⁶ Troitskiy, Mikhail. A Russian Perspective on the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In: *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization*. May 2007, SIPRI Policy Paper, No. 17, pp. 34, 42. Mode of Access: http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=338

¹⁷ Song, Weiqing. Interests, Power and China’s Difficult Game in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) // *Journal of Contemporary China*, 2014, No. 23(85), pp. 93; Gabuev,

Alexander. A “Soft Alliance”? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis / European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2015, p. 7. Mode of Access: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

¹⁸ Gabuev, Alexander. A “Soft Alliance”? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis / European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2015, p. 5. Mode of Access: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

¹⁹ Brenton, Sir Tony. Russia and China: An Axis of Insecurity // *Asian Affairs*, 2013, No. 44(2), p. 245.

²⁰ Gabuev, Alexander. A “Soft Alliance”? Russia-China Relations after the Ukraine Crisis / European Council on Foreign Relations, 10 February 2015, p. 5. Mode of Access: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR126_-_A_Soft_Alliance_Russia-China_Relations_After_the_Ukraine_Crisis.pdf

²¹ Ibid.

condone Russia's support for some separatist groups in what Moscow perceives as its sphere of influence, thus making the "bloc" less monolithic. However, the common anti-Western project is most visible in Central and East Asia where both countries are working together to keep the United States at a distance. However, China's growing power in all spheres clearly represents a threat to Russia's regional interests. China aims to become much more influential in Central Asia, especially in the economic sphere, thus threatening Russia's historic dominance there. One of the biggest problems for Russia in both the global and the regional theatre is that China will more and more overshadow Moscow in many ways. While it might well be that Russia and China find a way forward in sharing influence and responsibility in contested areas, for Russia, however, being the obvious number two in a key relationship is to come with negative repercussions in status but also material terms.²² All this is not to deny that China's rise offers massive economic opportunities for Russia itself as Beijing's hunger for energy resources is ever-growing and common projects offer benefits for both sides. It thus seems most likely that Russia will try to reap as many economic benefits as possible from its relationship with China and thus keep up economically, while attempting to defend the status-quo in terms of influence as long as possible and feasible. Whether this strategy will prove successful or if an over-reliance on Beijing will further jeopardise Russia's position remains to be seen.

Much of the above stands in stark contrast to the prevalent view of a common axis between the two countries.²³ Chinese commentators have accordingly labelled the Sino-Russian relationship as "friendly neutrality" or "flexible partnership."²⁴ As the analysis above has

shown, a rising China represents an opportunity for, as well as a threat to Russia's interests. The relationship is mostly instrumental and interest-based instead of underpinned by deep ties that might signify true friendship. Seen from Moscow, the relationship could thus be described as a "welcome challenge" – an oxymoron to represent its contradictory nature.

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²² Ibid. P. 8.

²³ For a quite striking use of the term, see: Kaylan, Melik; Schoen, Douglas. *The Russia-China Axis: The New Cold War and America's Crisis of Leadership*. New York: Encounter Publishing.

²⁴ Duchâtel, Mathieu. *China and Russia: Towards an Alliance Treaty?* In: *China and Russia. Gaming the West?* European Council on Foreign Relations, 02 November 2016, p. 4. Mode of Access: http://ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_%28002%29.pdf

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ПОСЛЕДСТВИЯ УСИЛЕНИЯ РОЛИ КИТАЯ ДЛЯ РОССИИ В КОНТЕКСТЕ НАПРЯЖЕННОСТИ ОТНОШЕНИЙ МЕЖДУ ВОСТОКОМ И ЗАПАДОМ: ПАРТНЁР В АНТИЗАПАДНОЙ КОАЛИЦИИ ИЛИ УГРОЗА РЕГИОНАЛЬНОМУ ВЛИЯНИЮ МОСКВЫ?

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<p>Информация о статье: <i>Поступила в редакцию:</i> 8 ноября 2016 <i>Принята к печати:</i> 1 февраля 2017</p>	<p>Аннотация: В данной статье критически анализируется распространенное мнение о том, что в свете недавнего обострения отношения между Россией и Западом, возможное создание российско-китайского альянса могло бы выступить в качестве противовеса США и их союзникам. В работе рассматривается вопрос: «Можно ли в действительности рассматривать Китай как союзника России, или расцвет Китая скорее представляет собой угрозу интересам России?» Анализ китайско-российской политики на глобальном уровне дополнен исследованием в области взаимодействия обеих стран на региональном уровне, в особенности в Центральной Азии.</p>
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<p>Ключевые слова: Россия, Китай, Центральная Азия, Запад, США</p>	

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