

The Bear and the Dragon

Prospects of Sino-Russian alliance, rapprochement, rivalry and the things in between

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Acknowledgments

When I started writing this thesis, I had delusions of grandeur. With my fluent Russian and passable Chinese, I thought that I would've uncover something that the rest of the scientific community couldn't. Then the reality hit me. As I was nearing the end, I came to a realisation that maybe my master thesis wasn't as revolutionary as I hoped it would be. There are several reasons to that – dubious quality of Chinese academic articles, no access to Russian academic articles (apart from those I found on the free net), short amount of time, the demanding format of 30 credit thesis, some personal reasons, but most of all because I didn't put in as much work into the thesis as I would've ideally wanted to. But who does?

To say that I brought something new to the table would be a lie. I was disappointed but still happy to be done. The process of writing this paper was filled with stress, anguishes, feeling of guilt, and lack of sleep – pretty much the usual stuff. Therefore I want to thank all the people that made my life a little bit easier. First of all, I want to thank my professor, Rune Svarverud, for his mails and advice. Thank you for guilt tripping me Rune or I would've never finished this thesis in time. I also want to thank Øystein Tunsjø of FFI for giving me advice on the theoretical part. Lastly, I want to thank my parents, all my friends and my 同学 that've supported me throughout the semester.

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Summary

Discussion and debate about Sino-Russian relations is on the rise and attracts the attention of experts and policy-makers around the world. Russia and China are arguably two of the biggest players in the international system and their strategic partnership already possesses a great geopolitical weight. Through detailed investigation of this bilateral relationship over a variety of issue areas, I argue that the Sino-Russian rapprochement is externally driven rather than having its own structure and dynamics. More specifically, realism's balance of power theory and balance of threat theory provide a relatively convincing explanation regarding the driving factors of Sino-Russian rapprochement. The West is still a top priority for Russian and Chinese policymakers and will still be in the near future. But as China enters the 21st century apparently poised to become a new superpower, Russia will have little choice but to make China a priority in its own right, independent of Moscow's relationship with the West. But right now, the relationship of between China and Russia is largely driven by the dynamics of superpower polarity rather than having a structure of its own.

1. Introduction

Discussion and debate about Sino-Russian relations is on the rise and attracts the attention of experts and policy-makers around the world. Russia and China are arguably two of the biggest players in the international system and their strategic partnership already possesses a great geopolitical weight. China is on its meteoric rise through economic development, while Russia still is considered as a military superpower. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the two giants has been dramatically improving. At the 2011 summit of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has expressed that the frequent exchanges between the two countries' leaders have fostered a high level of political mutual trust and facilitated the development of bilateral ties.¹ The bilateral trade between two countries is also growing at an unprecedented pace. But a closer look at this partnership will reveal many diverging interests and differences.

¹ Xinhua 2011.11.08: Chinese, Russian PMs reach consensus on major issues
http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2011-11/08/c_122247772.htm

There are differing opinions among scholars on the nature and the future of Sino-Russian partnership. A bullish view on the subject would be a further rapprochement between the two countries, eventually leading to somewhat of an alliance.² A bearish view would write the partnership off as being “long on rhetoric and short on substance”.³ So where is this relationship going? This paper aims at addressing the above question in a comprehensive way.

On theoretical level, the paper tries to examine the following questions: Is Sino-Russian partnership largely determined by the dynamics of superpower polarity at the global level or does the partnership has its own structure and dynamics that either override or interact with those at the global level?

In the first part, the theoretical framework of analysis is developed. The framework seeks to take a closer look at what spurs alliances, balance, opportunities for cooperation, by looking how factors like states' intentions, trust, dependence, defensive and offensive, capabilities play into alliance building. My proposed framework sits in a realist interpretation of state behaviour and alliance building. According to Stephen Walt⁴, the changing distribution of power, or balance of threat is what that drives states to seek alignments with others. Therefore, only from a systemic perspective, can we identify the underlying dynamics of the Sino-Russian rapprochement in the post-Cold War era. The second part focuses on giving an insight into foreign policy modus operandi of Russia and China. In order to understand how Chinese leadership views the Sino-Russian partnership, it is important to understand how Russia fits into China's overall foreign policy framework and worldview and vice versa. With this chapter, I want to demonstrate that neither Russia nor China is originally interested in entering into a formal alliance. The third part focuses on the formulation of current state of Sino-Russian relations, focusing on current state of energy, economic, military and foreign policy cooperation. Through this chapter, I want to illustrate and underline that the rapprochement is not driven by internal, or bilateral factors, but rather by external

² Li 2007

³ Lo 2008

⁴ Walt 1987

dynamics of superpower polarity. In the final conclusion section, I will touch upon the question of where the Sino-Russian relation is heading in the foreseeable future.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Alliance formation

From 1939 to the present, leading theorists and policymakers have continued to view the world from a realist point of view. Realist school of thought puts its emphasis on interests, rather than ideology, seeking peace through strength and recognition of that Great Powers can coexist despite their opposing values and beliefs. As argued by Robert Keohane, the fact that Realism offers something of a manual for maximizing the interest of a state in a hostile environment explains in part why it still remains “the central tradition in the study of world politics”⁵.

The unifying theme around which all realists base their views on is centred on the assumption that world politics unfold in an international anarchy, or a system with no overarching authority. This means that states are the paramount actors and because the one’s survival cannot be guaranteed under anarchy, the first priority for state leaders is to ensure continued existence of their state.⁶ In other words, “national interest is the final arbiter in judging foreign policy”⁷.

Because states operate in anarchical environment and because all states must pursue their own national interests, other countries and governments can never be completely relied upon. This brings us to another important concept of realist thinking, the self-help principle. This principle states that each state is responsible for ensuring their well-being and survival. In order to do that, states can augment their power capabilities. Smaller states or states with relative disadvantage in power capabilities, thus engage in what is called the balance of power. Most common definition of the balance of power holds that smaller states should enter into an alliance to counter a threat from a larger state or hegemony. The purpose of the

⁵ Keohane 1989: 36

⁶ Dunne & Schmidt 2004: 164

⁷ Jackson & Sørensen 2002: 68

balance of power is to attain a state of equilibrium where no one state or alliance of states is able to dominate the other.

Kenneth Waltz, a major contributor to the development of the theory, expressed in his book, *"Theory of International Politics"* that *"if there is any distinctively political theory of international politics, balance-of-power theory is it."* In international politics overwhelming power repels and leads others to balance against it. Waltz's point of departure stems from his view of distribution of power in the international system, as a key variable to understanding important international outcomes such as war, peace, alliances and the balance of power. According to the logic outlined above, there are several goals instrumental to preventing hegemony. One is to maintain the independence of other states in the system; another is to maintain power equilibrium through combination of individual state capabilities and aggregation of state capabilities in coalitions.⁸ This in turn leads to possible balancing formations against the potential hegemon.

Extending this logic to China and Russia, purely from theoretical point of view and acknowledging U.S.A as the current hegemon, both countries should've engaged in a balancing alliance against the latter. This has not yet happened. On the other side, since the end of the Cold-War and emergence of U.S.A as the sole superpower, none of the other states have engaged in overt counterbalancing alliances against the hegemon, mainly because America never showed aggressive intentions toward them. Empirically speaking, one can say that states only engage in balancing activities against those who they perceive as a threat – a core argument of the balance of threat theory proposed by Stephen Walt in his article titled *"Alliance Formation and Balance of Power"*.

Instead of looking at alliances simply as mechanisms to balance power in an international system, Walt⁹ sees alliances arising as a response to a "threat". This would mean that a state's alliance behaviour is determined not by the state's

⁸ Paul, Wirtz & Fortmann 2004: 32

⁹ Walt 1987: 17-49

power capacity but rather by the degree of threat they perceive from other states. Walt identifies four criteria states use to evaluate the threat posed by another state: its aggregate strength (size, population, and economic capabilities), its geographical proximity, its offensive capabilities, and its offensive intentions. Walt argues that the more other states view a rising state as possessing these qualities, the more likely they are to view it as a threat and balance against it.

Although not viewing China as an immediate military threat, Russian leaders are nonetheless wary of the rising China. After analyzing several Russian and Chinese scholarly articles, one can discern a threat perception gap existing in both countries. In general, the prevalence of “*China threat*” theory is much more discussed in Russian academic articles, with the “*Russia threat*” almost non-existent among Chinese counterparts.

In Chinese academic discourse, although still being seen as a “*pole*”(极), Russia is no longer a superpower on equal footing with United States.¹⁰ The strategic distrust towards USA, is today of much greater concern for Chinese leaders than Russia. This was underlined in a monograph by Lieberthal & Wang, which concluded that “U.S. - China strategic distrust is growing” and “is potentially very corrosive”¹¹.

In Russia, China’s role as a competitor is much more prevalent. For example, Russians are much more wary of Chinese economic penetration especially in regards to Russian Far East (RFE).¹² A prominent Russian scholar, Alexander Lukin, wrote that the main obstacle to successful economic co-operation is “*the aggressive and selfish manner of China to uphold its trade interests, not always taking its partners’ interests into account*”.¹³ Extending Walt’s theory to the situation, one might argue that Russia seeing China as a threat chooses to engage in the act of balancing against China, thus effectively putting roadblocks to further rapprochement.

¹⁰ Ma 2005: 8

¹¹ Lieberthal & Wang 2012

¹² Lo 2008 (b): 4

¹³ Lukin 2007: 145

2.2 Is Sino-Russian alliance a possibility at all?

For realists like, John Mearsheimer¹⁴, prospects for cooperation are far too grim in general. This is because states are power maximizers either because it is the means by which they can ensure their security or because they want other values that power is believed to bring. The situation concerning alliances is akin to that of prisoners' dilemma in game theory, where the players are unsure of the intentions of their partners, so that both choose not to cooperate. The premise for such an outcome is that the pay-offs from non-cooperation should be higher than those from cooperation. Because many alliances are structured in a way that the states can expect more payoffs from cheating or exploiting the partner, it seems inevitable that those alliances will eventually fail. Unfolding this logic to its maximum extent, China will continue to maximize its power in Asia, pushing it inevitably to the edge of conflict with Russia. But is this scenario very likely?

Waltz would argue that an alliance between China and Russia is very much plausible as long as USA maintains its position as a global superpower. Walt on other hand will focus more on threat perceptions and how they develop over time. Thus altering of Russia's perception of China, or China's threat perception of USA can have an impact on relationship between the two countries.

3. Modus Operandi of Chinese and Russian Foreign Policies

3.1 Understanding Chinese Foreign Policies

3.1.1 Three basic concepts

In Chinese foreign policy debates, one can discern three key concepts: *shi*, identity and strategy. *Shi* (勢), a term that doesn't easily translate itself to English, refers to an "overall configuration of power and the direction or tendency of the process of change in which an actor acts and interacts."¹⁵ It in itself involves two other important concepts: discernible broad trends and international power arrangement, or as Chinese call it *guoji geju* (国际格局). This concept of *shi* is important in

¹⁴ Mearsheimer: 2001

¹⁵ Zhu 2010: 17

formulating China's middle-and-long term strategies and involves following questions: Who is the dominant power? Will the current configuration of power bring harm to China? Can it maintain the peace and stability of the world? What is its broad trend of development?¹⁶

The concept of Identity, in international relations, as defined by prominent scholar Alexander Wendt, is "a property of intentional actors that generates their motivational and behavioural disposition".¹⁷ Concept of strategy refers to how national interests can be achieved within the framework of the international system. For China, it is largely derived from its understanding of *shi*.

3.1.2 Shi of today

Because power in China is very concentrated amongst the elite leaders, their perception of the world greatly influences the basic orientation of China's foreign policy. During most of Mao Zedong's reign, the world was perceived as pro-capitalist and confrontational towards China. Therefore the whole country was mobilized as though the war was inevitable. Deng Xiaoping's perceptions were rather diverging. Because he viewed that war could be avoided and the peace and development were the *shi* of his time, he initiated the era of reform and opening up, otherwise known as *gaige kaifang* (改革开放).

The bombing of Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999 sparked a nation wide debate and reconsideration of the western world's intentions and especially the role of American leadership. One of the more prominent voices in the debate was He Fang (何方), former director of the Institute of Japan Studies at the China Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). He concluded that the world had entered into a new era of peace and development and that it was quite possible for China to avoid war and cooperate with the West instead.¹⁸

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.18

¹⁷ Wendt 1999: 225

¹⁸ He Fang, Lun Heping yu Fazhang Shidai, 2000

President Hu Jintao wrote the latest treatise on shi in 2009.¹⁹ It underlines five main points: (a) profound transformation; (b) a harmonious world; (c) common development; (d) shared responsibility and (e) active engagement. A more concise understanding of these main points is given by Party's main outlet, Renmin Ribao. In its foreign policy analysis²⁰, the article states that (a) *"as a world power, China's vision is necessarily global, and it does not pay undue attention to any one country"*; (b) *"President Hu Jintao no longer tries to hide China's growing economic weight in global affairs and the role it will have to play in order to sustain growth"*; (c) *"To nourish this huge economic engine, China has to import an ever-increasing amount of resources from different parts of the world"*; (d) *"it is essential for China to strive for a more stable and peaceful international environment"*; (e) *"China has made it clear that it wants to build a harmonious world"*.

3.1.3 China - a team player?

How does this transform itself to foreign policy? Is China willing to be a part of a strategic partnership or an alliance? China's is heavily involved in regional economic groups. Not only are they members, they have also expressed support of the major principles of multilateralism. The Chinese government has repeatedly stated that it advocates equality among members, open and free trade, investment and non-discriminatory treatment. This is a far-shot from China that viewed multilateralism as a tool of Western imperialism.

When it comes to security cooperation, China has been sceptical of entering or creating a single collective security organization, a la NATO, although there have been some changes to that view. In the Chinese IR community, one can discern an increasingly positive view on multilateral security arrangements, the main argument being that multilateral security arrangements could offer a mechanism to counter U.S.'s bilateral military alliances around the Asia-Pacific.

China is also a founding member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO),

¹⁹ Liaowang Xinwen Zhoukan 2009.11.24, 'Hu Jintao shidaiguan de wu da Zhongguo Zuzhang'

²⁰ Renmin Ribao 2006.12.30, China takes its place on international stage

with Russia and the Central Asian republics, member of the WTO and co-signee of numerous international treaties.

China is indeed a productive and active member of the international society. However, the degree of China's commitment to multilateral arrangements is constrained by its determination to maintain national sovereignty and its insistence of political flexibility. This points to a certain trait in China's attitude towards the multilateralism, which is of essentially instrumental nature.

3.2 Understanding Russian Foreign Policies

Since the collapse of Soviet Union, Russia has been on a quest to elaborate a new foreign policy vision, one that would help a weakened Great Power confronting uncertainties of the new world order.²¹ In the early 1990s, with Yeltsin as a president, the world saw Russia undertaking major reforms, taking gigantic steps towards the democratic West – an experiment that failed miserably. This led to emergence of foreign scepticism and blooming of nationalism. The move to the west was then replaced with a determination to restore Russia as an independent international world actor with interests distinct from the liberal capitalist west. The foundation of this vision was the idea that Russia is a Great Power and although weakened, it had interests all over the world and a responsibility to protect itself from uncertainties and dangers present. Russian political elite is therefore more inclined to play a role of a global power rather than integrating itself into regional blocks.²² As former foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov repeatedly have noted – Russia is not an appendage or supplier of natural resources to the world market, but a major power with its own distinct national interests.²³ This notion is also underlined by several official strategy documents.²⁴

While Russian foreign policy is global in scope, it is also at the same time constrained by domestic political considerations and internal rejuvenation. As Mankoff points

²¹ Mankoff 2009: 11

²² Trenin 2003: 80

²³ Mankoff 2009: 12

²⁴ Russian MFA 2008

out, “Russia’s foreign policy has emphasized tactical flexibility and caution as it seeks a breathing space to recover the country’s strength.”²⁵ As the country’s relative power is increasing, one can expect to see a much more expansionist and assertive Russia.

3.2.1 Russian foreign policies towards China

For Russia, China poses as an alternative to the west, whether as a successful model of economic development without political liberalization and/or as a pole it can align itself in opposition to the West. At the same time, as pointed out, because of Russian perception of itself as a distinctive element in the international society, it has maintained a wary partnership with China, based on economic cooperation and shared commitment to checking the American influence in the world. As a country uneasy with US-led western domination, for Russia, China, as an emerging world pole, is regarded as a natural partner in establishing a multi polar world order.

On the other side, there is a degree of sinophobia present among Russians. Many Russian observers are very sceptical of their country’s close association to Beijing. For example, former foreign minister Kozyrev argued against close ties because he feared that China, as a stronger power, would be able to bend Russia to its ends than vice versa. By getting closer to China, he was also afraid of estranging the West. Many in Russia share Kozyrev’s perspective, especially among the pro-Western Russians. For them, seeking closer cooperation with China meant distancing itself from the West and vice-versa. In this sense, Russian westernizers and their opponents share a common and rather dichotomous outlook on China as a counterweight to the West.

This dichotomous approach is somewhat a recent development in Russian foreign policy.²⁶ Despite rapprochement with the west, Yeltsin in the early 1990s sought also to improve ties with China. The situation changed around mid-90s, when NATO started its expansion towards east and US-led intervention in Balkans happened. The idea of a multipolar world became much more prominent in both countries’ rhetoric.

²⁵ Mankoff 2009: 39

²⁶ Ibid.: 199

In 1996, with downfall of Kozyrev and the ascendance of Primakov, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has been established.

For Russia, the partnership with China not only provided it means to successfully resist expansion of the West but also with an alternative concept of identity as a state lying in Eurasia rather than Europe.

4. Sino-Russian relations after Soviet's fall

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the relationship between two giants has been dramatically improving. Less than forty years ago, the two countries were considered as enemies on the verge of nuclear confrontation.²⁷ Today, the relationship has never been better. The bilateral trade between two countries is growing at an unprecedented pace. According to former Russian president, Medvedev, the trade volume between the two countries is expected to reach \$100 billion in the next three to five years.²⁸ This means almost a tripling from today.

This staggering improvement between the two giants have spurred a strain of alarmist thoughts concerning the strategic alliance of the authoritarian countries, seeing this rapprochement as an apparent confluence of values and interests as inimical to the West. Such alarmism seems very plausible, given the recent events and records of China and Russia's voting in the Security Council, but it is hardly justified.

Much of the dynamics of early Sino - Russian relations were driven by the fact that Beijing's relations with Moscow in the early years of the People's Republic were close, but China was undeniably the junior partner. With the years, the nature of Sino-Russian relations has changed. The increase in Chinese relative power has spurred a whole different set of dynamics, driven by China increasing self-confidence and Russian concerns about China's rise.

²⁷ Lo 2009:

²⁸ China Daily 2011.06.16: Sino-Russian trade opportunities abound
http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/business/2011-06/16/content_12716429.htm

Sino-Russian relations entered the limelight fully during the tenure of Vladimir Putin, when he became the president in 2000. The foundation though was very much laid by Gorbachev and built upon by Yeltsin.²⁹

Gorbachev was very much a very breakaway persona in the context of soviet leadership. Rather than relying on the military force, Gorbachev advocated "New Thinking" in the foreign policy and chose to exercise political influence through diplomatic relations and economic cooperation. As a part of this new strategy, he persistently pursued closer relations with China. In order to restore the connection, Gorbachev went on to resolve the splitting issues between two countries, including the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, deployment of Russian troops along China's northern border and support for Vietnamese military presence in Cambodia. His efforts resulted in the Chinese government agreeing to a summit meeting in Beijing in May 1989, the first since the Sino-Soviet split in the 1950s.

As the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, Russian president Boris Yeltsin initially embarked on pursuing an overt pro-west alignment. Although, of course, representatives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs talked about the importance of China, they always emphasized the priority of the West. Less cautious leaders, such as former Russian Prime Minister, Yegor Gaidar, even made no secret of his attitude toward China as a dangerous and useless neighbour.³⁰ Nevertheless, Chinese mission to Moscow succeeded in salvaging the gains of the previous decade in bilateral relations. The deputy foreign ministers of the two sides affirmed continuity with the bilateral agreements reached in 1989 and 1991, including the treaty on border demarcation, and agreed on the establishment of a joint economic, trade, and science and technology committee to improve relations.³¹ Li Peng and Boris Yeltsin reconfirmed these understandings a month later. As a result, the trade between the two countries exploded from 370 million to 6 billion USD by 1991.

The following years marked two milestone agreements: delimitating the 4,200-

²⁹ Menon 2011: 104

³⁰ Lukin 2003

³¹ Rozman 1997

kilometre eastern sector of the Russo-Chinese border, which entailed compromises on the ownership of islands in the Amur, Argun and Ussuri rivers and the delimitation agreement for the short, 55km stretch of border to the west, between Kazakhstan and Mongolia.³²

Despite some breakthroughs, liberal moves in Moscow undermined any realistic rapprochement between the two countries. The gradual shift started first in 1996-1998, with Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin forging a strategic partnership.³³ On his state visit to Beijing in 2000, Putin confirmed that Russia views China as a strategic partner. It is not until 2003 that one could observe a notable quickening of the pace of improvement. This emphasis continued notably under former president Medvedev, whose first overseas trip, apart from a brief stop in Kazakhstan, was to China.

Several barriers had slowed down the evolution of Sino-Russian relationship and the success of Sino-Russian rapprochement has been possible mainly because of the parties' ability to remove existing serious impediments. Ideological barriers fell in the post-Mao period. The two countries managed to work out most of the border disputes and stopped viewing each other as immediate military threats. By the mid-1990s shared strategic interests became the driving force for closer ties in which the arm sales played a major role.

Despite the considerable progress, it is also important to keep in mind many areas where China's and Russia's interests conflict. For every common ground, there are also divergent interests that hinder the cooperation reaching its full potential. Let us look at some of the overarching themes.

4.1 Military Cooperation

The amelioration of the relations between the countries was also spurred by the mutual disarmament and reduction in military deployments. The Russian disarmament was driven by the collapse of the Russian economy, while Chinese

³² Menon 2011: 105

³³ Bellaqua 2010: 14

wanted to save money and create a more modern force.³⁴ As a result, China and Russia stopped viewing each other as major military threats. A significant outcome of this was the resumption of arms sales, which occurred under Yeltsin. By the time he resigned, on the last day of 1999, Russia had become China's prime arms supplier. According to a study done by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in the period of 1991 – 2010, more than 90 per cent of China's imported major conventional weapons were supplied by Russia, while China accounted for nearly 40 per cent of Russian exports.³⁵ The arm sales between the two countries reached its pinnacle in 2005, which also interestingly marked the beginning of the decline in both Chinese interest in Russian military systems and Russian willingness to sell advanced technology to China. A possible explanation could stem from Chinese aspirations of producing the equipment themselves and unwillingness to buy out-of date technology from Russia. Russians on the other hand had about their own technology being someday used against it.

4.2 Energy cooperation

The fundamental reality driving China's energy strategy globally, and in its energy relationship with Russia in particular is its inability to provide sufficient quantities of energy to satisfy its own domestic needs. China is a net importer of oil and has in 2010 surpassed USA as the world's largest energy consumer.³⁶ Russia on other hand is world's largest producer of both crude oil and both largest producer and exporter of natural gas.³⁷

There have been a number of breakthroughs in the energy cooperation between two countries that have manifested themselves in a number of practical and tangible ways. In December 2009, Vladimir Putin opened a new oil export terminal that will serve as a key gateway for Russian energy exports to Asian markets. The terminal was built at Kozmino, near Nakhodka, as part of Russia's energy strategy of export

³⁴ *ibid.*: 106

³⁵ SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>>

³⁶ International Energy Agency, 'China overtakes the United States to become world's largest energy consumer', 20 July 2010, <http://www.iea.org/index_info.asp?id=1479>

³⁷ International Energy Agency 'Key World Energy Statistics 2011'

diversification to Eastern energy markets, which according to the plan should grow from the current 6 to 22–25% for liquid hydrocarbons (oil and oil products), and while natural gas export should grow from 0 to 19–20%.³⁸ Many argue that this plan is highly unlikely as Russia, at the current production and extraction rates will not be able to sustain its own production as well as fulfil its energy commitments. However if China proves serious about developing its natural gas transport infrastructure and gas-fired power generation, the Sakhalin Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) terminal could help to represent a more realistic assessment of Russia's Chinese dimension.

As situations it is today, bilateral energy ties are one of the weaker areas of cooperation. Russians are concerned of being an energy appendage to the Chinese economy, while China seeks to diversify its energy sources. Despite the presence of complementary energy diversification priorities, cooperation in the energy sector has gone largely unfulfilled.

4.3 Economic cooperation

Although growing rapidly, the bilateral trade between the two countries is still very small. As of 2009, the total trade between two countries was 38.75 billion USD, marginally above Thailand and only one tenth of the trade volume between China and European Union. Beijing looks to Moscow mostly for natural resources – not only energy, but also timber and non-ferrous metals.³⁹ This makes many Russian analysts worry that their country is engaging in some kind of neo-colonial economic relationship where primary commodities go out and finished goods go in.⁴⁰ As mentioned earlier, energy cooperation is also far from strategic. There is Chinese interest in Russia as an expanding market for consumer and industrial goods, but Russia will remain of marginal importance compared to the huge markets in the West and the Asia-Pacific.

³⁸ Ministry of Energy of Russian Federation 'Energy Strategy of Russia for the period up to 2030

³⁹ MOFCOM's Market access Report on Russian Federation (2010)

⁴⁰ Mankoff 2009: 195

At present, China's economic muscles are far greater than Russia's. Chinese have every objective reasons to claim the title of the locomotive of Asian economy and the role of "active growth factor" of the global economy. However, further strengthening of China's position in the world economic system would certainly posit some serious problems for Chinese leaders, with the main roadblock being the country's voracious appetite for natural resources. Accordingly, one can expect a long-term increased activity in China that aims to address or minimize this problem.

When it comes to Russia, its position in the world economy have been formed in the first place by the country's ability to maintain and develop the strongest sectors of the Soviet legacy - gas, oil, wood, ferrous and nonferrous metals, seafood, military technology, nuclear energy, aerospace technology, etc. At the same time, Russia has not managed to win any new niches in the global market for goods and services. Most likely in the foreseeable future, the structure of Russia's participation in world economic relations will not undergo major changes.

That being said, the area of shared interests and complementarities between Russia and China in the global economy is now wider than the area of their actual or potential conflict of interest⁴¹. This creates a stable platform to build and diversify forms of bilateral cooperation, for cooperation in the framework of the integration processes in East and Central Asia. However, the orientation of China's economic ties to the U.S, European and Asian markets limit the possibility of Russian - Chinese cooperation or joint action in the markets of third countries, and in the fight for the overall improvement of the conditions of international trade. A potential conflict of interest between the two countries can arise with Russia's inclusion into a free trade zone with China, leading to the uncontrolled mobility of goods and labour services from China to Russia. This is a scenario that Russia is not yet ready for⁴². In any case, however, the Russian side does believe that benefits of increased interaction between Russia and China outweigh the cons.

⁴¹ Kuzik & Titarenko 2006: 389

⁴² *ibid.*

4.4 Central Asia

There is an existing wariness inside the Kremlin of China's possible geopolitical ambitions. In his speech given at Blagoveshchensk in 2000, the administrative capital of the Amur oblast, a city that was shelled by Chinese during the boxer rebellion, Putin declared that if "we do not undertake real efforts to develop the Russian Far East, then in a few decades the Russian population will be speaking Japanese, Chinese and Korean". Medvedev delivered the same sentiment in 2008, during his trip in Russian Far East.

Indeed Russians are wary of possible geopolitical ambitions China might have and many Russian officials continue to believe that China represents at least a potential rival.⁴³ China's military presence in the eastern central-Asian region is eminent. It's armed forces border Tajikistan, Kirgizstan and Kazakhstan. Russia's forces only border Kazakhstan. Given this in account, China can count on their cooperation with country's security interests. The Russian Pacific Fleet has only 18 ocean-going ships, nearly all of which are obsolete. The Russian air presence in the Far East is equally troubled. The Chinese Air Force has purchased more modern aircraft from the Russian defence industry than the Russian Air Force.

The increasing gap in economic and military weight between China and Russia continues to have important strategic consequences. China, using its increasing power, is trying to penetrate Russia's traditional sphere of influence, namely Central Asia. The result has been an intensified struggle for influence and resources with both Moscow and Beijing seeking to lock up energy and pipelines for economic as well as geopolitical reasons. It is a battle that China is winning at the moment.

On the other side Russians and Chinese both see a meaningful cooperation on countering the so-called three evils – Separatism, Terrorism and Extremism. This has resulted in a Regional Anti-Terrorist structure as a part of SCO. In August 2007, approximately 6500 from all six member of the SCO conducted largest joint military

⁴³ Mankoff 2009: 195

exercises held by the group. Much of the same happened again in February 2009.⁴⁴ As a part of a statement regarding the ethnic riots in Xinjiang in 2009, SCO general secretary issued a statement regarding Xinjiang as an inalienable part of China and that all member vowed to enhance cooperation in fighting the three evils.

4.5 Asia-Pacific

Russia has strong economical interests in Asia-Pacific region. At the international level, Russia not only has to compete with China but also with U.S. and Japan. On the domestic level, the Russian leaders have to face the pressure of other political parties, interest groups, pro-Western faction that would rather see Russia developing their ties with the West, etc.

With the end of the Cold War and the decline of its national strength as well as other external strategic adjustments, Russia's position in Southeast Asia has been greatly weakened. It only is barely able to maintain a limited military existence in Vietnam, but the consciousness of Russia being a great power was not completely lost. Russia's Southeast Asia policy was originally a continuity of the Asia-Pacific strategic thinking of the Gorbachev period. Economic ties and diplomacy would replace military means and ideology as a means of gaining influence and building participation in Southeast Asian affairs.⁴⁵

In November 2000, Putin pointed out in his speech on the future of Russia: New Oriental, Russian foreign policy will be firmly tilted to the Asia-Pacific, and Russia will actively develop relations with ASEAN in order to promote the ASEAN countries "common home construction", and to maintain peace and stability in the region. From the geo-strategic perspective, as well as the international positioning of both the Russian and Southeast Asian countries, the fundamental conflict of interests does not exist. Their relationship reflects the post-Cold war state of dynamic and complex balance of power. Therefore ASEAN countries hold a positive attitude to Russia's participation in East Asian affairs, especially as a deterrent for China.

⁴⁴ Zhu 2010: 121

⁴⁵ Larin 2010

Overall, Russia's Southeast Asia policy is positive but not expansionary. Its main policy objectives are: in politics, focusing on restoring the world's great power status, seeking to increase their voice in the Asian and Pacific Affairs, strengthen cooperation with ASEAN and other security dialogue and cooperation of the parties in order to create a favorable geopolitical security environment. In the economy, Russia wants to actively participate in the integration of the Asia-Pacific region in order to aid their own economic recovery and develop an arms-export market⁴⁶.

China's regional objectives in Southeast Asia appear to be tied to China's overall strategic posture⁴⁷: Maintain a stable political and security environment, particularly on China's periphery, that will allow China's economic growth to continue; Maintain and expand trade routes transiting Southeast Asia; Gain access to regional energy resources and raw materials; Develop trade relationships for economic and political purposes; Isolate Taiwan; Gain influence in the region to defeat perceived attempts at strategic encirclement or containment. For the past few years, China has been relatively active in regards to the last point, showing a growing assertiveness in the region. There is a prevalent view among Chinese analysts that the tensions can be attributed to US and its "returning to Asia" policy. It is widely believed that Washington is using the South China Sea issues as a means to pursue a soft containment of China.⁴⁸ In that sense, Asia-Pacific region might prove to be a common ground for Sino-Russian cooperation in the future, as China doesn't perceive Russia as a threat.

4.6 International System

One of the more visible aspects of Sino-Russian cooperation is their vetoing track record in the UN Security Council. Neither Russia nor China seem to be very comfortable with U.S.' perceived leadership and the unipolar world order.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Vaughn & Morrison 2006: 7

⁴⁸ Li 2012

Multipolarity is the key concept in both Chinese and Russian foreign policy and both countries have repeatedly agreed on this term and subsequently have included it or alluded to it in nearly all of their joint declarations, statements, and treaties dating from the mid-1990s to the present.⁴⁹ Indeed, the cooperation in the international system has been one of the more stable constants in Sino-Russian relations since the fall of Soviet Union. They have similar voting patterns and have also worked together at other multilateral forums, adopting much of the same stance on range of international issues. Opposition to sanction Iran, Sudan, North Korea opposition to missile defence and weaponization of the space and very lately in regards to situation in Syria, are one of the many issues that China and Russia cooperated on to the great aberration of the west.

One of the plausible explanations explaining the similar worldview of the two vastly different crises is offered by Susan Turner, which puts everything in to the context of identity crisis that both countries have experienced.

Ascendance of U.S as the primus motor in the new unipolar world order, have left both Chinese and Russian leader in disillusion as they have lost much influence in affecting world politics. Where they before had leverage in the super-power balancing game, both ended up being subjects to one “policing” superpower.⁵⁰ China first experienced the ramifications of this in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Square massacre, when the U.S. Congress suspended arms sales to China and attempted to make China’s most favoured nation (MFN) status contingent upon the improvement of its human rights record. China’s former foreign minister, Qian Qichen, declared the following year that *“The USA’s hegemonic stance and its attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of other states pose the greatest danger to socialist China,”* and suggested that in order to “weaken pressure from Washington, China must broaden relations with Japan, Russia, South Korea, and other neighbouring countries.”⁵¹ Russians perceived USA as to be undermining Russian power by providing fewer post-war funds than Russia wanted and by keeping the North Atlantic Treaty

⁴⁹ Turner 2009: 160

⁵⁰ Yuan 1998: 56

⁵¹ Levin 2008: 98,

Organization (NATO) intact despite their objections. It was in the context of their “identity crisis” that China and Russia established a “constructive partnership” in September 1994. In 1996, the word “strategic” replaced “constructive” in defining the two countries’ partnership and Evgeny Primakov replaced the pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev as the new foreign minister of Russia. In 1997, the “Joint Russian-Chinese Declaration about a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order” was first among a string of statements emphasizing multipolarity and denouncing U.S. hegemony.⁵²

Although Russia and China both seemingly share the critique of hegemony and agree on the justice, peace, and stability inherent in a multipolar world order, the individual tone of each country’s leaders indicates a discrepancy in the means by which they might want to achieve this order. This was exemplified by the Russian Georgian conflict in 2008. Bearing their separatist movement in mind, Beijing refused to endorse Moscow’s actions at the SCO summit in Dushanbe, in 2008.

Digging deeper into Chinese scholarly debates on Russia’s role in international system one will find two different, but widely regarded views. Some scholars argue that Russia is undergoing a decline in both prestige and influence and has already lost its power a superpower.⁵³ Their view is that Russia lacks a long-lasting social foundation for a sustainable strong state and as long as Russia continues its development model of a “strong state and weak society”, its power and prosperity will not last.⁵⁴

The more optimistic scholars emphasize that even if Russia’s relative power has declined, it still is a “world state” with a potential to be a “world power” and therefore shouldn’t be underestimated. “Russia’s relative power and absolute power have actually made much headway as compared with the early years after the

⁵² These include: the “Sino-Russian Joint Statement” of November 10, 1997, the “Joint Statement on Sino- Russian Relations at the Turn of the Century” and the “Joint Press Communique on Sino-Russian Summit Results” of November 10, 1998.

⁵³ Wang 2005: 78

⁵⁴ Fan & Lv 2006: 58

collapse of the Soviet Union”⁵⁵.

4.7 Spheres of congruity

In China’s foreign policy, USA occupies the top spot and Chinese analysts regard the Sino-US relations as the most important bilateral relations in the world.⁵⁶ In developing its ties with US, China is seeking to carefully reduce American influence in East and Central Asia.

Such actions are based on the concept of the multipolar world, a concept that is the official basis of the early stage of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Relations with Russia are helping China to establish a more favourable external environment for itself. This is true especially, in regards to containing North Korea and getting an exclusive access to energy resources of the Russian Far East, which are out of the control of US and its allies, and thus a very important source of resource diversification.

The most positive tangible result of the Sino-Russian partnership for Russia is the border agreements between Russia, China, and the Central Asian states.⁵⁷ The border between the two countries is colossal and is more than 4000 km long. It was and still is in both countries interests to keep the border disputes at calm. China and Russia managed to resolve most of the border-related issues. As mentioned by former Russian ambassador to China, Rogachev, “it is the first time in the history that every inch of the border is legally agreed upon”. Removing the border issue and taking confidence building measures limitation of armaments in the 100-kilometer zone on both sides of the border reinforced political and military stability and made a solid foundation for further cooperation between the two giants.

Apart from its geopolitical and geostrategic importance, Russia is an important

⁵⁵ Yang 2007: 3

⁵⁶ Jiang 2003

⁵⁷ Kireev 2006

potential source of energy and raw material to China.⁵⁸ China also believes that Russia can play a stabilizing role in Central Asia, especially in regards to curbing pan-Turkish tendencies and extremist Islamic movements.

Although on the decline, the military cooperation between China and Russia is still an important factor in the relationship and shouldn't be overlooked. Despite the decline in sales of traditional arms and weapons, there is an interest on both sides in development of advanced weapons systems.⁵⁹ This would help China to tilt the military balance in Asia (and especially in the Taiwan Strait) to its favor. However, it must be clear that military modernization is not the first priority for China, which is more focused on maintaining a strong economic as well as political system. This is why the importance of Sino-Russian military cooperation should not be overestimated.⁶⁰

With the increasing economic cooperation, China will gradually be able to exert more influence on Russia's foreign, defense, and domestic policy, its economy, and the development of its demographic processes.⁶¹ This fact is underestimated in Russia, and also in Asia. Russians do view China as a key to its own economic development and thus are very interested in seeing a prosperous and stable China - a China that could increasingly satisfy the needs of its population and that will open its market to Russian goods and services. This strategic Russian attitude to China only strengthens the rationale for future Russo-Chinese strategic cooperation.⁶²

The final congruity between China and Russia is the number of common threats and the fear of the long-term prospect of any unilateralist actions that might threaten either Russian or Chinese national interests.

⁵⁸ Gu 2003

⁵⁹ For detailed information on Russian-Chinese military-technical cooperation, see Konstantin Makienko, *Voенно-tekhnicheskoe sotrudnichestvo Rossii i KNR v 1992-2002 godakh: dostizheniia, tendentsii, perspektivy* (Moscow: Gendalf, 2002);

⁶⁰ Chen 2006: 102-113

⁶¹ Voskressensky p.34

⁶² *ibid.*

4.8 Spheres of incongruity

Although not present in the mainstream rhetoric, there is a latent sinophobia existing among Russian political elite. Especially in regards to the Russian Far East, China is regarded as a threat.⁶³

Another incompatibility of Russian and Chinese interests covers their strategic vision, especially regarding the Asia-Pacific region. Russia is essentially a status-quo power in the region, clinging to positions that it won during the Soviet period. Having experienced a decline its economic, political and military muscles, Russia seeks to reduce regional tensions while concentrating on rebuilding its strength.

It seeks to minimize or eliminate threats and maintain its dominant presence within its security zone, which encompasses the territory of the Russian Federation as well as the entire Commonwealth of Independent States. Although its military strength has declined, Russia seeks to maintain its strategic deterrence over all other states in Asia. It seeks to integrate its economy with those of the Asia-Pacific region, although its major economic orientation is toward the West.

China, on the other hand, is essentially a revisionist power, seeking to gather the economic and military capabilities to compete with the United States and Japan on the regional and, in the near future, on the global stage.⁶⁴ It seeks to maintain military superiority in the region, while trying to reduce the US presence regionally. In order to do so, it needs continued access to the energy.

In the economic realm, as mentioned earlier, Russian and China have experienced a complete role reversal. Because of the collapse of Soviet Union and Russia's need of complete economic restructuring, the size and value of Russian economy has shrunk to almost half of its former size. While China, once among the world's poorest countries, has doubled its GDP and is now the world's second largest economy. Its

⁶³ For arguments, see Viktor Larin, *Kitai i Dal'nii Vostok Rossii v pervoi polovine 90-kh: problemy regionalnogo vzaimodeistvii* (Vladivostok: Dal'nauka, 1998); Trenin, *Kitaiskaia problema Rossii*; Vilia G. Gel'bras, *Kitaiskaia real'nost' Rossii* (Moscow: Muravei, 2001).

⁶⁴ For arguments see Robert H. Donaldson and John A. Donaldson, "The Arms Trade in Russian-Chinese Relations."

rate of growth is no longer in the double-digit region, but still is formidable. The direction of their economies are diverging, but China and Russia still haven't figured out a mutually beneficial and complementary economic model except from exchanging Russian energy and raw material for products of Chinese light industry.

Demographic aspect of the relationship is not all too good either. The capital investment in Russian Far East has fallen and the region experiences population decline, despite large influx of both legal and illegal immigrants. The picture is completely different on the Chinese side, where the population density is ten times larger than the Russian side. As mentioned, Russians are wary of Chinese penetration of RFE and this may lead to local and central authorities implementing tough measures to curb the considerable loss of the Russian population in the region.

5. Future Scenarios For Sino-Russian Relationship

It is very tempting to evaluate or predict the relationship between China and Russian in simple terms of boom or bust, military-political alliance or a new schism. The reality is always far more complex than this. This chapter will explore some of the possible future scenarios of Sino-Russian partnership. But first, let us review what a Sino-Russian partnership is.

The first point is that relationship between China and Russia is very normal, with its ups and downs filled with successes along with failures. In contrary to what many may believe, the strategic partnership between China and Russia is not a relationship of a new type⁶⁵ but rather a traditional geopolitical partnership where each side is out to maximize its own national interests. Because China is a nation-state rather than value-driven multilateral agglomeration like the West, the very nature of the relationship is different. Simply put, China cannot offer Russia a prospect of integration into multilateral institutions like G8, WTO, etc. Therefore their relationship is based on rules and values.

⁶⁵ Lo 2008: 175

Because geopolitics still matters, the preservation of geopolitical space and the projection of power remain central in China's and Russia's priorities.⁶⁶ Russia is wary of China's growing influence in Central Asia, while for China, a stable relationship with Russia means, among other things, one (long) border less to worry about.

The partnership between China and Russia, as it is today, is limited. It is limited in scope, depth and mutual trust. Despite a substantial progress, many of the achievements reached by both countries, were relative and partial. As I've pointed out earlier, trade and economic cooperation is still small, military cooperation is dwindling, energy cooperation is not happening and there is an existing phobia of China present among the Russians. Because of this, they tend to respond, rather than initiate challenges in the world politics arenas. They tend to oppose, rather than to promote certain agendas in world affairs.⁶⁷

The partnership is asymmetrical. There is little convergence between the two countries' perspectives, interests and capabilities. As I've mentioned earlier, where Russia regards itself as a world power, dominant power in post-Soviet space and as a regional "superpower", China holds a much lower opinion of the country. The opposing perceptions have a critical impact on the policies of both countries' policy. The practical outcome of such divergent perceptions is that China wouldn't feel constrained to further expand its influence in Central-Asia, competing with Russia in the Asia-Pacific, etc.

Attempting to forecast future or long-term trends is often a futile endeavour, because of so many variables that may change at any time. Nonetheless, let us identify the number of possible scenarios of development of Russian-Chinese relations in the near to medium term:

⁶⁶ *ibid.* 176

⁶⁷ Li 2007: 497

5.1. Status quo

The most plausible and relatively easy executable scenario is an extrapolation of the current model of Russian-Chinese relations, where sufficiently intense political contact outpaces the level of trade and economic, cultural and social ties. In this case, the quality and the future of Sino-Russian relations will be affected by existing challenges between the two countries, alongside with other external factors. In other words, in this state, dependent on external as well as internal factors, relationship between China and Russia could either end in a convergence or tension. In this state, the Sino Russian partnership is relatively fragile and is dependent on a stable and prosperous future in both Russia and China. Actual reduction of Russia's place in the strategic priorities of China and China's place in Russia's strategic priorities could render the whole partnership to a mere formality. As Putin once pointed out “ the disposition of political forces and development trends will have a crucial impact on the future of the partnership⁶⁸ .

5.2. Strategic convergence

Strategic convergence scenario is based on the assumption that both countries will build upon achieved success and further enhance the cooperation. This would involve comprehensive deepening of Russian-Chinese cooperation based on a breakthrough in trade, economic and social ties. Large-scale development of trade and economic relations will facilitate the solution of a number of acute problems in bilateral relations (migration, anti-dumping investigations, etc.) and will also contribute to the solution of social problems of Siberia and the Far East. Parallel growth and co-development of China and Russia is the ideal scenario, from the point of view of Russian-Chinese cooperation. Strengthening of multilateral institutions such as SCO will provide conflict resolution mechanisms, defusing any tensions and eliminating the need for a “Great Game”.

The strategic convergence is one of the more plausible and convincing scenarios because it is a continuation of already established positive trends. It is politically flexible and wouldn't lock China and Russia into a situation of choosing sides. The

⁶⁸ Putin 2006

external factors that drove China and Russia together are not going to disappear any time soon. Moscow will still be wary of NATO's eastward expansion and China will still be concerned of U.S intentions towards Taiwan, Asia-Pacific region and the its security alliance with Japan.⁶⁹ In the sense that a closer relationship with each other would represent leverage against U.S, neither China nor Russia would be willing to give it up any time soon.

However, the implementation of such steps require considerable effort on the part of both Russia and China, as well as on enabling international environment and global economic environment. For the strategic convergence to happen, both Russia and China are dependent on a stable and prosperous growth – a factor that is not insulated from the external international environment. The relationship between China and Russia might as well end up in a ...

5.3. Strategic tension

Strategic tension between two countries could occur in the event of neither Russia nor China doing sufficiently enough effort to deepen the existing relationship. Couple this with unfavourable external environment, the weaknesses and limitations of the relationship would soon become increasingly apparent. Lack of understanding and trust between the leaders and a significant part of the population of both countries, can lead to sudden intensification of unresolved or not fully resolved issues (road, oil, migration, etc.). This could lead to a backlash of anti-Russian or anti-Chinese sentiment in both countries.

In other words, one would see a trend of strengthening of negative elements and gradual falling out and/or even alienation between Moscow and Beijing. Under this scenario, Russia and China would engage in a typical tactical game with each other and limiting partnership only to areas of particular need. Rivalry in Central Asia would escalate to more overt dogfight for influence.⁷⁰ The cooperation on international arenas would even more so reduced to rhetoric. One could also envisage the emergence of economic tension between the two countries.

⁶⁹ Rozman 1997

⁷⁰ Yu 2007: 149-50

5.4. Military-political alliance

Both Chinese and Russian leaders have consistently denied any wish of entering into a formal alliance with each other. As Bobo Lo points out, "the biggest problem with an alliance is that it is an inflexible course of action that demands considerable commitment."⁷¹ A formal alliance between China and Russia would necessarily precipitate a new cold war, which is at the moment not in neither Russia's or China's interests. Despite for somewhat strained relationship with the US and the West, for the time being, both countries' political, economic and security interests are closely tied to cooperative engagement with the West.

There is though one scenario that could precipitate the Sino-Russian alliance. As we know, today it is the primus motor of Sino-Russian rapprochement is the shared strategic convergence, more specifically, the shared feeling of threat from unilateralist actions by the US. The deepening and increasingly strategized Sino-Russian rapprochement can thus be considered as a product of bilateral soft balancing strategy against US-led hegemony. Thus, in this regard, under certain circumstances such as America's approval of NATO's expansion inside the boundaries of the former Soviet Union⁷², the enacting of the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act, and/or the pursuing of a missile defense program despite strong opposition from Moscow and Beijing, could nudge the two closer together by pushing the security priorities to the first place. The two powers will then have enough ground to overcome all kinds of "limitations" by forming a relationship verging on an alliance.

The reality of a military-political alliance is improbable but not impossible. and is very much constrained by deep-seated mutual suspicions of each other. Despite all the vocal criticism of NATO enlargement, Russians still view China as a more likely military threat⁷³, while PLA is suspicious of Russia's long-term agenda in Eurasia.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Lo: 2008: 186

⁷² For example by letting Georgia and Ukraine join the NATO.

⁷³ Lo 2008: 187

⁷⁴ Shambaugh 2004: 303

5.5 Confrontation

The Sino-Soviet rupture and the following border clashes of 1969 showed us how quickly the relationship between two allies can deteriorate. It took only ten years after signing of the 1950 treaty for the latent conflicts to erupt. Same scenario could also play out today. The world today is far more globalized, intertwined and interdependent than back in 1960s, but dismissing the possibility for the confrontation would be unwise.

There are several issues that could lead to a confrontation between China and Russia. The first one is the situation in Central Asia and the second one is RFE. In Central Asia, both powers vie for influence. Russia wishes to reassert its regional leadership, while China wants to expand and maximize its influence. Central Asia has an unsettling effect on both sides. Russia feels infringed by Chinese economic expansion. China on the other hand, while acknowledging Russian dominance in the region, sees that its scope of influence has reduced, especially when it comes to economic cooperation. In regards to RFE, China's expansion into the region, coupled with longstanding Russian security anxieties is also a somewhat unbalancing factor.

A change in foreign policy directions of the two countries could also precipitate a conflict. One cannot also exclude the emergence of more assertive and even aggressive foreign policy from both sides. Even though China still advocates the notion of peaceful rise, the contours of an offensive China is slowly emerging. Especially China's growing assertiveness in the South China Sea has prompted a debate among China's foreign-policy community⁷⁵. For Russia, the change in foreign policy direction may come from something different. A recession, triggered by for example a slump in world commodity prices, could trigger what Bobo Lo calls a "siege mentality" where Russia sees threats everywhere. China would naturally be a target of Russia's "paranoia".

An acute political crisis, followed by the fall of communist party in China, could also trigger a chain of events that could lead to a confrontation. This view is shared by

⁷⁵ Li 2012

several Russian academics, the most notable being Alexei Voskressensky. He argues that “if reforms in China fail, there will be even more problems for Russia and China’s neighbouring countries (...) it will be practically impossible to contain the migration of huge masses of unemployed people from across the border”⁷⁶.

Likelihood of confrontation is rather small. The most obvious reason to that is the fact that both countries are in possession of nuclear weapons. A mere threat of mutually assured destruction would be enough to deter any sense of military adventurism. When it comes to the collapse of China, even though there are people today that think this will happen sooner rather than later⁷⁷, the assumption of China’s unravelling is rather speculative and is rather unlikely in the near future. Finally, even if China collapses, there have been on historical basis to anticipate mass influx of Chinese to Russia.⁷⁸

5.6 Concluding remarks

It is all so tempting to see the Sino-Russian relationship as a paradigm shifting alliance that could potentially threaten the interests of the West. This relationship is almost too good to pass down. It has it all – two global powers tied together with remorse for western liberal principles in a quest to dethrone the U.S. led unipolar world. This was especially true for me, a master student, invested in both China and Russia, culturally, politically and linguistically. On one side you’ve an ailing, but natural resources-wise endowed ex-superpower, paranoid of everyone and everything, seeking to restore its former relevance in the international system. On the other side you have an emerging superpower, addicted on expansion and natural resources that seeks to tap into Russia’s vast reserves. The only thing binding them together is the somewhat convergent vision of a multipolar world. Their relationship is driven mostly by expediency and conjectural fluctuations of economy, relationship to US, etc. Although put together very bluntly, this reflects the reality of the situation.

⁷⁶ Voskressensky: *The Rise of China and Russo-Chinese relations*. P. 28

⁷⁷ see Gordon Chang – *The Coming Collapse of China*, Random House 2001

⁷⁸ Lo 2008: 191

For China and Russia to truly establish a solid partnership, Moscow and Beijing will need to find a more constructive basis of engagement, like evolving their economic relationship. And of course, like everything else that is meaningful, this will require not only vision, but also the political will and perseverance to see the task through. But do Russian and Chinese leaders have this will?

China and Russia both regard themselves as fallen powers on their quest to attain their former grandeur. Both have aspirations to be global powers with their own distinct set of national interests. As mentioned earlier, the degree of China's commitment to bilateral or multilateral arrangements is constrained by its determination to maintain national sovereignty and its insistence of political flexibility. Essentially, I would argue that China views on strategic relationships are of instrumental nature. Simply put, China engages in a relationship as long as it has something to gain from it.

Much of the same goes for Russia. Russia's insistence on being treated like a World Power has endured through Yeltsin and long into the Putin era. Russian elites, thinkers and policy makers have long viewed their country in Great Power terms, with interests stretching all over the world and with a right to be consulted on every international matter of great importance. This consensus is so strong that Russian leaders will have no other choice than to pursue the creation of a multipolar world, with Russian being one of the poles.

The West is still a top priority for Russian and Chinese policymakers and will still be in the near future. But as China enters the 21st century apparently poised to become a new superpower, Russia will have little choice but to make China a priority in its own right, independent of Moscow's relationship with the West. But right now, the relationship of between China and Russia is largely driven by the dynamics of superpower polarity rather than having a structure of its own.

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