

STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA: IMPORTANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In the light of the present political crisis in Ukraine and Russia's involvement in it, particularly the Ukrainian Civil war and Crimea annexation, Asia is becoming more and more important for Russia. The West¹ has become hostile towards Russia; it is implementing economic sanctions and other means of political and economic pressure such as imposing restrictions on entering the European Union and the USA for some Russian politicians and businessmen. Among all, the main Asian partner for Russia is China. This research paper focuses on current relations between Russia and China, outlining the reasons for establishing a strategic partnership between these two countries in the contemporary context and explaining why those bilateral relations are sustainable in the future.

SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

For the past few decades we have seen a significant rise of Chinese economic and political strength. China has become a "major hub of the global economy"² due to its rapid economic growth. It also proves to be a leader in the Asian regional subsystem: it has not only economic strength, but also political power and diversified economic and political relationships with

world's "core" countries, including Europe, the United States and Russia. These factors make China stand out against other Asian regional powers.

China is rising to dominate Asia in both political and economic sense and has already reached the second position in the world in terms of GDP, with only the United States surpassing it. While some analysts predict that China will soon pass ahead of the United States in economic terms, the majority of scholars are skeptical about it because much depends on the methods of calculation and the choice of critical measures. Nevertheless, Chinese economic strength is indisputable and it is one of the strongest players on the international arena economic-wise.

Some experts say that the power dynamics in the world are reshuffling and the source of influence is shifting from the West to the East. According to professor of Politics and International Affairs at Princeton University G. J. Ikenberry, "American era is coming to an end, as the Western-oriented world order is replaced by one increasingly dominated by the East"³ with China to serve as the main source of Asian dominance.

Considering Russia, it has shown a high degree of stability despite a sharp decrease in oil prices – an economic determinant which is an integral part of the Russian economy – and the ability to withstand economic and political pressure coming from the outside. Russian

¹ Term "The West" in this research paper refers particularly to the United States and the European Union.

² Putin, Vladimir. Russia and the Changing World // *Sputniknews*, February 27, 2012. Mode of access: <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20120227/171547818.html>.

³ Ikenberry, John G. The Rise of China and the Future of the West // *Foreign Affairs*, February, 2008. Mode of access: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>.

Ruble was very volatile in the wake of the sharp decrease in oil prices and economic sanctions imposed on Russia in response to the Ukrainian crisis. Russian Ruble depreciated dramatically but later it stabilized on acceptable level contrary to more pessimistic expectations of most of the Russian and foreign analysts.

Partnership between Russia and China – two global powers – is a promising alliance which shares the same interests, and is able to withstand global threats and shape the existing world order. This is the main reason to maintain and develop Sino-Russian relations further.

Two areas where Russia and China especially need each other are energy and global governance. Energy cooperation is one of the most valuable assets that Russia can offer to China in exchange for further mutually beneficial political and economic cooperation. Russia is planning to increase its energy presence in Asia. According to “*Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030*”, published in 2010, Russia is planning to increase oil exports to the Asia-Pacific region from 8 to 22-25 per cent and natural gas from zero to 20 per cent up to 2030.⁴ In the light of the recent crisis in Ukraine with all its negative consequences for Russia, Russian energy presence in East Asia, particularly in China, may even exceed the aforementioned numbers.

Considering global governance, the both countries seek political cooperation in order to maintain equitable and promote a multipolar world order, and to withstand global threats. In April 1997 Moscow and Beijing adopted the “*Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order*”.⁵ The aim of this document was to promote sovereignty and the equality of all members in the international community. Also, Beijing is interested in having a protected and peaceful northern border with Russia, “so that

it can concentrate its military resources and planning on other strategic theaters, above all in the Western Pacific.”⁶

FOREIGN FACTORS

Nowadays, it is important to think trilaterally: the United States, Russia and China are powerful players on the international arena with complex system of interrelations. The United States conducts powerful and comprehensive foreign policy affecting almost every country in the world. With its influence on the East Asian countries – to larger extent on Japan and South Korea and to less extent on Vietnam and Philippines – along with the local tensions between China and its aforementioned regional neighbors, there is a threat for China to end up in the middle of a “geopolitical encirclement” if the relationships between Russia and China will deteriorate. In this case the United States will have more leverage to influence China’s economic and political decisions.

Besides, energy security of China will be under threat because the sea routes through which China imports energy resources are controlled by the countries that can be easily influenced by the United States, particularly Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Such a scenario is unacceptable for China which increases the importance of the bilateral partnership with Russia from the Chinese perspective.

Russia also becomes an important strategic ally of China due to its ability to conduct aggressive foreign policy towards the West, a foreign policy that China is not willing to conduct due to various reasons. Among those reasons are strong economic ties with the West, particularly with the United States and adherence of China to less aggressive and more moderate foreign policy.

The both countries can cooperate to balance regional power dynamics and to contain the United States with its extensive foreign policy fueled by their ambitions of a global hegemon, which corresponds to the interests of the

⁴ Energy Strategy of Russia for the Period up to 2030. Official Document. Mode of access: [http://www.energystrategy.ru/projects/docs/ES-2030_\(Eng\).pdf](http://www.energystrategy.ru/projects/docs/ES-2030_(Eng).pdf).

⁵ Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order, 1997, Moscow. Original document retrieved from the official web page of the United Nations. Mode of access: <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-153.htm>.

⁶ Lukin, Artyom. Why the Russian Far East Is So Important for China // *The World Post*, April 16, 2015. Mode of access: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/artiom-lukin/russian-far-east-china_b_6452618.html.

both countries. Close cooperation between Russia and China is important to maintain an equitable world order and promote multipolarity in the world.

Economic cooperation and further integration is another important part in Sino-Russian relations. "...colossal potential for business cooperation – a chance to catch the Chinese wind in the sails of our economy",⁷ Putin writes in his article "*Russia and the Changing World*". Dmitri Trenin, the director of Moscow Carnegie Center, suggests that "while shared global and regional interests are important to the Sino-Russian relationship, they are not the only glue: trade and investment play a key role."⁸ According to statistics published by General Administration of Customs of China on the 10th of January 2014, Russia is the 10th largest trading partner of China, with trade volume amounting to US \$89.21 billion.⁹ Trade volume in 2014 was the US \$95.3 and in 2015 it is expected that trade volume may reach US \$100 billion.¹⁰ Economic cooperation and integration is an integral part of Sino-Russian relations.

Economic collaboration with China is also a great opportunity to develop the economy of the Russian Far East and Siberia, and to integrate further those regions with other better developed regions of the country. Financing from China helps to develop the infrastructure of the remote Far Eastern regions. Therefore this area attracts more Russians to settle, both from central and provincial areas. Economic activity in these areas increases and generates income for the federal budget.

⁷ Putin, Vladimir. *Russia and the Changing World // Sputniknews*, February 27, 2012. Mode of access: <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20120227/171547818.html>.

⁸ Trenin, Dmitri. *True Partners? How Russia and China See Each Other / Centre for European Reform*. Official Site. February 2012. Mode of access: <https://www.cer.org.uk/publications/archive/report/2012/true-partners-how-russia-and-china-see-each-other>.

⁹ General Administration of Customs of China. Official Site. Mode of access: <http://english.customs.gov.cn>.

¹⁰ *China-Russia Partnership Mature & Stable, Not Targeting 'Third Parties' – FM Wang Yi // Russia Today*, March 9, 2015. Mode of access: <http://rt.com/news/238857-china-russia-mature-partnership/>

However, there are some issues with possible Chinese active presence in Russian Far East. Chinese investments can pose a threat to Russian national economic security, with more and more Chinese nationals populating these regions. Inability to assimilate them in Russia may lead to serious territorial tensions in a few decades: the Chinese settlers might attempt to hold referendums to secede and join the PRC, possibly justifying their claims with the Crimean precedent. Russia can end up being in conflict with one of its most important strategic allies. But, if it is the case, it is a long-term perspective. In the first instance, China needs to develop its North-Western part, which is characterized by low density of population amounting to several million people comparing to almost 1.3 billion population in the Eastern part of China (note, that the total population in China is 1.357 billion as of 2013),¹¹ so that Chinese territory will be more evenly populated before the issue of overpopulation of Chinese territory will become of a high concern. Along with Chinese policy of population control, this issue might never arise. However, it should be kept in mind.

SUSTAINABILITY OF SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

Bobo Lo, an expert in Sino-Russian relations, in his book "*Axis of Convenience*" suggests that the relationship between China and Russia has become closer because of the common selected interests without sharing the same values. This means that the long term sustainable partnership between these countries is impossible.¹² In the case of Russo-Ukrainian relations we have seen that sharing the same values and even possessing the same national identity did not prevent those countries from breaking up and having serious conflicts. As another example, Japan and the United States are close partners, yet having very different history and different values. Therefore, it is arguable that interests, not values, are the main determinants in building mutually beneficial sustainable strategic relations.

¹¹ National Bureau of Statistics of China. Official Site. Mode of access: <http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/>

¹² Lo, Bobo. *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, 2008. 300 p.

Furthermore, according to A. Voskressenski, the Dean of the School of Political Affairs and Professor of Comparative Politics and Asian Studies at MGIMO University, “In non-Western democracies that are building societies of this synthetic type, values are not always completely separated from interests.”¹³ Claiming that there are number of different determinants in Sino-Russian relations and suggesting that their relations are non-sustainable in long term due to different set of values seems incomprehensive, at least.

Also, Bobo Lo argues that China “recognizes that Russia can be a difficult, unreliable partner – and sometimes competitor – but also that it has no choice but to work with it.”¹⁴ This statement is quite arguable, however. Russia is – quite the opposite – reliable partner for China. Today Russia has serious tensions with the West and betraying China in any way will be a strategic failure for Russia. Moreover, relationships of Russia with the West have always been, to various extents, complex: there were booms and falls in those relations but some degree of tension always remained. The West always perceived Russia as a competitor and even as a potential threat, which has its own serious implications. The fact that NATO has been continuously expanding to the East and that the military potential of the organization is increasing recently suggests that there is a deep and long-lasting internal struggle between Russia and the West; and Russia views this process as a direct threat to national sovereignty. This fact makes Russia a reliable partner for China. Indeed the reliability of the both counterparts is one of the main reasons for establishing a trust-based strategic Sino-Russian relationships.

China and Russia have their own models of development, different from the Western ones. Ideas of Westernization and “democratic transition” are not necessarily ideal and

universal;¹⁵ and it may not fit Russia and China in the way it fits “core” Western countries. Simply copying the same models of development does not result in its successful implementation and does not guarantee the same outcomes those models produce in other parts of the world.

Moreover, both Russia and China view the promotion of human rights and democracy by the West on their territories as directed against their national sovereignty. National sovereignty is viewed as an overall control over the internal affairs by the government and exclusion of any external parties from any internal decision-making process.¹⁶ Perception of a concept of national sovereignty by Russia and China is very similar, which is another important common point between these countries. According to Allen Carlson, sovereignty “lies at the core contemporary China’s evolving relationship with the rest of the world.”¹⁷

SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS UNDER THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It is important to study the relationships between Russia and China under the historical context. At previous points in the history, namely from the 16th to the end of 20th century Russia was stronger than China economically, politically and militarily. And history has shown that the dominance of one country may lead to suppression of another even without direct military conflicts. Indeed, Russian Empire pressed China to sign unequal treaties in the 19th century, such as Treaty of Kulja, Treaty of Aigun, Treaty of Saint Petersburg and Li-Lobanov Treaty. They are appraised differently by different scholars but there is

¹³ Voskressenski, Alexei D. Alternative Votes: “Non-Western” Democracies and Asian Political Systems // *Global Asia*. October 18, 2013. Mode of access: <https://www.globalasia.org/issue/the-politics-of-trust/>.

¹⁴ Lo, Bobo. How the Chinese See Russia // IFRI. December, 2010. Mode of access: <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/mr6chinaloengdec2010.pdf>.

¹⁵ Voskressenski, Alexei D. Alternative Votes: “Non-Western” Democracies and Asian Political Systems // *Global Asia*. October 18, 2013. Mode of access: <https://www.globalasia.org/issue/the-politics-of-trust/>.

¹⁶ Зиглер Ч. Различия в восприятии суверенитета США, Китаем и Россией // *Сравнительная политика*. – 2012. – №1(7). – с.14. [Zigler, Charles. Razlichiiia v vospriiatii suvereniteta SShA, Kitaem i Rossiei (Contrasting U.S., Chinese and Russian perceptions of sovereignty) // *Sravnitel'naia politika*, 2012. No. 1(7), p.14].

¹⁷ Carlson, Allen. *Unifying China, Integrating with the World: Securing Chinese Sovereignty in the Reform Era*. Stanford University Press, 2005. p. 224.

a consensus that those treaties, to various extents, favored Russian Empire and, therefore, were unbeneficial for China.

Many things have changed since the 20th century. The power dynamics have shifted and the East gained such economic strength that it now has capabilities to challenge the West.¹⁸ China for the first time in the modern history dominates economically over Russia. It means that the future period of bilateral relationships should be studied under different dimension where Russia is economically weaker than China.

There were no open wars or even major military conflicts between Russia and China when Russia was stronger. And, perhaps, there would not be any direct military conflicts in the future when China is stronger. Both countries are strong militarily and politically (however, China is stronger economically) and they have very complex relations with countries in their neighboring region. Sino-Japanese, Sino-Korean, Sino-Vietnamese, and Russo-Ukrainian relations are graphical examples. Therefore, China and Russia are not interested in any kind of conflicts between each other as it may result in a number of negative consequences for the both countries.

However, China might use its economic superiority to influence Russia. The first such a case was 2014 negotiations over a gas deal¹⁹ when China got beneficial terms. Meanwhile, according to some experts, the terms of this gas deal are the best terms possible for Russia.²⁰ It means that China might have used its economic superiority to get even better terms, but it has chosen different model of interaction with Russia. If it is the case and China develops further the relationships with Russia based on mutual respect, then the future of Sino-Russian

relations is optimistic and cooperation will be efficient and productive.

Despite the fact that China and Russia recognize the importance of bilateral relations, today the West remains the main partner both for Russia and China. Trade volume of Russia with the European Union is about 8 times greater than trade volume between Russia and China. And probably neither Russia nor China will sacrifice their relationship with the West at any circumstances. Therefore, the scenario when Russia or China will be forced to choose sides – either bilateral partnership or partnership with the West – should be avoided. Otherwise, not only the loss of partnership will be a strategic failure for both Russia and China but also it might degenerate into more serious tensions in the Eurasian region.

It is also important to emphasize that Russo-Chinese strategic partnership does not pose threat to any other nation. These bilateral relationships are not substitutes, but rather complements to their individual relations with the West. Many respected scholars view Sino-Russian relations as a peaceful alliance and not as an alternative to the United States and Europe. According to Professor A. Voskressenski, “China and Russia are not working and are not planning to work in concert against any third country. This strategic cooperation vis-à-vis the outside world is aimed at present only at deterring any outside policy that might possibly hurt the national interests of the two countries.”²¹

As for now, relations with China are stable and are characterized by trust and respect. “Our nations have created a solid mechanism of bilateral ties, reinforced by legally binding documents. There is an unprecedentedly high level of trust between the leaders of our two countries. This enables us and the Chinese to act in the spirit of genuine partnership, rooted in pragmatism and respect for each other’s interests”²²

¹⁸ Ikenberry, John G. The Rise of China and the Future of the West // *Foreign Affairs*. February, 2008. Mode of access: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2008-01-01/rise-china-and-future-west>.

¹⁹ Russia and China Sign Framework Agreement on Gas Supplies Via Western Route // *Gazprom News*, November 9, 2014. Mode of access: <http://www.gazprom.com/press/news/2014/november/article205898/>.

²⁰ Downs, Erica. In China-Russia Gas Deal, Why China Wins More // *Fortune*. June 20, 2014. Mode of access: <http://fortune.com/2014/06/20/in-china-russia-gas-deal-why-china-wins-more>

²¹ Voskressenski, Alexei D. The Rise of China and Russo-Chinese Relations in the New Global Politics of Eastern Asia. Slavic-Eurasian Research Center. 2007, pp. 3-36.

²² Putin, Vladimir. Russia and the Changing World // *Sputniknews*, February 27, 2012. Mode of access: <http://sputniknews.com/analysis/20120227/171547818.html>.

Putin writes. And it is acknowledged both by Russian and Chinese political elites and expert communities.

CONCLUSION

All in all, the partnership between Russia and China is strategically important for the both counterparts. Further development of friendly relations is a natural process of *rapprochement* between two neighboring countries, which share a wide range of similar interests.

The relationships between Russia and China are sustainable in the future. Close coop-

eration is for the best interests of both sides. If Sino-Russian relationships deteriorate for some reason, then China will end up surrounded by unfriendly states – Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, Philippines and Russia, and its energy security will be under the threat; and Russia will lose its vital strategic ally and could possibly be increasingly isolated.

China and Russia have their own rich histories. Their identities are very different from those of the United States and Europe. Thus, Russia and China require different approaches of understanding each other, dealing with each other and evaluating their relations.

Strategic Partnership between Russia and China: Importance and Sustainability of Bilateral Relations

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Abstract: *In the light of the present political situation in the world, namely complex relations between Russia and the West, on the one hand, and existing tensions between China and some of its regional neighbors, on the other, strategic partnership between Russia and China is gaining more and more importance for the both countries. The article aims to outline the reasons for maintaining and developing further bilateral partnership and explains the sustainability of those relations in contemporary context.*

Key words: *China, Russia, Asia, Sino-Russian relations, energy, global governance, multipolarity.*

Стратегическое партнерство между Россией и Китаем: актуальность и устойчивость двустороннего партнерства

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Аннотация: *На сегодняшний день, учитывая всю сложность отношений России с Западом, а так же существующие противоречия между Китаем и некоторыми его региональными соседями, стратегическое партнерство между Россией и Китаем становится все более и более важным для обеих стран. В статье дается оценка двусторонним российско-китайским отношениям, перечисляются причины для развития и поддержания этих отношений, а так же объясняется их теперешняя устойчивость и даются долгосрочные прогнозы.*

Ключевые слова: *Китай, Россия, Азия, Российско-Китайские отношения, энергетика, глобальное управление, многополярность.*