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Not just ‘convenient’: China and Russia’s new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics

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'Not just 'convenient': China and Russia's new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics'

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Abstract.

The argument made here runs counter to that often found in the more mainstream literature on the China-Russia relationship. This literature is of course both varied and rich. It does not tell a single story. But amongst a very large number of experts the view has been - and in many respects remains - that there will always be much more that will divide Moscow and Beijing than unite them. This I suggest is not only contradicted by an increasingly large body of evidence: it also runs the very real risk of misunderstanding the geopolitical challenge facing the United States and its allies in both Europe and Asia. This is not to be alarmist. The US and its allies still retain formidable advantage. Nor for a moment am I suggesting that we are in the midst of some new - largely mythical - Cold War with the West facing some new axis of authoritarian evil. But it is to suggest that unless we call things by their right name, there is a very real chance that two very illiberal powers who pose an important challenge to the West (and do so more effectively together than apart) could make hay while the democracies go on reassuring themselves that there is very little to be concerned about because China and Russia are bound by their character, culture and history to be enemies rather than friends, competitors rather than what they have in fact become: strategic partners.

Key words; China, Russia, strategic partner, Putin, Xi Jinping, Ukraine

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Introduction

“Appearances are deceiving. The self-styled “strategic partnership” may look in the pink of health, but beneath the surface there are serious contradictions”. Bobo Lo. ‘A Partnership of Convenience’ The New York Times, 7 June, 2012.

“Both sides talk up ties rhetorically, but China and Russia are unlikely to forge a sustained strategic partnership”. Ali Wyne, ‘The Limits of China-Russia Co-operation’, The Wall Street Journal. 22 May, 2014.

“So, even if they agree to work together on an equal footing, reality will inevitably reshape their cooperation framework”. Constantinos Filis. ‘Could a Chinese-Russian Strategic Partnership Challenge the Power of the West?’ LSE US Centre. (online) June 20, 2015

“Some indications that China and Russia are no longer fast friends are subtle. Others could hardly be clearer”. Motohiro Ikeda, ‘China-Russia Rift may help other ties bloom’, Nikkei Asian Review. April 11, 2016.

If China’s modern relationship with the United States has received more than its fair share of attention – too much – some might complain in both Asia and Europe¹ - the same could hardly be said until very recently of its complex relationship with another important state with which it has had an even closer history: Russia. This is surprising. After all, the two countries share one of the longest land borders in the world. The old USSR was for many years a close ally of the Chinese Communists. And though Russia may have abandoned communist rule - while China has not - the two today appear to be on excellent terms, so much so that China is now regarded by Putin as Russia’s indispensable friend while Russia and its much feted leader is now viewed in China in the most positive terms imaginable.² But in spite of the mounting evidence that the two have formed what even they now call a ‘strategic partnership’, there are still many who doubt whether the relationship is an especially secure one. Indeed, the majority view would still seem to be what it was some time back:³ namely, that even though relations might have improved, and in some areas improved dramatically, more will always divide the two countries than unite them.⁴ As one

expert noted only a few years ago, even though things between the two sides had got better, the relationship would, and could, never become a close one.⁵ Nor was this his view alone. As another writer suggested in a much cited study followed two years later by a wide – ranging paper on the same subject, the relationship would for ever remain ‘non-committal and asymmetrical’: ‘convenient’ for both sides to be sure, but nothing we should be especially impressed by.⁶ In fact, Bobo Lo’s underlying argument – that the character, culture, history and interests of these two countries were just too different for them to make common cause – is one which seems to have been adopted by most experts. Thus we are regularly informed that the two countries are less friends than rivals (especially when it comes to Central Asia);⁷ that the Russians and the Chinese just don’t like one another (call it cultural misunderstanding if you will); and that while many policy-makers in Beijing view the Russians with contempt, the Russians themselves view China with a mixture of awe (because of its economic success) and fear (because it is doing so much better than Russia).⁸ Nor we are told would either be prepared to sacrifice their more important ties with the western capitalist economies for the dubious benefits of working closely with the other. Their own economies are not especially complementary either.⁹ And to cap it all, there is, we are informed, a growing and deepening power gap between the two which must inevitably push the two apart. Geoff Dyer has perhaps expressed this idea more eloquently than most. China and Russia he notes are both power obsessed states. But one of those powers is on the up – obviously China – while the other, Russia, is on the way down. This he then goes on to argue can only feed Russian anxieties; and as those anxieties grow, Russia will pull back from a dependency relationship on a China it once regarded as its little brother and whose rising power it fears. The two are thus destined to be very uneasy bedfellows at best, rivals at worst. All talk of a new strategic partnership therefore is so much hot air.¹⁰

In what follows I want to challenge this still dominant view.¹¹ I do so not because there are no differences or potentially conflicting interests between China and Russia. That would be plainly absurd. Rather I do so for a rather different reason, which is to explain what the various sceptics seem unable to: why it is that these two powers have managed to form an increasingly close relationship in spite of all their obvious differences. I also want to contest the view – once put forward by liberal theorists with greater confidence than it is now – that Russia and China would in time be effectively incorporated into that essentially western construction known as the ‘international community’. Clearly this has not happened, or has happened only very partially. Admittedly, neither country sees any alternative but to work

inside that most important of all western institutions known as the world market; nor do either really pose a serious ideological threat to the West.¹² Yet they clearly oppose the West in a number of significant ways. Most obviously, they are hostile to the distribution of power within an international system which they believe works to their disadvantage while privileging the position of the West and the United States. They are also less than willing to play by a set of rules which take it as read that in the modern world there is simply no room for some latter-day version of the Monroe Doctrine - whether this be expressed in Russia's case by its claims to have rights in its own 'near abroad' or in China's by its sovereign claims to most or all of the East and South China seas. Politically moreover neither accept the very basis upon which the contemporary western order is built: liberalism. Nor is this all. As Rozman has pointed out, in a series of brilliant studies, though the identity discourse in the two systems is different, it is not that different. On the other hand, it is vastly different to that which pertains in the West.¹³ Now none of this taken together adds up to what we might term classic balancing behavior. Indeed, even Putin denies that Russia and China are seeking to form a new military bloc.¹⁴ The Chinese are more careful still, and even avoid using the term alliance to describe their relationship with Russia.¹⁵ Nonetheless, it is impossible to ignore the by now self-evident fact that what increasingly binds the two together - more so than ever since the great financial crash of 2008 followed three years later by the US 'pivot to Asia' and the subsequent breakdown in relations between Russia and the West - has become increasingly more important than what separates them. Naturally, this does not mean they do not have other interests, including in China's case a very great interest in exporting as much of its capital and goods to the rest of the world. But this does not detract from the main argument being advanced here: namely, that China which has so few serious friends in the world today appears to have found something close to one in Russia, and that Russia - increasingly isolated from the West and in need of as much support as it can muster - has clearly discovered one in China.¹⁶

To make good on my claim (one I would suggest that it is now claiming more adherents) I have divided the essay into several parts. In the first section I take a brief look at history or more precisely at how both countries look at two events which have shaped their evolution ever since: the second world war and the collapse of the USSR. History, I suggest, not only matters a great deal to both countries. That much is obvious. But these two historical 'moments' in particular help define the way in which both Russia and China today view the world and indeed one another. In part two I then look at their positions on international

affairs, focusing in particular on their critique of American power and US policies in the world system. In part three I go on to look at four key areas where China and Russia now cooperate regularly: inside the P5 of the UN; as part of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization; within the BRICS organization; and over their preferred trade architecture for the Asia Pacific.

Finally, I reflect on the future in the light of the crisis in Ukraine. Here I differ from those who seem to think that the crisis has exposed deep fault lines in the Sino-Russian relationship. I take a rather different view, which, stated bluntly, is that the crisis has revealed something quite different: namely that China has been prepared to ignore certain basic principles in order to maintain its relationship with Russia, while Russia has been more than willing to appease China in order to make sure it can keep the Chinese on their side. Naturally, nothing is over-determined. But if one were to make a prediction (a fool's errand to be sure) it is that a Russia under increasing siege from what it now perceives as being a permanently hostile West, and a China confronted by an America that stands as the principle obstacle to its ambitions in Asia-Pacific, have come to the not illogical conclusion that there is nothing to lose, and probably much to be gained, from moving even closer together. That this presents a challenge to the West is obvious. Whether though it turns into an existential threat remains to be seen. This I suggest will depend just as much on how the United States and the West respond to this challenge as it will on policies pursued by Moscow and Beijing. And here there may be interesting lessons to be learned from the Cold War. As we now know, US intransigence tended to push the two communist countries together - or at least did until Washington played an altogether different game and devised a strategy which then helped pulled them apart. We are clearly no longer living through a Cold War. But the West still needs to devise an effective strategy. However, before it can do so it has to know what it is facing rather than taking comfort in the idea that we can just wait for China and Russia to drift apart because their relationship is, as some sceptics insist, 'vulnerable, contingent and marked,,by uncertainties'.¹⁷ If only it were that simple. We certainly don't have to hyperventilate about the relationship. On the other hand, we do ourselves no favours if we blithely dismiss it as if it were some 'temporary meeting of minds' or a mere 'axis of convenience' devised by tactically shrewd policy-makers in Moscow and Beijing who today claim they are friends, but who will in time – we are reassured - be pulled apart by forces they probably don't understand and by the tragic logic of a great power rivalry over which they have little or no control.¹⁸

History

“The People’s Republic of China and Russia are more aware of the world’s problems than the United States because they have gone through terrible wars unleashed by the blind egoism of fascism,” Fidel Castro.¹⁹

One of the basic reference points in the ongoing debate about the durability of the China-Russia relationship is of course what happened in history, or more exactly what happened in their history to create what many still believe is a serious barrier to the establishment of trust between the two. The list of grievance on the Chinese side in particular is indeed a long one, going right back to the unequal treaties of the 19th century, through Stalin’s efforts to stop the CCP coming to power in 1949, and on to the great split between the two communist states between the early 1960s and the late 1980s. Yet history as we know is always contested terrain, and one could just as easily make the case that the past has the potential to unite the two countries rather than divide them. After all, if it had not been for the USSR, the Chinese Communist party would never have come into being in the first place; and though Stalin was never less ambiguous about Mao, in the end the Soviet Union did provide the PRC with massive support in its early formative years. Moreover, the USSR and China did fight on the same side in World War II, a fact the world was graphically reminded of in 2015 when the Chinese President was guest of honour in Moscow standing next to Putin as the tanks and troops rolled by during the victory parade. Four months later Putin then attended another massive event in Beijing celebrating China’s victory over Japan. The two leaders also used these deeply symbolic occasions not just to recall times gone by, but to demonstrate how far their relationship had improved in more recent years. Indeed, Xi’s visit to Russia and his appearance at the Moscow commemorations according to one Chinese official ‘pushed the China-Russia all-round strategic partnership relationship to a new level’, while Russia’s equally active participation in China’s celebrations according to Putin himself marked yet another major step forward in a fast maturing relationship.²⁰

But it is not just the war that unites the two. So too does a more recent event: the collapse of the Soviet project itself between 1989 and 1991. The reasons why a once mighty superpower with an extensive industrial base, a huge military capability, and a powerful apparatus of controls finally imploded has been analysed at length in the West. However, the collapse of Soviet communism has perhaps been of even greater interest to those states directly and indirectly involved themselves, namely Russia and China. The official line in Russia initially was that that the end of the Cold War and the implosion of the USSR were more or

less inevitable given the burdens of empire and the more efficient character of their capitalist competitor. But all was not lost it was felt. Indeed, precisely because these seismic changes appeared to open up the way to deep economic reform at home and a much improved relationship with the West, there was good reason to think they would lay the foundation for greater prosperity at home and huge economic opportunities abroad. In fact, for a while, with a liberal and Democratic President in the White House calling for a deep strategic partnership with Russian reform, there looked to be every chance that Russia would be able to come to terms with its much reduced role in world politics, not to mention its diminished influence in its former imperial space.²¹

Whether there was ever any chance of a new cooperative relationship being built between post-communist Russia and the US remains an open question. What is not open to question is how quickly this early vision of a new deal began to lose its allure. The shift from what has been described as the pro-western phase in Russian thinking to something quite different evolved through several stages. In simple chronological terms however the decline in the relationship began as early as 1990 when the West refused large scale economic aid to Russia; it then continued after 1993 with the enlargement of NATO; the relationship was further compromised as Russian nationalists and communists began to mobilize their not inconsiderable base of support at home; and it was finally provided with a more material form as the Russian economy imploded because of what many in Russia saw as a deliberate western plan to reduce the country to the status of a Third World country. Certainly, long before Putin assumed office, there was a sizeable group of Russians who insisted that having given away everything to the West between 1989 and 1991, Russia had got nothing back in return other than broken promises and a raft of policy suggestions that had impoverished the majority and allowed a narrow band of oligarchs to seize control of the nation's assets.²²

In terms of his policies Putin did not at first seem to represent a break with those pursued by his predecessor Yeltsin. But very soon it became clear that he had a strategy of sorts at the heart of which was a drive to consolidate as much power in his own hands while aligning his own political fortunes with those of Russian state power.²³ Though not opposed to working with the West, or even the United States, his basic outlook was infused with an underlying suspicion of the western world and what he appeared to view as a western desire to ensure that Russia remained weak and dependent. The consequences of this for both

Russia and its near abroad – not to mention Russia’s relations with the United States and the European Union – were deeply significant. Putin also added a ‘dash of history’ to justify his new stance and he did this by turning to a group of patriotic ‘Eurasianists’ who were more than happy to provide him with a story that best suited his purpose. At the heart of this was the very strong belief that Russia was not merely different to the ‘liberal’ West: the West it was argued was almost congenitally hostile to Russia. This had been true for the greater part of the 19th century. It remained true for the whole of the Soviet period. And it continued to be true into the 21st century. In fact, according to Putin’s apologists (though whether Putin believed it himself is impossible to know) the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the USSR itself were all part of a larger western plan to ensure the West’s and the United States’ continued primacy. This is why 1989 and what followed in 1991 were not the progressive ‘liberating’ events portrayed in much western literature, but rather well organized regime-changing plots backed by certain traitors at home like Gorbachev.²⁴

Unsurprisingly, this particular narrative was one that found a ready audience in China. In fact, the Chinese had been saying very much the same ever since the collapse of Soviet power back in 1989 – in part because they opposed political reform *per se* and in part because Gorbachev’s reforms had posed a very real danger to Chinese communist rule itself. Indeed, as we knew then (and have found out more since) during that fateful year, Beijing did as much as it was then possible for it to do to prevent the collapse happening; and, when that proved impossible, they then took their own draconian measures in the June of 1989 to ensure that the contagion did not bring down communist rule at home. Always hostile to Gorbachev, and from the outset opposed to what they viewed as his dangerously destabilizing efforts to liberalize the Soviet system – Deng later commented that even though Gorbachev may have looked ‘smart’ he was in fact ‘stupid’ - the Chinese had little trouble in agreeing with Putin’s less than positive analysis of both 1989 and the final denouement of Soviet power later in 1991. And why not? After all, what had happened to the USSR could just as easily have happened to China itself.²⁵

In rather typical Stalinist fashion, the Communist Party then went on to draw all sorts of ‘lessons’ about how to make sure that what had happened to the Soviet Union did not happen to China.²⁶ This was not a task they took lightly. Commissions were set up and study groups created tasked with the crucial job of explaining what had destroyed the other communist superpower. As has been observed, the collapse of the Soviet Union following

hard on the heels of communist collapse in Eastern Europe and East Germany ‘was a deeply disturbing experience for the Chinese communists’.²⁷ It was also a deeply complicated problem, which might in part explain why it took a dozen study groups over thirteen years (not to mention a 6-part documentary series on Chinese TV) before they could come to any firm conclusions. Even then, the conclusions at which they arrived at were not entirely consistent. Nor did they necessarily agree with Putin that the collapse of the Soviet Union had been a catastrophe. After all, once the USSR had disintegrated, China itself no longer faced a united rival on its northern and eastern borders. That said, China in the end did concede that what had happened contained lessons for both states: the first was that while economic reform might be necessary (and in China’s case, essential) one should make sure that this did not threaten the integrity of the state; and the second was that one should for ever remain wary of the West’s intentions especially when the West – as it tended to - dressed up its geostrategic ambitions in liberal rhetoric. Herein lay the most obvious lesson of all: namely that whatever else may have divided them in the past, and might divide them in the future, both states had a very strong interest in supporting the other against those who challenged their sovereign right to rule in a particular way. By so doing they would not only be protecting themselves at home from dangerous ideas born in the West. They would, ironically, also be upholding the fundamental Westphalian principle of non-interference upon which the whole international system had rested for centuries and would hopefully do so for decades to come.²⁸

Hegemony and its discontents

“China opposes hegemonism and power politics in all their forms, does not interfere in other countries’ internal affairs and will never seek hegemony or engage in expansion” Xi JinPing at the 18th Party Congress. 2012.

The lessons drawn from the collapse of Soviet power thus provided, and still provides, China and Russia with a common point of historical reference. But it was the structure of the new international system that concerned them more. Both of course recognized that with the passing of the old order the world had changed for ever; and both would now have to sink or swim in a world dominated by the market. There could be no going back to the past. On the other hand, the world as seen from Beijing and Moscow was not one in which either could feel especially comfortable. For one thing, the established rules governing the world had all been written by the West. The metaphorical table around which the main players then sat

was also made and designed in the West. And sitting at the top of the table of course was the established hegemon: United States.

To add material insult to injury, in this world the United States not only possessed a vast amount of power – soft and hard - but an extensive alliance system as well. Its very existence not only reminded China and Russia how few genuine friends they had themselves; it also contributed in significant ways to America's ability to place pressure on the two countries. The US may have proclaimed its innocence, insisting that the last thing it was thinking about when it enlarged NATO was to encircle Russia, or that when it tilted to Asia it was looking to contain China rather than engage it. However, that is not how things were viewed in either Moscow or Beijing. Indeed, for the Chinese the so-called 'tilt' (accompanied as it was by what they saw as a change in US military doctrine)²⁹ was seen as a highly aggressive act; and the only legitimate response, it was felt, was to fight fire with fire which it did with an 'outpouring' of increased 'anti-American sentiment' in China itself followed up by what looked to many as a final abandonment in practice, if not in theory, of the tried and true Deng principle of keeping a low profile.³⁰ To underscore the point, it also began to refer to the US less frequently as global partner - though such language did not disappear entirely from the Chinese foreign policy discourse³¹ - and more as a potential rival which would for ever seek to maintain its position of primacy in Asia through the manipulation of its still highly dependent allies.³²

This in turn connects to a wider debate in which China and Russia have been engaged for some time about the structure of the world system after the Cold War; and one thing has emerged from these: neither feels that their interests, singly or collectively, are best protected in a system in which power is so heavily concentrated in the hands of a single 'hegemon', especially when that hegemon happens to be a liberal power like the United States of America.³³ This not only flows from their very strongly held realist belief that hegemony by definition confers great status on the hegemon. The concentration of power in the hands of a single power they argue is also likely to encourage greater assertiveness. Clinton may have resisted the temptation for a while, though not entirely as the NATO-led bombing of Kosovo showed. But post 9/11 the situation changed dramatically, and buoyed up by a American public fearful of yet another attack, and taking full advantage of the freedom afforded it by the much debated unipolar 'moment', the US launched a war on terror with the ostensible goal of combatting global jihad (of which the Chinese and Russians

approved) but with the unwritten purpose (to which they did not) of reasserting US power after what many on the republican political right saw as a post-Cold War decade of drift.³⁴ The lesson drawn in China and Russia from all this were obvious: until and when the distribution of power in the international system had become more evenly distributed – in short had become ‘multipolar’ – then the world would not only remain a deeply disturbed place but one in which their voice would remain marginal at best, insignificant at worst.³⁵

China and Russia’s various efforts to challenge what they saw, and still see, as America’s global pre-eminence has also brought both into direct opposition with what they view as something equally challenging: the western idea of ‘humanitarian intervention’, or to give its more official title, the international community’s right to protect individuals when sovereign states fail to uphold certain basic norms. The story of course is not a simple one. Indeed, in theory, neither power is by definition opposed to the basic principles of R2P. That said, the two clearly feel deeply uncomfortable with the whole drift in western thinking which they insist allows the West to bring outside pressure to bear on what they see as recalcitrant states. This, they argue, not only undermines the UN system based on the original Charter of 1945 and the principle of sovereignty. It provides a green light for the West to force change from without on states with whom the West either happens to disagree or with whom both China and Russia may have significant economic and strategic relations.³⁶ But this is not all. Their even greater fear, one suspects, is that if the democratic West is given the green light to change or overthrow dictatorial regimes in say Iraq, Libya or Syria, this opens up the theoretical possibility at least of them legitimately demanding change in Russia and China as well. In this sense, their hostility to intervention is not just because they look at the world differently: it is because they worry that under the guise of advancing the rights of the human, or protecting peoples from their less than perfect governments, the West could use the doctrine of humanitarianism as a Trojan Horse with the purpose of weakening their own control at home.³⁷

This would be less important of course if either China or Russia, or both, happened to agree with the kind of values that America and most of its allies have sought to promote over the past twenty five years. But this is clearly not the case. Indeed, viewed from the vantage point of Putin’s Kremlin and or China’s leadership compound in Zhongnanhai, the values publically espoused by the West look deeply problematic. It is one thing doing business with the West. It is something else altogether when engagement with the West leads as the Chinese and

Russians clearly fear it has, to ideological contamination. The market may be neutral politically, but the West as a project is not; and faced with such a challenge the two countries together have taken different, but not entirely dissimilar, counter-measures.³⁸ These have included in the Chinese case an extensive system of censorship reinforced in the age of the web by a massive array of controls over what they have defined rather ominously as ‘information imperialism’.³⁹ Russia may not have the same system of controls. Nevertheless, under Putin, the flow of information has been severely curtailed by a media that is now either completely state controlled or run by the friends of the President. Like the Chinese the Russians have also spent an inordinate amount of time and effort trying to curtail flows of information from the outside world in an attempt to uphold what some Russians now call ‘internet sovereignty’.⁴⁰ Those close to Putin have even spoken of the West having launched what they call an ‘information war’ against Russia’, one which they have no intention of losing. Indeed, in one typically forceful statement (one of several) the Russian Foreign Minister not only linked US aggression back to the cold war and an unreformed cold war mentality, but to American exceptionalism and what he termed the belief by Americans that they possessed an ‘eternal uniqueness’, one which allowed them to resist any form of external interference into their affairs but made it perfectly acceptable for them to become deeply involved in the affairs of others.⁴¹

Finally, in this ongoing ideological battle against the liberal West both China and Russia have tended over the years to identify any form of internal dissent with some assumed western plot to undermine their respective systems. In the case of Russia the presumed link between opposition at home and the machinations of some unnamed western agencies is now regularly made in the media. Indeed, in 2014, a TV programme was put out (hosted by the same individual who allegedly murdered Litvinenko in London) purporting to show that there were still many traitors in Russia, all of them – including a number of NGOs – being supported by (and obviously working for) the West. Others are portrayed in harsher terms still, most notably the Ukrainians who are now systematically portrayed in the wider Russian press as being little more than stalking horses for the Americans and their dangerous allies in Brussels. China may have adopted a somewhat (though only somewhat) less bellicose approach. Nonetheless, in its own ongoing struggles against all those who would challenge the idea of the ‘harmonious society’ it has rarely, if ever, been reluctant not to associate dissent at home with acts of subversion from abroad. Nor has it been backward in coming forward in sanctioning those in the West whom they deem to have overstepped the

ideological mark – as Norway found out to its cost back in 2010 when the Nobel Peace Prize committee had the temerity to award the prize to the jailed human rights activist, Liu Xiabo. Whether or not Beijing viewed the award as a western plot remains unclear. What is clear is the impact it had on the official mind in China, reinforcing its basic belief that western countries (even small ones like Norway) were engaged in subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle forms of subversion whose ultimate purpose was political change in China.⁴²

Working together

“Russia and China attach great importance to cooperation within multilateral formats, including the UN, G20, BRICS, the SCO” Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov.⁴³

If, as I have suggested here, China and Russia adhere to a broadly similar view of the world while together asserting their right to protect themselves from what they both regard as that bearer of ideological contamination known as the liberal West, how has their increasingly close strategic partnership manifested itself at the international level? Here again the by now standard answer is that in spite of a certain tactical convergence on specific issues one should not overstate the extent of their collaboration. Not only do big divisions remain. China has also become far too respectable - too much of a ‘stakeholder’ - to be drawn into an ever closer diplomatic relationship with its less than respectable neighbour, especially when the neighbor in question has, it is argued, little to offer.⁴⁴ Indeed, in the midst of the crisis occasioned by Russian intervention in Ukraine, one respected western newspaper made a very direct comparison between the ‘constructive’ approach being pursued by the Chinese and the ‘increasingly dangerous’ approach adopted by the Russians. It is high time, the paper went on, for the ‘provocative’ Russians to learn something from the more pragmatic Chinese. Whether Putin ever read the advice coming from the *Financial Times* is of course unknown. But one suspects that if he had, he might have wondered why the editorial made no mention of the tacit support he was already receiving from the Chinese in his efforts to undermine Ukrainian sovereignty. He may have also noted that the editorial also forgot to mention the fact that in the years leading up to the Ukrainian crisis, the apparently ‘irresponsible’ Russians and the ‘well-behaved’ Chinese had been working increasingly closely together on a range of significant international issues in a number of key international fora.⁴⁵

The first, and perhaps most important, arena where China and Russia had been working closely together was at the United Nations where both occupied seats as Permanent Members of the UN Security Council. Their approaches were not identical. To be sure.

Indeed, China appeared to be less willing than Russia to deploy its veto, usually preferring to use the less controversial strategy of abstention when faced with resolutions it opposed. Moreover, on some issues involving international security (Iran's nuclear programme for example) China was willing to support measures such as sanctions. Nonetheless, like Russia, it consistently resisted the use of force by the West against recalcitrant regimes if the purpose was regime change; and more generally, opposed any form of economic pressure being applied to states deemed to be guilty of human rights abuses. The record speaks for itself. Thus in 2006, it effectively prevented any action being taken against Sudan over its genocidal behaviour in Darfur. In 2007 it then stymied the UN over Myanmar. And a year later, it acted once again to protect Mugabe's Zimbabwe from censure. But more was to follow when China with Russia together and repeatedly vetoed UN motions aimed to censure Russia's close (and only) ally in the Middle East, Syria. In 2011 for example both vetoed a resolution condemning the Syrian regime's handling of anti-government street protests. A year later they vetoed an Arab League Plan calling for political change. Resolutions calling for sanctions against Assad were also vetoed, as was a UN draft resolution in May 2014 backed by 65 countries calling for the crisis in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court.⁴⁶ And so it went on, causing something close to a storm in the UN and the wider Arab world. One writer even accused the two of 'kneecapping' the Security Council.⁴⁷ But all to no avail. In fact, at a 2014 meeting in Beijing, the two both appeared to be congratulate the other for having prevented a western intervention which in their view would not only have made matters much worse, but would have undermined any moves toward a peaceful resolution of the conflict.

If increased political co-operation in the United Nations points to more than just a coincidental meeting of minds over specific issues, then China and Russia's formal membership of the sometimes underestimated - and often understudied - Shanghai Co-operation Organization or SCO points to something of equal significance: a proven longer term ability to cooperate in matters relating to hard security. Of course, the SCO was not, and was never intended to be, the Eurasian equivalent of NATO. However, over time it soon became more than the sum of its disparate parts. A Chinese initiative in the first instance with the purpose of promoting some degree of regional co-ordination where before there had been none, the SCO has since its foundation in 2001 taken on several roles which now include a counter-terrorism function, a sharing of intelligence, and an increasingly high degree of military co-operation – especially between China and Russia.⁴⁸

Initially, China was keen to stress that even if no western power was likely to play a role in the organization this did not mean that its purpose was anti-western or anti-American as such. However, even if the SCO sought 'no open confrontation' with the US, it was difficult to think of the SCO not having some broader strategic purpose, especially after 9/11 when the US began to increase its presence in Central Asia. This certainly worried the ever sensitive Chinese, though given their own concerns about terrorism they were prepared to concede some temporary US presence. The Russians too conceded some US role for the time being. But as time passed, the Russian position changed. Indeed, the longer the US remained in Central Asia, the more concerned the Russians became with what they saw as an American attempt to establish a long-term presence in countries that had once formed part of the USSR. In the end, things came to a head and in July 2005 it managed to get its SCO partners – including China - to demand of the West and the US that they remove their forces from SCO members' territories. They in turn linked this specific demand to a wider debate about the kind of international system they sought and the role the SCO might play in creating a new 'world order', one in which no single power (here meaning the United States) would have a 'monopoly in world affairs' or be able arrogate to itself the right to interfere 'in the internal affairs of sovereign states'. Furthermore, at its various meetings China and Russia started to behave as if the SCO formed the kernel of a powerful new security organization constructed on principles very different to those found in the liberal and democratic West. Underwritten politically by what has become known as the 'Shanghai spirit' with its strong emphasis on non-interference, stability and diversity, the SCO thus soon came to form part of wider Chinese and Russian strategy with the purpose of establishing deeper co-operation between the two powers. Of course, the SCO still only has a limited impact on the security situation in Eurasia more generally; and the organization it is accepted has been unable to 'sustain or even execute many of the agreements it reaches at meetings due to conflicting national regulations, laws, and standards'. There are also ongoing complaints that some SCO members have so far been unwilling to 'supply the collective SCO bodies' with the resources necessary to make them function effectively.⁴⁹ That said, a body which did not exist some time ago exists today; and it exists with the broad overarching purpose of allowing both Russia and China to find a united and separate voice in a part of the world from which they seek to minimize or even exclude the Americans.

If both China and Russia have invested much into maintaining and strengthening SCO as a regional security organization, the same could just as easily be said of an even more famous

entity which started life back in November 2001.⁵⁰ Initially, of course, even the idea of the BRICS was pooh-poohed by most conventional economists; and even after it had begun to take on a life of its own, there were still those who repeated the line that the countries who constituted the BRICS were just too different to be viewed as a united bloc. Even so, the simple idea of the BRICS not only helped redefine the way many people came to see the world - contributing in no small part to the notion that power was shifting away from the West – the BRICs themselves began to take on an institutional life of their own. Indeed, something which had only started out as being an acronym gradually morphed into something more tangible following the financial crash of 2008.⁵¹ Certainly, since its first summit in 2009 the BRICS has assumed ever greater importance; and within the BRICS organization itself China and Russia have worked closely together fashioning common positions attacking in one breath western-style structural reforms, and then, in another, the unequal character of the world's financial system and the privileged role enjoyed by the US dollar. They have been equally vocal on global governance issues, arguing that the current distribution of voting power on the IMF and the World Bank is much too heavily weighted in favour of the Europeans and the Americans. But not only have they been strongly critical of the West. At the Brazil summit in 2014 the two also helped the BRICS establish two financial bodies (including one Bank) which would, they hoped, challenge the primacy of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. Now whether or not these various efforts could ever weaken, let alone undermine the West's grip on the levers of financial power was not at all clear. Still, it was not without significance (or irony) that a body that had been invented in the West by a western economist, many years later looked like it was now providing both China and Russia with a platform from which they were able to launch rather effective criticisms of western practices.⁵²

Of course the BRICS, like the SCO, is still a work in progress. But in spite of the problems currently facing some of its members, what may once have been defined (and dismissed) as a mere 'club' has over time taken steps towards becoming something more.⁵³ Perhaps there is no clear idea yet of what each of the five members want the BRICS to become; and there are real worries too about the current state of at least one of them (Brazil). Nonetheless, a body that was for the first few years of its existence virtually ignored or simply written off, has assumed a significance that few would ever have believed possible. Nor should we make the mistake (as some are now doing) of confusing the economic challenges facing individual BRIC countries today with its demise as a body. Take China. It has no illusions about its own economic problems. Nevertheless, it would be quite wrong to think that it views the BRIC relationship as some sort of sideshow whose importance

is bound to fade over time.⁵⁴ If this were the case it is difficult to understand why at the last party Congress it was picked out as one of the most important pillars in the creation of a more multilateral and multipolar world. It would also be impossible to explain why China more than anybody else has been urging other BRIC countries to play an even more active role within it. And it not just China alone. India too continues to view the organization as an important vehicle, not only in terms of encouraging co-operation between the BRICs themselves, but also as a vehicle for enhancing its own international status. Russia is in little doubt either about the continued value of the BRICs both as an economic body, but even more significantly as a geopolitical counterweight to the West – one that also happens to confer upon Russia something which the West in its view never will: recognition as an equal in an international system in dire need of reform.⁵⁵

Finally, in any assessment of the China –Russian relationship one should not underestimate the importance of wider trade questions relating to the Asia Pacific region. Indeed, in what has rapidly become a battle between the United States and China over which body should define the trade agenda around the Pacific, it is not insignificant that Russia has rushed into support China – which favours APEC – while taking great exception to American efforts to establish its own parallel organization in the shape of the TPP.⁵⁶ Not only has it done so because both countries were at first excluded from TPP. It has acted thus because like China it seeks to thwart America's much vaunted 'tilt to Asia' of which TPP is seen as being a vital part. Making its own very strong claim to be as much an Asian power as a European one – some have even talked of a Russian tilt to Asia - Russia has certainly been highly active on the diplomatic front of late. Indeed, at the APEC summit hosted by the Chinese in Beijing in November 2014 it could not have been more active or Putin more vocal. It was quite 'obvious', Putin noted in one interview, that the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was nothing more than 'just another American attempt to build an architecture of regional economic co-operation' from which the US in particular 'would benefit'. But the effort would fail he continued, and would do so in large part because the Americans had gone out of their way to exclude 'two regional players' in the shape of Russia and China. Thus having stressed the dubious motives of the Americans, Putin then emphasized how close Russia now was to China, noting that 'relations between the two countries' had never been better. Indeed, according to Putin, they had 'reached the highest level' in our 'entire history'.⁵⁷ The Chinese President did not appear to digress from this assessment. Nor did the official Chinese press who continued to rail against what they saw as an American-led strategy of returning to Asia by opening 'the door' to the Asian 'market' as part of an even wider, and more insidious, effort to encircle China itself.⁵⁸

Of course, this jaundiced view of US policy was strongly denied by officials in Washington; and indeed at the same APEC summit -and at later fora in 2015 and 2016 - Obama went out of his way to stress that the TPP was definitely not an ‘anyone but China club’.⁵⁹ Indeed, in 2015 he even invited Russia and China to join. But neither the Russian leadership or the Chinese seemed to be won over. Indeed, Putin continued to see all this as part of a larger American plan to either undermine or surround Russia, even though some Russian analysts argued that TPP might have positive results for the country.⁶⁰ The Chinese president appeared to be equally aggrieved, even though certain reformers in China appeared to be in favour of joining.⁶¹ Either way, both stuck to the original official line that TPP was a direct challenge, and that the only thing that could hold it back (aside from opposition to it coming from the American people themselves!) was an ever closer partnership between a China that was more than happy to have Russia making the case against America on its behalf, and a Russia that was now more keen than ever to strengthen its ties with China in a period when its own relations with the West had moved from being poor to bad to near disastrous following events in Ukraine.⁶²

Conclusion

“China does not want the South China Sea dominated by Americans. Russia does not want the West — the United States and Europe — to penetrate what Moscow perceives as ‘its sphere of influence.’ In short, Russia and China do not want a world dominated by the United States”⁶³

Though the crisis in Ukraine might be seen as being the immediate cause of what some are now claiming, rather spuriously, is a “new” Cold War between Russia and the West, its deeper origins can be traced back to the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 and the traumatic effect this then had on Russian power and Russian identity.⁶⁴ Squeezed, as Russia then felt that it was, between on the one hand an unsympathetic and predatory West determined to spread its liberal values, and on the other by a rising tide of nationalist sentiment in its former republics, Russia was bound, in the end, to try and call a halt to what Putin came to see as the country’s precipitate decline. The material foundation for this was in the first instance provided by a near ten-fold increase in the price of oil and gas. But Russia’s rebooting also took a more direct form, firstly in Georgia in 2008 when it intervened directly to punish a Georgian government looking westwards towards NATO, and then, more seriously, in 2013, when Ukraine took what now looks like a tipping point decision to establish a much closer relationship with the European Union. What followed is by now

well-known with revolt breaking out in Kiev, Russia's chosen political proxy in Ukraine taking flight, Crimea then seceding from Ukraine, followed in turn by ongoing Russian-inspired interventions in East and South-East Ukraine.⁶⁵

As we now know, this unprecedented crisis not only had a major impact on Russia's relationship with the West. It also posed a serious problem for China. Naturally enough Beijing was following these events with enormous interest, fully aware that what Russia had done and was doing – organizing a secession and then continuing to interfere into the internal affairs of another state – ran directly counter its own cherished foreign policy principles. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that some Chinese officials heartily disapproved (in private) of Russian actions. Moreover, Beijing (to be fair) did issue a number of statements which though not directly critical of Russia, did repeat their by now standard foreign policy position that matters should be settled through negotiation not force and that all parties to the conflict should recognize each other's sovereign rights. But to many observers this looked like so much window dressing. Indeed, while Russian-led or Russian-backed forces continued to operate in southern and eastern Ukraine, an admittedly coy China seemed to be doing quite a bit in the background either to protect Moscow from serious criticism - significantly China abstained in the subsequent UN Security Council vote on a resolution condemning the referendum in Crimea - or to explain away Russian behavior altogether. In fact, as the crisis unfolded, China appeared to suggest that if anybody was to blame it was not so much their close friend Putin, but rather a meddling West that had failed to understand history or the 'complexities of the Ukrainian issue'. One analyst even blamed the whole crisis on the West for having enlarged NATO. Moreover, according to the same source, Ukraine really belonged to Russia in much the same way as Taiwan belonged to China. Indeed, for the Russians, he went on, 'the loss of Ukraine' would be 'even more serious than if China were to lose Taiwan'.⁶⁶

China's diplomatic attempts to sound even-handed in public, while scolding the West for acting irresponsibly, undoubtedly helped the Russians in their moment of diplomatic need. China meanwhile took full advantage of the situation to enhance its own position. Certainly, the much vaunted gas deal signed in May was one that worked to China's advantage. As Putin himself later confessed, the Chinese had driven a particularly hard bargain. Nor did the drive to improve economic relations end there. Indeed, as if to make the point even 'clearer than the truth' to those who may have been wondering about the health of the relationship, the two countries went on to sign yet another energy deal in November, followed by further negotiations over the next eighteen months. It is true, of course, that the various agreements

came nowhere to delivering on their early promise. But as others pointed out, new deals had been struck where there had been no new deals before. Nor did the drive to improve relations end there. Only a few months after Putin had signed a law formally incorporating Crimea into Russia, Russia and China signed a major new arms agreement involving the Russian transfer of some of its very best aircraft technology. In April of the following year, Russia then sold China its most advanced Surface-to-Air missiles (the S-400) in what was reported at the time to be ‘the largest Sino-Russian arms deal in over a decade’.⁶⁷ This in turn was followed a month later by their first ever joint naval exercise together in the Eastern Mediterranean (another even bigger one took place five months later). And in August of 2015 the two countries conducted what was claimed to be their ‘largest ever naval exercise in the Pacific’.⁶⁸ Certainly, if China was feeling uncomfortable in supporting Russia over Ukraine, as some western analysts suggested at the time, it was certainly not showing.⁶⁹

Naturally enough, none of this seemed to make much difference to those who had always doubted the staying power of the relationship. Thus a short while after China and Russia had signed the new gas deal, one analyst was still reassuring his readers that the relationship was still ‘more superficial than strategic’.⁷⁰ A few months later and another pundit was claiming that the Russian and Chinese leaders were not really ‘buddies’.⁷¹ By the beginning of 2015, yet another writer was suggesting that even if China and Russia might have looked like they were getting on extraordinarily well, the economic relationship with China could not deliver what Russia really needed.⁷² And by September we were being told that their friendship was once again facing new stresses and strains as the Chinese economy slowed and oil prices tumbled.⁷³ Yet in spite of all the jeremiads and dire predictions that the relationship was about to take a tumble, nothing of the sort happened. Indeed, as we have seen, far from stuttering or coming to a halt, the relationship became more entrenched still, as indeed the two leaders of the two countries openly confessed. As Putin made clear - and Xi did not demur - the continued ‘expansion of the Russian-Chinese partnership’ met and presumably would continue to ‘meet the interests and strategic goals of our two countries’.⁷⁴

The question then remains: how might the relationship evolve in the future? The sceptics obviously think, and continue to insist, that underlying tensions will in the end make the relationship – whose significance they doubt anyway - either less important or undermine it altogether. But this is certainly not a view supported by the evidence at the moment. Nor is there much to suggest they will be pulling apart any time soon. Indeed, why should they? After all, the relationship has already realized major strategic and political gains for the two

sides. It has provided both with important diplomatic cover at crucial moments. It has led to increased political and military co-operation (if not a formal military alliance). And though there are still important problems in the economic relationship, it is worth recalling that whereas trade back in the 1990s was negligible, by 2016 China had already become Russia's single biggest trade partner and Russia an important source of energy for China. More important still, the partnership permitted the two to confront together what both agreed was their biggest joint problem: namely, an American-led global alliance which not only tried to limit their ambitions, but put into doubt the very legitimacy of their respective regimes. Theoretically, things could change of course. For instance, the two countries could both adopt western style human rights reforms. Russia and China could come to accept the international order as it is. Russia could stop acting in the way it has been acting in Ukraine. The West could accept the annexation of Crimea. China could give up on its goals in the East and South China seas. It might even accept that the United States has a right to be an Asian power. But the chances of any of this happening are virtually nil. The scene is thus set for a continued stand off, one consequence of which will be to reinforce the belief in Moscow and Beijing that in a hostile international environment, one should stick close to one's friends (however imperfect they may be) because in an insecure world such friends (warts and all) are central to achieving what both are still striving to achieve: namely, greater political security at home, fewer obstacles to their ambitions in their own neighborhood, and a more equal world system in which the United States and its allies have less control over what happens. So long as they continue to share these basic goals – and there is no reason to think these are going to change any time soon - there is every chance the two will continue to travel along the same, sometimes rocky, path they have been moving along together since the beginning of the twenty first century.⁷⁵

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² See Jeremy Page, 'Why Russia's President is "Putin the Great" in China' *The Wall Street Journal*. 1 October 2014. <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-russias-president-is-putin-the-great-in-china-1412217002>

³ Rajan Menon, 'The Strategic Convergence between Russia and China', *Survival*, Volume 39, Number 2, 1997, pp. 101-125.

⁴ For a strong refutation of at least four of the more comforting western myths about the China – Russian relationship and why it will always fall foul of various obstacles according to this account see

Alexander Korolev, 'The Strategic Alignment between Russia and China; Myths and Reality', *The ASAN Forum*, April 30, 2015. <http://www.theasanforum.org/the-strategic-alignment-between-russia-and-china-myths-and-reality/>

⁵ Rajan Menon, 'The Limits of the Chinese-Russian partnership', *Survival*, Volume 51, Number 3, 2009, pp. 99-130.

⁶ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*. Washington D.C, Brookings Press, 2008, and his *How the Chinese See Russia*. Russie.Nei. Reports no. 6. IFRI. Russia,NIS Center, December 2010, pp. 1-30.

⁷ 'Russia and China: An Uneasy Friendship, *The Economist*, May 9th 2015.

⁸ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2013, esp. pp. 78- 86.

⁹ On some of the many problems facing economic relations between China and Russia see Bjorn Alexander Duben, 'Why Russia's turn to China is a Mirage', July 8th 2015, <http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate/2015/07/08/why-russias-turn-to-china-is-a-mirage/>; Michael Schuman, 'Thaw in China-Russian Relations hasn't Trickled Down, *The New York Times*, December 15, 2015. http://mobile.nytimes.com/2015/12/16/business/international/thaw-in-china-russia-relations-hasnt-trickled-down.html?referer=&_r=0; and Jacopo Dettoni, 'Trades Misses targets despite political deals'. *Nikkei Asian Review*. January 20, 2016. <http://asia.nikkei.com/Politics-Economy/International-Relations/Trade-misses-targets-despite-political-deals>

¹⁰ Geoff Dyer, *The Contest of the Century: The New Era of Competition with China*. London, Allen lane, 2014, p. 212.

¹¹ For an exposition of a view close to the one expressed in this essay see however Gilbert Rozman, 'The Sino-Russian Partnership is Stronger than the West Thinks', 11 January 2015. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gilbert-rozman/sino-russia-partnership_b_6140358.html

¹² See Daniel Drezner, 'The system worked: Global economic governance during the Great Recession'. *World Politics*, 2013, 66, 123–164. doi: 10.1017/S0043887113000348 [[CrossRef](#)], [[Web of Science](#) ®]

¹³ See Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order*. I Stanford University Press, 2014.

¹⁴ Putin denies that "China and Russia are..creating any military blocs or alliances against anybody" but he does admit that "we are in the process of building an alliance to safeguard our national interests." See 'Russia, China do not form blocs against anyone: Putin', *China Daily: USA*, 20/06/2015.

¹⁵ Feng Zhan, 'China's New Thinking on Aliances', *Survival*, Volume 54, Number 5, 2012, pp. 129-148.

¹⁶ Benni Avni, 'Vladimir Putin's Budding Bromance with China's Xi Jinping'. *Newsweek*. 16/5/15. <http://europe.newsweek.com/vladimir-putin-xi-jinping-32> See 7392?rm=eu

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²⁰ See 'China Invites Russian troops to second world war parade in Beijing' *The Guardian*. May 11 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/may/11/china-invites-russian-troops-to-second-world-war-parade-in-beijing>; and 'Russia and China Celebrate Japanese Surrender in World War II' *The Moscow Times*. <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/multimedia/photogalleries/russia-and-china-celebrate-japanese-surrender-in-world-war-ii/5859.html>

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³³ Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, 'Status Seekers: China and Russia's Response to U.S. Primacy', *International Security*, Volume 34, Number 4, Spring 2010, pp. 63-95.

³⁴ See Michael Cox, 'The Empire's Back in Town: Or America's Imperial Temptation – Again', *Millennium*, February 2003, vol. 32 no. 1, pp. 1-27.

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⁶³ Quote from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/02/24/the-real-winner-of-the-ukraine-crisis-could-be-china/>

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