

What Accounts for the Sino-Russian Alliance?

Written by Matt Finucane

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2015/06/08/what-accounts-for-the-sino-russian-alliance/>

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Sino-Russian relations are better today than at any point throughout their troubled history. Many factors account for this, and this essay will first explore motivations for their informal alliance as dictated by the structure of the inter-state system. Following this, an account will be made of the formative domestic factors—above all else, the survival of their regimes—that predispose these states to alliance, and finally the purpose of this alliance will be addressed, for in seeking to reformulate the already-fraying world order, each pursues a system in which both state and regime could further consolidate power.

As Bobo Lo writes, “at no stage in the two countries’ common history has there been a period of unalloyed good relations” (Lo, 2008, p.2). Indeed, the imperial period, Russia first constituted one of many so-called ‘barbarian tribes’ that sought trade in China, then the world’s wealthiest country; in times of strength (and Chinese disarray, following the 1894 Sino-Japanese War) Russia colluded with European and Japanese forces to systematically annex and subordinate Chinese territories for economic gain (Kotkin, 2009; Tan, 1967, pp.11-14).

In the Soviet period, following Communist revolutions in both countries, this theme endured, and the Soviet Union was at times an “indispensable backer” and at others a “patronising mentor” (Lo, 2008, p.2). Soviet conduct increasingly reminded the Chinese communists “of the history of foreign privilege and imperialism”, and their cries of ‘great-power chauvinism’ and Soviet ‘hegemonism’ were only “new terms to address an old dilemma, the problem of empire in Russian history” (Jersild, 2014, p.210).

Relations reached their nadir when fighting broke out along the Sino-Soviet border in March 1969, and retaliatory usage of the Soviet nuclear arsenal—once pledged to protect China from American encroachment—was considered, should a full-scale Chinese invasion be mounted (CPSU CC, 1958; Kotkin, 2009).

The product of this was Sino-American rapprochement: a process beginning in the early 1970s that “help[ed] Washington put Moscow on the defensive” by complicating Soviet security in the late Cold War (Golan-Vilella, 2013; Tucker, 1991). Sino-American collusion had facilitated the Soviet Union’s downfall, however, the ‘strategic triangle’ was quickly revealed to be of only “transitory significance”—for its lack of wealth and strictly regional focus China was important to the US “simply in the context of crises with other countries” (Golan-Vilella, 2013; Yahuda, 1993, p.15). That such crises invariably hinged on Cold War dynamics, the collapse of the Warsaw Pact (and its superpower patron shortly afterwards) would erase even the vestiges of China’s global strategic importance (Ross, 1993, p.194).

Strategic Considerations

How then, does one arrive at the amicable Sino-Russian relations practiced today? On the international stage raw power plays a significant role (as will be properly addressed later), and as realist Kenneth Waltz wrote, “The structure of a system changes with changes in the distribution of capabilities across the system’s units” (Waltz, 1979, p.97). In the formation of alliances, Stephen Walt qualifies Waltz’s contribution with the claim that states “balance against threats rather than against power alone” (Walt, 1987, p.5). It is this formula that precipitated Sino-American rapprochement, and that continues to shape relations at the inter-state level today.

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By the end of the Cold War, the predominance of a single superpower—the United States—was so absolute that Pami Aalto writes that the great power category collectively suffered “a loss of status” (2007, p.461). Both Russia and China retained formidable nuclear arsenals and sizeable armed forces, but politically they were unstable—Russia for its reckless and rapid liberalisation, and China in the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests (Lucas, 2008, p.247; Lo, 2008, p.2). The US, on the other hand, was formidably advantaged both strategically and economically. In the 1990s it presided over the worldwide dissemination of the ‘Washington consensus’—that all states should work within its free trade regime—from the safety of its high-unassailable hemisphere (Walt, 2014; Little, 2003, p.454). The absence of any state or alliance that could check American power across the globe provoked a liminal fear in China and Russia; the manifestation of this untamed power in a series of questionable wars and interventions would first prompt accusations that the US sought to become “the world’s police force” (Buckley and Cummings, 2001, p.2).

Often in violation of international law, each subsequent conflict seemed only to vindicate this claim. Russia, having lent tepid support for the 1992 intervention in Bosnia, increasingly joined China in resolute opposition to the “intervention in the sovereign affairs” of other states (Bowker, 2007, p.59; Singh, 2001, p.65). Russian criticism of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 was trenchant, and though the intervention against Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya in 2011 was UN-sanctioned, both Russia and China criticised the US as having acted well beyond its ‘responsibility to protect’, and Russian President, Vladimir Putin, called it as “a gross violation of the UN Security Council resolution and essentially an act of aggression” (Putin, 2014). The net result of these “extraordinarily shortsighted” policies was twofold: they convincingly demonstrated America’s enduring military predominance (thus prompting Russian and Chinese rearmament), whilst undermining American *influence* abroad, as respect and adherence to the American world order faltered (as will later be addressed) (Ikenberry and Kupchan, 2004, p.44; Haass, 2014). In increasingly perceiving a mutual security threat, the primary motivator for the Sino-Russian alliance comes from a shared desire “to restrain the ‘hegemonic’ power of the United States” (Lo, 2008, p.5).

Beyond the Security Dilemma

Nonetheless, there are other factors in this relationship that a security-orientated analysis (and ‘black box’ conception of the state) might obscure. Indeed, this section will demonstrate that undergirding all facets of Russian and Chinese policymaking is the inexorable quest for the survival of their regimes.

This underlying factor immediately accounts for Russian and Chinese hostility to Western-sponsored ‘regime change’. Although violent regime change, as practiced in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq or Gaddafi’s Libya, is more likely to affect Russian and Chinese allies—those lacking nuclear arsenals—than their own states, unrestrained intervention and challenges to state sovereignty nevertheless set a worrying precedent. More concerning were those regime changes that occurred with minimal violence, beginning with the overthrow of Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, in 2000.

Both Russia and China vehemently opposed the ‘Colour Revolutions’ around their peripheries in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), and blamed US-sponsored organisations such as USAID, Freedom House, and the National Endowment for Democracy for directly fomenting the unrest (Green, 2014; Zygar’, 2014). Though such responses wholly obscure the effective causes of these protests (invariably corruption, usually vote-rigging), it is worth noting that such organisations do adhere closely Russia’s and China’s peripheries, and there is certainly an extensive normative element to East-West competition (USAID, 2014a; 2014b; NDI, 2010).

More recently these organisations have been criticised for inciting the crises in Ukraine and Hong Kong. In Ukraine, it is estimated that the United States—either directly or through ‘non-governmental’ organisations—has invested more than \$5 billion dollars since 1991 to guide Ukraine towards what secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs, Victoria Nuland, called “the future it deserves” (Mearsheimer, 2014). The protests in Hong Kong have not developed to such an extent, and any kind of overthrow seems highly unlikely. Nevertheless, in banning British Ministers of Parliament from visiting the protests—as American political figures had participated in Ukraine’s Maiden protests—the fear of escalation from the “meddling in the internal affairs of another country” is palpable (Wright and Legge, 2014; Mearsheimer, 2014).

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Beijing and Moscow's institutional counter to this has been the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), founded in 2001 to check the influence of Western powers in their neighbouring states, to collectively tackle instability such as drug trafficking and terrorism, and as of 2004 "dispense coordinated advice for authoritarian Eurasian regimes" (Facon, 2013, p.463; Green, 2014). Collaborating to this end has been essential; for the Eurasian states—all of which have suffered Russian empire within living memory—"the presence within the SCO of another 'big one,' China", has soothed fears of subordination for it "offers them a possibility to balance the two giant regional powers" (Facon, 2013, p.464). This institution is complemented with a gradual domestic crackdown on civil society, reaffirming "the master institution of *sovereignty*" as a "bulwark against unwarranted encroachments by outside powers or international organisations" (Aalto, 2007, p.462; Sakwa, 2011, p.205). In Russia, the latest instances of this are the 2012 laws imposing considerable fines on those who participate in "unsanctioned demonstrations", and requiring non-governmental organisations to register as "foreign agents" (*inostrannyye agenty*) if they receive funding from outside of Russia (Herszenhorn, 2012; Barry, 2012). In China, so concerted an effort has not been necessary since 1989, since unlike Russia it never dabbled with what was then termed a return to "the standard of civilisation" (Sakwa, 2011, p.200).

This is not the only difference between the two powers—a fact emphasised by their divergent expectations of the SCO. Russia had always expected the SCO to gradually integrate into a "loose security bloc" or "quasi-military alliance", with its ultimate aim to become, if not a peer competitor, an "anti-NATO counterweight" (Kotkin, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2014). So far, "China has consistently resisted Moscow's lobbying", and this shows no signs of abating (Kotkin, 2009). This is indicative of the fundamental difference between the Russian and Chinese powers; whilst the former is a "declining power with revisionist aims in Central Europe", the latter is "a rising power with revisionist aims in the Pacific, but continuing dependence on the U.S. economy and global economic institutions"—dependence which, through a confluence of woeful economic stewardship and shrewd diplomacy, Russia has largely avoided (Green, 2014). Russia has "gone the route of military alliances and formal organisations", and both its leadership and state-owned media, *Russia Today* and *Rossiia Segodnya*, are frequently critical of Western domestic and foreign policies (Standish, 2014; Putin, 2014). Thus "while resisting the United States is the animating theme in Putinism, there is still enough Dengism in Xi's worldview that a stable U.S.-China relationship matters" (Green, 2014).

This is primarily economic, and indeed "the currency of China's influence is cold hard cash" (Standish, 2014). Trade is, therefore, of unparalleled importance to China, and, where Russia registers on this scale (in energy and arms exports), of great significance to Russia's stability. It comes as little surprise that trade in these areas forms an integral part of the Sino-Russian alliance, especially when one considers their mutually beneficial structural differences.

As the core of a former superpower, Russia retains many of the trappings associated with supplying a bloc-sized armed forces; however, with only half the GDP of the Soviet Union and a far smaller, professional armed forces, arms exports became an immediate necessity to keep the industry afloat (Kotkin, 2014). In an effort to revive the Russian economy, one of Putin's first initiatives was the formation of state-owned arms export company, Rosoboronexport, which saw the Russian arms trade skyrocket and even overtake that of the United States in 2013 (Lucas, 2008, p.247; SIPRI, 2013). China, on the other hand, as an aspirant global power "still in the early stages of evolution from a [...] developing nation into a developed nation", desperately needs arms to supply its leviathan armed forces, and of a quality and quantity it cannot produce domestically—a need exacerbated by Western sanctions on arms following the Tiananmen protests (Lo, 2008, p.4; Kotkin, 2009). Their amicable relations allow China to purchase Russia's most advanced equipment, including SU-35 multirole fighter aircraft, S-400 air defence systems, and Lada-class submarines—all of which furthers its aim to project power in the South China Sea—whilst furnishing the Russian arms industry with extensive and long-term contracts (Kofman, 2014).

Similar dynamics present themselves in the energy industry. China's demand for oil and gas is vast and ever-growing, since such materials are fundamental for the continued expansion of its economy; Russia possesses each in abundance and is eager to trade them, since they produce as much as 50% of Russia's federal revenue (Bremmer, 2009; Johnson, 2014a). This relationship again yields unique gains for each side. The double-edged sword that is Russia's 'energy weapon'—the reduction in supply or increase in price of gas to Europe for political ends—is sharpened at one end, whilst the potential for Western states to "take advantage of Moscow's dependence

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on energy exports” through a rigorous sanctions regime is blunted, as gas from the same fields can be re-routed to China, albeit for a lesser price (Johnson, 2014a; 2014b). China, on the other hand, reaps its own special reward. The consequences of producing 81% (as of 2012) of its electricity via coal are long-known—inhaling Beijing’s air “on a bad day” is equivalent to smoking 21 cigarettes (WCA, 2014; Ratner and Rosenberg, 2014). Beyond environmental and health concerns, however, “pollution is fast becoming a political issue that threatens the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party”—in seeking to “free itself from coal’s chokehold”, Russian gas provides an affordable and considerably ‘cleaner’ alternative (Ratner and Rosenberg, 2014; Johnson, 2014b).

Again we return to the quest for regime survival, from which economic stability cannot be separated. While Russia and China’s domestic situations might differ, a stable economy is foundational to each regime’s legitimacy—more so than genuine democratic practice, which in Russia polls at only 9% compared to inflation (62%), living standards (42%), and unemployment (26%) (WCIOM, 2014). Whilst China’s Xi Jinping must meet “the Chinese peoples’ expectations of rising living standards”, Putin “needs to keep a smaller corrupt kleptocracy satisfied”; a healthy trade in arms and energy—industries which boast Russia’s highest-paid executives—bountifully facilitates each (The Moscow Times, 2014; Green, 2014).

A Zero-Sum Game?

Nevertheless, critics of a realist bent—inclined to measure relationships in *relative* rather than *absolute* gains—frequently point to the inequalities inherent in the Sino-Russian alliance. They note that Russia sells oil to China at \$20 a barrel—a price that “borders on the shocking”, since by 2017 it will be less than one-third the market value (Kotkin, 2014). Russia’s gas is similarly undersold, and the two 2014 deals settled on a price between \$10-11 per cubic foot—less than what state-owned energy company, Gazprom, has long considered its \$12 break-even price (Ratner and Rosenberg, 2014). Optimism in the potential for Russia to “play two big customers against each other” is similarly misguided, for having distanced itself from unreliable African and Middle Eastern energy sources, China is unlikely to mortgage its energy security with Russia, and simultaneously cultivates relations with other Central Asian energy exporters (Johnson, 2014b; Ratner and Rosenberg, 2014; Standish, 2014). It is also seeking to develop its domestic supply of shale gas, tipped to be the largest of any country in the world, and a project that would come to fruition at about the same time as any new Sino-Russian pipelines (Tucker, 2012).

This theme continues in the Sino-Russian arms trade, and since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has been reverse-engineering imported weapons and pressuring Russia “to sell it not just the finished products but also the underlying manufacturing technology” (Kotkin, 2009). Indeed, here the Ukraine crises complicates Sino-Russian relations, for having inherited a disproportionate share of the USSR’s military-industrial complex, Ukraine “enabled China to reduce its dependence on Russia’s defence industry by providing an alternative source for technologies that Russia either can’t, or won’t, sell” (Kofman, 2014). Indicative of Russian displeasure, following the reverse engineering of its Su-27 fighter aircraft (China’s J-11), Russia cut Ukraine from licensed production and chose only to export proprietary systems “that China cannot duplicate with Ukraine’s help” (Kofman, 2014).

More generally, one notes that despite the flurry of treaties at the turn of the century, including the 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship, promising economic and diplomatic cooperation and an implicit defence pact, the 2001 establishment of the SCO, and the 2004 Complementary Agreement, demarcating their shared border, integration has either stalled—at China’s behest—or developed only when weighted substantially in Beijing’s favour. The SCO remains much as it was in 2001, and even the diplomatic support pledged has been underwhelming—neither China nor the SCO would support Russia’s 2008 war in Georgia, and China’s official position on Russia’s annexation of Crimea in March remains non-committal (Fitzgerald, 2014; Holmes, 2014).

As such analyses conclude, to frame the alliance as ‘win-win’ is to take it at China’s own valuation—one that frequently “flatters Moscow with rhetoric about their ‘strategic partnership’” (Kotkin, 2009). Nevertheless, the *absolute* gains of the Sino-Russian relationship are too significant to ignore; that Beijing has more ‘options’ than Moscow should not obscure the great significance of their many existing ‘selections’ (Ratner and Rosenberg, 2014).

Indeed, seldom do two neighbouring great powers in an anarchic world form so intimate a relationship, complete with

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trade agreements in the most vital areas, a multilateral security alliance, and a demilitarised border—all absent an overbearing power self-interestedly encouraging their integration (Anderson, 1997, p.82). The Sino-Russian alliance also plays an increasing role in combatting 'international terrorism'—especially in light of the instability in Iraq and Syria—since both claim to be its victims in Russia's Chechen republic and China's Xinjiang autonomous region respectively (Olesen, 2014; Gresh, 2014). To this end, the SCO conducted its largest military exercise in August this year, envisaging a scenario of "a separatist organisation [...] supported by an international terrorist organisation, plotting terrorist incidents and hatching a coup plot to divide the country" (Kucera, 2014). Finally, critics term the Sino-Russian alliance a "secondary axis", and in doing so highlight its primary utility: having succeeded where prior efforts have invariably failed, their relationship allows each to focus attention on their respective primary axes: the Sino-American and Russo-German relationships (Kotkin, 2009; Orenstein, 2014).

A New World Order?

Recently, writers such as Richard Haass have pointed to such topics as broached in this essay and framed them as symptomatic of a change in world 'order'—specifically that the "balance between order and disorder is shifting toward the latter" (Haass, 2014). Order is traditionally established by the mighty, and though the "post-1945 settlement was as much about securing US hegemony as about any altruistic desire to extend peace and prosperity", dominant states are wise to "offer significant concessions to those who benefit least from the system, to ensure that their position is made bearable"—a stable order should benefit "both the mighty and the meek" (Stephens, 2014; Little, 2003, p.451; Ikenberry and Kupchan, 2014, p.44).

This order steadily unravelled with the loss of American influence and respect for American institutions abroad (Haass, 2014). The troubling consequences of humanitarian interventions in Iraq and Libya has undermined support for the 'responsibility to protect', whilst the 2008 Doha talks, in preserving American and European protectionism yet insisting that China and India open their nascent and uncompetitive industries, raises concerns as to the equity of the Washington consensus (Haass, 2014; Bremmer, 2009). Alternatives increasingly present themselves, and Russia and China each propose a 'multipolar world' in which "the preferences of a single actor [...] should not be allowed opportunistically to trump the norms which the hegemonic constellation itself advanced" (Sakwa, 2011, p.203). Putin declares that "Beijing shares our vision of the emerging equitable world order", and Xi extolls a reordering of world affairs via the "so-called China Dream" (Putin, 2012; Rozman, 2014). Each of which envisions Moscow and Beijing playing substantially larger roles in their respective regions, and without the threat of outside interference.

It is worth noting that beyond this, little consensus exists, and the danger of the Sino-Russian alliance, like other victorious coalitions, disintegrating *post facto* is very real—especially once their "profound asymmetry" becomes more apparent, and Russia's utility as an arms and energy exporter is exhausted (Walt, 1987, p.31; Kotkin, 2009). The order they advance is nevertheless one in which great powers are less constrained—at the expense of their smaller neighbours—and one in which regimes like those of Putin and Xi would thrive, absent any international check to their power.

The Sino-Russian alliance remains principally orientated, on the international level, by its opposition to American hegemony. At the domestic level, regime survival drives further cooperation, and where these levels meet, the Sino-Russian alliance has both shielded and consolidated their respective regions—the foundations of their proposed new order. Whether the alliance will survive this structural transition is yet unknown, and differences between Russia and China look certain to complicate, as well as complement, proceedings. Nevertheless, with US hegemony waning, a return to a multipolar system seems likely. Many precedents for such systems exist; few, if any, could be called 'ordered' in any serious sense.

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Date written: December 2014