

[연구논문]

# The Emerging Anti-American Axis of Russia and China: Implications for Asia\*

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## 1. Introduction

Russia and China may now be experiencing a pivotal moment in their post-Cold War relationship, which will determine whether they will shift from a non-committal partnership to a strategic alliance. Being the two strongest powers on the Eurasian landmass, the state of the Russia – China relationship is of profound significance for the world's largest continent, and particularly for its Asian side, where Beijing displays growing ambitions.

The paper investigates the evolution of Russo-Chinese strategic relationship – from its beginnings in the mid-1990s to the present, focusing on the motives that have lately been driving Beijing and Moscow ever closer, above all their respective antagonisms with

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Washington. It then goes on to assess possible implications that Sino-Russian entente may have for Asian security order. In conclusion, three basic scenarios are outlined of possible future configurations in the Russia-China-US strategic triangle and their impact on the Asian balance of power.

### **(1) The beginning of the “strategic partnership”**

In the immediate aftermath of the breakup of the Soviet Union, the Sino-Russian relationship experienced a brief period of uncertainty. The newly democratic Moscow was eager to join the West, to which it looked as the political and economic model. Russia’s President Boris Yeltsin and his Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev were more than willing to act in lockstep with the United States, Western Europe, and the Western-led institutions. Understandably, this caused great concern in Beijing. For one, the collapse of the Soviet Union was viewed there as a serious blow to the communist ideology with potentially adversarial consequences for the CCP’s rule. Beijing also feared that, with Russia joining the Western liberal camp, China’s isolation in the wake of the Tiananmen events would become even more complete. The geopolitical triangle of Washington-Beijing-Moscow, which China had so skillfully exploited since the early 1970s, threatened to reconfigure in such a radical way as to leave Beijing out in the cold facing the triumphant West. This would doom the PRC to the pariah status in international community.

To Chinese rulers’ relief, these fears never materialized. The new Kremlin inhabitants had no intention of antagonizing or alienating

China, even for the sake of proving Russia's newfound democratic credentials. After a short pause, Boris Yeltsin continued Gorbachev's course aimed at improving relations with Beijing.<sup>1)</sup> In December 1992, Yeltsin visited Beijing (with Jiang Zemin reciprocating in September 1994). By contrast, Yeltsin's maiden visit to Tokyo, which had been scheduled to take place ahead of China's trip, in September 1992, was abruptly cancelled by the Russian side because of the Kremlin's unwillingness to make concessions on the South Kuril Islands dispute, which the Japanese saw as the main item on the bilateral agenda. It was an early indication that China, not Japan, was going to be Russia's main friend in Asia.

The mid-1990s marked a watershed in Russia's foreign policy. Russia began to feel bitter disappointment, and even anger, with the West. It was seen as treating Russia as a defeated adversary which could at best be a junior partner in the Western-dominated order. The list of major Russian grievances included NATO's eastern enlargement, lack of economic aid from the West, and refusal to grant Moscow its rightful place in the international system. Disenchantment with the West induced Moscow to seek closer ties with the PRC, which, for its part, was happy to embrace Russia. This was manifested in Yeltsin's visit to China in April 1996, during which the two sides stated their intention to develop "relations of an

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1) That said, there were moments in the early 1990s when the Kremlin's chaotic decision-making put Russo-Chinese relations at risk. The most serious incident happened in 1992 when one of Yeltsin's trusted aides persuaded him to sign a decree allowing the opening of Taiwan's de facto embassy in Moscow, which was almost tantamount to recognizing Taipei. The scandalous decision was quickly reversed after protests from China backed by Russia's ministry of foreign affairs.

equal trustworthy partnership aimed at strategic partnership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Alexander Lukin “The Russian Approach” 148). Yeltsin declared that there were no more controversial questions between Russia and China and from that time onward the strategic partnership became official policy for the two countries (Alexander Lukin “The Russian Approach” 148). In April 1997, in Moscow, Yeltsin and Jiang signed Declaration on a Multipolar World and Formation of a New International Order, where they stated their common vision which was in clear opposition to the US-centered hegemony.

Another reason for Russia’s shift toward China was the desire to gain economic benefits by expanding trade with its fast-growing economy. Whereas in the early 1990s China’s economic prospects looked uncertain and the West appeared the only option for trade and investment, by the second half of the 1990s the economic rise of the PRC, and its potential, was beyond doubt.

## **(2) The strategic partnership under Putin**

Vladimir Putin, who succeeded Yeltsin in 2000, continued to emphasize good relations with China. In June 2001, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization was launched, in whose establishment and further functioning Beijing and Moscow have played the role of co-leaders. The SCO quickly became one of Eurasia’s most important regional arrangements and has served as another major channel of Sino-Russian collaboration.

In July 2001, Putin and Jiang signed Treaty of Good Neighborly Friendship and Cooperation. The treaty became the legal foundation

for the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Inter alia, the parties affirmed their respect for joint borders and support for the territorial integrity and national sovereignty of their partner. Beijing and Moscow declared that they did not have any territorial claims between themselves, vowing to turn the shared border into a “border of eternal peace and friendship.” The treaty pronounced that it was not “aimed at any third country” and its wording was careful to avoid any phrases that could be interpreted as anti-American.

Unlike the 1997 declaration, the treaty did not even mention the multipolar world concept. This change in tone, as compared to the late 1990s, was mainly attributable to Putin’s desire for closer relations with the West. In his early years in office, Putin saw the United States and Western Europe, rather than China, as Russia’s top partners. This became especially apparent after September 11. While Putin was the first foreign leader to call George W. Bush and offer America all necessary help, he did not speak with Jiang Zemin until a full week later. As Alexander Lukin (“The Russian Approach” 160) points out, “Russian contacts with China remained at the pre-September 11 level against the background of a radical intensification of Moscow’s relations with the United States, NATO, and Western Europe.” This caused apprehension in China over Russia’s possible shift in favor of the West. Chinese experts saw the Putin government as having lost enthusiasm about advocating multipolarity for fear of offending the Americans. Chinese security analysts were particularly alarmed by Moscow’s decision to allow Central Asian countries to grant the United States access to their territory and airspace to wage war in Afghanistan. The Chinese also took notice of Russia’s

increasing tolerance of NATO's eastward expansion (Li 160).

Moscow's somewhat reduced eagerness for engagement with Beijing was also evident in the geo-economic sphere. In 2002, when a major state-owned oil company, *Slavneft*, was put up for privatization, the Russian government publicly refused to sell it to CNPC, although the Chinese oil giant offered the highest bid (Danilov). Another high-profile controversy involved the projected oil pipeline from Eastern Siberia to China. An agreement to build a pipeline from Russian Angarsk to Daqing in northeastern China was reached in 2001, but just a few months later Moscow began negotiating with Tokyo an alternative route to Nakhodka on the Pacific Coast, targeting Japan and the United States, rather than China, as main consumers of the Eastern Siberian oil. Not surprisingly, those about-faces by Moscow caused consternation in Beijing. Some cooling in the relationship did not preclude Russia and China from signing an agreement in 2004 that formally completed the long process of border settlement between the two countries. The agreement decided the ownership of several remaining islands and islets on Amur River which had been left undetermined by the 1991 Soviet-Chinese border treaty.

By the mid-2000s Sino-Russian political relationship began to pick up steam again. This was largely due to visible deterioration of relations between Russia and the West. The Putin administration felt that its goodwill and concessions were not reciprocated by Washington. The West would not recognize Russia as an equal partner and continued what the Kremlin perceived as a brazen encroachment upon Russia's sphere of vital interests in its "near abroad." The Putin

government was especially alarmed by the “color revolutions” that took place in Georgia, Ukraine and Kirgizstan, viewing them as engineered by the State Department. By then Russia, buttressed by the strong economic performance on the back of high hydrocarbon prices, had enough confidence to stand up to the West. Putin’s Munich speech in February 2007 was a stark warning that Moscow was prepared to pick a fight. This necessitated a new closeness with Beijing. One of the initial signs of the stronger Russia-China partnership was the SCO’s collective decision in July 2005 to call on the United States to withdraw its military bases from Central Asia.

In a curious reversal of roles from the early 2000s, Russia began to act increasingly anti-American, while China was quite cautious, reluctant to support the combative drive of Putin’s Munich statements. China made it clear that it was not ready to side with Russia in her tensions with the United States so as not to jeopardize Beijing’s all-important relations with Washington. The Chinese leadership under Hu Jintao was also somewhat uncomfortable with Moscow’s recalcitrant rhetoric and actions as they obviously did not fit with Beijing’s concept of the “harmonious world” (Portyakov). This stance was manifest in the wake of the August 2008 war that Russia waged against Georgia. Beijing conspicuously declined to approve of Moscow’s actions and did not recognize the independence of Russian-backed South Ossetia and Abkhazia. A temporary decline in the political dimension of the Sino-Russian partnership led some observers to the conclusion that, after having passed its peak in around 2005, the relationship would be experiencing “growing distrust and complexity” (Hyodo 44-53).

However, by 2012, Russian and Chinese views on the core issues of international politics began to converge again. Russia's anti-Western posture remained more or less unchanged, so the main change occurred in China's foreign policies. The 2008-09 recession that wreaked havoc on the West seemed to have given Beijing confidence that the balance of power was inexorably moving in its favor. This coincided with leadership transition in the PRC. The cautious and uncharismatic Hu Jintao was succeeded by the much tougher and seemingly more nationalistic Xi Jinping, whose foreign policy bore discernible features of great-power offensive realism. China's growing geopolitical ambitions, particularly in East Asia, were clearly at odds with what America stood for. Russia and China now almost equally shared in anti-Americanism, turning their strategic partnership into a quasi-alliance.

The reinvigorated Sino-Russian entente amply displayed itself, when the two countries blocked the Western-backed UN vote on Syria in 2012. The Ukraine crisis, which started to develop in the fall of 2013, further consolidated Moscow-Beijing axis. China's response to the developments around Ukraine was telling. Ever since the crisis began to unfold, the Chinese media tended to blame Western meddling for what was happening there. There was no sign whatsoever of Beijing's condemnation of the Kremlin's moves in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. China's official press commentary was sympathetic with Moscow, stressing that Putin's determination to protect the interests of Russia and Russian-speaking citizens is "quite understandable" ("Commentary"). Many of China's netizens blogging on the websites, such as *Weibo*, displayed admiration for Putin's

defiance of the West.

Beijing's abstention at the UN Security Council vote on Crimea could hardly be interpreted as opposition to Russia. In fact, Beijing made it quite clear that it disapproved of using the UN stage to pressure Russia. What was even more important was that China ruled out any possibility that it might join political and economic sanctions against Russia. In terms of international diplomacy, such a stance by China could be interpreted as nothing other than benevolent neutrality toward the Kremlin.

Putin's visits to Shanghai in May 2014 and Beijing in November 2014, as well as other multiple Russia-China high-level meetings during the year, underscored the growing closeness between the two powers – despite, or perhaps because of, the Ukraine mess. The two sides concluded a host of agreements, substantially expanding and deepening their cooperation in, among other fields, energy, finance, and high-tech sector. The strengthened ties between Moscow and Beijing were epitomized by a 30-year 400 billion USD mega deal to supply natural gas from Eastern Siberia to northeastern China, followed a few months later by another long-term agreement that would allow China to receive gas from Western Siberia (“Russia”).

## **2. Russia's threat perception: between the Occident and the Orient**

It is certainly true that both Russia's governing elites and ordinary people are wary of China. During the past two centuries Russia was

more advanced and powerful as compared to China, encouraging the Russians to think of the Middle Kingdom somewhat condescendingly. That traditional perception is now being painfully reassessed. Russian leaders are steeped in the balance-of-power politics. They strongly believe in the maxim that what really matters in international arena are capabilities rather than intentions. From this perspective, some form of entente with the US to insure against the growing Chinese power could make sense (see, for example, Mearsheimer). Besides, many would argue that Russia, for all its Asiatic elements, historically and culturally leans more toward Europe and the West. The main problem with such arguments, though, is that the US-led West is seen by Moscow as a bigger, and more immediate, threat than China. There are four principal reasons for that.

First, the West is widely perceived as seeking to transform Russia in its own image, so that Russia would lose its core identity. Efforts by the US and EU to export democracy and liberal values are viewed as aggressive moves designed to undermine the ideational and institutional foundations of Russia's statehood. By contrast, Moscow highly appreciates China's principle of non-interference in other countries' affairs and its tolerance of diverse models of political and socio-economic development.

Second, ever since the 1990s Moscow has been worried about the West's penetration of Russia's "near abroad", that is the territory of the former Soviet Union that the Kremlin deems its sphere of influence. The tensions spiked under the George W. Bush administration, culminating in the 2008 brief war between Russia and Georgia, a U.S. ally. Under Obama, Washington somewhat reduced

its involvement in the post-Soviet space. Nevertheless, the Kremlin remains deeply suspicious of the U.S. intentions in Russia's backyard. For example, Moscow was deeply offended by Hillary Clinton's remarks that the United States would try to prevent the Russian-led re-integration of the post-Soviet space (Clover). The Ukraine crisis of 2013-14 only served to underscore the depth of divisions between Russia and the West over the future of the post-Soviet countries.

China has also been increasing its engagement with the former Soviet republics, especially in Central Asia. Yet, it has been careful not to provoke Russian ire. China's links to post-Soviet states has mainly been economic, not challenging Russia's residual political hegemony. As opposed to the US-sponsored color revolutions, Beijing has never acted against the post-Soviet ruling regimes with close ties to the Kremlin or tried to establish military presence in the former Soviet Union. To be sure, Moscow is not particularly happy about Beijing's growing economic leverage over Central Asian republics, but is willing to put up with it as long as China respects Russian strategic interests in this area.

Third, America's military strategy is a more serious concern to Russia than China's. In particular, NATO's missile defense program causes grave apprehensions in Moscow. There is a strong opinion within the national strategic establishment that once completed, the missile shield will be able to negate Russia's nuclear deterrent. On the contrary, China's current military posture is assessed as less of a security risk to Russia, because Beijing's defense modernization and deployments are principally aimed at the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and the Western Pacific.

Fourthly, foreign policy rhetoric and diplomatic style matter a lot in shaping Moscow's threat perceptions. America is not shy talking about its being the sole superpower and its determination to lead the world, which evokes much irritation in Russia. Meanwhile, China endorses the idea of a diverse and multi-polar world, wholly backed by Moscow. Furthermore, actions and words by American high-profile politicians and diplomats often contribute to America's image as a country adversarial to Russia. For example, Mitt Romney, a man who had a chance of becoming the next President of the United States, repeatedly labeled Russia as America's top "geopolitical foe". Mike McFaul, the former U.S. ambassador in Moscow, had a record of controversial gestures infuriating the Kremlin, such as meeting opposition leaders or publicly alleging that Moscow paid "bribes" to Central Asian leaders ("Ambassador"). It is simply impossible to imagine Chinese top politicians and diplomats behaving that way. On the contrary, Beijing appears 'hypersensitive' to Russian sensibilities (Rozman 27).

Historical aspects of the relationship should not be overlooked as well. Sino-Russian relations are often portrayed as troubled, conflict-prone and fraught with mutual suspicions. That may be partly true, but one also needs to be aware of the more positive historical legacy in the bilateral ties. The two mighty states' special relationship goes back to the Treaty of Nerchinsk of 1689 which established a border between China and Russia. At that time, the treaty was unique, in that the Qing Empire treated the Russians as equals (Cohen 218). And in 1715 the Chinese imperial government permitted Moscow to establish a Russian Orthodox mission in Beijing, which assumed the

role of a de facto embassy, the only foreign mission of its kind in China for over a century (Kissinger 51). Significantly, Russia and China have never fought a major war with each other. There were, of course, military incidents and border clashes, but they never reached the scale of an all-out warfare.

It is also amazing how smoothly the power transition process took place between the two countries. Dmitri Trenin is correct to say that “[n]o other great-power relationship in modern history, including the U.S.-Russian one, has undergone a change so abrupt, profound and quick, under peacetime conditions – and no other relationship has undergone such a momentous change so smoothly. In terms of power, Russia and China have traded places and have happily adapted to the new situation” (Trenin 5). Trenin goes on to argue that this owed, in the first place, “to the management of the relationship by the two countries’ leaderships and elites” (Trenin 5).

The Polish scholar Alicja Curanovic notices that, especially considering their extremely long shared border, Russo-Chinese relations are unique in their relatively harmonious and peaceful history. It appears that Russians have historically found ways of rationalizing any perceived risks from China. This stands in stark contrast to Russia’s relationship with the West, which has been consistently demonized by most Russian regimes. Throughout Russian history it was the West rather than the East that was perceived as the gravest threat. This difference, Curanovic explains, could be partly attributed to the religious factor. Orthodox Christianity is regarded as one of the essential components of “Russianness”. It is important that Orthodox Christianity has always emphasized

differences between Russia, the sanctuary of the “true faith,” and the renegade and apostate West, which is aggressively trying to destroy Russia and its identity (Curanovic). China, which has no strong religious affiliation, has never been seen as a spiritual threat: “Russians, at least partly because of the intense effort to differentiate themselves ideologically from Europe, could afford relatively greater objectivism in relations with Chinese” (Curanovic 228). “The West” was the dominant Other in the self-identification of Russians, while relations with “the East” were mostly a function of interaction between Russia and the West (Curanovic 221).

It is interesting to trace how, in the post-Soviet Russia, the perception of “China threat” fluctuated depending on the state of relations with the West. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when there was still a possibility for Russia being integrated with the West, Russian political leaders and senior officials made statements that explicitly or implicitly referred to the ‘China threat.’ For instance, in 1995 the minister of construction Yefim Basin warned in a press interview that the Chinese and Koreans were poised to invade the Russian Far East demographically turning it into “a sovereign republic of narrow eyes” (cited in Alexander Lukin “The Russian Approach” 147). In 1996, he was echoed by the defense minister Pavel Grachev who alerted the public that Chinese were trying to conquer the RFE through peaceful means (cited in Alexander Lukin “The Russian Approach” 147). In 2000, in Blagoveshchensk none other than Vladimir Putin himself talked of the menacing possibility that “even the indigenous Russian population in a few decades will speak mainly Japanese, Chinese, and Korean” (cited in “Obraz”).

A decade later the tone of the country's leadership decidedly changed. In September 2010, Putin rejected any notion of 'China threat':

Foreign experts keep telling us about the threat from China. We are not worried at all...There is the huge Far East, Eastern Siberia, an under-populated territory. And there is powerful China, over a billion people. We should be afraid. We are not afraid...There is no threat on the side of China...We have co-existed with China for a thousand years. We had difficult moments, and at times better relations, but we know each other very well and we have got used to respecting each other...China does not have to populate the Far East and Eastern Siberia to get what it needs: natural resources...We have just finished the construction of an oil pipeline. We are ready to build two gas pipelines. We will be supplying coal to them...China does not want to worsen relations with us to solve its current goals ("Highlights").

The consensus in the Kremlin is that, in the foreseeable future China will not pose a threat to Russia. This point was nicely summarized by General (Ret.) Leonid Reshetnikov, who heads Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, a think tank under Russian President:

We are closely following the situation in China. Of course, this is a big country, where different factions exist, including expansionist ones. But we are confident that China is interested in good relations with Russia. China's main rival is the United States, not Russia. Therefore China needs a well-protected and quiet rear area. For the next 30-40 years Russia is unlikely to face any threat from China. Beijing is doing its best to avoid whatever might cause Russia's irritation and negative reaction. A serious conflict between Russia and China is possible only if grave mistakes are made by us

or by the Chinese, or else if the American agents do a good job in China. The Western countries are keen to set Russia and China against each other. They keep forcing on us this China threat notion. Yet we will never buy that (Remarks by Leonid Reshetnikov 2014).

### **(1) The drivers of Sino-Russian alliance**

Since its inception in the second half of the 1990s, Sino-Russian strategic partnership has received varying assessments. Until recently, prior to the Ukraine events, the dominant view has been that it is “an inherently limited partnership”, which is imbalanced and fraught due to cultural barriers and the two countries’ significantly divergent interests that are likely to diverge even more in the future (Lo; Kotkin). Any idea of upgrading the partnership to the level of alliance has been rejected as unrealistic (Kuhrt).

Yet, early on, there was also a dissenting view that saw Russo-Chinese collaboration as something much more durable and having great potential for further development. In 2001, Ariel Cohen characterized it as an ‘emerging alliance’ that will require careful monitoring, predicting that ‘the degree to which the Sino-Russian alliance may become anti-Western in future depends on how deeply the two Eurasian powers feel that the United States threatens their interests’ (Ariel Cohen). In his 2008 article Tom Wilkins concluded that the Moscow-Beijing partnership was “a highly efficacious vehicle for coordinating Russo-Chinese-SCO security policy. Those who doubt its capacities and durability may be in for a shock as it increasingly exercises dominance in Central Asia and begins to wield powerful influence on the global stage”(Wilkins 378).

It seems that the latter view, emphasizing the potency of Russo-Chinese collaboration, is borne out by the developments in recent years: since 2012, there has been a steady increase in the depth and scope of the bilateral relationship. Of course, it would not be accurate to describe the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership as an alliance yet, but the relationship is certainly growing stronger. One indication is the frequency of summit-level meetings. In 2013 alone, Putin and Xi met five times.<sup>2)</sup> It was highly symbolic that Xi's maiden visit abroad was to Moscow (in March 2013). Indeed, Russo-Chinese partnership, as it stands today, looks much more solid and efficient than some of Washington's "treaty alliances", such as, for example, the US-Thailand alliance.

What are, then, the main drivers of Sino-Russian entente? First and foremost, it is predicated on shared hostility toward America's hegemony in world politics. Viewing themselves as great powers, both Moscow and Beijing are loath to the idea that there should be the systemic hegemon who dictates and adjudicates global rules, particularly considering the fact that Russia remembers itself as having been a superpower, while China preserves the memories of the Middle Kingdom's glory. From the balance of power perspective, it is only natural that two lesser poles should join forces against the preponderant player.

Going down to the regional level of geopolitics, the US hegemony prevents Russia and China from enjoying dominance in what they

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2) Bilateral summit in Moscow; the BRICS summit in Durban; the G20 summit in St. Petersburg; the Shanghai Cooperation Summit in Bishkek; and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Meeting in Bali.

regard as their rightful domains. For Russia this is the post-Soviet space, for China East Asia.

Finally, there is an issue of identity. Both Moscow and Beijing see the US-led West as the primary threat to their nations' civilizational selves as well as legitimacy of their political regimes. Gilbert Rozman makes the compelling case that what pulls China and Russia ever closer together are their national identities containing significant elements of the shared communist legacy. Despite the lack of cultural affinity and trust, the Sino-Russian identity gap is likely to remain much narrower and less obtrusive than the two nations' respective gaps with the United States. For both states, the post-Cold War era is best characterized as a struggle between two civilizations: theirs and the West. The fervent anti-Americanism cements their partnership (Rozman).

## **(2) Russian rationale for entente with China**

As noted earlier, since around 2012 Sino-Russian partnership began to grow noticeably stronger, raising the question whether we may be seeing a full-blown alliance being born. The main reason for the reinforced ties is that Russia and China have entered what is likely to be for them a prolonged period of heightened rivalry with the United States and its allies.

Putin's comeback for a third term in 2012 signified the end of the attempted, and failed, "reset" with the United States. Russia's relations with the West deteriorated to the point where many started to speak of a Cold War 2.0. Annexing Crimea and intervening in

Ukraine, Putin crossed the Rubicon. Unwilling to sacrifice what it sees as its vital interests in Ukraine and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space, Moscow began to brace itself for an extended confrontation with the West. In this battle, where main weapons employed by the West are economic sanctions, China's support for Russia will be crucial. Unlike the superpower Soviet Union, which was capable of confronting the West on its own, contemporary Russia needs allies, of which China is by far the most important, especially in the economic realm.

In the course of the Ukraine mess, signs began to emerge that Moscow was reconsidering the level of its partnership with Beijing. Whereas before the Ukraine situation an alliance with China was completely out of question, in 2014 it became a possibility. There was no better indication of that than Putin's statements. In October 2011, in an interview to Russian major TV channels, Putin dubbed China one of Russia's "very serious partners" and dismissed any notion of "China threat", but at the same time he ruled out Russian involvement in the "struggle" between China and the US, essentially proclaiming Moscow's strategic equidistance between the two most powerful actors:

..however attractive mineral resources of Eastern Siberia and the Far East could be in the contemporary world, the main struggle is not about them. The main battle is for the world primacy, and in this we are not going to contend with China. In this China has other rivals. So let them deal with one another (Interview with Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin 2011).

Just two and a half years later, Putin's evaluation of the strategic

partnership with China was palpably different: the sense of deliberate neutrality was gone. During his televised talk show – a highly scripted event with pre-arranged questions from the audience – he was asked if it was possible to formalize Russo-Chinese partnership ‘as a military and political union.’ After extolling the excellent state of the bilateral relations, Putin’s response to the question was neither in the affirmative nor in the negative, which most probably was a subtle way of signaling that Moscow at the very least did not exclude entering into a more alliance-like relationship with China:

Speaking of our relations with China, they are progressing very successfully in terms of trust and collaboration, which are unprecedented... Generally, I think that the bloc mentality is a thing of the past. NATO was established as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union and to the Soviet Union’s policy in Eastern Europe. The Warsaw Pact was signed in response. The Soviet Union ceased to exist, but NATO remains. We are told it is changing and becoming more of a political organisation. But Article 5 is still in effect, which is an article on mutual military support. Who does NATO act against? Why is it expanding towards our borders?

Are there plans to establish new blocs? I don’t know; we haven’t thought about this. But it is absolutely clear that we will be expanding collaboration with China. Our trade with the United States is 27.5 [billion], but trade with China is 87 billion, and it is growing. And experts will agree that China is gradually becoming the number one economic power. The question is when it will happen: in 15, 20 or 25 years. But everybody understands that it is inevitable...Therefore, we will certainly continue to develop relations with China. We have never had such trust-based relations in the military industry. We began holding joint drills at sea and on land, in both China and the Russian Federation. This gives us reason to assume that Russian-Chinese relations will be a significant factor in global policy and will substantially

influence modern international relations (“Direct line”).

A few months later, meeting with the head of the Chinese government, Li Keqiang, Putin stated that Russia and China were “natural partners and natural allies,” using the word “ally” that Moscow had shunned before with respect to Beijing (“Putin”).

Similar changes in attitude were visible in Russia’s expert community. According to the surveys of foreign policy experts conducted by Russian Institute of Strategic Studies, in 2011 the majority of respondents believed that Russia should take a stance of neutrality in the Asia-Pacific, but in 2013 most experts favored closer strategic ties with China, seeing Beijing as Russia’s main partner in the region (Abayev 135-7).

### **(3) Chinese rationale for entente with Russia**

Beijing demonstrated almost symmetrical desire for dramatically raising the level of bilateral strategic collaboration. By 2012-13, there was little doubt left that China’s paramount external policy goal was to establish its own version of the Monroe doctrine in East Asia, which inevitably resulted in rising tensions with the United States. Relations between Beijing and Washington have been getting increasingly precarious and fraught. Regarding East Asia as its natural sphere of influence, resurgent China sees America as the only true force able to hamper its geopolitical aspirations (Wang 34). China seems more and more willing to do away with Deng’s maxims of cautious foreign policy and up the ante in its competition with the

United States over the primacy in East Asia and Western Pacific.

However, even if China becomes, as widely predicted, the number one economy and manages to significantly reduce, or perhaps altogether eliminate, the military gap with the United States, this will not be enough to mount a viable challenge to the American hegemony. For China would have to confront not the United States alone but the U.S.-led Asia-Pacific bloc counting, among others, Japan, Canada, Australia, and perhaps India. Thus China needs at least one major-power ally. Beijing currently has just one formal ally – North Korea, while Pakistan can be viewed as something of a *de facto* ally, at least *vis-à-vis* India. Although valuable to China, these countries can hardly be regarded as huge strategic assets. China lacks a dependable ally of a truly great power standing. The only candidate is Russia. The northern neighbor's strategic depth, huge natural resources, military power, pockets of scientific and technological prowess all could be a significant force multiplier for China.

If Sino-American rivalry goes from its currently more or less subdued mode to an open clash, Russia would find itself in a pivotal position (Luttwak 141-2). Even short of an alliance, good relations with Russia give China huge strategic benefits. First and foremost, it provides Beijing with “a stable strategic rear area” (Friedberg 170). With Moscow as a close friend, China can be confident about the security of its northern borders and can count on an unimpeded access to Russia's natural resources. Thus Beijing becomes much less vulnerable to embargos and naval blockades that the United States and its maritime allies are sure to use against China in case of a serious confrontation. In an American blockade of China, Russia will

be the most important “swing state” and “could tip the balance of a blockade in favor of either China or the United States” (Mirski 10-11).

Unlike outspoken Russian leaders, Chinese top decision-makers almost never give substantive public comments on issues of foreign policy. Sentiments in China’s expert community and the media can be a surrogate indicator. In recent years, there have been rising calls among Chinese scholars to upgrade the partnership with Russia to a full-scale alliance (for Chinese views arguing in favor of the alliance with Russia, see, for example, Yan; “US Actions”; Dai), while some news outlets posit that Beijing and Moscow are ‘allies’ without an alliance treaty (Mu). China’s first blue book on national security, commissioned by the government and written by scholars of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, stated that China should consider forming an ‘alliance with Russia’ (“Terrorism”). Some Chinese analysts argue that the balance of power in Asia is already defined by the US-Japan alliance versus China-Russia coalition, with India and ASEAN swaying in between (Chen). The 2014 pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong made Beijing even more suspicious of the United States and strengthened China’s common cause with Russia on the anti-American basis.

In 2003 Avery Goldstein argued that, since 1996 China had been pursuing a foreign policy similar to Bismarckian Germany’s diplomatic strategy:

China has attempted to build a series of relationships with other major powers that enhance its attractiveness as a partner while maximizing its own leverage and flexibility by not firmly aligning with any particular state or

group of states. Rather than explicitly identifying friends and enemies among principal actors on the international scene, China sought to establish partnerships with each as a way of binding their interests to China's and reducing the likelihood that any would be able to cobble together a hostile coalition... (Goldstein 74)

Goldstein goes on to point out the risk:

Should China's relations with any of the major powers significantly deteriorate, especially if the international system does become truly multipolar, the remaining partnerships might be reinterpreted as de facto alliances (Goldstein 86).

China has not abandoned this neo-Bismarckian grand strategy as of yet, but its continuation looks much less certain than a decade ago. Should Beijing opt for an alliance with Moscow, this could set in motion dynamics very similar to what Europe witnessed in the run-up to World War I. Then the Franco-Russian agreements of 1891 and 1894, creating their strategic alliance pitted against Germany and Austria-Hungary, "marked a watershed in Europe's rush toward war" by turning the balance-of-power diplomacy rigid and ushering in a zero sum game (Kissinger 181-2).

#### **(4) Putin and Xi – two of a kind?**

The personalities of Russian and Chinese leaders, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, are going to be a major factor in deciding the fate of a Russo-Chinese alignment. They are two autocratic chief executives who have concentrated in their hands almost exclusive

powers to make foreign policy decisions. In case of Russia, there has never been much doubt that it is Putin who personally makes principal decisions on foreign policy and national security. In China, strategic decision-making has until recently been done by the party-state collective leadership, but now Xi appears to be running the country's diplomatic and security policies on his own, with Politburo's Standing Committee playing very little role (Perlez).

Although Putin and Xi seem to get along quite well, it is hard to say if the two have personal sympathy for each other. In fact they do not even need to have good human chemistry between themselves – as long as they see eye to eye geopolitically. And it seems that Xi and Putin understand one another perfectly because they share the flair for hardball *realpolitik* in international affairs, coupled with a conservative and nationalistic authoritarianism in domestic affairs. Both men attach extremely high priority to military force and security apparatus as tools of defending national interests abroad and maintaining what they see as legitimate order at home.

Gilbert Rozman writes of “striking parallels... in the ways in which Presidents Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin...were envisioning the resurgence of their countries domestically and internationally” (Rozman 1). Another strong conviction shared by the two is that the West poses the main obstacle to grand projects of ‘Sinocentrism’ and ‘Russocentrism.’ Thus Putin and Xi are drawn together as natural allies against the US-led West. In this contest, matched against contemporary Western leaders with zero charisma and underwhelming foreign policy performances, the Putin-Xi duo is going to be a formidable force. It is significant that Putin and Xi are here to stay

for a long time: Putin is likely to seek, and win, re-election in 2018, while Xi will not quit until 2022 and in fact may continue to serve as China's paramount leader beyond 2022.

### **(5) The contours of a Sino-Russian alliance**

China and Russia see their crucial national interests as mutually non-exclusive at the very least. As Dmitri Trenin observes, the Russia-China bond "is solid, for it is based on fundamental national interests regarding the world order as both the Russian and Chinese governments would prefer to see it" (Trenin 6). Moscow is not inimical to China's rise as a great power as this creates for Russia economic and political alternatives other than the West. For its part, China sees its security interests as generally compatible with those of Russia (Li). This convergence of basic interests constitutes the foundation for strategic partnership. The existence of a common foe – the United States – may be transforming the partnership into a de facto alliance.<sup>3)</sup> Whether this ongoing conversion from partnership into alliance is actually completed will mainly depend on the intensity of Russian-American and Sino-American disagreements. Both Beijing and Moscow appear to proceed from the assumption that their antagonisms with Washington will not dissipate any time soon.

If an alliance-type relationship between China and Russia eventually arises, how might it look like? Its general patterns can already be

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3) The characterization of Russo-Chinese relationship as a 'de facto alliance' is increasingly used by Russia's leading foreign policy experts (See, for example, Karaganov).

discerned. This is not necessarily going to be an alliance of the classical style designed for joint use of military force against other states for defensive or offensive purposes. The case against a Sino-Russian *military* alliance is simple: neither side actually needs it – at least for now.<sup>4)</sup> Russia and China are nuclear-armed powers with formidable conventional armies, which makes them more than capable of independently guaranteeing their national sovereignty and, when necessary, projecting power in their perceived zones of influence. Thus the strategic value of the alliance will primarily lie in economic and diplomatic dimensions.

As a hot war between contemporary great powers is getting more and more problematic due to the enormous destructive force of nuclear warheads and other modern arms, warfare is migrating into the domain of trade and finance, as well as new ‘spaces’ such as cyber. In the twenty-first century, economic sanctions, embargos, black lists and hacker attacks are becoming weapons of choice in the conflicts of major powers. This is what Russia has amply experienced in the Ukraine crisis. And this is what China may face, if and when it clashes with the United States. Thus mutual economic support becomes crucial for Moscow and Beijing. As noted earlier, the bond with China will give Russia a considerable degree of economic independence from the sanction-prone West, while China will enjoy secure access to Russia’s vast reserves of natural resources so that its voracious economy can continue functioning even in the

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4) A military alliance between Russia and China is unlikely in the short-to-medium term, but cannot be ruled out 5-10 years from now, provided the security situation in Eurasia continues to deteriorate.

case of a US-imposed naval blockade.

In terms of diplomacy, Moscow and Beijing will provide each other support in the geographic areas they deem their legitimate spheres of influence. Moscow will recognize East Asia as China's domain, but will do so in exchange for Beijing's support of Russian privileged interests in Eastern Europe and the post-Soviet space.<sup>5)</sup> In fact, Russia appears to have already tacitly acknowledged the primacy of Chinese interests in East Asia. One of Russia's leading experts on East Asia Georgy Toloraya laments that Russia shows passivity in the Asia-Pacific affairs for fear that its more independent and proactive stance might anger China. In particular, Russia has "almost accepted Chinese domination in Korean affairs" (Toloraya 104-5). One indication of Russia's unwillingness to behave as an active independent pole in East Asia can be found in Russian presidents' consistent failure to show up at the annual meetings of East Asia Summits. Ever since Russia was admitted as a full member in 2011, Russian leader has not once made it to the summit which is seen as the region's premier security forum (Artyom Lukin).

The summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), held in Shanghai in May 2014, underscored Russia's growing, albeit still tacit, acceptance of China's leading role in East Asian security. Xi Jinping's statements at the summit were unusually blunt and specific, attacking the US-led alliances in the Asia-Pacific as "the outdated thinking of Cold War"

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5) Even before the Ukraine crisis, in 2008, a senior official of Russian foreign ministry admitted that China wanted Russia to keep low-profile in the Asia-Pacific as a precondition for China not interfering with Russian interests in Central Asia (Alexander Lukin "Rossiya" 21).

and proclaiming that “security problems in Asia should be solved by Asians themselves,” (“China Focus”) leading many observers to suggest that China may now be ready to abandon Deng’s ‘lie low’ strategy and seek the dominant role in constructing Asia’s new security framework, in which America should play a very limited part, if any at all (Shimada). In comparison to Xi’s energetic rhetoric, Putin’s speech at CICA was bland, offering Moscow’s standard boilerplate on the need for “a new security architecture” in the Asia-Pacific “that guarantees equal interaction and a genuine balance of power and harmony of interests” and is based on the “concept of indivisible security” (“Putin”).

The Ukraine crisis has made Russia more preoccupied with defending its interests Eastern Europe and reduced its ability to pursue whatever geopolitical ambitions it might have in East Asia. The more Russia gets bogged down in Ukraine and other post-Soviet rivalries, the more it needs China and the more it defers to Chinese interests in Asia. Moreover, the Ukraine crisis diverts Washington’s attention from East Asia and eases American pressure on China, giving Beijing a freer hand in the region.<sup>6)</sup> Thus, from a cynical realpolitik perspective, it makes a lot of sense for China to tacitly encourage Russia to stand its ground in the conflict with the West.

Central Asia will be another crucial area of Sino-Russian diplomatic cooperation. Whereas China seems ready to recognize former Soviet states in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus as

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6) A Chinese general, former military attaché in Moscow, was reported as saying that, thanks to the Ukraine crisis, “China will get at least a 10 year respite in its global contest with America.” (Kashin)

Russia's area of dominance, the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia are likely to emerge as a condominium of Moscow and Beijing. Should they form an entente, Moscow and Beijing will have Central Asia, as well as Mongolia, to themselves, effectively shutting out all external powers from the heart of Eurasia.

If the current trends continue, what might ultimately emerge from a Sino-Russian rapprochement is a Eurasian league, which, in controlling a continental heartland, would be reminiscent of the World War I Central Powers (*Mittelmächte*) alliance.<sup>7)</sup> It might also resemble Karl Haushofer's notion of the anti-Western "continental bloc" of Germany, the Soviet Union and Japan.<sup>8)</sup> In the first decades of the twenty-first century, a Sino-Russian entente could assume the form of a bilateral alliance or a multilateral pact, possibly based on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization framework.<sup>9)</sup>

### **3. Conclusion: Sino-Russian strategic scenarios and America's choices**

What are possible scenarios for further developments in Russo-

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7) The Central Powers were one of the warring coalitions in World War I. The two main participants of the Central Powers alliance were Germany and Austria-Hungary strategically located in the middle of Europe.

8) The leading Nazi geopolitician Karl Haushofer put this idea forward in 1940. The continental bloc concept is almost forgotten in the West, but is well known, and increasingly popular, within Russia's strategic community.

9) Some scholars already see the SCO as a 'Eurasian defense alliance' led by China and Russia (Tse-Hei Lee 16).

Chinese strategic relations and their impact on Asia? There are, of course, an infinite number of futures, but I would still identify three basic alternatives for the next 10-20 years.

**Russia's retreat from Asia's balance of power.** This scenario is more or less an extension of the current situation. Russia continues to be in confrontation with the West over Ukraine and other related issues. Preoccupied with rivalry over Ukraine and the post-Soviet space, Russia, and to some extent the United States, will be distracted from Asian affairs and have less political resources to deal with Asia. This will give China more freedom of action and alter the Asian balance of power in its favor. Furthermore, as Russia's isolation by the West remains in place and probably stiffens, Russia will have to rely more on China economically. This would inevitably result in Moscow displaying more deference, albeit not subordination, to Beijing on security matters in the Asia-Pacific.

This scenario stops short of Russia and China forming a true alliance. They will remain in strategic partnership, but Russia will largely avoid supporting Beijing's claims to the sphere of influence in East Asia and try to preserve for itself a modicum of strategic independence in Asia. In particular, Moscow will retain some options for strategic interaction with the Asian countries that Beijing considers its rivals, such as Japan, Vietnam, and India, although the extent of this cooperation will not be enough for Russia to play any substantial balancing role vis-à-vis China.

**Sino-Russian alliance.** This scenario envisions the continued strengthening of Moscow-Beijing strategic partnership – to the point where it is transformed into a full-fledged alliance, perhaps based on

a mutual defense treaty. As discussed above, this could take the form of Sino-Russian condominium over the Eurasian heartland. The likelihood of this scenario is directly proportionate to the intensity of antagonisms between Russia and the United States, on the one hand, and China and the United States, on the other. It can materialize if Washington continues to pursue its policy of double containment – against both Russia in Eastern Europe and China in East Asia. Under such an alliance, directed against the United States and its allies, Russia would openly support Chinese assertions in Asia and the Western Pacific, while Beijing would back Moscow's claims to hegemony in the post-Soviet space. This would be an extremely dangerous development for Asia, Eurasia and the entire world, as it would again split the international system into two hostile alliances, reproducing many of the elements of the pre-World War I and Cold War rivalries.

**Russia balancing China.** Under this scenario, which may be the most desirable but currently not the most likely, Russia and the West eventually resolve their conflict over Ukraine and normalize their relations to the point where meaningful strategic collaboration becomes possible. At the same time, Moscow preserves its strategic partnership with Beijing, but significantly deemphasizes its anti-Western components.

Having secured its Western flanks, Moscow could play a more active part in the Asian strategic game. This potentially gives Russia the option of being a significant independent element in the balance of power in Asia, if not a swing state, which will be greeted by most Asian states – who do not want to see the Asia-Pacific dominated by a single-power hegemony, be it China's or America's,

or divided into a bipolar structure of Beijing vs. Washington.

**Choices for America.** In all of the above scenarios, the United States, still the only superpower and a formidable force in Asia and Eurasia, will act as the key and the most crucial variable. In essence, Washington has three choices.

First, it may continue to pursue the strategy of dual containment vis-à-vis *both* Russia and China. Ever since the 1990s, Washington has sought to counteract Russia in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia, while confronting China in East Asia. However, it is becoming more and more doubtful that the United States has sufficient resources to efficiently pursue this containment strategy.

Second, the United States could prioritize either Russia or China as the main challenge and focus its efforts on containing this challenge, while reaching accommodation with the side identified as a lesser security risk.

Third, Washington may attempt to achieve accommodation with both Moscow and Beijing, perhaps forming a grand Eurasian concert of the three great powers. If the United States, Russia and China come to mutual understanding, it would set the stage for a benign version of multipolarity and later perhaps a multilateral architecture in Eurasia, in which not only Moscow, Washington and Beijing but also the majority of Eurasian stakeholders could be invested and engaged.

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## Abstract

# **The Emerging Anti-American Axis of Russia and China: Implications for Asia**

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Russia and China may now be experiencing a pivotal moment in their post-Cold War relationship, which will determine whether their relations will shift from a non-committal partnership to a strategic alliance. Being the two strongest powers on the Eurasian landmass, the state of Russia – China relationship is of profound significance for the world's largest continent, and particularly for its Asian wing where Beijing displays growing ambitions.

The paper investigates the evolution of Russo-Chinese strategic relationship – from its beginnings in the mid-1990s to the present, focusing on the motives that have lately been driving Beijing and Moscow ever closer, above all their respective antagonisms with Washington. It then goes on to assess possible implications that Sino-Russian entente may have for Asian security order. In conclusion, three basic scenarios are sketched of future configurations in the Russia-China-US strategic triangle and their impact on Asia.

## **Key Words**

international politics, Eurasia, Asia, Russia, China

