



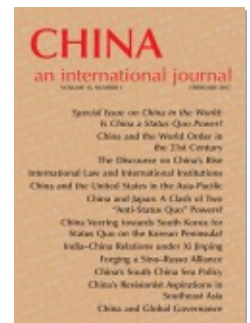
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Forging a Sino–Russo Alliance: Analysis with a Hybrid Theoretical Framework

Lance L.P. GORE

China and Russia belong to different civilisations that preclude a stable alliance. However, the two countries share views on many major international issues and are in a viable position to push for an alternative international order. This article employs a hybrid model to examine the dynamics in the Sino–Russo relations, taking factors such as external pressure, national identity, culture and history, overall national strategy as well as balance of power into account.

Whether China is a status quo power or a challenger can be a misleading question. The “status quo” is always evolving; the rapid post-war recovery and prosperity of the old European powers and Japan caused the breakdown of the gold standard and the disintegration of the Bretton Wood System in the 1960s and 1970s; the fall of the mighty Soviet Union and the disintegration of the Eastern bloc ushered in not only liberal triumphantism but also an era of civil wars and ethnic/religious strife, leading to the doubling of the number of states in the world since the conclusion of the Cold War. The emergence of Islamic fundamentalism and the related armed non-state organisations such as the Al-Qaeda and Islamic State (ISIS) has reshaped the post-war order and changed the nature of warfare and statecraft, as has globalisation. And China seems destined to alter yet again the “status quo”.

At the level of great power politics, a key dynamic reshaping the “status quo” is the relationship between China and Russia, two nuclear powers capable of standing alone against the West. Smaller rising powers may alter the status quo in a gradualist and piecemeal manner, but these two powers (possibly India as well) have the potential to bring about fundamental changes; for both are sufficiently different from the Western powers that have created and dominated the existing order. A revolutionary change

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to the status quo is possible only when the constitutional order is replaced;¹ and only the emerging non-Western powers such as China, Russia and India are in a position to introduce an order based on different constitutional principles. The Islamic fundamentalism that has so profoundly altered the global geostrategic landscape since 9/11 is nevertheless devoid of state power—it is instead the antithesis of state power, and hence has only limited potential in the game of great power politics. In contrast, any changes introduced by China and Russia will be fully backed by state power.

China's and Russia's potency to make changes will increase exponentially if the two states enter into an alliance of some sort. That will bring together two of the most formidable land forces in the world, the second and third nuclear forces, two space powers, two of the largest air forces and two large and rapidly developing navies, one-quarter of the world's population, and a soon-to-be the largest economy and largest resources-rich land mass in the world. Fateful events seem to have coalesced to make such an alliance a real possibility. America's "pivot to Asia", the heightening tensions in the South and East China Seas, the deterioration of US–Russia (more broadly, Russia–West) relations as a consequence of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's recent high-profile "turn to the East" strategy etc., seem to be driving the two into each other's arms. In 1992, the two states declared that they were pursuing a "constructive partnership"; in 1996, they progressed towards a "strategic partnership"; and in 2001, they signed a treaty of "friendship and cooperation". In 2014, the two states declared "a new stage in Russian–Chinese relations of comprehensive partnership and strategic interaction". These events have created a complicated geopolitical milieu that reignited discussions in the policy and scholarly circles about the prospects of a China–Russia alliance. There is no shortage of voices in both Russia and China advocating such an alliance,² but in the West the majority view downplays such a

¹ For the constitutional order theory see Philip Bobbitt's central thesis (in his book *The Shield of Achilles*); see Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace and the Course of History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002). A constitutional order achieves dominance by best exploiting the strategic and institutional innovations of its era; the peace treaties that end epochal wars ratify a particular constitutional order and international community of states; and each constitutional order asserts a particular basis for legitimacy. In terms of the current international system, Bobbitt argues that it is transitioning from an order of nation-states to market-states.

² For example, Alexei Pushkov (the head of the Foreign Affairs Committee in Russia's lower house) stated that "the United States runs the risk of making a huge foreign policy blunder by simultaneously antagonizing two major world powers..." See "Confronting Both Russia and China 'Strategic Mistake' for US—Russian", *Lawmaker*, at <<http://en.ria.ru/world/20140421/189291820/Confronting-Both-Russia-and-China-Strategic-Mistake-for-US-.html>> [24 June 2014]. Some Russian analysts also argued that "American cannot stop pushing China and Russia to a new political and military alignment". In China, where until recently the official line was "non-alignment" (*bu jiemeng zhengce*), some prominent scholars have started to make unambiguous calls for a comprehensive strategic alliance with Russia by arguing on the pages of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Party School's internal publications that "China–Russia strategic relations are the most substantive ones", and elsewhere that "China will be unable to shift the world from unipolarity to bipolarity unless it forms a formal alliance with Russia". Most recently, John Mearsheimer, on multiple occasions, castigated American policy towards Russia by calling it "strategic foolishness of the first order" because it drives Russia and China to come together against American interests.

possibility.³ This study employs a hybrid theoretical framework to systematically sort out the factors that can affect the formation of a Sino–Russo alliance and the likely impact on the existing world order.

A HYBRID THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Realist Tradition

Balance of power has been the main analytic tool used in the discipline of international relations to explain the formation of alliances between states.⁴ Realists take pride in basing their analysis on “real” and “objective” material forces that minimise subjective speculations. In the realist conception, an alliance is formed between two or more countries to offset the growing power of a common adversary. According to Hans Morgenthau, nations form alliances to offset growing powers and restore the balance.⁵ Fedder regards an alliance as “a process or a technique of statecraft or a type of international organization”⁶ aimed at maintaining balance of power. Sorokin defined alliances as “formal agreements between sovereign states for the putative purpose of coordinating their behavior in the event of specified contingencies of a military nature”.⁷ Wolfer regarded it as “a promise of mutual military assistance between two or more sovereign states”.⁸ For Stephen Walt, alliance can be either “a formal or informal arrangement of security cooperation between two or more sovereign states”, pointing out that states may be willing to cooperate but unwilling to sign a formal treaty.⁹ In general alliances, in realism are defensive mechanisms driven by fear.¹⁰ It is always a means to an end of maintaining equilibrium.

Stephen Walt modifies this power-centred account of alliance formation by adding a twist of perception. He argues that states balance against the state or coalition that poses the greatest threat instead of against the strongest. His theory of “balance of threat” argues that states respond to changes in the balance of power only when there

³ For example, Francios Godement, “Introduction” to *China Analysis*, no. 195 (European Council on Foreign Affairs), 2016, at <[http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_\(002\).pdf](http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_195_-_CHINA_AND_RUSSIA_GAMING_THE_WEST_(002).pdf)> [23 December 2016].

⁴ Kenneth Waltz stated that “[b]alance of power politics prevail wherever two, and only two, requirements are met: that the order be anarchic and that it be populated by units wishing to survive”. See Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979), p. 121.

⁵ Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, 5th ed. (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1973).

⁶ Edwin H. Fedder, “The Concept of Alliance”, *International Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (1968): 68.

⁷ Gerald L. Sorokin, “Arms, Alliances, and Security Tradeoffs in Enduring Rivalries”, *International Studies Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (1994): 422.

⁸ Arnold Wolfer, “Alliances”, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. David L. Sill (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 268.

⁹ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987) pp. 12–3.

¹⁰ Kajsa Ji Noe Oest, “The End of Alliance Theory? A Literature Review of Realist Alliance Theory”, Institut for Statskundskab Arbejdspapir 2007/03, 2007, at <http://polsci.ku.dk/arbejdspapirer/2007/ap_2007_03.pdf> [23 December 2016].

is a perceived increase in the threat from such changes.¹¹ Compared to power that can be measured, threat is inherently perceptual, hence by shifting from balance of power to balance of threat the issue of perception is incorporated (perhaps inadvertently) into the realist framework. It is a critical step methodologically in that it introduces “subjective” elements into the balance of power framework. What matters is the perception of threat, whether real or fantasised, and the perceived gap between the intentions of leaders who issue the threat and the perception of leaders on the receiving end.¹² The ultimate source of change in the balance of power is the differential rates of growth of aggregate national power, that is, a state’s total resources including territories, population, industrial and military capabilities, governance, national cohesion and technological prowess, etc., which are staples in the study of national interests. Forming alliances is one way to restore balance of power but it is premised on a clear understanding of national interests. In the revisionist view of balance of power, alliance should be based on the alignment of national interests or, in Schweller’s words, “balance of interests”.¹³ For Snyder, alliance is a subset of the broader phenomenon alignment.¹⁴

As such, I would argue, alliance is a response not only to perceived threats but also to perceived opportunities. A primary example is NATO in the decade after the Cold War, when its Warsaw Pact counterpart was gone and Russia was too weak to pose a real threat. It is as much a tool to make gains as to avoid losses. A primary purpose of most alliances is to combine members’ capabilities in a way that further their respective security, economic, political, strategic and other interests. Apart from similar cognitive issues mentioned earlier, the comprehension, aggregation and presentation of national interest is also an inherently political process.¹⁵ “Balance of threat”, “balance of interest”, etc., have added nuances and sophistication to the realist analysis. Nevertheless, these revisionist ideas have inadvertently introduced a dose of constructivism into the realist framework. By indigenising perception and interest formation, they have caused two shifts: altering the defensive conception of alliance and introducing the perception as an intervening variable. By doing so, it puts our

¹¹ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*.

¹² Janice G. Stein, “Building Politics into Psychology: The Misperception of Threat”, *Political Psychology* 9, no. 2 (1988): 246.

¹³ Randall L. Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In”, *International Security* 19, no. 1 (1994): 93.

¹⁴ Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ For example, Donald E. Nuechterlein’s oft-referenced definition: “National interest is the perceived needs and desires of one sovereign state in relation to other sovereign states comprising the external environment”; see Donald E. Nuechterlein, “National Interests and Foreign Policy: A Conceptual Framework for Analysis and Decision-Making”, *British Journal of International Studies* 2, no. 3 (1976): 246. For a general discussion of the concept, see also Lance Gore, “Between the Giants in Pursuit of Asian Prosperity: Dilemmas of Australia’s National Security Strategy”, in *The Australian ‘National Interest’ in the Asian Century: Trade, Investment and Security*, ed. John Farrar, Mary Hiscock and Vai Io Lo (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015).

study of the possibility of a Sino–Russo alliance in a broader context than balance of power, and hence allows for a fuller assessment.

A Dose of Constructivism

The two basic tenets of constructivism are: first, that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than “material forces”; and second, that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than objectively given.¹⁶ Nevertheless, most symbolic interactionists¹⁷ believe that a physical reality does indeed exist; that people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and that these meanings are derived from social interaction and modified through interpretation. In other words, people do not respond to reality directly but rather through a filter of social understanding of it, and actors’ identities and interests are endogenous to and arise out of their interactions. For example, Alexander Wendt argues that balance of power *per se* does not predict whether two states will be friends or foes, and that anarchy does not automatically lead to the realist world. Instead, three cultures—Hobbesian, Lockean or Kantian—can prevail over anarchy, and which one prevails is determined by a history of interaction.¹⁸

Continuous interaction among states may have a transformative effect on their role identities (i.e. how they perceive “self” and “other”) and consequently, on their understanding of self-interests. As Wendt puts it, “interests presuppose identities because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is”.¹⁹ When Joseph Nye speaks of “complex learning”, or Robert Jervis of “changing conceptions of self and interest”, or Robert Keohane of “sociological” conceptions of interest, each is asserting an important role for the transformation of identity and interest.²⁰ Identity formation and hence interests construction highlight the importance of reciprocity or reflective appraisals. For example, based on his case study of Arab politics, Michael Barnett discovered that the states find each other threatening and form alliances against each

¹⁶ For examples, Emanuel Adler, *Communitarian International Relations: The Epistemic Foundations of International Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005); Christian Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, in *Theories of International Relations*, 3rd ed., ed. Scot Burchill et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2005); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ Constructivism in international relations draws heavily from the insight of symbolic interactionism and, to a lesser degree, structuration theory in sociology, represented by the works of George H. Mead, Herbert Blumer, Anthony Giddens etc. See H. Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism; Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969); Larry T. Reynolds, Nancy J. Herman-Kinney, eds., *Handbook of Symbolic Interactionism* (Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press, 2003); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

¹⁸ Alexander Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics”, *International Organization* 46, no. 2, (1992): 391–425, 396.

¹⁹ Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 231.

²⁰ Wendt, “Anarchy is What States Make of It”, p. 393.

other not because of differences in power, but because they believe in different things.²¹ Other things being equal, states prefer to ally with states whose political outlook is similar to their own.²² This point can also be observed in Southeast Asia where the United States—with far superior aggregate power and global power projection capability than any other states—is generally not perceived as a threat (even by its former foe Vietnam), a sharp contrast to the hostility America encounters in the Middle East. Because of the perception of the United States as a benign power built over decades of interaction with it, the states in the Southeast Asia region do not feel a need to balance against the United States. Instead many want to be allied with it to hedge against the uncertainties associated with the rise of China.

Towards a Hybrid Framework

Incorporating meanings and symbolic interaction, crystallised in the process of interstate institution-building (here is the entry point of neo-institutionalism), into the realist world results in a hybrid analytic framework. The framework accentuates the ideational process in shaping the strategic behaviour of states, as well as the adaptive institution-building that regulates such behaviour. This framework also necessitates the investigation of the process of identity formation and interest construction so that power analyses become less rigid than in the realist framework. Although structural conditions do pose constraints, they create the space for the type of constructivism that is mutually beneficial (or destructive for that matter) to take place, even if the involved parties benefit disproportionately.

The hybrid framework also expands the strategic choices of states in alliance formation. Given its emphasis on the ideational process, the framework opens up a realm for analysing the emergence of new constitutional rules that may eventually transform the prevailing order; besides, it opens the door to conceptualising alliances not only as a defensive or reactive mechanism, but also an offensive or active one. As such, an alliance not only balances against threat but also involves joint efforts in projects to advance common interests that may, in due course, create shared identity and policy stance in important areas. In short, an alliance is a contracted (formal or informal) obligation premised on not only interest alignment but also shared values, aspirations and understanding of the world. In this light, a new Sino-Russo alliance is potentially offensive, not necessarily in the military sense but rather in its concerted effort to push for an alternative constitutional order.

Analytically, such a framework pursues research questions at two interrelated levels: the “material forces” level and the ideational level that makes sense of those material forces through identity formation, interest construction and institution-building. Ideas, ideology, motivation, aspirations and identity, etc., are difficult to

²¹ M.N. Barnett, “Identity and Alliances in the Middle East”, in *The Culture of National Security*, ed. P.J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 400–47.

²² Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, p. 168

analyse directly. One way to overcome the difficulty is to draw upon the rich insight and fruitful research of neo-institutionalists. Institutions are essentially realised ideas (or ideas in practice) that specify the rules, and define roles as well as identities. In other words, these intangibles can be pinned down and studied at the institutional level.

Therefore, this approach infuses both the neorealist and neo-institutionalist analyses with a dose of constructivism that redirects focus to a different set of questions. When infused with constructivism, the realist thrust of this analysis results in the investigation of how two states make sense of the power relations between them in the context of their respective relationships with other powers (or coalitions), their cultural traditions and historical legacy, their geopolitical and geoeconomic positions and so on. The neo-institutional thrust in this analysis, when infused with constructivism, directs us to examine the institutional ties that the two states forge with each other as well as with other states, which embody not only self-interests but also their respective strategic visions and aspirations, evolving identity and understanding or framing of self-interests. This article is divided into three sections. The first section analyses the “material forces” (privileged by realism), the second discusses the construction of identity, meaning and institutions that frame national interests (favoured by constructivism and neo-institutionalism), and the third draws tentative conclusions.

THE “MATERIAL FORCES”

Chief among the “material forces” that determine alliance formation are hard power, geopolitics and geoeconomics. These three constitute the payoff structure that serves as the basis for strategic calculation of the realist states. The United States has been the world’s strongest economic power since the turn of the 20th century and the dominant military power after the Cold War. The Soviet Union emerged victoriously from World War II as the second-strongest power. China, on the other hand, started almost as a client state of the Soviet Union but has emerged as the world’s second-largest economy and third-ranked military power over the last three decades. With proud histories and distinct cultural traditions, all three countries are by nature dominant players, and a treaty alliance between any two of them is possible only in exceptional circumstances. The question is whether the two weaker powers would feel vulnerable enough to form an alliance to counterbalance the United States and its allies as they did in the 1950s.

Tables 1 to 4 list the key indicators of national hard power of Russia, China and the United States. Table 2 shows that, in constant 2010 US dollars, China’s gross domestic product in the mid 1970s was less than one-fifth that of the Soviet Union, while the latter amounted to less than a quarter of America’s. However, by 2014, the tables turned on China. The GDP of Russia, the main successor state to the Soviet Union, was only one-fifth that of China, while Chinese GDP was half of the United States. In purchasing power parity (PPP) terms, the shift of economic power is more dramatic. The Chinese GDP surpassed that of the United States (US\$19.81 trillion

TABLE 1
Hard Power Indicators of China, Russia and the United States

	China	Russia	United States
Global Firepower Ranking	3 (of 106)	2 (of 106)	1 (of 106)
Square Land Area (km ²):	9,596,961	17,098,242	9,826,675
Coastline Coverage (km):	14,500	37,653	19,924
Shared borders	22,457	22,407	12,048
GDP (PPP)	US\$17.630 trillion	US\$3.568 trillion	US\$17.460 trillion
GDP (nominal)	US\$9.33 trillion	US\$2.113 trillion	US\$16.72 trillion
Budget*	rev.: US\$2.118 trillion exp.: US\$2.292 trillion	rev: US\$439 billion exp: US\$450.3 billion	rev: US\$2.849 trillion exp: US\$3.517 trillion
Population:	1,355,692,576	142,470,272	320,202,220
Manpower Available:	749,610,775	69,117,271	145,212,012
Fit-for-Service:	618,588,627	46,812,553	120,022,084
Reaching Military Age Annually:	19,538,534	1,354,202	4,217,412
Active Military Personnel:	2,333,000	766,055	1,400,000
Active Military Reserves:	2,300,000	2,485,000	1,100,000
Aircraft (All Types):	2,860	3,429	13,892
Helicopters:	908	1,120	6,196
Attack Helicopters:	196	462	920
Attack Aircraft (Fixed-Wing):	1,311	1,305	2,797
Fighter Aircraft:	1,066	769	2,207
Trainer Aircraft:	352	346	2,809
Transport Aircraft:	876	1,083	5,366
Tank Strength:	9,150	15,398	8,848
AFV Strength:	4,788	31,298	41,062
Self-Propelled Guns	1,710	5,972	1,934
Towed Artillery:	6,246	4,625	1,299
MLRS Strength:	1,770	3,793	1,331
Fleet Strength:	673	352	473
Aircraft Carriers:	1	1	20
Submarines:	67	55	72
Frigates:	47	4	10
Destroyers	25	12	62
Mine Warfare Craft:	6	34	11
Patrol Craft:	11	65	13
Annual Defense Budget	US\$145,000,000,000	US\$60,400,000,000	US\$577,100,000,000

Notes:

* For the United States, revenues exclude social contributions of approximately US\$1.0 trillion; expenditures exclude social benefits of approximately US\$2.3 trillion (2013 est.)

Sources: CIA.gov (website of the Central Intelligence Agency); *CIA World Factbook*; wikipedia.com; public domain print and media sources; and user contributions. Some values may be estimated where official sources are lacking.

TABLE 2
Real GDP in 2010 Dollars (US\$ billion)

Year	US	USSR	Russia	China
1969	4770.04	1063.03	823.71	142.02
1970	4779.66	1096.53	849.19	166.02
1971	4937.16	1130.21	875.45	198.22
1972	5196.99	1164.97	902.53	212.10
1973	5490.33	1201.18	930.44	220.16
1974	5461.89	1238.79	959.21	237.55
1975	5451.16	1277.43	988.88	243.01
1976	5744.70	1317.14	1019.47	264.16
1977	6009.49	1358.21	1051.00	259.93
1978	6343.72	1400.66	1083.50	279.69
1979	6545.15	1444.46	1117.01	312.32
1980	6529.16	1489.51	1151.56	335.98
1981	6698.50	1535.47	1187.17	362.32
1982	6570.56	1583.20	1223.89	381.32
1983	6874.93	1632.29	1261.74	415.85
1984	7373.95	1683.04	1300.76	460.99
1985	7686.52	1733.75	1340.99	530.95
1986	7956.48	1785.30	1382.47	602.44
1987	8231.90	1849.36	1425.22	655.74
1988	8577.97	1908.13	1469.30	731.69
1989	8893.68	1905.32	1457.58	814.23
1990	9064.34	1847.52	1413.86	847.32
1991	9057.66	1740.25	1342.50	879.85
1992	9379.75	1497.04	1147.42	960.61
1993	9637.25	1355.76	1047.96	1097.41
1994	10026.34	1169.26	916.23	1250.65
1995	10299.03	1107.70	878.27	1414.24
1996	10689.95	1068.29	846.65	1568.75
1997	11169.64	1082.25	858.50	1725.76
1998	11666.63	1038.59	813.00	1886.20
1999	12213.22	1096.30	865.03	2033.96
2000	12713.05	1198.62	951.54	2188.94
2001	12837.05	1269.57	999.99	2370.63
2002	13066.42	1334.93	1047.42	2585.93
2003	13433.14	1436.29	1123.84	2845.18
2004	13941.67	1549.08	1204.49	3132.12
2005	14408.00	1653.08	1281.29	3486.36
2006	14792.23	1797.02	1385.76	3928.31

Year	US	USSR	Russia	China
2007	15055.31	1956.66	1504.03	4484.65
2008	15011.48	2059.94	1582.97	4916.73
2009	14594.75	1921.55	1459.27	5369.77
2010	14964.31	2015.67	1524.89	5930.75
2011	15204.00	2110.83	1589.91	6482.30
2012	15556.86	2184.05	1644.53	6978.37
2013	15902.12	2231.03	1666.22	7513.69
2014	16271.05	2245.67	1670.38	8064.44

Sources: World Bank World Development Indicators, International Financial Statistics of the IMF, IHS Global Insight, and Oxford Economic Forecasting, as well as estimated and projected values developed by the Economic Research Service all converted to a 2010 base year; at <<http://www.ers.usda.gov/datafiles/...Data/.../HistoricalRealGDPValues.xls>> [23 December 2016].

and US\$18.04 trillion, respectively) while Russia's GDP (at US\$3.58 trillion) was only 18 per cent of China's and 20 per cent of the United States', dropping to the sixth place in 2015 (Table 3).

Nevertheless, in terms of aggregate national power, the three countries are comparable. All three are continental countries with large populations. In terms of military strength, they have been consistently ranked at the world's top three in recent years, with Russia in second place due largely to its stockpile of nuclear weapons rivalling that of the United States (Table 4).²³ Many view Russia's prospects with gloom because of its declining economy and shrinking population, which may eventually accentuate its vulnerability to seek alliance with China or binding with the United States. However, the reality is somewhat different. Figure 1 indicates that Russia's population decline bottomed out in 2001 and has exhibited an upward trend in the past decade or so. Russia's economy has also substantially improved under Russian President Vladimir Putin (Figure 2), and Russia is as ambitious as China. Therefore, from a realist point of view, none of the three is vulnerable enough to seek alliance with another for now. However, in the context of an expanded concept of alliance, Russia and China can still engage in joint projects in many areas of strategic importance and become a potent force to be reckoned with in transforming the status quo.

²³ Of course, Russia's much weaker economy raises the question of the sustainability of its defence spending.

TABLE 3
Ranking by Average GDP Values (PPP)

Year	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th
2020 (IMF Forecast)	China 28,229.144	US 22,488.616	India 12,708.363	Japan 5,521.726	Germany 4,500.566	Indonesia 4,155.459	Brazil 3,977.896	Russia 3,975.744	United Kingdom 3,240.196	France 3,159.792
2015 World Bank (IMF Forecast)	China 19,814.369 18,975.871	US 18,036.648 18,124.731	India 7,998.278 7,996.623	Japan 4,738.294 4,843.066	Germany 3,857.073 3,815.462	Russia 3,579.826 3,458.402	Brazil 3,198.898 3,259.079	Indonesia 2,848.028 2,840.243	United Kingdom 2,700.547 2,641.432	France 2,647.706 2,633.896
2010	US 14,964.400	China 12,091.693	India 5,478.697	Japan 4,319.827	Germany 3,205.575	Russia 2,977.897	Brazil 2,685.969	France 2,336.364	United Kingdom 2,193.949	Italy 2,031.798
2005	US 13,093.700	China 6,459.365	Japan 3,874.042	India 3,339.548	Germany 2,677.620	Russia 2,005.385	United Kingdom 1,996.045	France 1,982.855	Brazil 1,963.323	Italy 1,782.702
2000	US 10,284.775	China 3,610.254	Japan 3,263.238	Germany 2,264.651	India 2,147.725	France 1,630.931	Italy 1,541.779	United Kingdom 1,538.921	Brazil 1,523.544	Russia 1,265.558
1995	US 7,664.075	Japan 2,866.925	China 2,196.813	Germany 1,924.061	India 1,471.625	France 1,284.185	Italy 1,278.169	Brazil 1,269.229	United Kingdom 1,171.515	Russia 1,067.012
1990	US 5,979.588	Soviet Union	Japan 2,368.693	West Germany 1,548.457	China 1,092.075	France 1,070.013	Italy 1,062.581	India 1,018.305	Brazil 969.692	United Kingdom 923.639
1985	US 4,346.750	Soviet Union	Japan 1,585.086	West Germany 1,144.657	France 807.519	Italy 800.123	Brazil 753.822	India 653.454	China 640.568	United Kingdom 627.367
1980	US 2,862.475	Soviet Union	Japan 996.736	West Germany 837.262	France 578.363	Italy 570.972	Brazil 553.631	United Kingdom 433.914	Mexico 389.330	India 389.299

Notes: The 10 largest economies by average values of GDP (PPP) by every half decade from the available data in IMF and World Bank lists (in US\$ billion).

Sources: See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_largest_historical_GDP> [23 December 2016]. Updated figures for 2015 are from <<http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/GDP-PPP-based-table>> [23 December 2016].

TABLE 4
World Nuclear Forces, January 2015

Country	Year of first nuclear test	Deployed warheads ^a	Other warheads	Total Inventory
United States	1945	2,080	5,180	7,260
Russia	1949	1,780	5,720	7,500
United Kingdom	1952	150	65	215
France	1960	290	10	300
China	1964	..	260	260
India	1974	..	90–110	90–110
Pakistan	1998	..	100–120	100–120
Israel	80	80
North Korea	2006	6–8
Total		4,300	11,545	15,850

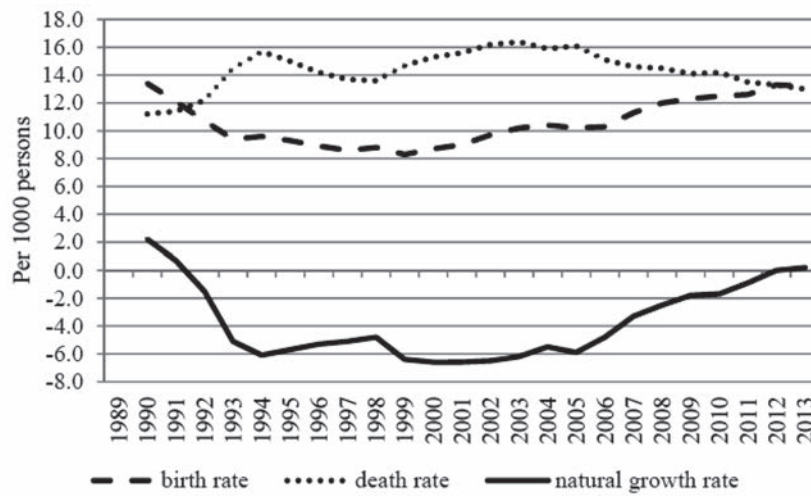
Notes:

All estimates are approximate.

^a “Deployed” denotes warheads placed on missiles or located on bases with operational forces.

Source: *SIPRI Yearbook 2015* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

Figure 1. Population Dynamics in Russia



Source: Calculation based on data from ROSSTAT, at <<http://www.gks.ru/>> [23 December 2016].

Figure 2. Economic and Military Growth in Post-Soviet Russia

Source: The World Bank, at <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD/countries/>> [23 December 2016]; and SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, at <http://www.sipri.org/research/armaments/milex_database> [23 December 2016].

Geopolitics-wise, the larger context of the entente between China and Russia is America's pivot to Asia, and the European Union's sanctions against and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) pressure on Russia for its annexation of Crimea. While EU sanctions may prove to be just a short-term pressure tactic with limited effects because many EU members (especially Germany) are dependent on Russia for energy, the US pivot and NATO's eastward expansion are long-term trends that have squeezed the strategic space of both China and Russia. NATO's eastward expansion is inevitable as a security guarantee to smaller states on Russia's periphery. It is, likewise, inevitable that the shift of global economic centre to the Asia-Pacific has steered America's pivot to Asia. Pressured from the east by myriads of alliances between and among the United States, Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore and implicitly including Taiwan along the island chains, China is compelled to turn to the west for breathing space. Pressured from the west, Russia turns east to the Asia-Pacific to diversify its energy market and seek economic opportunities. Hence, the pressure from both ends of the Eurasian continent is driving the two together. Similarly, both have neighbours that alienate the two and seek security cooperation or partnerships with the United States.

In comparison, the geoeconomic foundation for a possible Sino–Russo alliance appears far more solid. It is founded on the complementarities between the two geographically adjacent economies. South of the Sino–Russo border is the “factory of the world” with tremendous dynamism and entrepreneurship; to the north is a vast resource base of raw material and energy supply. China has the capital, unmatched

infrastructure-building capability and surplus of manufactured goods. Russia, especially its Far East Region (or RFE, short for Russian Far East), is in desperate need of capital and infrastructure; its development depends on how much it can tap into the Asia-Pacific dynamism. Moscow's desire to expand energy exports intersects with Beijing's search for greater energy security. Overland supply of raw materials and energy from Russia and Central Asia will reduce China's supply line vulnerabilities in the Indian Ocean, the narrow Strait of Malacca and the troubled South China Sea, all of which have a dominant presence of the US Navy. In Putin's words, the two countries "are consistently moving towards the formation of a strategic energy alliance" and "active work is being done to reduce the dependence of bilateral trade on external economic factors".²⁴

However, Sino–Russo bilateral economic ties are highly asymmetric. China's much higher growth rate underscores Russian anxiety concerning the RFE. The Russian and Chinese economies were roughly the same size in 1993, but by 2014 Russian GDP shrank to less than one-fifth of China's. According to the 2010 census, the RFE's population declined by 20 per cent since 1991 to just 6.293 million, which is projected to fall to 4.7 million by 2025.²⁵ In contrast, China's three north-eastern provinces alone are home to 110 million people. The unequal population sizes will have asymmetrical impacts, raising fear in Russia that an influx of Chinese may eventually take over the RFE.²⁶ Russia is also extremely anxious that it will end up as a junior partner and an energy appendage of China.²⁷

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST PROCESS

China's rapid rise on the world stage and Russia's return to great power status provide the impetus for the two countries to define and articulate alternative modernity and

²⁴ "Russia, China Moving Towards Strategic Energy Alliance–President Putin", *Voice of Russia*, at <https://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014_05_19/Russia-China-moving-towards-strategic-energy-alliance-President-Putin-6384/> [25 June 2014].

²⁵ Andrew S. Bowen and Luke Rodeheffer, "Is Russia Losing Control of Its Far East?", *The Diplomat*, 2013, at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/is-russia-losing-control-of-its-far-east/?allpages=yes>> [24 June 2014].

²⁶ For example, Joseph Nye, "A New Sino–Russian Alliance?", *Project Syndicate*, 12 January 2015, at <<http://www.projectsyndicate.org/commentary/russia-china-alliance-by-joseph-s-nye-2015-01>> [2 April 2015].

²⁷ In September 2008, President Medvedev voiced Russian anxiety over the eastern territories, warning his countrymen that the Far East Region (RFE) could turn into a raw material base for more developed Asian countries, stating that "unless we speed up our efforts, we can lose everything". See Bowen and Rodeheffer, "Is Russia Losing Control of Its Far East?". In 2000, President Putin famously warned that unless long-term trends were reversed, "Russians in the border regions will have to speak Chinese, Japanese and Korean within a few decades". Twelve years later, returning to the subject, Putin named the development of the RFE "the most important geopolitical task" facing the Federation. Vladimir Putin, "A New Integration Project for Eurasia: The Future in the Making", *Izvestia*, 3 October 2011, at <<http://www.russianmission.eu/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3->> [26 June 2014].

development. Shared interests and compatible visions create the space for new joint projects that may generate additional shared interests. The two have cooperated in the establishment of a development bank with other BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) countries—a “developing world” version of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank.²⁸ The unexpected success of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) initiative is indicative of room for rising powers like China to assume leadership in the existing order. The creation of an alternative set of international organisations could enhance Beijing and Moscow’s diplomatic rhetoric and muscle, allowing them to align more closely with the rest of the developing world. However, the scope and depth of such collaboration, and indeed the perception of common interests in the first place, are constrained by their respective cultural identity and historical legacy, which limit the type of and determine the nature of constructive/collaborative process engaged by both states. Here lies the fundamental divide between them that no amount of effort could eliminate completely.

Cultural Identity and Historical Legacy

The tsarist Russia’s empire-building from the 17th to 19th centuries was a reversal of the westward march of the Mongol empire into the heartland of the Slavic people. The population, political, cultural and economic centre of Russia remains anchored in its European part while the vast stretches of land in Siberia and the RFE are largely empty. China, on the other hand, was a stationary empire on the east end of the Eurasian continent, representing the only continuous civilisation of the world. The two oversized states belong to two very different civilisations and hence have very different cultural identities.

Russia has always considered itself European and is proud of that cultural lineage.²⁹ The modern Russia finds great inspiration in the United States, Great Britain, France and Germany; it finds very little in the Chinese cultural tradition that is inspiring.³⁰ Tsarist Russia championed modern Western civilisation on its eastward march to the Pacific coast, subduing the indigenous peoples and destroying their cultures and traditional ways of life along the way. Against the backdrop of a waxing West and a waning East, with few exceptions, people in between the spheres of influence of the

²⁸ Mike Cohen and Ilya Arkhipov, “BRICS Nations Plan New Bank to Bypass World Bank, IMF”, *Bloomberg News*, May 2013, at <<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-03-25/brics-nations-plan-new-bank-to-bypass-world-bank-imf.html>> [26 June 2014].

²⁹ Marlene Laruelle, “Russia’s National Identity and Foreign Policy toward the Asia-Pacific”, *The Asian Forum*, 24 January 2014, at <<http://www.theasianforum.org/russias-national-identity-and-foreign-policy-toward-the-asia-pacific/>> [4 April 2015].

³⁰ During the 2014 Winter Olympics at Sochi, Russia, Putin’s advisor, Molov, gave an interview to Na Xiaobin, a well-known Chinese blogger, commentator and independent reporter, in which he laid out the fundamental differences between Russia and China in terms of historical experiences, cultural identities and national aspirations. The transcript in Chinese is available at <<http://www.gelonghui.com/p/79517.html>> [23 December 2016].

Russian and Chinese empires were drawn to Russia rather than to China. Russia had brought an entirely different civilisation to the doorstep of China, and compatibility between the two has always been an issue. With the rise of China, there has been a renewed cultural pride in China that may lead to a clash of civilisations. Russia's persecution of Chinese retailers and Confucius Institutes signals fundamental cultural or even civilisational differences and a deep identity chasm. There is also the issue of ego, especially on the part of Russia—can it overcome resentment to what appears to be a junior partner's role, given its previous status as an imperial power in the tsarist Russia and a big brother to China?

At the societal level, culturally embedded negative stereotypes of each other persist despite years of sustained efforts by both governments to promote cultural exchanges. Bitter historical memories have always haunted the bilateral relations. The tsarist Russia, according to Chinese accounts, annexed 1.7 million square kilometres of Chinese territory. The Soviet Union under Stalin also helped Outer Mongolia gain independence from China. A rising China is inevitably tempted to recover its “lost territories”, which strikes fear among Russians. This will remain a protracted and sensitive issue in their relationship, despite the legal resolution of all of their border issues.

On the other hand, both China and Russia do share a common legacy from the communist era that stands them apart from the Western states. The two have similar victim complex and harbour resentments towards the West. Both aspire to regain their past grandeur, and this is one project they could collaborate against common foes.

Cognitive Convergence

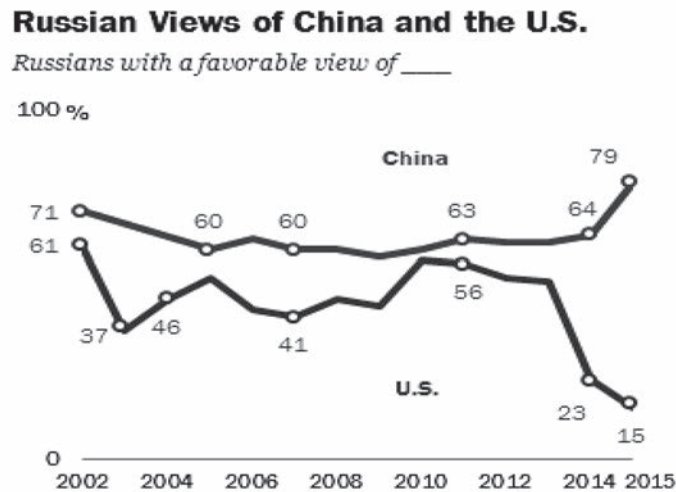
A gradual convergence of the two states' views on international affairs is discernible at the ruling elite level even though cultural and historical stereotypes persist among the populations. To a certain extent, the centralised power and state control of the media in both countries have facilitated the convergence. The relative autonomy of the two states has also elevated the significance of discourse at the elite level in defining national interests and steering policy course.

A main driving force of the cognitive convergence is the perceived hostility from the West that gives rise to identity politics of “us against them”. As Rozman points out, identity political formations typically aim “to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context”.³¹ In part because of the state control of the media, the elite perception of Western maliciousness is to a large extent shared by the population. Figure 3 shows that Russian people's positivity towards China is highly correlated with their negativity towards the United States. China and Russia, unhappy about the state of world affairs, naturally push for an alternative order that is more accommodating to their interests, views and values. And they find comfort

³¹ Gilbert Rozman, “The Russian Pivot to Asia”, *The Asian Forum* 2, no. 6 (November–December 2014), at <<http://www.theasianforum.org/the-russian-pivot-to-asia/>> [4 April 2015].

in each other's company in doing this. The joint communique issued after the 2014 Shanghai summit promised further close coordination in foreign policy, mutual support in enhancing each other's international standing and influence, and joint effort in establishing "an international system that is more just and equitable".³² Putin lauded the absence of any political problems between Russia and China and that the bilateral relations are a "truly exemplary partnership that should be a model for major world powers", as both countries "have common priorities both on the global and regional scale".³³

Figure 3. Russian Views of China and the United States



Source: See <<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/08/russians-warm-to-china-as-relations-with-u-s-cool/>> [23 December 2016].

Russia and China have been actively advancing the idea of a "new security architecture" and "sustainable security" in the Asia-Pacific region.³⁴ The two states attempt to work together outside of US confines, oppose American unilateralism, embrace a new multi-polar world order, and call for the West to give up "funding or encouraging the activity

³² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, "Joint Statement on New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Russia", at <http://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_chn/zyxw_602251/t1157763.shtml> [25 June 2014].

³³ *Xinhua News Agency*, "Putin: China-Russia Follow Great Power Relations Model", *Jiefangwang*, May 2014, at <http://www.jfdaily.com/guoji/bw/201405/t20140520_357650.html> [25 June 2014]; see also "Russia, China to Closer Coordinate Foreign Policy Steps within UN, BRICS, APEC", *The Voice of Russia*, 20 May 2014, at <http://voiceofrussia.com/news/2014_05_20/Russia-China-to-closer-coordinate-foreign-policy-steps-within-UN-BRICS-APEC-4195/> [25 June 2014].

³⁴ "Implementation of Gas Contract with China to Begin on May 22—President Putin", *News Europe*, May 2014, at <https://sputniknews.com/voiceofrussia/news/2014_05_21/Implementation-of-gas-contract-with-China-to-begin-on-May-22-President-Putin-0435/> [23 June 2014].

aimed at changing the constitutional order of other states”.³⁵ As alternative to Western discourse on international relations, the proposed “new security” emphasises mutual security and “sustainable security” that are based on economic growth and a “win-win” strategy—with a distinctive constructivist bend. Chinese President Xi Jinping elaborated these concepts at the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building in Asia (CICA) summit in May 2014, calling for a “common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security strategy for Asia”. Xi criticised the pursuit of “absolute security” that undermines the security of others and stated that “[w]e need to innovate our security concept, establish new regional security cooperation architecture, and jointly build a shared, win-win road for Asian security”.³⁶ Russian President Putin concurred, accusing the US missile defence network as an example of the absolute invulnerability of one country requiring the absolute vulnerability of others.³⁷ Xi specifically voiced opposition to military alliances in the balance of power tradition, stating “[m]ilitary alliances targeted at a third party are not conducive to common regional security”.³⁸ Both Russia and China have accused the United States of “sticking to a Cold War mentality”.

These efforts amount to pushing for a new constitutional order. The keywords of this new order seem to include “new security”, “win-win diplomacy”, “free trade and economic integration” and “building a community of destiny”. These are proactive in comparison to China’s long-standing “five principles of peaceful co-existence”. These ideas seem to be eagerly embraced by a large number of third-world states that are marginalised by the prevailing order. Through symbolic interactions, Russia and China are coordinating their rhetoric as well as interests.

Institution-building for an Alternative Order

The envisioned constitutional order apparently favours multilateralism and multi-nodal networks of cooperation and partnership crystallised by institution-building. In fact, significant institutional infrastructure has been constructed for the two to collaborate in many international issues. At the 2014 CICA summit, Xi produced a long list of institutions that include CICA, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, East Asia Summit, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS, G20, Asia–Europe Meeting, China–Russia–India Foreign Ministers’ Meeting, etc., as mechanisms of cooperation for regional states free from Western dominance. In particular, the CICA summit is the largest forum on Asian security that excludes the United States and Japan. Many

³⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC, “Joint Statement on New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Russia”.

³⁶ “Summit to Reshape Asian Security with New Concept”, *Xinhua News Agency*, 21 May 2014, at <http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-05/21/c_126531123.htm> [24 June 2015].

³⁷ Richard Weitz, “As Tensions with West Rise, Moscow Looks to Asia”, *The Diplomat*, July 2013, at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/07/as-tensions-with-west-rise-moscow-looks-to-asia>> [24 June 2014].

³⁸ “China Champions New Asian Security Concept: Xi”, *Xinhua News Agency*, 21 May 2014, at <<http://english.peopledaily.com.cn/n/2014/0521/c90883-8730684.html>> [27 June 2014].

member states, such as Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Palestine and Qatar, are often at odds with Western states. China's "One Belt, One Road" (OBOR) initiatives and Russia's Eurasian Union are some of the boldest strategies under the new vision. The most successful institution-building so far are the AIIB, the Silk Road Fund, and the BRICS Development Bank, with the SCO Development Bank also on the radar. These and many others constitute dense institutional networks that may undergird a potential new constitutional order.

STRATEGIC REALIGNMENT

The probability of alliance formation among states is also determined by the compatibility of their respective national strategies that attend to a broad range of national interests. The possibility of a Sino–Russo alliance should be examined in the context of Russia's Eurasian project and its pivot towards the Asia-Pacific,³⁹ and China's westward march spearheaded by its Silk Road strategy. Russia's and China's respective grand national strategies point to a temporal and spatial confluence that would bring both potential conflicts and convergence of interest, as well as perils and opportunities. Which outcome would prevail depends on how both states evaluate the situation, their perception of each other as friend or foe, or as competitor or partner, and also on the strategic choices they make. There is always a broader range of possibilities than a strict realist analysis would allow.

China's Grand Strategy

Pressured by America's pivot to the Asia-Pacific and its deteriorating relations with Japan and several Southeast Asian states over territorial disputes, China finds greater significant incentives to look westward to avoid the perceived US containment in the east. China's east coast is locked by myriad US security alliances, whereas the vast, resource-rich Eurasia to its north and west is much less hospitable to US presence. China's "hedge" against the United States is best encapsulated in its "march west" strategy to build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" (SREB), or its own pivot to Eurasia.⁴⁰

China's westward march was initially motivated by its risk mitigation strategy for energy access. Given its reliance on maritime traffic that traverses sea lanes in the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Malacca, which are beyond its control, China is well aware of the strategic significance of importing its energy overland, with Pakistan as a crucial node. China's investment in and leasing of the Pakistani port at Gwadar at

³⁹ Andrew C. Kuchins, "Russia and the CIS in 2013: Russia's Pivot to Asia", *Asian Survey* 54, no. 1, A Survey of Asia in 2013 (January/February 2014): 129–37.

⁴⁰ Wang Jisi, "Marching Westwards: The Rebalancing of China's Geostrategy", *International and Strategic Studies Report*, no. 73 (October 2012), Center for International and Strategic Studies, Peking University; Ankit Panda, "China's Pivot West: China has begun 'Marching Westwards' in Asia: the Consequences Could be Huge", *The Diplomat*, 29 October 2013, at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/10/chinas-pivot-west/>> [23 December 2016].

the mouth of the Strait of Hormuz crystallises this strategic vision. China's structural adjustment of the economy also underlines its “march west” strategy. With rising land and labour costs on the coastal regions, China's low-cost manufacturing is increasingly redeployed to the inland regions, and its open door policy is shifting its emphasis to Central Asia. China pitches itself as a “good neighbour” to the region and as a source of the much-needed investment, a vision well received by Central Asian governments. A China-friendly Central Asia is also a bulwark against instability in the restive Xinjiang Uighur province by turning it into a trade hub for the region.

China's push to the west has taken shape in the form of the Silk Road initiatives. The SREB envisions clusters of development projects along the overland transport network linking both ends of the Eurasia continent. The 21st-century Maritime Silk Road is designed to spawn similar development regions from China's coastal region to Europe through the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, East Africa and the Middle East. Comprehensive networks of high-speed railways, highways, pipelines, ports, and fibre-optic across huge parts of Eurasia, Southeast Asia and the Middle East have been proposed. China's geographic proximity to and connectivity with Southeast Asia, South Asia and Central Asia have given it a clear advantage over the United States. Its increasing economic prowess and ability to swiftly implement large-scale projects also accord it a tremendous competitive edge. China is on good terms with most key players in the two new Silk Roads, with possibly a hitch on the land route that crosses the heartland of the traditional Russian empire—hence, it needs the cooperation of Russia. Even if partially realised, the OBOR would produce a tectonic change to the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of Eurasia.

Russia's Grand Strategy

Russia has never lost its self-identity as a great power bordering on an empire, and under Vladimir Putin, it is working meticulously on regaining that status. As Russia is regarded with suspicion by the West and is too proud to join the European Union or NATO as an ordinary member state, Putin has started his own empire-building project of Eurasian integration and a strategic pivot to the Far East. In Putin's vision, Russia's future will not be European or transatlantic, but “Eurasian”. In 2007, three of the former republics of the Soviet Union—Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan—formed the “Eurasia Custom Union”, which later became the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015. Putin plans to turn the Eurasian Economic Union into a “powerful, supra-national union” of sovereign states similar to the EU, uniting economies, legal systems, customs services and military capabilities to form a bridge between Europe and Asia that would rival the EU, the United States and China.⁴¹

The dramatic rise of Asia-Pacific as the centre of the global economy in the post-war era renders the primeval RFE vulnerable. Russia recognises the need to expedite development in the RFE to reduce vulnerability and to tap into the dynamism

⁴¹ Putin, “A New Integration Project for Eurasia”.

of the Asian economic powerhouses. Compared to America's "pivot to Asia" strategy, Russia's eastern pivot has been primarily driven by fear. Indeed, Western-imposed sanctions have hastened Russia's pivot to the east and accelerated its participation in Asian markets.

Collision or Collaboration?

The two grand strategies highlight the divergence of national interests that points to a possible collision course. The Eurasian Union initiative may conceivably have adverse impacts on China's substantial investment made on both sides of its western borders, because it would exclude China from the former Soviet space and erect trade barriers to China. Conversely, the SREB presents a competing vision for Central Asia. In the security realm, Russia plans to transform the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which excludes China, into Central Asia's primary multilateral security institution. China has so far deferred to Russia's role in Central Asian security but this may change with the expansion of China's economic interest in the region and its military prowess. If both countries' preoccupation with the United States and the West diminishes, other targets of nationalism may rise to the forefront.

However, none of these are inevitable as long as China and Russia engage in a "win-win" constructivist process, which is reflected in the careful wording of the joint communique issued on 20 May 2014. The Russians succeeded in emphasising the critical role of Eurasian integration in security, economic development and as a bridge between the Asia-Pacific and the EU, which is consistent with the objectives of the SREB. The Russian side was also "highly appreciative of China's willingness to consider the interest of Russia in the design and implementation of the Silk Road Economic Belt" and both sides promised to search for ways "to make the projects along the Silk Road compatible with the Eurasian Union".⁴² A hybrid analytic framework cannot help but highlight the potential in the Sino-Russo alliance. Both countries' economies remain highly complementary and Russia's new emphasis on developing the RFE partially overlaps with China's economic westward march. Russia has significantly relaxed foreign ownership restrictions on its oil and gas fields, and opened up the farm and service sector to foreign investors. Over the past decade, Russia and China have also developed close military relations, holding joint exercises annually. These exercises have expanded in scale and scope, and moved beyond counter-piracy and terrorism drills to active collaboration in anti-submarine, surface-air defence and amphibious warfare.

Meanwhile, Russia consciously engages in identity adjustment, pitching itself more as a Pacific nation by emphasising its Asian heritage.⁴³ Russia's engagement,

⁴² Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Joint Statement on New Stage of Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between China and Russia".

⁴³ See Edith W. Clowes, *Russia on the Edge: Imagined Geographies and Post-Soviet Identity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

which may or may not turn out to be successful, does alleviate the otherwise gloomy prospects as seen from a bona fide realist perspective. This may lead to a further convergence of views between Russia and China on their relationship and their position in world politics, and ultimately a convergence of important national interests.

CONCLUSIONS

Three tentative conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis. First, while there is no unsurmountable obstacle to a Sino–Russo alliance; combining Russia’s military prowess and China’s economic dynamism could make them a formidable force to reckon with in world politics. Their economies are almost a perfect fit for trade and investment; their views and stances on a range of important issues in world politics are remarkably similar. They have also been coordinating their activities at the United Nations Security Council and elsewhere. Over the years, they have developed a series of joint projects and institutions that provide the sustenance of cooperation that may lead to an alliance. Both countries have also developed substantial defence ties as is evident in Russia’s key role in China’s modernisation of the People’s Liberation Army. In sum, the geopolitical, geoeconomic and institutional foundations for such an alliance certainly exist.

For now, however, it is more advantageous for China and Russia to remain in a strategic partnership instead of an alliance, which maximises their options and opportunities and better serves their distinctive national interest. As nuclear powers, neither China nor Russia faces imminent danger of being attacked by any power. In the long run, China and Russia alike may need the United States and the European Union more than they need each other for economic development. An important lesson of the Cold War is that an alliance is geopolitically stable but geoeconomically sterile. Both China and Russia have denied that their recent collaboration is one of alliance,⁴⁴ and China has embraced an “independent foreign policy of peace” since the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Neither party seeks a world where their relationship is viewed as the second coming of the Sino–Soviet axis of the Cold War.⁴⁵ For both, an alliance can be forged but better to be avoided.

However, there is always the possibility that the two countries may be forced into an alliance. The large-scale joint naval war games in recent years are a sign of Moscow shifting its geopolitical alignment with China at a time when both are increasingly being isolated. China faces what it perceives as US-instigated provocations from neighbours from the East and South China Seas. Russia faces sanctions and chastisement from the West after its annexation of Crimea. The existing networks of

⁴⁴ Stephen Kotkin, “The Unbalanced Triangle”, *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2009), at <<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/65230/stephen-kotkin/the-unbalanced-triangle>> [22 June 2014].

⁴⁵ Scott W. Harold and Lowell Schwartz, “A Russia–China Alliance Brewing? Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin’s Recent Summit Drew Wide International Attention. Are We Witnessing the Dawn of a New Alliance?”, *The Diplomat*, April 2013, at <<http://thediplomat.com/2013/04/a-russia-china-alliance-brewing>> [27 June 2014].

security alliances—virtually all relics of the Cold War—that the United States have built on both ends of Eurasia may compel Russia and China to form an alliance if both feel cornered. A United States in decline will have to increasingly rely on its networks of alliances.

Second, a Sino–Russo alliance, if materialised at all, would be shallow and pragmatic; it lacks the deeper cultural identity underpinning necessary to be stable and enduring like NATO, and is unlikely to support sovereignty integration like the EU does. Russia and China are sufficiently dissimilar from the West for a possible alliance but they are too different from each other to form a stable alliance. It is conceivable that Russia may swing towards the Western camp if the West stops treating Russia as an outcast of Western civilisation, as US President Donald Trump seems to be doing. That however will never happen to China.⁴⁶ China will always be an alien to the West but Russia may become a part of the West, which has been its dream from the time of Peter the Great.

Third, Russia and China’s joint promotion of alternative constitutional order is perhaps more subversive to the existing order than a formal alliance. It is the embodiment of a new constitutional order in their joint efforts, and their combined capability to push for it that makes their collaboration a potent force for change, with or without an alliance. Such constitutional order has not been clearly articulated and there may be major differences between the two, but it is sufficiently different from the present, Western-defined constitutional order to make it politically as well as strategically significant. China and Russia’s non-alliance may perhaps better serve that purpose of pushing for a new constitutional order because each can attract more diverse followers without forcing their respective foes to unite. In any case, a closer and more robust Sino–Russo relationship is a significant development in world politics.

⁴⁶ For example, Molov asserted during an interview with Na Xiaobin that “Russia destined to return to the mainstream ideology of the West”; see the transcript in Chinese is available at <<http://www.gelonghui.com/p/79517.html>> [23 December 2016].