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In search of the 'Other' in Asia: Russia–China relations revisited

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that Russia and China are partners of consequence and that the neglect of the normative dimension of the Sino-Russian relationship has led its impact on global governance to be undervalued and misunderstood. Following a constructivist approach, the paper examines the shared norms underlying an ever closer Sino-Russian partnership, despite divergent interests in a number of areas. A first section examines how shared norms lead Russia and China to define their identity similarly, facilitate joint actions, and constrain their individual policy choices. For Russia, elaborating its own unique identity is crucial to its claim to global status, though complicated by interactions with multiple 'Others.' Russia's effort to engage Asian partners is often viewed as hedging against China, but as second section argues that Russian engagement in Asia is better understood in terms of Russia's effort to define an Asian identity. A third section highlights the securitization/desecuritization dynamic in Sino-Russian economic relations. Xi Jinping's efforts to redefine China's global role reinforces its tendency to desecuritize the vulnerabilities that lead China to seek economic cooperation with Russia. Russia, fearing becoming a 'resource appendage' of China, then securitizes economic relations with China.

KEYWORDS Sino-Russian relations; self-other; identity; hedging; securitization; Asia

Introduction

The Sino-Russian relationship is back in the headlines, but the discussion trends towards the extremes. Is the strategic partnership between the two countries an alliance or a sham? Is Russia becoming China's resource appendage or is Russia hedging against a rising China? This paper argues they are partners of consequence and that the neglect of the normative dimension of the Sino-Russian relationship has led it to be undervalued and misunderstood. Following a constructivist approach, the paper examines the shared norms underlying an ever closer Sino-Russian partnership, despite divergent interests in a number of areas. Taking into account the normative basis for their relationship is key to understanding the role Russia and China play as norm-makers and challengers to existing global governance structures.

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The first section addresses how shared norms lead Russia and China to define their identity in similar ways, facilitate joint actions, and constrain their individual policy choices. For Russia, elaborating its own unique Euro-Asian identity is crucial to its claim to global rather than regional status, though complicated by interactions with and reactions to multiple 'Others'. Since the 1990s, a number of scholars have turned to social theory to better understand the social context of identity formation (Neumann 1999; Suzuki 2007; Suzuki 2015). Theorists disagree on the consequences of defining one's own identity in contrast to 'Others'. Some argue that geographically defined 'Others' lead to more antagonistic relations (Diez 2004: 320), while other analysts caution that perception of the 'Other' as different need not imply that that state is threatening (Rumelili 2004: 28). It is argued here that, while differences with Asian – especially Chinese – 'Others' reinforces Russia's sense of self as European (Curanovic 2012: 222; Tsygankov 2006: 26) this need not inevitably lead to tensions with China. To the contrary, it is tensions with 'Others' in the West and pressure by the United States and European Union (EU) that drive Russia to accentuate its Asian identity and engage with its neighbors in Asia, especially China.

Critical constructivists see identity reflected in diplomatic practices, not causing them (Bukh 2009: 320) and similarly Russia's identity as a Euro-Asian state is viewed as being reinforced by Moscow's multipronged engagement with Asian states, which tends to be misconstrued as hedging behavior. The second section of the paper examines Russia's engagement in Asia in terms of its effort to define an Asian identity.

Resource-driven economic cooperation with China, and to a certain extent with other Asian partners, exacerbates Russian fears of dependence on resource exports to Asia and becoming a 'resource appendage' of China. Meanwhile China's quest for status and fears of social instability lead Chinese officials to understate their vulnerabilities, as demonstrated by China's increased reliance on Russia for resources. A securitization/desecuritization dynamic (Buzan et al. 1998: 4; Waever 1995: 57) ensues between Russia and China, in which Russians 'securitize' economic relations with China (i.e. describe economic relations as a threat, which an audience accepts as valid), while Chinese 'desecuritize' (downplay any threat and highlight the normality of interaction), at the same time omitting mention of their own country's vulnerabilities and dependence on Russia. The third section highlights how Xi Jinping's efforts to redefine China's global role reinforces the tendency to downplay the vulnerabilities that lead China to seek closer ties to Russia.

An Undervalued Partnership

Discussion of the Sino-Russian partnership in the West is oddly out of step with analysis by Russian and Chinese policy experts. Although a few Western experts provide more balanced analysis that highlights shared interests (Kuchins 2014: 4) and common positions on global issues (Rozman 2014a), others have dismissed the relationship as 'an axis of convenience' (Lo 2008: 3), and a fragile and imbalanced partnership with an uncertain future (Nye 2015; Swanström 2014: 480–1). By contrast, Russian and Chinese official statements highlight that, while they are not aiming for an alliance, their shared positions on major global issues are 'one of the core elements of regional and global stability'[1]) and that the two countries 'draw from each other's support' as they confront global challenges.[2] Similarly, the consensus position among leading Chinese and Russian scholars remains that China continues to follow a policy of non-alignment due to

the potential costs and risks involved in an alliance (Luzyanov and Zhao 2015: 8). To be sure, Russia and China have competing interests in many spheres, especially the Russian Far East and Central Asia, as well as a troubled history of border relations. The conflicts of interest between Russia and China are amply documented (Kim and Blank 2013a, 2013b; Lee and Lukin, Ar. 2015) and it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine them in detail.

Russia and China: partners of consequence?

Much of the discussion of Sino-Russian relations is based on realist conceptions of great power interactions, and the normative dimension of the partnership tends to be neglected or undervalued. As Henry Nau has argued, however, there is a distribution of identity in Asia, as well as a distribution of power (Nau 2003: 233). The identity that Russia and China share – adherence to shared norms about the priority of political stability, opposition to interference by the West in their domestic affairs – underpins their partnership and gives it strength, despite divergent interests in some areas (Rozman 2014b). David Kerr cautions, however, that 'the compatibility of Russian and Chinese visions on these political constructions does not predetermine the interaction of their interests…' (Kerr 2005: 431).

Some scholars argue that normative factors are better predictors of alliance formation than material ones (Lai and Reiter 2000: 223), though a shared identity does not necessarily mean complete harmony (Barnett 1996). Russian and Chinese leaders do not claim to be pursuing an alliance, but, in their joint statements over the past two decades, and especially in their 2001 Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, Russian and Chinese leaders have outlined a set of shared norms – parameters for appropriate behavior in the Sino-Russian partnership. Following Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, norms are said to embody a quality of 'oughtness' (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998: 892). They enable states to set standards for their assessments of international developments and justify particular responses. These norms can shape state behavior in three ways: they support the development of a sense of common identity, encourage joint action, and constrain individual actions (Gelpi 1997: 339; Tannenwald 2007).

Common identity

Despite vast differences in their historical trajectory and culture, Russia and China are seeking to define their own identity in similar ways. They claim to be returning great powers and aspire to regain what they each view as their own rightful role in the global order (Allison 2013: 3; Clunan 2009: 16; Ogden 2013: 261; Sakwa 2011: 199; Wilson 2015: 3). This is a complex process, as each country has played a variety of roles in different historical contexts, and both countries are beset by what Qin Yaqing, President of China Foreign Affairs University has termed an 'identity dilemma', reflecting their difficult interactions with a global order founded on unfamiliar Western concepts (Qin 2011: 49).

The individual and joint efforts by China and Russia to stake out a new role in this order, nevertheless, have the potential to reshape it through the values they are promoting. In speeches (Putin 2015; Xi 2013a) and joint statements,[3] Xi Jinping and Putin uphold the political value of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, and advocate respect for the development path they choose, as well as mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-interference, non-use of force, mutually

beneficial cooperation, equality, and peaceful coexistence. The values that Russia and China share also resonate with the foreign policy principles that each of the two states espouses.

In his speech to the Central Party Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs, Xi Jinping outlined the new leadership's key foreign policy principles and emphasized that 'China should develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role as a major country' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2014). Xi also stressed that China would never give up its 'legitimate rights and interests or allow China's core interests to be undermined' and 'would seek other countries' understanding of and support for the Chinese dream, which is about peace, development, cooperation and win-win outcomes' (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC 2014). Similarly, the Russian national security concept asserts that it is in Russia's long-term interest to transform the country 'into a world power, whose activity is directed at supporting the strategic stability and mutually beneficial partner relationships within the multipolar world'.[4]

Ever since the 'color' revolutions in the post-Soviet space in the 2000s, Russian and Chinese officials have denounced Western interference in the domestic affairs of other countries. Russian and Chinese leaders have sought to reign in the activities of foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and control the flow of information from outside their borders to defend their sovereignty and maintain regime stability. The 2014 conflict in Ukraine showed that Chinese leaders chose to emphasize that the principle of non-interference was at stake. While concerned about any potential implications of events in Crimea for Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan, commentary in Chinese official publications has sided with Russian claims of Western interference in the domestic politics of Ukraine and hypocrisy in hailing the independence of Kosovo but not of Crimea. A *People's Daily* article depicted the Ukraine crisis as the 'final battlefield in the "cold war"' (Wang 2014). Both Russia and China also stated their opposition to sanctions in their May 2014 joint statement.[5]

A Chinese editorial in *People's Daily* similarly portrayed Russian involvement in Syria in the fall of 2015 in part as a US−Russia proxy war, though the article highlighted that Russia intervened militarily to protect its own security and that the Russian military strikes were necessary in light of the ineffectiveness of Western actions against ISIS. The editorial praised Russian actions as a 'sensible strategic move' which was 'helping to strengthen its image as a responsible stakeholder'.[6] Putin explained his decision to launch air strikes in Syria in terms of the principle of non-interference and support for an elected government. In an interview with Russian and Turkish media, he argued that the air strikes were carried out in response to a request by the legitimate government of Syria, though the military actions were designed to combat terrorism, not buttress the Assad regime.[7]

In addition to supporting regime change in other countries, the United States is seen as a constraint on the ability of Russia and China to take up their rightful position in the contemporary world economic order. Both Putin and Xi Jinping have advocated reform of global economic governance that would expand the role of emerging economies (Putin 2014; Xi 2013b: 371). For China, the problems are more long-term. In reaction to the 2008 recession, Chinese officials have argued for reduced global economic dependence on the dollar and encouraged partners, including Russia, to settle accounts in local currencies rather than dollars. As the world's second-largest economy, China wants to be a rulemaker in global economic policy and a model for developing countries, not just a responsible stakeholder, as proposed by World Bank Chairman Robert Zoellick a

decade ago. China has forged ahead with its own Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank, collaborated with Russia in the BRICS New Development Bank, and expressed support for a new Shanghai Cooperation Organization Bank.

For Russia, by contrast, the immediate problem is the West's imposition of economic sanctions in response to the Ukrainian conflict, which has led to a plunge in the ruble's value and obstacles to obtaining needed energy technology. Although Russia has approached China's multilateral financing initiatives with caution, for fear of the Russian contribution being overshadowed by that of its wealthier neighbor, Russia's exclusion from the G-8 and marginalization within the G-20 led President Putin to join the AIIB, find areas of cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Community and China's One Belt One Road project for Central Asia, and expand bilateral financial cooperation.

Russian and Chinese leaders contend that the similarities in their worldviews are an important basis for their partnership and, in fact, the growing spheres of policy coordination reflect these shared political values, as we will see below. Sharing political values, however, does not preclude some differences in phrasing and content that reflect their unique historical trajectories. Peaceful coexistence, for example, a term typically found in Sino-Russian joint statements, is associated with Chinese foreign policy today, although it was Vladimir Lenin who developed the concept and it was later borrowed by subsequent Soviet leaders to refer to the possibility of cooperation with non-socialist states (deConing et al. 2015: 7−10,13).

Joint Action

In recent years, we have seen greater policy coordination in the United Nations between China and Russia on Syria. Although a comparison of Chinese and Russian behavior in the UN Security Council on the Syria votes shows some differences in approach and interests (Snetkov and Lanteigne 2014), their joint actions belie shared views of the primacy of state sovereignty and opposition to Western interference in the domestic affairs of states. Chinese officials have rejected any outside intervention in that is not supported by the Syrian government, although China, unlike Russia, has no major vested interests in the Assad Regime (Liu and Zhang 2014: 419). As Chinese Ambassador to the UN Wang Min explained, China's '…fundamental point of departure is to safeguard the purposes and principles of the UN Charter as well as the basic norms governing international relations, including the principles of sovereign equality and non-interference in others' internal affairs…' (Wang 2012).

Like China, Russia also later rued its decision to abstain on the 2011 UNSC vote, which enabled NATO to broaden the UN-approved mission and support Libyan forces seeking to topple the Gaddafi regime (Averre and Davies 2015: 819). Unlike China, however, Russia has vested interests in the Assad regime, including naval basing rights at Tartus, sales of military equipment, and energy investments, and, as we have seen in the fall of 2015, has been willing to use military force to defend its interests.

Russian officials reject forced democratization in the guise of R2P and argue that the international order requires respect for the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference (Averre and Davies 2015: 824). In September 2015, President Putin argued that the export of democracy had led to chaos and power vacuums in the Middle East and other regions and reaffirmed the importance of state sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of other states (Putin 2015). Like their Chinese counterparts, Russian leaders and officials emphasize the responsibility of states to protect their own

citizens and reject the liberal vision of a universal responsibility to protect individuals in harm's way, particularly if perpetrated by their own government (Kurowska 2014: 503). Thus far the conflict in Syria has spurred greater strategic coordination between Russia and China, including their first joint out of area naval maneuvers, as a part of the mission to dispose of Syrian chemical weapons.

Information policy

Joint action by Russia and China on information policy has involved multilateral action within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the United Nations, as well as a recent bilateral agreement. In contrast to Western norms of free flow of information, Russia and China speak of information security in terms of the state's ability to prevent the dissemination of information that may constitute a threat to governments and the values they hold dear. The 'color' revolutions in the mid-2000s and the Arab Spring of 2011 led to a series of initiatives by the SCO to protect information security. Thus, in 2009, the SCO adopted an agreement on cooperation information security and in 2011, six SCO states, including Russia and China, proposed a code of conduct on information security to the UN General Assembly, which they updated in January 2015 (Korzak 2015). The code's emphasis on information sovereignty, which democratic states see as an effort to justify censorship, is one of many areas of disagreement between the Sino-Russian concept of information security and the Euroatlantic consensus (Giles and Hagestad II 2013: 2; Lewis 2010). Russia and China also agree on the need to 'democratize' the governance of cyberspace (meaning they oppose a leading role by the United States) and the desirability of multilateral governance by state actors rather than multi-stakeholders (the US preference) who could also be non-state actors. A 'cyber non-aggression pact' was one of the 32 agreements that Putin and Xi signed during their May 2015 summit meeting (Kulikova 2015; Russian Government 2015a).

Russia and China also pledged to promote international legal norms to protect national and international information security and engage in a series of confidence-building measures. Some observers contend that the Sino-Russian agreement represents a response to the release earlier that year of the U.S. Department of Defense Cyber Strategy as well as a sanctions program by the U.S. Department of the Treasury to take action against cyber actors that threaten the US interests (Lasiello 2015; Kulikova 2015). Nonetheless, Russia and China were able to highlight their broad agreement on information policy, at a time when the international community as a whole remains divided not just on a code of conduct, but even on the words to be used to describe relevant activity. In the United States and Europe, for example, the concern is with threats to cyberspace (meaning networked systems and related infrastructure), while Russia and China are concerned about what they term 'information space' (*xinxi kongxian* in Chinese and *informatsionnoe prostranstvo* in Russian), which refers to a domain for communication among people (Giles and Hagstad II 2013: 6–7). The September 2015 Sino-American agreement, for example, was considerably more limited in scope and confined to pledges by the two governments not to support cybertheft of intellectual property.[8]

Financial Coordination

The economic gyrations in China, the collapse of the ruble, the related falling dollar value of Sino-Russian trade, and delays in major infrastructure projects between Russia

and China, lead observers to gloomy forecasts for Sino-Russian economic cooperation. However, despite the short-term difficulties in Sino-Russian trade and investment, there is a longer term trend towards greater financial coordination. Since the 2008 global financial crisis China and Russia have criticized the dominance of the dollar, which exposes other countries to US economic risk. China succeeded on November 30 2015 in including the yuan as a reserve currency in the International Monetary Fund and has been taking further steps toward yuan convertibility. China also plans to extend yuan-dominated loans through its state-owned Silk Road fund and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

At the same time, both China and Russia have sought to encourage the use of national currencies in their bilateral and multilateral trade. The imposition of Western sanctions against Russia has accelerated this process, but was not its initial impetus. China's UnionPay international payment system entered the Russian market in 2013 (including Crimea, where Visa and Mastercard could no longer operate due to Western sanctions). In 2014 the Russian Central Bank and the Bank of China agreed to a $23.5 billion currency swap. In August 2015, China began an experiment in Suifenhe, a city along the border with Russia, to accept rubles for payments as well as yuan. By mid-2015, financial journalists hailed the birth of the 'petro-yuan', as Gazpromneft began accepting payments for oil deliveries to China in yuan instead of dollars (Durden 2015).

Constraints

The Sino-Russian partnership constrains the freedom of action of the two countries by limiting their ability to criticize aspects of their partner's policies they do not share or wish to support overtly, and by restricting their own opportunities to pursue interests that may be at odds with their partner's. Given the priority of the Sino-Russian partnership, Russian policy-makers have thus far treaded cautiously in expanding relations with Asian states. Since being admitted as a member of the East Asian summit in 2010, for example, a Russian president has yet to attend the meeting, which involves an annual meeting of heads of state. Some scholars interpret Russia's reticence as a way of avoiding controversies involving China, though the end result is Russian marginalization (Gabuev 2015b; Lukin, Ar. 2013). Russia has been silent on China's conflict with Japan over the East China Sea as well as on South China Sea issues and no support for Chinese positions was mentioned in Sino-Russian agreements.

The Sino-Russian partnership has set limits to Russian–Vietnamese relations; for example, the 2001 Sino-Russian treaty obliges Russia to respect China's territorial integrity, which, according to Beijing, Vietnam threatens with its claims to the Paracel Islands. Nonetheless, as Ivan Tsvetov from the Russian International Affairs Council asserts, Russia's role as a 'neutral actor interested in the peaceful development of the region' may help reassure China about its regional security and open up possibilities for trilateral energy cooperation (Tsvetov 2014). Chinese analysts follow Russia's ties with Vietnam carefully and, for the most part, view the relationship as a part of the Russian effort to boost its influence in Asia more broadly, rather than as a challenge to China (Li 2012; Kang 2012: 35,37).

China, too, has had to tread cautiously in moving forward with its 2013 One Belt One Road (OBOR) plan for Central Asia. Recognizing that Russia's response to Xi's 2013 initiative was wary, if not altogether negative (Yu 2015), Chinese policy-makers took a series of steps to accommodate Russian sensitivities. Chinese maps of the new Silk Road were

redrawn to include Russia and Chinese policy-makers and experts emphasized that the Chinese initiative, which focuses largely on infrastructure development, was designed to complement the Eurasian Economic Union promoted by Russia, not to compete with it (Christoffersen 2010: 13; Swaine 2015: 23). As Chinese Commerce Minister Gao Hucheng explained, 'Xi Jinping pointed out that the "Belt and Road" construction is not closed but open, not China's solo but a chorus of countries along the "Belt and Road"' (Chen and Nan 2015). On May 8 2015, Putin and Xi Jinping signed a joint statement on implementing cooperation between the two initiatives.

Putin's pattern of interventionism first in Ukraine, and then in Syria has posed some policy dilemmas for China, which has long advocated non-interference in the affairs of other countries (Yu 2014). While uncomfortable with what Foreign Ministry Vice Minister Fu Ying termed Russia's 'often surprising diplomatic maneuvers' (Fu 2015; Lukin, Al. 2015), Chinese leaders have shown understanding of Russia's broader goals in Ukraine, which they understood as a perhaps excessive response to Western interference in the country's domestic affairs. In the case of Syria, Chinese policy-makers interpret Russian actions as a part of a resurgent US−Russia competition and accept Russian military intervention to the extent that is destined to boost the regime of an existing government which has supported it.[9] The killing of a Chinese national by ISIS on November 18 2015 provides an additional rationale for Chinese support − the broader anti-terrorist struggle, within which the Chinese government has sought to frame its domestic security problems in Xinjiang. Tensions between Turkey and Russia further complicate this agenda and the Chinese government avoided taking sides over the issue of the Russian aircraft shot down by Turkish forces over their airspace. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei urged all sides to 'strengthen their coordination and communication'.[10]

Russia's Asian identity and diversified partnerships in Asia

Despite the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, Russia has been developing energy and military ties with some of China's most difficult neighbors, Vietnam and India, and improving relations with countries with problematic ties to China, such as North Korea and Japan. Russia has also made some inroads in relations with states which have seen tensions increase recently in their relations with China, including Burma and the Philippines. According to some experts, Russian behavior in Asia should be understood as hedging against a rising China. Following this logic, Russia proclaims a strategic partnership with China and bandwagons with China against the United States, while covertly balancing against China's rising power through energy and military relations with its opponents in Southeast and Northeast Asia (Kim and Blank 2013a: 145−6).

Is Russia hedging against a rising China? In part, the answer depends on the criteria used for defining hedging. Its broadest usage equates hedging with diversification of partners in an uncertain Asian regional environment (Park 2011: 139). According to Robert Sutter, regional powers such as China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea seek a wide range of partnerships in the region while warily engaging the United States. He adds that China's rise has resulted in a similar combination of engagement and precautionary moves by neighboring states (Sutter 2009: 256). Other scholars view hedging as insurance against a more specific threat (Foot 2006: 88), a response to the expected costs of another state's opportunistic moves (Lake 1996: 15) or a fallback position in case of a deterioration in the security environment (Weitz 2001: 38). Used in this sense, hedging refers to a combination of engagement and balancing behavior. Evan Madeiros argued,

for example, the United States and China engage in 'mutual hedging' – both outwardly express a desire for bilateral cooperation while simultaneously bolstering other partnerships in Asia and pursuing military modernization (Madeiros 2005: 146).

Evelyn Goh contends that most great powers typically engage in a combination of engagement and containment. In her view, hedging needs to be distinguished analytically from balancing behavior. She argues that hedging is best defined as 'a set of strategies aimed at avoiding (or planning for contingencies in) a situation in which states cannot decide upon more straightforward alternatives such as balancing, bandwagoning, or neutrality. Instead they cultivate a position that forestalls or avoids having to choose one side [or one straightforward policy stance] at the obvious expense of another' (Goh 2005: 41; Goh 2006). Goh states that hedging refers to a form of 'indirect balancing,' designed either to preclude potential constraints on one's freedom of action or to create relationships that could be used as leverage in the event of a worsening of the security environment (Goh 2006).

According to Goh's definition, Russia's Asian diplomacy cannot be equated with hedging. Russia's partnerships with India and Vietnam originated in the period of decolonization – a time when these countries also enjoyed good relations with China. Subsequently, in context of the cold war and the Sino-Soviet conflict the Soviet Union sought to boost ties with Vietnam and India to counter both the US and Chinese threats. The continuation of these long-standing relationships since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the development of the Sino-Russian partnership reflects enduring bilateral interests such as military and energy cooperation. Although Russia has not overtly sided with China in its conflicts over East China Sea islands or South China Sea issues, as Goh notes, neutrality is not the same as hedging. In fact, some recent Russian weapons sales to China have the effect of strengthening Chinese positions in these conflict zones (Kazianis 2015).

Russia's identity as an Asian state requires multiple partners in the Asia-Pacific region. Although the Sino-Russian partnership legitimates Russia's role in Asia to some extent, to expand its presence in the region Russia needs to develop relations with a wider range of states (Christoffersen 2010: 85). The 2013 foreign policy concept of the Russian Federation embodies the contradiction between a privileged relationship with China, based on their shared positions on key global issues, and the expansion of Russia's multilateral and bilateral ties seen as necessary to strengthen the Russian presence in the Asia-Pacific region and contribute to regional conflict resolution.[11]

One of the challenges Russia faces in engaging Asia, is that Russia is in Asia but not of Asia. Russian policy-makers and thinkers have long wrestled with the identity issues associated with their state's geographic location astride two continents and traditionally Russia's identity debates have reflected efforts to define the Russian place in European civilization as well as the nature of the Russian state (Laruelle 2014). As Russia's Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific noted, Asian states 'often do not regard Russia as an Asia-Pacific country, because its demography, economy and politics largely follow European patterns' (Russian C.S.C.A.P. 2010: 2; Valdai 2014: 9).

Some analysts argue that what reinforces Russia's Asian identity is its ability to engage Asian neighbors and become embedded in Asian regionalism. As the Valdai Club Report notes, 'The development of Siberia, the Far East and the Arctic is not even a mega-project. It is a meta-project. From the symbolic and philosophical point of view, the development of our eastern territories is a key step toward fulfilling Russia's historic mission as a bridge between Europe and Asia' (Valdai 2014: 58). The development of

Russia's eastern regions has faced many economic and political obstacles, however, which lead some scholars to conclude that Russia is only a marginal player in Asia at best (Blank 2012: 251; Hill and Lo 2013). Nonetheless, Vladivostok scholar Viktor Larin notes that while there may be discussion in Russia about its role in Asia, 'no one argues about the [Russian] Far East as a part of the East Asian economic space. It is a *fait accompli*' (Larin 2011: 85,87).

Other experts argue that regional integration is an identity project, not a developmental one. According to this perspective, what is interesting about Russia's Asian agenda is not its geopolitical context or Russia's success or failure in integrating in Asia; rather it is what this agenda tells us about Russia's identity (Moldashev and Islam 2015). In other words, the meta-project is not the fulfillment of Russia's mission as a bridge between East and West, but its elaboration.

How does Russia define its identity in Asia? Constructivists posit that states formulate their identity by comparing themselves to 'Others' who are different and positing a distinction between the self and the 'Other' (Neumann 1999). According to this view, Russia's ability to fulfill its Asian identity presupposes some degree of wariness with respect to China, which is often posited as Russia's 'Other' in Asia because of their divergent geopolitical trajectories as well the cultural differences between the two (Trenin 2012a: 188). Unlike Europe, which has defined itself in response to non-European 'Others' on its periphery (Neumann 1999: 41), identity formation is more complex for Russia, which straddles Europe and Asia, rather than being located clearly within one region or the other.

While successful economic role models can be found in the Asia, Anne Clunan claims that 'On the whole, all the national self-images implicitly or explicitly view Russian or Western traditions as superior to Eastern ones' (Clunan 2009: 81). For Natasha Kuhrt, Russia's efforts to engage Asia may lead, paradoxically, to a reassertion of Russia's European identity. She notes that Russia faces a dual problem in engaging Asia – how to integrate Russia's eastern regions in the dynamic Asian economy, while ensuring they remain anchored to European Russia (Kuhrt 2012: 475).

David Kerr argues that President Putin's embrace of a unique Eurasian identity is an attempt to maintain Russia's status as a great power. According to Kerr, in referring to the collapse of the USSR as a great catastrophe, Putin is 'asserting the inevitability of sustaining some version of the middle continent as a Russia-centered civilizational space that both separates and unifies East and West. Only in this way can Russia avoid the fate of being reduced to a regional power—a power that matters to its neighbors but not otherwise' (Kerr 2009: 2). As Dmitry Trenin explains, Russia is a global power because it spans from Europe to Asia and 'without Siberia, Russia would no longer be Russia, but Moscovy' (Trenin 2012a: 88).

Nonetheless, defining one's own identity in relation to another state need not presuppose enmity between the two. Bahar Rumelili argues, for example, that one must distinguish between the definition of identity based on a difference between the self and 'Other(s)' and behavior premised on perception of the 'Other(s)' as a threat. (Rumelili 2004: 29) In a study of the EU's interactions with peripheral states, for example, Rumelili concludes that the diversity observed reflects 'the possibilities inherent in self/Other interaction' and 'does not necessarily lead to a behavioral relationship based on the perception and representation of the "Other" as a threat to self's identity' (Rumelili 2004: 46). Thus perception of differences between Russia and China does not imply that China poses a threat against which Russia must balance in Asia.

Putin's turn to the East is really a slow rebalancing process that began some years earlier partly in response to the perceived weakness of the West, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Mankoff 2015: 69). In 2009, Russia's energy strategy revealed a shift in emphasis to Asian energy markets, an effort to reduce Russian dependence on energy exports to Europe and take advantage of growing demand in Asia. Since the East Siberian Pacific Ocean pipeline came online in December of that year, Russia has been able to expand energy relations not just with China and Japan, but also with Southeast Asian states like the Philippines and Indonesia. In recent years Russia has become a member of all of the key Asian multilateral institutions and the 2012 APEC forum took place in Vladivostok.

Although Putin's diplomatic and energy initiatives in Asia predated the Ukrainian crisis, recent tensions in Russia's relations with the United States and the European Union over Ukraine have reinforced the importance of Russia's 'Asia vector' and dramatized how 'Other' the West is. Nonetheless, even though tensions with the West may have heightened Russia's interest in engaging Asian states in the past year, the Asia-Pacific may yet be the arena where Russia and the United States rediscover some common interests, despite their many differences (Lee 2013: 323–4; Lukin, Ar. 2011: 153).

China's resource vulnerabilities and Sino-Russian interdependence

China and Russia both suffer from the consequences of resource vulnerabilities, but Russia's fears of becoming China's resource appendage are more widely discussed (Lee and Lukin, Ar. 2015; Lukin, Al. 2015; Russian C.S.C.A.P. 2010: 2; Trenin 2012b: 26; Valdai 2012: 46) than are Chinese insecurities about adequate and secure resource supplies. To the contrary, Chinese scholars 'desecuritize' and refute Russian concerns by noting that it is up to Russia to take the proper steps to avoid excessive dependence on resource exports to China and other countries (Liu 2013; Li, X. 2013: 8; Zhao 2013: 3).

Xi Jinping's emphasis on the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the fulfillment of the Chinese dream of a moderately well-off society has accentuated the tendency to 'desecuritize' its resource vulnerabilities and highlight instead its growing global clout. In a major departure from the Deng Xiaoping era practice of keeping a low profile and downplaying capabilities to focus on domestic economic reform (*tao guang yang hui* 韬光养晦), Xi Jinping has urged his fellow citizens instead to showcase China's successes, take advantage of strategic opportunities, and strive for achievement (fen fa you wei" 奋发有为) (Sorensen 2015: 65–6; Xi 2013a: 326). This new approach has been accompanied by more intrusive message management of issues that depart from this upbeat narrative, thorough censorship of the media, more internet control, and pressure on academics, journalists, and NGO representatives. At the same time, Xi Jinping's government has sought to use diplomatic and economic levers to reward friendly countries. As Russian resistance to Chinese upstream investments has declined in the aftermath of the post-Ukraine sanctions, Chinese officials have become more interested in opportunities in Russia. Xi explained, '…we need to help neighbors in times of crisis… .In response, we hope that neighboring countries will be well inclined towards us, and we hope that our appeal and our influence will grow' (Xi 2013a: 327).

In its relations with Russia, China has always emphasized that the complementarities between the two neighbors improve their prospects for economic cooperation. While Russian policy-makers discuss the security implications of economic cooperation with China, Chinese officials 'desecuritize' by focusing on mutually beneficial development

outcomes. (Cui and Li 2011: 155) The other side of this observation is that China has certain vulnerabilities, especially inadequate energy and water supplies and Russia's abundant resources can potentially relieve these pressures. Understanding Chinese vulnerabilities and fears is important in assessing the motivations behind Chinese foreign policy behavior and strategic thinking (Nathan and Scobell 2012: xiii; Pillsbury 2012: 152). As Elizabeth Economy and Michael Levy argue, China's ongoing quest for resources increases only its reliance on commodity markets (Economy and Levy 2014: 6). This in turn China's only serves to reinforce efforts by Chinese leaders to achieve great power status (Nathan and Scobell 2012: 33), which leads resource supplying countries like Russia to 'securitize' and become fearful of the consequences of their economic cooperation with China.

China is now the world's largest energy consumer and its dependence on imported oil and gas are expected to increase. Chinese officials, including top leaders like Hu Jintao, have expressed anxiety over the security of maritime oil imports (Tanner and Mackenzie 2010: 41), which has accentuated the importance of overland energy cooperation with Russia. Although some of the academic discussion in China highlights whether or not China should 'help' the Russian economy by increasing oil purchases (Yu 2015: 12), the underlying reason for increased Sino-Russian energy cooperation is rising Chinese demand. Here Chinese scholars 'desecuritize' their country's increased dependence on imported energy, while Russian analysts focus on Russia's position as a resource supplier. Russia hopes to be China's leading oil supplier beginning in 2018, providing up to 37 million metric tons per year. If recent Sino-gas deals move forward, China could outrank Germany as the largest single purchaser of Russian gas (Jiang 2015). Much depends on the pace of China's increased gas use and the success of its own domestic production from conventional and non-conventional sources (Jaffe et al. 2015: 5; Paik 2015: 27).

Water scarcity represents another source of resource vulnerability for China. Some provinces bordering on Russia, such as Heilongjiang, are facing increasingly acute water pressures, and measures to boost provincial development further stress available water resources. In contrast, Russia ranks second after Brazil in terms of renewable water resources and 72% of those water resources are located in Siberia and the Russian Far East (Likhacheva and Makarov 2014: 6).

Beginning in the 1990s, economists have used the concept of 'virtual water' to take into account the amount of water needed to produce agricultural and industrial goods. By this logic, all trade has a virtual water content and involves an amount of water used in production of good or acquired through the import of a product which used the water resources from the country of origin (Ma et al. 2006: 835; Sherwood 2013: 255). The concept of virtual water enables to understand the extent that water scarcity in China is reflected in trade and agricultural cooperation (such as land leasing) between Russia and China. A recent study of virtual water in Russian trade with Asia-Pacific countries concludes that the abundant water resources in Siberia and the Russian Far East put Russia in a good position to develop its virtual water exports in the form of agricultural products, particularly with neighboring China displaying a rising demand for water (Likhacheva and Makarov 2014: 15).

There are two areas of Sino-Russian economic cooperation which highlight the importance of virtual water and demonstrate China's dependence on Russia for water resources: timber trade and agricultural land leasing. China's imports of timber from Russia demonstrate high virtual water content (Tian and Ke 2012: 388). Russia had been China's number one supplier of timber until an export tariff was imposed on raw logs in

2007 to encourage investment in wood processing in Russia. This effort to restrict raw resource sales and develop processing industries more appropriate to great power status had the unintended consequence of contributing to illegal cutting and sales to China, as well as ecological damage to Russian forests (Newell and Simeone 2014: 55). Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2012 has required it to gradually reduce its tariff on raw logs. China is currently the largest importer of Russian timber.

Although environmental organizations have criticized the impact of logging, the leasing of Russian agricultural land to China has proven to be especially controversial. Chinese officials have long contended that leasing Russian farmland and arranging for Chinese farms laborers to work on Russian farms takes advantage of the complementarities in the Russian and Chinese economies. In 2009 Chinese and Russian officials agreed to guidelines making investment in agricultural cooperation a priority, which President Putin and Xi Jinping reiterated in June 2012 meeting. Although some small Chinese companies have gained a foothold in farming in Russia, Amurskaya oblast banned Chinese agricultural workers beginning in 2013 because of their excessive use of pesticides and night soil, in violation of local laws (WantChinaTimes Staff reporter 2012). The June 2015 signing of a preliminary agreement to lease 115,000 hectares of farmland bordering on Heilongjiang province to a Chinese company provoked an outcry. An article by former military attaché Wang Haijun in *Global Times* hailing the agreement as a sign of increasing trust and a rejection of paranoid views of Chinese economic expansion was interpreted as confirmation of Chinese intentions to use the land deal to expand migration to Russia. Russian netizens signed online petitions opposing the deal in Zabaikalskiy kray (Blagov 2015; Gabuev 2015a; Sputnik International 2015).

Nonetheless, agricultural cooperation has been moving forward between the two countries in investment and trade. In May 2015, Xi Jinping and Putin agreed to create a $2 billion investment fund to support projects in agriculture, possibly including a free trade zone on Heilongjiang's border with the Russian Far East. China is considering ending its ban on Russian grains (imposed in the early 1990s because of a fungal contamination in Russia) and has already resumed its imports of Russian rapeseed in 2014 and soybeans in 2011.[12]

Conclusion

One of the outcomes of the recent events in Ukraine has been a closer relationship between Russia and China. This paper has argued that, because of normative affinities, this has always been a partnership of consequence, rather than a tactical arrangement. Sharing norms does not imply holding identical positions on all issues; rather, Russia and China share a common perception of Western pressure on their domestic choices and constraint on their freedom of maneuver globally. While some in the West downplay the significance of Sino-Russian partnership, even before the Ukrainian crisis, there was serious talk of alliance in Chinese and Russian policy circles.

For now, the prospect of alliance remains just talk, because of China's longstanding resistance to alignments and Russia's interest in broader engagement with a wider range of Asian states. This paper has argued that Russia's integration in Asia has been devised as a meta-project, destined to reaffirm the country's global status, rather than a development project. Russia has sought to define its identity as an Asian state in conjunction with the Chinese 'Other,' from which it diverges civilizationally, as a respite to perceived pressures from 'Others' in the West, with which it shares more cultural affinity.

Russian differences with China are not the same as a perception of a Chinese threat, and, indeed some Russian overtures to Asian states and institutions have been restrained in deference to the Sino-Russian partnership.

Has the deepening Sino-Russian partnership led to greater Russian dependence on China? This paper contends that the issue is clouded by the securitization/desecuritization dynamics between the two. While some Russian voices loudly 'securitize' and point to the dire threat of Russia becoming a 'resource appendage' of China, Chinese policymakers and analysts 'desecuritize' and downplay Chinese vulnerabilities. Xi Jinping's focus on accentuating Chinese achievements has further deepened the gap between the optimistic rhetoric of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation emanating from Beijing and reality of resources constraints to Chinese economic growth and Sino-Russian interdependence.

The growing normative affinities underpinning their interdependence have implications that reach far beyond the boundaries of their partnership. In their arenas of global joint action – the United Nations, information policy, and finance, Russia and China have become norm-makers, rather than norm-takers, and outlined shared principles on the use of force in international conflict, information sovereignty, and alternatives to the domination of the dollar and the Western consensus in the global economy. These joint efforts result from their shared identity, not from failed Western policies (Larson and Shevchenko 2010: 93) or inadequate governance structures (Reilly 2012: 90). Increasingly, the Sino-Russian partnership has consequence not just for their bilateral interactions but for global governance as a whole.

Notes

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