
How the Chinese See Russia



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Executive Summary

China is in the midst of one of the most remarkable transformations in history. In its search for economic development and industrial modernization, Chinese policy-makers look to the West for their points of reference. Russia, which once offered an alternative model, now stands as an object lesson in what *not* to do. And while Moscow and Beijing routinely describe their relationship as the best it has ever been, today the so-called “strategic partnership” lacks substance in important areas.

There is no single “Chinese view” of Russia, but rather a multiplicity of perceptions. In order to reflect the diversity of Chinese elite views and to draw out some overarching themes, this essay looks at Chinese attitudes toward Russia through six lenses.

HISTORY

The first is **historical context**. The successes of the Sino-Russian relationship over the past two decades go against historical logic. During the “century of humiliation” (1842-1949),¹ China viewed the Russian Empire as one of the foreign powers that took unconscionable advantage of its weakness. In the 1920s and 1930s, Moscow’s lukewarm support and poor advice almost led to the extinction of the fledgling Chinese Communist Party. Even during the era of “unbreakable friendship” following the 1950 Sino-Soviet treaty, Mao Zedong regarded the USSR as an untrustworthy and overbearing ally.² Differences were aggravated by territorial grievances, with the Soviet Union retaining the vast lands conceded by China in the “unequal treaties” of the mid-19th century. China’s post-war reconstruction and development owed a huge debt to Soviet military, economic and technological assistance, but the abrupt withdrawal of all Soviet advisors in July 1960 initiated a freeze in relations that lasted three decades. The imprint of this difficult legacy is much less pronounced than it once was, but it continues to influence both the way the Chinese look at Russia and their conduct of international relations more generally.

Second, the Chinese have consistently viewed **Russia as a great power**. At various stages, it has been a Western imperial power (in the 19th century), a nuclear superpower (during the Soviet era), and a declining but still important international actor (post-Cold War). In the mainstream Chinese narrative, Russia is a great power that is simultaneously strong and weak, assertive but insecure, a partner

GREAT POWER RELATIONS

¹ China’s ‘century of humiliation’ dates from the treaty of Nanking at the end of the First Opium War (1842) to the founding of the PRC (1949). During this period, China suffered repeatedly from foreign invasion, civil war, peasant rebellions, regime collapse, economic disintegration, and natural disasters.

² Li Z., *The Private Life of Chairman Mao*, London, Arrow Books, 1996, p. 115-118.

yet also a competitor in areas such as Central Asia. Moreover, Russia is not just a great power unto itself, but also in conjunction with others. Chinese policy thinkers are constantly mindful of the threat of “geopolitical encirclement,” whereby the other great powers—Russia included—conspire to contain China’s rise.

NEIGHBORLY RELATIONS

Third, Russia is **China’s most important direct neighbor**—and has been since the parallel expansion of the Russian and Qing empires in the 17th century. Extended geographical proximity to the world’s second nuclear weapons power significantly raises the stakes for Beijing of an effective “good-neighborly policy.” The Chinese attitude toward Russia as a neighbor combines elements of grand strategy, interregional cooperation between China’s northeast and the Russian Far East, and national security policy.

Fourth, the **personal dimension** is critical. One of the paradoxes in Sino-Russian relations is the curious combination of physical closeness on the one hand, and psychological and cultural alienation on the other. This is evident even today, when Russian and Chinese attitudes toward each other have rarely been better. Another contradiction is the disjunction between the apparent warmth of official ties, and the indifference of much of the Chinese elite and public toward Russia.

COOPERATION WITHOUT VALUES

Fifth, much of the progress in Sino-Russian relations since the fall of the Soviet Union has been achieved on the basis of a **partnership of interests**. Despite occasional speculation about normative convergence,³ there is little like-mindedness on values. Yet this has scarcely mattered. Indeed, Sino-Russian cooperation has benefited from modest expectations, the absence of ideological baggage, and the realization that pragmatism, not empathy, is the key to success. While their relationship is more limited partnership than strategic partnership,⁴ Beijing identifies a clear interest in cooperating with Moscow on cross-border management, preserving a secure neighborhood in Central Asia, resisting Western criticisms of their record on democracy and human rights, and developing commercial ties. 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.

Finally, the Chinese **analyze Russia’s future potential**. There is a general expectation that Russia’s overall influence in the world will diminish over time, particularly if it fails to reinvent itself. In this event, its importance to China is likely to undergo considerable change. A stagnant Russia would be of diminishing account in China’s rapidly expanding network of international relationships. Nevertheless, it would retain some importance as a residual great power, key neighbor, and raw material resource for Chinese

³ See, for example, R. Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, London, Atlantic Books, 2008, p. 53-80.

⁴ B. Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution Press and Chatham House, 2008, p. 177.

modernization. Even while they criticize its failings, Chinese scholars are reluctant to write Russia off, and some even fear that it may in time pose a renewed threat to Chinese interests.⁵

Chinese perceptions of Russia are not only diverse, but also susceptible to change. While history matters, historical determinism does not provide a reliable basis for understanding how such perceptions are likely to evolve. There is no law that dictates these will always be characterized by a sense of estrangement and suspicion—as has historically been the case—or, alternatively, that a “natural” complementarity of interests presupposes an eventual strategic convergence.⁶ There are many variables and potential game-changers—modernization and nationalism in Russia, domestic developments in China, Beijing’s shifting world-view, and larger international trends. The complex interplay between these factors will shape how the Chinese view Russia over coming decades.

⁵ See D. Shambaugh, *Modernizing China’s Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, Berkeley and London, University of California Press, 2004, p. 303.

⁶ G. Rozman, debate on “China-Russia relations—Enduring Alliance or Limited Partnership?” Open Society Institute, New York, 19 March 2009, <www.soros.org/resources/events/china_20090319>.

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Previous works on the subject

- “China’s ‘Permanent Reset,’” *Russia in Global Affairs*, September/October 2010, p. 102-13;
- [“Russia, China and the United States: From Strategic Triangularism to the Postmodern Triangle,”](#) *Proliferation Papers*, No. 32, Winter 2010 / *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 47, February 2010;
- “Ten Things Everyone Should Know about the Sino-Russian Relationship,” CER Policy Paper, December 2008;
- *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, Brookings Institution Press and Chatham House, 2008;
- *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy* Chatham House and Blackwell Publishing, 2003;
- *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

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Introduction

For much of the last three hundred years, Sino-Russian interaction has been tense, awkward and occasionally confrontational. Periods of cooperation have been infrequent, and even in good times the two countries have regarded each other with a suspicious eye. Today, Moscow and Beijing routinely describe their relationship as the best it has ever been, and the hostility that once defined it has largely evaporated. Yet despite some notable achievements, above all the settlement of a long and contentious common border, the so-called “strategic partnership” lacks substance in important areas. Political coordination is limited, strategic mistrust endures, economic ties are unbalanced, and human contacts are superficial. The level of Sino-Russian engagement is impressive by the standards of the recent past, but much less so when compared to other, more influential relationships on both sides.

This essay examines Chinese attitudes toward Russia as a great power, neighbor, partner and competitor. China is in the midst of one of the most remarkable transformations in history. In the space of 30 years, a once abjectly poor country has become the world’s second largest economy and the one plausible (if still only potential) analogue to the United States in world affairs. During this dramatic period, the relationship with Russia has remained something of a sideshow. If the recent narrative of bilateral engagement has been largely positive, then Chinese policy-makers and thinkers nevertheless look to the West for their points of reference and sources of modernization. Russia, which once offered an alternative model, now stands as an object lesson in what *not* to do. To many Chinese, particularly among the younger generation, it has simply become an irrelevance.

But for all its well-documented problems, Russia remains a major international actor with the capacity to affect core Chinese interests. The leadership in Beijing understands that national modernization, the building of a stable neighborhood and China’s transformation into a global actor will depend, in some measure at least, on a functional relationship with its largest neighbor. The “Russia factor” in its world-view may have declined, but it has certainly not disappeared. Russia retains thousands of strategic and tactical nuclear weapons; enjoys abundant natural resources; stretches across a vast and unstable continent; is a permanent member of the UN Security Council; and shares a 4,000 kilometer border with China. Russia matters both of itself and as a critical component of the global environment in which Chinese foreign policy must operate. President Hu Jintao’s vision of a “harmonious world”⁷ is inconceivable without some sort of

⁷ “We should endeavor to preserve the diversity of civilizations in the spirit of equality and openness, make international relations more democratic and jointly build a more harmonious

accommodation with Moscow. And the ongoing US-Russia “reset,” against a background of growing Sino-American tensions, has only highlighted the importance of nurturing the “strategic partnership.”

world where all civilizations coexist and accommodate each other.” “Hu Makes 4-point Proposal for Building Harmonious World,” Xinhua news agency, 16 September 2005, <www.china.org.cn/english/features/UN/142408.htm>. The concept of a “harmonious world” is based on the premise that the success of China’s modernization depends on a benign and stable international environment. See Jiang Zemin’s address at the 16th Congress of the Communist Party of China, 17 November 2002, <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-11/17/content_632330.htm>.

Heterogeneity and Complexity

There is no single “Chinese view” of Russia, but rather a multiplicity of perceptions. This could scarcely be otherwise, given the diversity and complexity of modern China. But it is also a function of the multidimensional nature of Russia’s importance to Beijing—as historical and psychological influence; as great power and strategic actor; and as bilateral partner and competitor. Chinese views of Russia are a heterogeneous mix of ideas, instincts and experiences. They fluctuate according to circumstances within China’s polity and society, the bilateral relationship, and the broader regional and global context.

They also reflect a range of political, professional and generational perspectives. Government officials, for example, are almost invariably upbeat in their assessments; their duties do not allow them the luxury of acting otherwise. The shrinking Russia-watching community talks up the importance of the relationship, emphasizing both past achievements and future potential. International relations scholars, by contrast, tend to be more skeptical or dismissive, partly because they bring a broader perspective to the subject and partly because they have no particular stake in the relationship. Many of them see Russia as an unreconstructed power in serious decline, yet even they are divided on whether this decline is long-term or temporary.⁸ Finally, the younger generation gives Russia little thought, being much more preoccupied by material aspirations and China’s domestic problems. If they focus at all on foreign policy matters, then it is on engagement with the West and, to a lesser extent, Japan.⁹

A note on sources

This essay is based on the author’s conversations with Chinese scholars and analysts over many years, up to and including 2010, as well as numerous written sources. It should be acknowledged at the outset that it has not been easy to ascertain what the Chinese think about Russia and the Russians. Often it is a matter of identifying what is *not* being explicitly said, of distinguishing between rhetoric and policy action (or inaction), and of putting together disparate pieces of a necessarily incomplete jigsaw puzzle.

⁸ Author’s conversations with Chinese international relations scholars in Beijing (November 2009) and Shanghai (May-June 2010).

⁹ Author’s interviews with Chinese students and journalists in Beijing and Shanghai (2009-10).

There are two problems in particular. The first arises from the opacity of Chinese decision-making, which can make it extremely difficult to discern the real views, let alone relative influence, of different actors. Official statements are often misleading, driven by the primary requirement to communicate positive messages about “strategic partnership,” “win-win” outcomes, “interdependence,” and a “harmonious world.” Although the debates on China’s international relations have become more open in recent years, there remain major political and cultural constraints on the discussion of public policy. Commentators are allowed some latitude, but there are clear taboos. Overt criticism of government policy is off-limits, while there is a more generalized pressure to talk up China’s foreign relations. The “consensus-driven nature of Chinese decision-making” has a crimping effect not only in official circles, but also on the wider policy debate.¹⁰

The second challenge is more Russia-specific. The Chinese government has set great store by its partnership with Moscow, which has been one of the signal successes of contemporary Chinese foreign policy. Academic scholars and political analysts are consequently reluctant to offer direct criticisms of Russia that would set them at odds with the official line. In public commentary, they tend to laud the relationship while confining any adverse remarks to relatively specific (and resolvable) problems. Even in private, they prefer to accentuate achievements and understate shortcomings. This reflects not only a natural discretion, but also an inclination to make the best of things.

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¹⁰ L. Jakobsen and D. Knox, *New Foreign Policy Actors in China*, SIPRI Policy Paper No. 26, Stockholm, September 2010, p. 17.

The Historical Setting

History has played a crucial role in the formation of Chinese attitudes toward Russia. Unfortunately, its impact has been almost entirely negative. The difficulties date back to the 17th century, with the expansion of the Russian and Chinese empires eastward and northward, respectively. Although it would be an exaggeration to speak of great power rivalry then, given the lukewarm enthusiasm for imperialist ventures in St Petersburg and Peking, a clash of peripheries nonetheless ensued. From the outset, the Sino-Russian relationship would come to be defined more by competing interests than shared perceptions and effective cooperation.

In the 17-18th centuries, the predominant sentiment of the ruling Manchus was one of contempt.¹¹ But with the arrival of the foreign powers in China in the mid-19th century, Russia grew from being a largely disregarded presence to becoming the dominant player in northern China. The “unequal treaties” of Aigun (1858), Peking (1860) and Tarbagatai (1864) transferred nearly one-and-a-half million square kilometers of Chinese territory to Russia—in effect, the southern part of the present-day Russian Far East.¹² The Russians also extracted treaty concessions for the key ports of Dalian and Port Arthur on the Bohai Sea.

Chinese feelings of victimhood vis-à-vis Russia were scarcely diluted by the growing ties between the Soviet and Chinese Communist Parties (CCP) in the 20th century. At various times during the Chinese Civil War (1927-49), Moscow gave greater support to Chiang Kai-shek’s Nationalist government than to the Communists, and even after the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the Sino-Russian relationship remained difficult. Mao believed—rightly—that Moscow had no interest in a strong, independent-minded China; he condemned its refusal to return Mongolia to Chinese rule; claimed that the USSR had left China exposed to US aggression during the Korean War (1950-53); and railed against the arrogance of the Soviet leadership.¹³ The public façade of political and ideological solidarity, embodied in the 1950 Sino-Soviet Treaty and the slogan of “unbreakable friendship,”¹⁴ masked acute tensions at the highest levels.

¹¹ See J.D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, second edition, New York and London, W.W. Norton, 1999, p. 117-119.

¹² During the 1880s, China lost further territories near Lake Balkhash in Central Asia.

¹³ Li, *op. cit.* [2], p. 115-118.

¹⁴ “[T]he unbreakable friendship of the Soviet Union and the Chinese People’s Republic serves and will serve to guarantee peace in the far East against all and every aggressor [...]” J. Stalin, “Answering Telegram to the Chairman of the Central People’s Government of the Chinese People’s Republic Mao Tse Tung on the occasion of the Sixth Anniversary of Victory over the Japanese Imperialists,” 2 September 1951, <www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1951/09/02.htm>.

After Stalin's death in 1953, the advent of Nikita Khrushchev saw a brief improvement in relations. However, his denunciation of Stalin's "cult of personality" and serious disagreements over Soviet assistance to China's nuclear weapons program led to a sharp deterioration of the relationship. The withdrawal of all Soviet technical advisors in 1960 led to a major rupture between Moscow and Beijing, initiating a downward spiral that culminated in several border clashes along the Ussuri River in 1969. Whereas the "unequal treaties" and the disappointments of the "unbreakable friendship" reaffirmed the notion of a perfidious Russia in Chinese consciousness, the 1969 clashes introduced the existential threat of a Soviet conventional and even nuclear attack.¹⁵ It also consolidated a lasting strategic animosity.

The significant improvement in Sino-Russian relations over the past two decades owes much to the strenuous efforts of both sides to overcome this accumulated historical baggage. Such efforts have resulted in some signal successes, in particular the demarcation of the entire length of the former Sino-Soviet border, from Central Asia to the Pacific coast. Overall, Russian and Chinese attitudes toward each other are vastly more positive than they were 20 years ago—a reality acknowledged by Chinese scholars.

Nevertheless, Russia's identity as a historical bogey in the Chinese imagination is dormant rather than extinct. Although the passage of time, not to mention enormous practical obstacles, has diluted Chinese interest in regaining the "lost one-and-a-half million square kilometers," a nagging

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sense of grievance remains. Chinese school textbooks, for example, routinely refer to the country's loss of territory and sovereignty and to the avariciousness of the foreign imperial powers. Notwithstanding the considerable progress in bilateral relations, Russia remains a major contributor to China's ongoing sense of historical victimhood.¹⁶

Similarly, the disagreements and misunderstandings that destroyed the Sino-Soviet alliance have generated an undercurrent of mistrust that endures to this day. This has been fuelled by more recent events. Moscow has shown that it is willing to ignore or sacrifice Chinese interests whenever it suits it. Thus, following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York (9/11) Vladimir Putin endorsed the American troop deployment in former Soviet Central Asia without informing, much less consulting with, Beijing.¹⁷ A few months later, Moscow acquiesced meekly in America's unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, despite having earlier issued a joint declaration with the Chinese that both sides would resolutely defend the treaty. Beijing has been periodically surprised by Russian actions, yet for the most part the Chinese have few illusions about Moscow's inclinations. They believe that Russia's history and civilization will always predispose it toward a much closer engagement

¹⁵ Li, *op. cit.* [2], p. 23.

¹⁶ Jakobsen and Knox, *op. cit.* [10], p. 22.

¹⁷ See Ye. Primakov, *Russian Crossroads: Towards the New Millennium*, New Haven CT and London, Yale University Press, 2004, p. 71.

with the West, and they largely dismiss the notion that Russia is an Asian country, except in the literal, geographical sense.¹⁸

The difficult past of Sino-Russian engagement has also impacted on Chinese strategic culture more broadly, informing a conservative, risk-averse approach to international engagement, as well as a continuing sensitivity toward “foreign interference” and geopolitical encirclement.¹⁹ There are interesting parallels between contemporary Chinese attitudes toward the West—at once a threat *and* a resource for modernization—and Mao’s schizophrenic approach to the Sino-Soviet “unbreakable friendship” in the 1950s.

¹⁸ G. Xing, “Russia’s Mission is Eurasian Integration,” interview with RIA Novosti, 31 August 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/valdai_op/20100831/160405118.html>. At the Ditchley Park conference on “The global implications of Asia’s rise,” 18-20 November 2010, none of the Chinese, Indian or Japanese participants so much as mentioned Russia.

¹⁹ Jakobsen and Knox, *op. cit.* [10], p. 21.

Russia as a Great Power

The Chinese see Russia as a great power, despite the sharp decline in its strategic fortunes after the fall of the USSR. This is unsurprising, given that over the three centuries of their direct contact, Russia steadily acquired the mentality, habits and geopolitical reach typical of a great power. For the Chinese, such long-term realities are not invalidated by occasional periods of decline and even crisis. Indeed, it would be counter-intuitive for them to think so, given that they themselves emerged not so long ago from 150 years of decline.

Russia, moreover, remains a great power according to many of the criteria the Chinese respect: vast territorial extent, possession of a huge nuclear arsenal and permanent membership of the UN Security Council (P-5).²⁰ These trumps are reinforced by recognition that Russia has the potential to do significant harm to Chinese interests, either on its own or in concert with others. A great power in decline is still a great power. And an unhappy great power is more likely to behave in a destabilizing fashion. Key Chinese domestic and foreign policy goals—economic modernization, the building of a “harmonious world,” the development of “comprehensive national power,”²¹ and the establishment of an “amicable neighborhood”—would be jeopardized in the event of a major deterioration in relations.

The risks of upsetting this still important great power are all the more serious given China's own weaknesses. Although many aspects of contemporary Russia inspire contempt (see below), most Chinese recognize that they continue to lag behind it in important areas. Though the gap has narrowed considerably in recent years, Russia is still seen as more advanced, more prosperous and more powerful militarily.²² In this connection, the Chinese draw a critical distinction between the *pace of national modernization* and their *current stage of development*. They believe that China has greater potential as the emergent superpower of the 21st century, but that Russia, for the time being, is more of a great power judged in terms of both capabilities and strategic culture. For example, despite the rapid modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), its capacity to project hard power remains considerably inferior to that of

²⁰ Author's interviews with Chinese international relations and Russian scholars, Beijing and Shanghai (2009-10).

²¹ “Comprehensive national power” may be loosely defined as the aggregate of political, military, economic, technological and cultural power.

²² Interview with prominent Chinese international relations scholar, Fudan University, Shanghai (June 2010).

Russia's armed forces. And notwithstanding China's impressive GDP, its income per capita is far below Russia's.²³

At the same time, many Chinese scholars see Russia as an unreconstructed great power, obsessively committed to geopolitical competition, with strategic aspirations scarcely moderated by its diminishing capacities.²⁴ Russia may be in decline relative to China and even the US, but if anything this has made it all the more attached to its great power "entitlements": sphere of "privileged interests" in the post-Soviet space; a seat at the high table of international decision-making; and universal endorsement of its central position in world affairs.

The issue for the Chinese elite is not whether Russia is a great power, but rather how to address the policy implications of its capabilities and self-image. One of their most frequent criticisms of Western policy-making in recent years has been the latter's failure to give Russia the respect due to a great power. A more careful and respectful approach, they believe, would have avoided many of the problems in Russia-West relations. In this respect, they have been especially critical of NATO enlargement, the alliance's military intervention over Kosovo, the (second) Iraq war, Western support for the "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine and, more generally, the public belittling of Russian interests and positions.²⁵

The Chinese approach to *Russia as great power* is the diametric opposite of the West's. They seek to manage, rather than integrate or convert, Russia. They talk up partnership while, in practice, assigning much greater significance to the indispensable relationship with Washington. They indulge Russia's pretensions for dressing up as a great power, while seeking to limit its influence in regional and global decision-making. High-sounding allegiance to a "global multipolar order" and formalistic participation in BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, China) summits are left unsupported by substance. And the Chinese have been careful to separate themselves from Moscow's more confrontational policies.²⁶

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Chinese views of Russia are conditioned by their perceptions of the larger international environment. They are based, first, on the overriding assumption that the US will remain the sole superpower for the next two decades, if not longer. America's decline is only relative—and relative to China rather than to Russia or Europe.²⁷ That said, Russia is regarded as

²³ According to the World Bank, China's Gross National Income (GNI) per capita in 2009 was \$6,710 (120th in the world), compared to \$18,390 for Russia (69th) based on purchasing power parity (PPP), <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GNIPC.pdf>>.

²⁴ Interview with international relations scholar, Fudan University, Shanghai, June 2010; also conversation with a leading Chinese scholar at Wilton Park, November 2010.

²⁵ This has been a constant refrain in the author's conversations with Chinese scholars in recent years.

²⁶ In 2008 Beijing not only refused to support Moscow's decision to recognize Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence, but led the opposition within the SCO against it.

²⁷ L. Zhu, *China's Foreign Policy Debates, Chaillot Papers*, No. 121, Paris, September 2010, p. 29.

an important pillar in an international system characterized by “one superpower, several great powers” or, more accurately, “several great powers, one superpower.”²⁸ Washington faces many more checks and balances in advancing its strategic and normative agenda, and the other powers—singly and collectively—have greater scope to promote their respective national interests.

The emergence of a more “equal”, if not yet multipolar, world order has both advantages and disadvantages for China. On the one hand, it gives it wider strategic choice and enhanced opportunities for leverage vis-à-vis Washington. On the other hand, a more “anarchic” international environment allows greater scope for hostile bandwagoning against Chinese interests. Russia is a potentially influential player in both these scenarios.

Beijing has seen fit on occasion to exploit Russia’s standing as a great power. On UN sanctions against Iran, for example, it hid behind Moscow’s partnership with Tehran until relatively recently. For years, Moscow had taken the lead in opposing Western policies, despite the fact that China’s relations with Iran are actually much more substantial than Russia’s.²⁹ Sino-Russian coordination has also been important in emasculating critical human rights resolutions in Geneva and New York, and in counterbalancing the US and its allies, Japan and South Korea, within the six-party talks on the Korean peninsula.

But in general the Chinese are less inclined to see Russia as a geopolitical partner than to ensure that it does not join with other powers in a policy of anti-Chinese containment. Recent international developments have only accentuated the importance of this aim. The contrast between China’s success in riding out the global financial crisis and the recession suffered by most of the other G-20 economies has caused many of these to regard China, rather than the US, as the main obstacle to their recovery.³⁰ Meanwhile, Washington’s improving relations with New Delhi, Tokyo, Hanoi and various ASEAN capitals are raising concerns about a new anti-Chinese consensus.³¹

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Beijing understands that Russia, as a fading great power, is more anxious than most about China’s emergence as a global superpower and dominant regional power. By itself, Moscow may not be able to do much to check this trend. But Russia working in conjunction with the US, Europe

²⁸ C. Jin, presentation at the 6th Beijing Forum, 7 November 2009.

²⁹ China-Iran trade in 2009 reached US\$ 21.2 billion, compared to US\$ 3 billion between Russia and Iran,

<<http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/aarticle/statistic/AsiaAfrica/201002/20100206776202.html>>;

<<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSLDE64P10N20100526>>.

³⁰ Comments by Chinese scholars at the Wilton Park conference, “Dialogue with China—Towards ‘Harmonious Society’—Governance, Participation and Social Cohesion,” 4–6 November 2010.

³¹ At the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum meeting in Hanoi, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s proposal for a multilateral approach to the problems of South China Sea provoked a furious reaction from the normally urbane Chinese foreign minister Yang Jiechi.

and (in time) Japan could make the objective of a “harmonious world” increasingly difficult to achieve. One of the principal reasons why Beijing has invested such efforts in developing the Sino-Russian partnership is precisely to guard against the possibility of Moscow joining just such a hostile coalition.

Russia as Neighbor

Considering that Russia and China share such a long border, there has been very little contact between them. Until the 19th century, Sino-Russian relations were limited to low-level trade between peripheries, while even after the “unequal treaties” the impact of the Russian Empire on China was far less than that of the Western powers. The “fraternal” ties between the Soviet and Chinese Communist Parties might have led to the expansion of neighborly relations, particularly after the founding of the PRC in 1949. But in fact cross-border interaction was kept to a bare minimum. In the 1930s, Stalin transformed the Soviet Far East into one vast labor and military camp, and his expulsion of the Chinese and Korean communities effectively quarantined the region from the rest of the Asia-Pacific.³²

Russia as regional player

The Chinese view Russia as a neighbor in two ways. The first is in regional terms. Russia’s size, its identity as a great power, and extent of physical proximity mean that it looms large in Beijing’s strategic calculus. In Central Asia, in particular, it is *the* key player. Although its influence has declined since 9/11, Russia retains considerable clout through its continuing dominance of the local economies, inter-elite networks across the region, substantial military presence, and “soft power” capabilities (Russian-language TV, etc.).

The Chinese recognize that Russia remains pivotal to their ability to realize important regional objectives: combating the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism and extremism; the building of an “amicable neighborhood”; and enhancing the security of China’s sensitive western areas—above all, the heavily Muslim province of Xinjiang.³³ Indeed, Beijing’s whole network of “neighborly” relations in Central Asia depends on achieving some level of accommodation with Moscow.

At the same time, the Chinese acknowledge that Sino-Russian interaction in Central Asia is becoming more competitive.³⁴ Since 9/11, Russian influence has been subject to growing challenges from East and

³² J.J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History*, California, Stanford University Press, 1994, p. 212-213.

³³ H. Zhao, “Central Asia in China’s Diplomacy,” in E. Rumer, D. Trenin, and H. Zhao, *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing*, Armonk NY, M.E. Sharpe, 2007, p. 157-160.

³⁴ Conversation with a leading Chinese specialist on Central Asia, Shanghai (June 2010).

West, as well as from the independent Central Asian republics. In a remarkably short space of time, Chinese energy companies have concluded several major pipeline and supply agreements with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Crucially, they have moved very quickly to implement them. The Chinese disavow any intention to compete with Russia (or any other great power).³⁵ Yet their actions are fundamentally changing the regional strategic map.³⁶ Today's competition for access to energy resources and economic influence will, over time, evolve into a wider struggle for political, strategic and normative influence.³⁷

Meanwhile, China's approach to Russia as a regional player resembles its handling of Russia as a great power. The Chinese flatter Russian sensibilities while maximizing their influence on the ground. This dual approach is evident in Beijing's dealings in relation to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). In public, the Chinese downplay their leading role in the organization, act very deliberately, and constantly emphasize the SCO's collective and consensual character. In reality, they use the multilateral cover of the organization to facilitate and legitimate the projection of Chinese influence across the region.³⁸

Cross-border cooperation

One of the more positive aspects of recent Sino-Russian interaction has been the expansion of interregional ties between China's northeast (Dongbei) and the Russian Far East (RFE). Steady progress in delimiting the Sino-Russian (and former Sino-Soviet) border, culminating in the final agreement of June 2005³⁹, created the conditions for improved cooperation. Importantly, too, relations have extended beyond the commercial sphere. Cross-border tourism has grown in recent years, and socialization at all levels has contributed to more welcoming attitudes on both sides.⁴⁰ The Russians have been impressed by the level of social and economic development found on the Chinese side of the border, while the Chinese have come to see the Russians as less Sinophobic than before.

However, it would be wrong to overstate the change in Chinese attitudes. The improvement of recent years has softened, rather than

³⁵ Zhao, *op. cit.* [33], p. 157-158.

³⁶ B. Lo, "China's 'Permanent Reset'," *Russia in Global Affairs*, September/October 2010, <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Chinas-Permanent-Reset-15001>>.

³⁷ Conversation with a leading Chinese Russianist, Shanghai (October 2009).

³⁸ Zhao, *op. cit.* [33], p. 150. Chinese instrumentalism regarding the SCO has not escaped Russian notice. In recent years, Moscow's interest in the SCO has diminished as it has invested greater efforts into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community—bodies in which China is not represented.

³⁹ On 2 June 2005, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing exchanged the ratification documents on the border settlement.

⁴⁰ In 2006, for example, the number of Russian visits to China reached 2 million, compared to 900,000 Chinese visits to Russia; author's conversation with Ji Zhiye, Vice-President of CICIR (China Institute of Contemporary International Relations), May 2007. These figures are somewhat misleading, however, since many so-called tourists are in fact shuttle traders, constantly criss-crossing the frontier.

eliminated, feelings of alienation. Persistent harassment of Chinese traders and laborers by local police and criminal gangs in the RFE ensures that Russians continue to be viewed by many as corrupt, racist and violent.⁴¹ The Chinese are also aware that, given the choice, some regional administrations would rather do business with the Japanese and South Koreans, who are seen as both more advanced and less threatening.⁴²

In another sense, too, growing socialization has not been healthy. Dongbei is much more developed socially and economically than the RFE, one of the most neglected and misgoverned regions in the whole Russian Federation. Indeed, there is arguably no other area of the bilateral relationship where the contrast between a rising China and declining Russia is so vivid. The palpable inequality between adjoining regions reinforces neo-colonial views of the RFE and Russia in general—as primarily a source of raw materials for the Chinese economy, and a secondary market for its manufacturing exports.

⁴¹ It is striking how vulnerable such attitudes are to the impact of well-publicized individual incidents. For example, the Russian sinking of the *New Star* cargo ship (February 2009) and closing of Moscow's Cherkizovsky market (June 2009) contributed to a significant decline in positive Chinese feelings towards Russia—from 54% in 2007 to 46% in 2009. See Yu B., "Putin Invited Xi: Overture to 2012," *Comparative Connections*, January 2010, p. 5.

⁴² Author's interviews with local officials in Khabarovsk, June 2007.

The Personal Dimension

During the period of the Sino-Soviet “unbreakable friendship,” many thousands of Chinese studied and worked in the USSR.⁴³ Over the same period, Soviet advisors provided the know-how underpinning the industrialization of the PRC. Moscow’s assistance was crucial to the development of core sectors, such as the military-industrial complex, the nuclear weapons program, space, oil, metals and chemicals.

However, the bitterness of the Sino-Soviet split and subsequent freeze in relations have largely obscured the enormous debt China owes to the USSR. This is due in large part to the failure of the personal dimension—a long history of antipathy that has, at various times, exacerbated policy differences. Even in the 1950s, when the Chinese were reading Russian literature and learning Russian songs, there were acute tensions between Mao and Stalin, and between Mao and Khrushchev. There was also a wider problem. The lopsided, clientistic nature of the relationship (“older brother”/“younger brother”) led to antagonistic perceptions: the Chinese seeing the Soviets as insufferably arrogant; the Soviets regarding the Chinese as petulant and ungrateful.

The distorted nature of Sino-Soviet interaction has had a lasting effect on Chinese attitudes. Despite the proliferation of human contacts at all levels over the past 20 years, there continues to be a marked psychological distance between the two populations, and considerable ignorance and prejudice on both sides. Chinese (and Russian) scholars readily admit that the biggest challenge facing the bilateral relationship today is to foster inter-societal engagement.⁴⁴

For many of the Chinese elite, Russia embodies the past. Its failure to reinvent itself in the post-Cold War era has led many Chinese to believe that it is yesterday’s hero, second-rate compared to the West.⁴⁵ In contrast to the 1950s, Russia’s relevance to Chinese modernization is limited almost entirely to the supply of natural resources. Once important areas of Sino-

⁴³ Former President Jiang Zemin, former Prime Minister Li Peng and ex-Foreign Minister Qian Qichen all spent significant time in the Soviet Union.

⁴⁴ Author’s conversations with various Chinese scholars (2006-10). A leading Russian Sinologist, Alexei Voznesensky, has remarked on “the low level of cross-cultural understanding and the fragility of benign attitudes that may change very quickly to distrust and even hatred.” See “The Rise of China and Russo-Chinese Relations in the New Global Politics of Eastern Asia,” in Akihiro Iwashita (ed.), *Eager Eyes Fixed on Eurasia*, Vol. 2, Sapporo, Slavic Research Center, Hokkaido University, 2007, p. 39. More recently, Zhao Huasheng has observed that “wider low-level issues are becoming the most unstable elements in Sino-Russian relations.” See “Sino-Russian Relations 2009 to 2010: A Perspective from China,” *Russian Analytical Digest*, No. 73, 23 February 2010, p. 8.

⁴⁵ Ma Longshan, cited in Zhu, *op. cit.* [27], p. 29.

Soviet cooperation, such as arms transfers and space cooperation, have remained stagnant or declined significantly in recent years.

More generally, there is a perception of Russia as lazy and complacent, a country resting on its laurels as a traditional great power and wealthy only by virtue of its vast natural resources.⁴⁶ The Chinese contrast their experience of modernization with Russia's much more problematic transition in the post-Soviet era. The main target of their criticism has shifted from the past mistakes of *perestroika* and "shock therapy" to Moscow's ongoing failure to introduce meaningful reforms.⁴⁷ (Curiously, Chinese attitudes reveal a disjunction between admiration/respect for Putin as a "strong leader," and criticisms of his administration's policy failures.)⁴⁸

The problem is no longer one of hostility, but of indifference. Younger Chinese, in particular, see Russia as a factor of no relevance to their lives⁴⁹—a perception confirmed by the numbers of Chinese learning English compared to Russian. Whereas only a few decades ago Russian was by far the most spoken foreign language in China, today there are a mere 120,000 studying it at schools and universities.⁵⁰ Compare this to the estimated 300 million Chinese learning English. The vast majority of Chinese students aspire to do further studies in America and Europe, not Russia.⁵¹ This stems partly from the practical recognition that English is the *lingua franca* of international business, but it also reflects a more general belief that the West offers far higher standards of education (and, consequently, better employment prospects back home).⁵²

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There are few signs of a revival of Chinese popular interest in Russia. Although two-way tourism has increased in recent years, and the number of students taking courses in Russia has grown slightly, there remain significant linguistic and cultural barriers to closer engagement. The positive impact of Russian tourists to China is superficial, and is counterbalanced by the negative perceptions of Russia that resurface from

⁴⁶ Author's interviews with Chinese scholars in Beijing and Shanghai (2009-10).

⁴⁷ Contrary to conventional wisdom, China's experience with economic reform has been more "shock therapy" than gradualist. In the second half of the 1990s, for example, then Premier Zhu Rongji laid off 46 million workers from state-owned enterprises (SOEs).

⁴⁸ By contrast, the Chinese appear to have no particular opinion of Medvedev. Unlike some Western observers, they do not labor an artificial distinction between Putin the "statist" and Medvedev the "modernizer."

⁴⁹ Private communication from a Chinese researcher at a leading brokerage company (September 2010). As one young journalist put it to the author, many Chinese of his generation believe that Russia is "pointless," interview in Shanghai (May 2010).

⁵⁰ Author's conversations with Chinese scholars, Shanghai (May 2007).

⁵¹ During his most recent visit to China, President Medvedev claimed that there were 18,000 Chinese students studying in Russia <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/90001/90776/90883/7151295.html>>. This estimate is higher than most, but still compares poorly to the 85,000 Chinese students taking courses in the UK <<http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/news/latest-news/?view=PressR&id=23165205>>.

⁵² As Jakobsen and Knox point out, "[a]mong Chinese economic leaders, a visiting fellowship at or degree from a Western university is now common." Jakobsen and Knox, *op. cit.* [10], p. 23.

time to time.⁵³ For example, the February 2009 sinking of the *New Star* fishing vessel, and the abrupt closure of Moscow's Cherkizovsky market in June 2009, provoked strong public criticism in China.⁵⁴ Officially sponsored ventures such as “the year of Russia in China,” “the year of China in Russia,” “the year of Russian language in China” and “the year of Chinese language in Russia” are aimed at stimulating inter-societal links. But they also underline the size of the task; tellingly, such artificial measures are largely superfluous in respect of America, Europe, Australia and East Asia.

⁵³ The great majority of genuine Russian tourists come on package holidays and have only limited contact with the local population.

⁵⁴ Seven Chinese died in the sinking of the *New Star*, while thousands of traders suffered serious losses following the closure of the Cherkizovsky market. See Zhao, *op. cit.* [44], p. 6; also Yu, *op. cit.* [72], p. 5.

Partnership of Interests

The Sino-Russian relationship is a partnership of interests, not values. The Chinese operate from the starting point that Russia is a European civilization with a necessarily Western centric world-view. Emphasizing shared norms and values—the primacy of national sovereignty and “non-interference” in the domestic affairs of other states—is useful when Russian and Chinese interests coincide, for example in resisting tougher sanctions against Iran or North Korea, or rejecting Western criticisms about human rights. But such normative “convergence” is essentially instrumental: to legitimate interest-driven policies in Moscow and Beijing. As far as the Chinese are concerned, “values” are a purely domestic affair, to be determined by each country. There is no interest in exporting the so-called “China model” of modernization or in asserting a mythical “Beijing consensus.”⁵⁵

Paradoxically, the fact that Russia and China are so different has been helpful to their relationship in one important respect: it has escaped the burden of expectations that has dogged Moscow’s interaction with the West. Sino-Russian partnership benefits from modest benchmarks and an absence of zeal. A difficult shared history works both ways: on the one hand, it has stored up a still influential legacy of mistrust (see above); but on the other hand it has meant that any tangible progress is accorded significant (and sometimes disproportionate) value.⁵⁶ It helps, too, that both sides recognize that the alternative to “strategic partnership”—a confrontational or frozen relationship—is clearly in no-one’s interest.

All that said, the Chinese look at partnership with Russia in predominantly defensive or prophylactic terms. The primary emphasis is on trouble-shooting, rather than actively working with Russia on a common regional and global agenda. It is indicative that Beijing’s chief priority in the relationship is to secure China’s strategic rear in the northeast and far west (Xinjiang/Central Asia).⁵⁷ This is not only important for intrinsic security reasons, but also because it frees the leadership to concentrate on more important priorities elsewhere: economic modernization, Taiwan, and the development of “comprehensive national power.”

⁵⁵ Remarks by Chinese scholars at the Wilton Park conference, “Dialogue with China: Towards ‘Harmonious Society’—Governance, Participation and Social Cohesion,” 4-6 November 2010.

⁵⁶ The disjunction between the rhetorical and the concrete was apparent during President Medvedev’s September 2010 visit to China. As during previous summits, the two sides signed a raft of agreements, most of which were MOUs (Memorandums of Understanding) and protocols or letters of intent.

⁵⁷ The term, “strategic rear,” is used frequently by Chinese scholars. See Ji Z., “China-Russia Bond,” *Contemporary International Relations*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January/February 2007, p. 18; also Zhao, *op. cit.* [33], p. 148.

The economic relationship

There is some validity to the frequent claim that the Russian and Chinese economies are mutually complementary and, consequently, that bilateral trade has considerable potential for growth. Resource-poor China needs increasing amounts of oil, gas and raw materials to sustain economic modernization, while Russia has abundant natural resources and regularly declares its intention to diversify energy exports.⁵⁸

But rhetoric is one thing, true commitment quite another. The record of Sino-Russian cooperation is mediocre, given the size of the two economies.⁵⁹ Although China has become Russia's second largest trading partner after the European Union, its share of total Russian trade in 2009 was 8.8 percent, compared to the EU's 47.6 percent.⁶⁰ The figures look even more unimpressive when viewed from Beijing; Russia accounts for less than 2 percent of China's total overseas trade. Furthermore, this bilateral trade is increasingly asymmetrical: China imports energy and other natural resources and exports manufactured goods to Russia. Manufacturing's share in Russian exports to China has fallen steadily in recent years to today's all-time low of 1.2 percent. While Moscow is anxious to redress this imbalance by increasing its share of value-added exports and developing a modernization partnership,⁶¹ Beijing is content with the existing structure of bilateral trade and looks to the West for technology and expertise.⁶² Meanwhile, Russian leaders speak bullishly of diversifying energy exports to Asia, yet continue to view Europe as the primary customer; the latter accounts for 80 percent of Russia's oil exports and nearly all its gas exports.⁶³

The Chinese regard the Russians as difficult business partners. They complain, first, that commercial ties are often hostage to geopolitical fortune. It seems there are always ulterior motives: (mis)representing China as an alternative energy market in order to pressure the Europeans on gas; alternating between Chinese and Japanese proposals for the East Siberian-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) oil pipeline; and minimizing Chinese equity ownership in Russian natural resource enterprises for fear of exacerbating strategic vulnerabilities. There is a suspicion that the Russians are less

⁵⁸ "[ESPO] is an important project for us because we are starting to diversify where we send our energy commodities." Vladimir Putin at the opening ceremony for the Russian section of the ESPO pipeline, 29 August 2010, <<http://premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/11956/>>.

⁵⁹ China overtook Japan as the second largest economy in 2010, while in 2009 the World Bank ranked Russia as the twelfth largest, <<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DATASTATISTICS/Resources/GDP.pdf>>.

⁶⁰ <http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2006/september/tradoc_113440.pdf>.

⁶¹ Press conference by President Medvedev, Shanghai, 28 November 2010, <<http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/1024>>.

⁶² See D. Kosyrev, "Needed: A Breakthrough with China," RIA Novosti, <<http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20100928/160753018.html>>.

⁶³ I. Danchenko, E. Downs and F. Hill, "One Step Forward, Two Steps Back? The Realities of a Rising China and Implications for Russia's Energy Ambitions," Brookings Policy Paper, No. 22, August 2010, p. 8.

interested in concluding deals than in using the “China card” to gain leverage over the West.⁶⁴

Second, the Chinese are irritated by the slowness of doing business with Russia. They note the disconnect between multiple memorandums of understanding and framework agreements, and the lack of movement on specific deals.⁶⁵ While it is true that over the past 12-18 months, the 20-year logjam on the Daqing spur to the ESPO pipeline has finally been unblocked, it is no coincidence that this belated progress coincided with the global financial crisis, a massive economic slump in Russia (GDP fell 7.9 percent in 2009—the worst of any G-20 country) and, most critically, the desperate need of Rosneft and Transneft for Chinese finance.⁶⁶ The Chinese emphasize the difficulties of doing business with Russia, not only compared to Western and Asian companies, but also Central Asian ones. Thus, the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) has been negotiating with Gazprom for more than a decade to import Russian gas. But despite signing multiple agreements, the two sides remain far apart on the critical issue of pricing.⁶⁷ By contrast, Beijing’s energy deals with Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were successfully concluded and implemented in just a few years.⁶⁸

The third problem is doubt about Russian good faith. Moscow’s renegeing of an earlier (2003) agreement over ESPO, and Rosneft’s renegotiation of a previous oil-for-loan arrangement with the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC), demonstrate that little can be taken for granted, even if endorsed at the highest level.⁶⁹ From this, Beijing has drawn the conclusion that the key to China’s energy security is to maximize options—within Eurasia as well as globally.⁷⁰

Political caution

The Chinese desire to avoid relying on Russian promises or good will is relevant to political dealings as well. Beijing seeks Moscow’s support on

⁶⁴ Author’s interview with a senior official in China’s National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) (June 2007).

⁶⁵ Comments by Xia Yishan at a Chatham House conference on “The Politics of Central Asian and Caspian Energy,” London, 24 February 2010.

⁶⁶ The Chinese lent US\$ 25 billion to Rosneft and Transneft in return for Russia agreeing to supply 15 million tons per annum over a 20-year period.

⁶⁷ During Medvedev’s September 2010 visit, the two sides signed their fourth gas agreement in six years. On pricing, the difference between them is reported to be as much as US\$ 100 per thousand cubic meters. See S. Wagstyl, “Russia-China Gas Deal: Wen to sign?” Beyond BRICs, *Financial Times* blog, 22 November 2010, <<http://blogs.ft.com/beyond-brics/2010/11/22/152251/>>; also “Russia/China: Energy Ties Yield Mutual Benefits,” *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 29 September 2010.

⁶⁸ Comments by Xia Yishan at Chatham House, 24 February 2010.

⁶⁹ In May 2003, Hu Jintao and Putin endorsed a YUKOS-CNPC agreement to build a spur connecting the ESPO pipeline to the main Chinese oil refinery at Daqing in Heilongjiang province.

⁷⁰ Chinese National Oil Companies (NOCs) are engaged in 200 overseas projects in 50 different countries. See “China: Energy Companies Change Strategic Tack,” *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, 26 April 2010.

“core interests”—the “one China” policy and Taiwan; denying legitimacy to the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan cause; and, most recently, territorial claims in the South China Sea. But China has modest expectations of Russian behavior. In the event of Sino-American confrontation over Taiwan, for example, they understand implicitly that Moscow would hardly go beyond pro forma moral-political support. On Iran, the Russian government has put some distance between itself and the Chinese leadership over UN sanctions,⁷¹ while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has even offered to “mediate” between Beijing and the Dalai Lama—an offer strongly criticized in the Chinese media.⁷² Underpinning Chinese doubts about Russian intentions is the assumption that Moscow’s commitment to bilateral cooperation is often contingent on the state of its relations with the West, and particularly with Washington.

Overall, the Chinese approach to cooperation with Russia may be characterized as one of skeptical pragmatism. It recognizes that the Russian elite, for all its talk about a “balanced” foreign policy, a “multipolar world order” and the need for greater engagement with Asia, remains uncomfortable with

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China’s rise.⁷³ The Chinese have learned to live with these lukewarm sentiments, partly because there is not much they can do to change them, but more because their own focus is overwhelmingly on engagement with the West. They see Russia as a niche partner with whom it is important to maintain stable and broadly cooperative relations, yet whose direct impact on Chinese interests is relatively circumscribed.

⁷¹ As part of the US-Russia reset, Moscow became openly critical of the Ahmadinejad regime and acceded to Washington’s demand for tougher UN sanctions against Tehran. The Chinese eventually acquiesced to a new round of sanctions in June 2010, but under duress—they feared they would be left isolated by Russia’s more accommodating stance.

⁷² Yu B., “Reset under Medvedev: *Zapad-Politik* and *Vostok 2010*,” *Comparative Connections*, July 2010, p. 10.

⁷³ Interview with a Chinese Russianist, Shanghai (May 2010).

Russia-Watching as Futurology

China faces an increasingly challenging international environment over coming decades. Its very success is provoking mounting anxiety, and not only in the West. Beijing's positive messages—"harmonious world," "win-win solutions," "interdependency"—are being lost amidst the growing perception in the West that China is a free-rider, whose strategic intentions are at best unclear and at worst ominous.

In this problematic context, Chinese international relations scholars are understandably fixated on the changing nature of Sino-American interaction. To a lesser extent, they are also looking at other great powers: a still economically influential Europe; an increasingly assertive India; and emerging powers in Asia and Latin America.

Visions of Russia's future

Russia, by contrast, is viewed as a power of diminishing importance—both in global terms and more specifically in relation to China.⁷⁴ There is little conviction that the Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" will expand much beyond its present parameters of non-committal political engagement and asymmetrical economic cooperation. Indeed, their interaction may become more difficult, as Russia feels strategically and perhaps even existentially threatened by China's rise.

Managing Russia will continue to be an important Chinese foreign policy priority for the foreseeable future. The preoccupation is less with a Russia threat *per se* than with the possibility that Moscow might join with others against Chinese interests. In this connection, one of the key questions will be the extent to which the US-Russia reset is successful in establishing long-term strategic cooperation between Washington and Moscow. (There is much less concern in Beijing about Russia-Europe convergence, since the latter is seen as an insignificant *political* actor.⁷⁵) The Chinese are doubtful about the durability of the "reset," but are nevertheless wary that enhanced US-Russia cooperation could come at their expense.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Panel discussion, "The Global Financial Crisis and the Rise and Fall of the Great Powers," 6th Beijing Forum, 6 November 2009.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ An op-ed in the influential *Global Times* suggested that the US and Russia had deliberately marginalized China from resolution of the crisis in Kyrgyzstan. Yu, *op. cit.* [72], p. 10-11.

As for Russia itself, the Chinese see its semi-authoritarian system as basically stable, and envisage that the Putinist elite will stay in control. There is no expectation that it will become a Western-style democracy or fall apart under the weight of internal contradictions. To the Chinese, the Russia of future decades will look rather like it does today: politically stable, economically unreconstructed, and with a strong sense of great power entitlement in international relations.⁷⁷

If this general prognosis turns out to be correct, Chinese attitudes toward Russia will undergo only gradual change. The self-styled “strategic partnership” will be characterized by public respect, but half-hearted engagement. Cooperation will center on a narrowing range of common interests rather than shared perceptions. And the widening gap between a rising China and declining Russia will cause tensions between them, but with little risk of real confrontation.

Game-changers

The interesting question is how far Chinese attitudes *could* change in response to developments in Russia, China and the international system. Among many potential game-changers, it is worth briefly mentioning six that could significantly influence the way the Chinese look at Russia.

The first is that *political and economic modernization in Russia takes off*. The emergence of a more democratic polity next to a still authoritarian regime in China would complicate Sino-Russian relations. Although it is improbable that Moscow would seek to “export” liberal democracy, a growing values-gap between close neighbors could revive historical and geopolitical tensions. A democratic Russia, for example, might align itself more closely with the Western powers on Iran, become more assertive on strategic disarmament, and even involve itself (“interfere”) in “core” Chinese interests such as Tibet, Taiwan and Xinjiang. A modernizing (even if not necessarily democratic) Russia would undoubtedly exert greater influence in regional and global affairs, often in competition with Chinese interests.

Second, at the other end of the scale, the advent of an *aggressive nationalism in Russia* would fuel Chinese perceptions of a new wave of Sinophobia. Otherwise normal bilateral differences would become heavily politicized, and geopolitical competition could escalate in sensitive regions such as Central Asia (see below). A repressive regime in Moscow might also adopt harsh measures to contain Chinese influence in the Russian Far East, leading to a breakdown in cross-border cooperative arrangements and an increase in “incidents”.

Third, *China’s modernization goes wrong*. Economic and social contradictions could lead to political instability and an increasingly neuralgic foreign policy in Beijing. In this event, Chinese attitudes toward its northern neighbor might assume more virulent forms. The major risk here is not the

⁷⁷ Interviews with Chinese scholars (2006-10).

scenario popularized by Russian doomsayers—that “millions” of rootless Chinese will flood into the RFE—but rather that Beijing could play up differences on a whole host of political, economic and security issues: competing interests in Central Asia, difficulties in commercial negotiations, disagreements over strategic disarmament and non-proliferation, and so on.

Fourth, a *serious deterioration in US-China relations* would raise the stakes in the formation of a new world order. Moscow might find it increasingly tempting to play the “China card,” indulge in strategic triangularism with Washington and Beijing, and revive ideas of Russia as bridge (and balancer) between East and West.⁷⁸ Such ambitions would resonate negatively in China. The threat of geopolitical encirclement would rear its head, and an angry Beijing could react by becoming more aggressive in Central Asia, as well as more militant in its overall conduct of international relations.

Fifth, *geopolitical and security tensions escalate in Central Asia*. Although China has been careful not to directly challenge Russia’s regional leadership, its growing economic influence is, of itself, creating new realities.⁷⁹ Over time, the Chinese may become less sensitive to Moscow’s concerns or, alternatively, the Russians could react more vigorously to the threat of economic and strategic displacement from the region. Doubts over the political succession in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and the inherent fragility of the Central Asian regimes, would supply the tinder for a growing rivalry between Moscow and Beijing and lead to an upsurge in radical nationalist, anti-Russian sentiment in China. Such tensions could be exacerbated by an international system that is shaped, not by Moscow’s vision of a multipolar world order, but by a Sino-American bipolarity in which Russia and others are secondary players.

Finally, there is the constant possibility of *major change on the Korean peninsula*—whether implosion of the DPRK regime, Korean reunification, armed confrontation, or the introduction of Chinese-style modernization in the North. The prospect of some sort of change appears all the more likely given recent events: the sinking of the *Cheonan*, the expansion of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program, the DPRK attack on Yeonpyeong island, and the transfer of power from Kim Jong-Il to Kim Jong-Un. Although Russia has played a discreet role so far, it may seek to involve itself more actively in Korean affairs. It might no longer automatically support Chinese policies, but instead maneuver between the various parties or even side with the US and its allies against Beijing. The adverse impact on Sino-Russian relations could be considerable.

⁷⁸ Moscow has plenty of form in this regard. See B. Lo, “Russia, China and the United States—From Strategic Triangularism to the Post-Modern Triangle,” *Russie/NEI Visions*, No. 47 and *Proliferation Papers*, No. 32, February 2010, p. 17-20.

⁷⁹ B. Lo, “China’s ‘Permanent Reset,’” <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/Chinas-Permanent-Reset-15001>>.

Conclusion

Sino-Russian relations have gone through significant highs and lows since the mid-19th century: the “unequal treaties” in the 1860s; the “unbreakable friendship” of the 1950s; the subsequent Sino-Soviet freeze; and, most recently, the evolution of “strategic partnership”. During these periods, Chinese attitudes have undergone corresponding fluctuations. Indeed, the main reason for their heterogeneity today is that they reflect the accumulated, messy imprint of previous eras, as well as the complexities of contemporary Chinese society and an ever more globalized world.

Under such conditions there can be little uniformity or predictability. Historical determinism, with its bias toward linear explanations and “inevitability,” is a poor guide to how China may view Russia in the future. The two countries have endured a difficult relationship through much of their history, and it is natural to imagine this will always be the case. It is equally tempting to believe that they have moved on from the misunderstandings of the past, and that the complementarity of their economic and security interests points instead to a genuine and lasting strategic partnership.

But reality is much less straightforward. Chinese attitudes toward Russia arise out of a context—domestic and external—that is in constant flux. What matter most are not the grandiose visions of politicians or a much-vaunted “tide of history”, but events whose arrival is often unforeseen and whose long-term consequences are difficult to assess. It is important to remember, too, that Russia is merely one component—and by no means the most important—in a larger Chinese foreign policy. Ultimately, the real issue is not so much how China sees Russia, but how it adapts to a fluid and unstable global environment. This, more than anything else, will determine the character and prospects of Sino-Russian interaction in the 21st century.