

STRUCTURAL SOURCES OF SINO-RUSSIAN DISTRUST

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Abstract. In recent decades, China and Russia decades have adopted accommodation, normalisation and convergence strategies that transformed their cooperation into a comprehensive strategic partnership. Despite having this strategic alignment, several issues still constrain their long-term relations, such as divergent views and assessment of the world order, imbalance in bilateral trade and investment, competition in their respective spheres of influence, Russians' fear of a Chinese immigrant onslaught, ideological cleavages, and asymmetrical power distribution between the two. This study explains the factors behind their convergence and divergences of interests and its implications for their future relations. While utilising content analysis as the research methodology this study hypothesizes that though the two are engaged in strategic and other partnerships, yet the structural differences will inhibit their long-term cordiality.

Keywords: big brother and junior partner dilemma, sphere of influence, world order, trade imbalance, Chinese immigrant labour, power asymmetry

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1. Introduction

Regional and systemic stimuli have forced China and Russia to develop conjoined interests, the most important being curtailing the ever-expanding influence of other great powers – specifically that of the United States. The prolongation of the Ukraine war has forced Russia to get closer to China. Though this cordiality is evident from the March 2023 visit of President Xi Jinping to Moscow, yet both states share a history of hostility with each other through major parts of the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, accommodation, normalization, and convergence strategies played a critical role in addressing the core differences between the two. Moreover, American unisolationist policies – specifically evident during the Trump administration (Mirza, Abbas, and Qaisrani 2022) – not only infuriated its allies but also pushed belligerent states to develop counter-balancing strategies and alignments. Sino-Russian alignment could help China address some of the threats emanating from the Asia-Pacific and help Russia to address the political isolation since the Crimean crisis. US sanctions against Russia in response to its invasion of Ukraine and a trade war with China further brought the two closer to each other. Their ambitions to challenge and curtail the American image of the world order also remain an important point of convergence.

Though this Sino-Russian alignment is considered a quasi-strategic and defence alliance, yet several issues still constrain the positive trajectory of their relationship. These include an imbalance in bilateral trade and investment, regional security and geopolitical deviations, divergent notions and interpretation of the regional strategic environment and of the world order, contentious behaviour over the issues of core interests, and the ‘big brother and junior partner’ dilemma – that is who is performing the role of a big brother in their relations.

This study endeavours to find the answer to the basic question that despite having convergence of interests in several issue areas, why China and Russia do not consider each other ‘full’ allies? And what are the sources of their distrust? While utilising content and document analysis as the research methodology, this study focuses on the convergences and divergences in their discourses, visions, goals, and strategies. Neoclassical realist theoretical framework has been used to explain the research problem. It explains the behaviour of the state at systemic and domestic levels combined. It provides that “the scope and ambition of a country’s foreign policy are driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material power capabilities,” but, that “the impact of such power capabilities on foreign policy is indirect and complex, because systemic pressures must be translated through intervening variables at the unit level” (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016, Rose 1998). Ripsman, and Taliaferro’s 2009 edited volume *Neoclassical Realism, the State, and Foreign Policy*, neoclassical realism has emerged as major theoretical approach to the study of foreign policy on both sides of the Atlantic. Proponents of neoclassical realism claim that it is the logical extension of the Kenneth Waltz’s structural realism into the realm of foreign policy. In *Neoclassical Realist Theory of International Relations*, Norrin M.

Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell argue that neoclassical realism is far more than an extension of Waltz's structural realism or an effort to update the classical realism of Hans Morgenthau, E. H. Carr, and Henry Kissinger with the language of modern social science. Rejecting the artificial distinction that Waltz draws between theories of international politics and theories of foreign policy, the authors contend neoclassical realism can explain and predict phenomena ranging from short-term crisis-behavior, to foreign policy, to patterns of grand strategic adjustment by individual states up to long-term patterns of international outcomes. It is, therefore, a more powerful theory of international politics than structural realism. Yet it is also a more intuitively satisfying approach than liberal Innenpolitik theories or constructivism. The authors detail the variables and assumptions of neoclassical realist theory, address various aspects of theory construction and methodology, lay out the areas of convergence and sharp disagreement with other leading theoretical approaches – liberalism, constructivism, analytic eclecticism, and foreign policy analysis (FPA). The study hypothesizes that although China and Russia are engaged in strategic and other partnerships, yet the structural differences would inhibit their long-term cordiality. In the prevailing geopolitical and geo-economics situation, their partnership would survive, but the entrenched mistrust, historical animosities, and developing asymmetries would challenge their relationship in the long run.

2. Why Sino-Russian 'comprehensive strategic partnership', and why now?

Rising China and resurgent Russia have caused a transformation in the geopolitical structure of the world. Significant developments such as mutual activism and cooperation in the international fora especially in the United Nations, exponential growth in the economic and military potentials, and assertiveness in their respective spheres of influence have challenged the ascendance and interests of the United States in the regional and international systems. Moreover, it is not only the US but also other states which have felt the ripple effects of their rise and resurgence. On the one hand, European states started feeling threatened after Russia's unilateral annexation of Crimea and attack on Ukraine (Ramzy 2022), and on the other, states in the Eastern and Southern Asia seem wary of the Chinese assertiveness.

Both China and Russia have a shared interest in maintaining stability in their regions, as well as ensuring the survival and growth of their own respective political and economic systems. As such, their strategic partnership has been a key factor in the development of a multipolar world order, with China and Russia as two of its key players. They have sought to strengthen their position in the world and counterbalance the power and structures supported by the United States. Despite this, the partnership is not without its challenges, including differences in the distribution of resources and conflicting interests in certain regions. However, both China and Russia have maintained a commitment to their strategic partnership and continue to work together to address the challenges they are facing. The following describes the factors that have brought the two states closer to each other.

2.1. Systemic constraints: the United States and the Western factor

The China-Russia relationship has been characterized by the traditional great power alignment and patron-client in a shifting pattern of positionality and major power-balancing politics. Their security needs and external compulsion for balancing forced the two to comprehensively collaborate in the 1950s. Their domestic political and ideological constraints and leaders' idiosyncrasies restrained the cordiality of their relations in the 1960s. After the end of the Cold War, accommodation and collaboration only became possible when Russia under Gorbachev started the reconciliation process (Kaczmarek, 2021). The interplay of the external-domestic trajectory of interests and compulsions led to the recent episode of their comprehensive partnership.

2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) of the United States declared China and Russia as 'revisionist states' posing a threat to the interests of the US and its allies (Trump 2017). A perception exists that these being revisionist states are bent upon "displacing, defeating, impoverishing, or otherwise marginalizing the top powers" (Daojiong 2017). Biden Administration's Indo-Pacific Strategy declares that China "is combining its economic, diplomatic, military, and technological might as it pursues a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and seeks to become the world's most influential power. The PRC's coercion and aggression spans the globe, but it is most acute in the Indo-Pacific" (Biden 2022a). Moreover his Pacific Partnership Strategy declares that China's "pressure and economic coercion ... risks undermining the peace, prosperity, and security of the region, and by extension, of the United States" (Biden 2022b). China and Russia, on their part, feel insecure in an American-dominated world order where American policies and actions are considered as curtailing the growth of the two. In the said order, they abhor the United States setting standards and establishing and enforcing the rules – at times against China's and Russia's interests.

Obama's Pivot to Asia policy (Lieberthal 2011), Trump's Indo-Pacific Strategy (Pompeo 2019), Biden's Indo-Pacific Strategy (Biden 2022a) and Pacific Partnership Strategy (Biden 2022b), Chinese high-tech needs for its military modernisation programs, and Russian economic compulsions in the wake of economic slowdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ongoing Ukrainian War have forced China and Russia to pursue mutual enhanced understanding and cooperation. Where Chinese rationale is based on security and geopolitical motivations, Russia's are based on geoeconomics and geopolitics. They consider the systemic status quo and the US-led world order as adverse to their aspirations of revival as global powers (Evans 2011).

Moreover, China's perception of the world order is paradoxical. Where it enjoys the benefits of liberal economic principles, such as free trade and globalisation of the economy, it is concerned about the geopolitical distribution of power and the role of the United States in it. It regards the US massive influence as a hurdle to its grand project of national revitalization – meant to revive its past glory and global status as a great power – and a major challenge to China's regional influence and attainment and preservation of its core interests (Ye 2019, Mirza, Abbas, and Nizamani 2020).

The primary objective of China, hence, to engage Russia at the strategic level is to imbibe and counter the systemic pressures, and reform – if possible, replace – the existing world order.

Systemic pressures and challenges apart, China's preoccupation with the regional security challenges posed by the US and its allies in the Asia-Pacific – specifically in the form of QUAD and AUKUS – paved the way for new strategic coordination with Russia. Since the Obama administration's rebalancing strategy, China has faced strategic compulsion to counter threats emanating in its neighbourhood and periphery (Medeiros and Chase 2017). Russia could help China in balancing and opposing US military presence and political alliance systems in the Chinese backyard.

2.2. Domestic compulsions and demands:

China's military modernization and Russia's economic development

Russia has also helped China in strengthening its strategic position against the US deployment of theatre missile systems and creating a more conducive regional environment (Fenghua 2015). Fu Ying notes that for China comprehensive partnership with Russia is important to maintain the balance and help in facilitating “the solution of some international problems” (Ying 2016). In order to respond to the threats emanating from its near abroad, and align with its ambitious grand designs China has started to re-organise and modernise its military power – specifically its naval power and missile defence system. The intention of the Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) is to become one of the sophisticated world-class militaries capable of waging modern conventional and non-conventional wars and averting external threats, especially emanating from the United States. Moreover, restoring the prestige of a great power requires a strong and advanced military. This has led China to develop strong military-to-military cooperation with Russia. Activism is witnessed in three major areas: joint military exercises, high-tech military cooperation and sale of arms, and high-level military contacts for a collective response to the emerging challenges (Meick 2017).

Russia, historically, has remained reluctant to sell sophisticated military equipment and high-tech know-how to China because of the fear that China would attain the capability through reverse engineering (Medeiros and Chase 2017). Western sanctions – in retaliation to the Crimean crisis, and the invasion of Ukraine – compelled Russia to expand avenues of cooperation with China (Mirza and Ayub 2021), including sale of the high-tech military equipment. China, now, is an important market for Russian arms, with the first delivery of S-400 air-defence systems reportedly completed in May 2018 (Saradzhyan 2020, TASS 2018). China accounted for about 12% of the \$15 billion worth of arms that Russia exported in 2017, according to the Russian Defence Ministry (Saradzhyan 2020). Figure 1 shows the exports of Russian arms to different states. Data represents that China received 23 percent of the total arms exported by Russia.

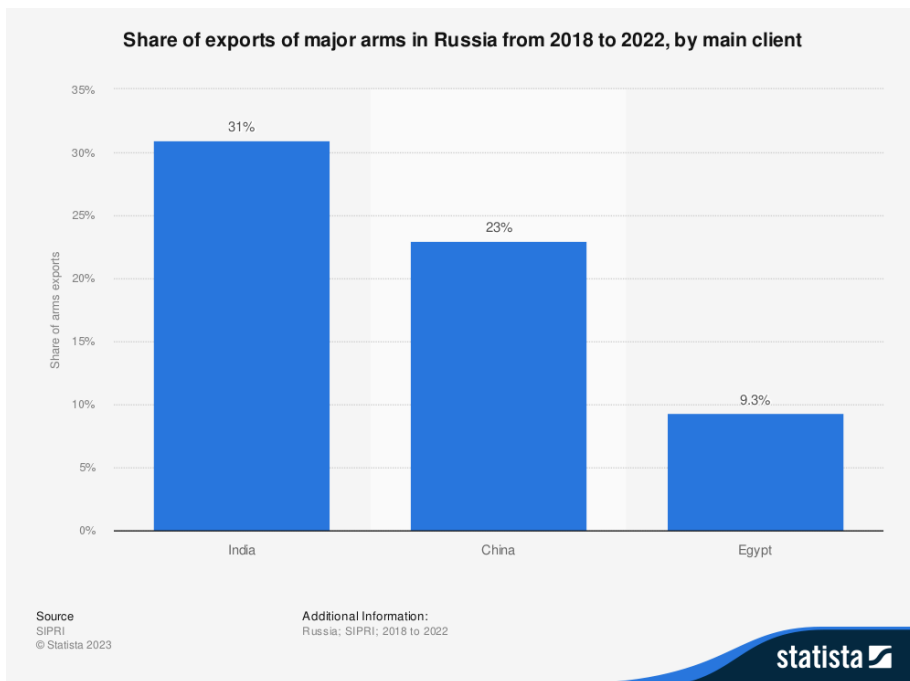


Figure 1. Source: SIPRI, Share of exports of major arms in Russia from 2018 to 2022, by main client. Statista (SIPRI 2023).

China has crafted a successful strategy to create a convergence of interests with Russia and establish a strategic partnership. But one of the Chinese prominent scholars reiterates “Beijing and Moscow are close, but not allies” (Ying 2016). Both are reluctant to establish an alliance, yet. It is partly due to the Chinese adhered policy of no alliance and partly due to the concerns and divergences over some other issues.

3. Challenges to China-Russia comprehensive partnership

Even though China and Russia have transformed their relationship into a comprehensive strategic partnership, their strategic cooperation has not transformed into an alliance. Their relationship is constrained by few concerns on both sides. Russia seems worried about the time when China would acquire massive influence and transform its economic potential into military and political influence (Stent 2020). China, on its part, remains wary of Russian behaviour because of its past experiences and its influence in Central Asia – a Russian backyard, where China has invested massively in recent years (Mirza and Ayub 2021). This section endeavours to empirically explain the areas of concern and divergences between Russia and China. What are their divergences and how are these posing a major challenge to the Sino-Russian enduring cooperation?

3.1. Diverging visions of the world order

US-led liberal world order based on democratic governance, free trade and preservation of human rights has been perceived by China and Russia as a threat to their political systems which are authoritarian in nature. On the one hand, China has multiplied its economic and political gains since its integration into the contemporary international economic order, on the other, it sees the Western and specifically US promotion of democratic ideals, human rights and minimum state control over the economic and political forces as a potential challenge to its political system. It also considers it to be a challenge to the security and stability of the regime and state. Against this backdrop, it has adopted an assertive foreign policy seeking to reform the existing world order. Russia, in the context of its historical role as a great power, seeks to re-assert its influence and establish a global status. It perceives the democratic liberal order and its ideals as a challenge to its authoritarian control over the state and society, its influence in the region and the stability of the regime. Hence, it wants to reform or replace the international system led by the US. This led to competition and even conflict between the Russia-China duo and Western states, especially with the US. This status quo-revisionist states antagonism encourages China and Russia to collectively face the constraints of the system, counter its influence and reform, if not change, the system.

Though several Chinese and Russian perceptions of the present world order – and the constraints that it puts on their behaviour – are shared, they differ on how this order can be reformed or replaced. China wants a reformation within the existing system and does not wish to completely destroy it, as it benefits from the present economic order and global trade regimes. China's strategy here remains to enhance its power and position steadily and gradually to replace the US from its leading position in the international system. It wishes to achieve this objective 'mainly through soft and economic means' (Trenin 2019). Russia, on the other hand, considers itself the victim of the prevailing world order and wishes to overthrow and challenge it by any means. Dmitri Trenin notes that Russia may "seek to maintain its geopolitical and security sovereignty *vis-à-vis* both the United States and China." While it considers the US as a belligerent state, it remains careful while dealing with China with the objective of not becoming 'overly dependent on the latter' (Trenin 2019).

China has given the impression that it intends to pursue a world order which is based upon the just principles of international relations – the democratisation of the IR (Wenchao and Haibing 2014). A world order where great powers would not interfere in the internal 'political' matters of other states (Schuman 2022). China has manifested through its behaviour that it has little to do with the political structures of other states and its business remains business. China, unlike other great powers, rarely attaches political strings with the economic exchanges (Kley 2015, Staff 2018). At least this is what China's rhetoric is. So, China promotes a world order based upon the 'free will' of the states, and where cooperation transpires without any pre-conditionalities, and where states' political sovereignty is protected.

Russia, on the other hand, while demanding democratisation of international relations, has shown through its behaviour that its image of world order is based

upon a system where Russia holds the central position. Ideological expansion and control, or at minimum strong political interference, in other states remain a peculiar feature of Russian foreign policy through most of its recent history. Independence of its satellite states in the foreign and defence policy formulation remain very limited. Besides, it has also been trying to ensure that the states that it ‘considers’ to be falling under its sphere of influence, do not try to make an alliance with the Western powers. And if they do, it reserves the right to interfere, even if that means military invasion. Georgia and Ukraine were vying for NATO membership. But Russia intervened militarily resulting in Russo-Georgian and Russo-Ukrainian wars. Another important feature of its foreign policy remains the protection of the Russians living anywhere in the world – specifically in the near-abroad. This remains one of the major tools of Russian statecraft to keep pressuring the states in its sphere of influence, that if they try to join hands with the West, Russia may intervene militarily on the pretext of protecting ethnic Russians and Russian business.

In such a state of affairs the two images of the world order, as envisaged by Russia and China, are often found to be not only contradictory but also competing with each other. This is specifically true in the case of the regions where Russians have their profound influence, but where the Chinese also have immense economic interests, such as Central Asia. These competing visions of the world order are something that prevents the two to go for a full alliance. Though the two states have recently gone along with each other smoothly, and have aligned their interests, yet the structural level difference of the competing images of the world order hinder them to forge an alliance. So, they have gone for alignment, and not a full alliance. Above all, their images of the world order are not in concert with the one promoted and defended by the United States.

3.2. Politics of influence: geopolitical divergences in Central and Southeast Asia

Central Asia is a region of strategic importance for both China and Russia, as it serves as a bridge between the two countries and provides access to valuable resources, markets, and transportation routes. As a result, both China and Russia have sought to exert influence in the region and maintain good relations with the Central Asia republics. However, the competition for influence in Central Asia has also been a source of tension between the two. While both states have been working to expand their economic and political influence in the region, they have different approaches and interests in the area. For example, China has been investing heavily in infrastructure and energy projects in the region, while Russia has remained focused on maintaining its political predominance therein.

Some analysts are concerned that Russia’s overarching influence in Central Asia can be threatened by China’s expanding power and interests therein. Central Asia, as a region, has emerged as an important source of competition as well as collaboration between the two (Mirza and Ayub 2021). The current politico-economic dynamics of the region can best be described as a ‘division of labour’ (Paszak 2020) where China is managing economic issues through its Belt and Road Initiative and Russia

is dealing with its politico-military dimensions. In recent decade, Central Asia's primary energy player has been the China National Petroleum Corporation. Simply, China has much more to offer Central Asian states than Russia, and its trade and investment have strengthened its clout. But the question remains whether Russia can prevent China from translating its economic clout into political one in the near future. This question is something that is creating unease in Moscow (Dave and Kobayashi 2018, Mirza and Ayub 2021). Russia has shown through its recent behaviour that it cannot let go of any state of the region and cannot let it fall under any other great power's sphere of influence. Thus, Beijing's expanding influence in Central Asia is seen with huge scepticism in Moscow. The region could become a source of geopolitical competition between the two as Russia would not cede its role as a regional hegemon (Mirza and Ayub 2021). Moreover, the region is considered by Russia as its 'Near Abroad' (Mesbahi 1997). China has remained very successful in making inroads in the region by enhancing energy cooperation with the regional states, and by investing billions of dollars in infrastructure and development projects.

Western states are trying to partially isolate China and Russia on the international stage. This has further enhanced the Sino-Russian entente (Stronski and Ng 2018). So far China and Russia have been managing their differences in the region amicably because of Western pressures, Russian economic constraints, and Chinese economic investments, but the situation may change once Russia overcomes its economic crisis (Holtom et al. 2011). It seems that a tacit understanding between the two has been developed that China will not disturb the political order of the region, thus assuaging Russian apprehensions, and Russia will let China expand economically.

The Belt and Road Initiative has tilted Central Asian economies more towards China. With economic engagement comes the security concerns of China *vis-à-vis* the states where it is investing billions of dollars. And security concerns ultimately can only be addressed with political engagement. For their part, Chinese experts are fully aware of this politico-economic calculation and the Russian apprehensions about the Central Asian sphere of influence.

Russia, on its part, has engaged with Southeast Asia militarily. It has supplied around \$10.7 billion worth of weapons to the region since 2000. The figure is higher than the weapons provided by the United States, China, or European Union (Boulianne 2022). Vietnam, specifically, remained one of the biggest importers of Russian weapons in the region (Hutt 2022). This Russian military engagement with the region is likely to cause tensions in Sino-Russian relations, because China considers that the regional states may utilise these weapons to counter its interests in the South China Sea. Some Chinese scholars have gone to the length of claiming that Russian defence cooperation with Vietnam is a form of 'covert containment' of China (Sheng, Xiao, and Jinfu 2013).

3.3. BRI & EEU: competing geo-economic designs and strategies

Another source of divergence between China and Russia can be observed in the geo-economic arena, specifically the competition over economic and trade influence in the Eurasian region. China's exponential economic growth and its status

as a leading trading power in the world with a vision to expand economically has challenged the Russian geo-economic influence.

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China’s massive infrastructure and development project – and its vision and acceptability in different regions of the world, especially the ones where Russia has important interests, has created concerns in Moscow. China is overambitious about its BRI, which is considered by many as a new Silk Route – an economic project that follows the trading routes of the mediaeval Tang and Yuan dynasties. The new Silk Road fulfils numerous objectives of Chinese authorities who wish to make their state a global superpower. BRI also aims at developing the Muslim-majority regions of China, which connects with Central Asia. In the further Southwest, China also aims to build an organic alignment with Iran, a state that serves as the hub of the Near East and Central Asia because of its vast size, position, and population as well as its historic imperial heritage.

Russia has established its own economic and trade organisation, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015, though it could not match the Chinese initiatives. Russia regards BRI as a rival to the EAEU (Sheng, Xiao, and Jinfu 2013). To avoid inconvenience, Russia and China have signed an agreement to avoid confrontation and align both projects to achieve mutual interests (Shakhanova and Garlick 2020,

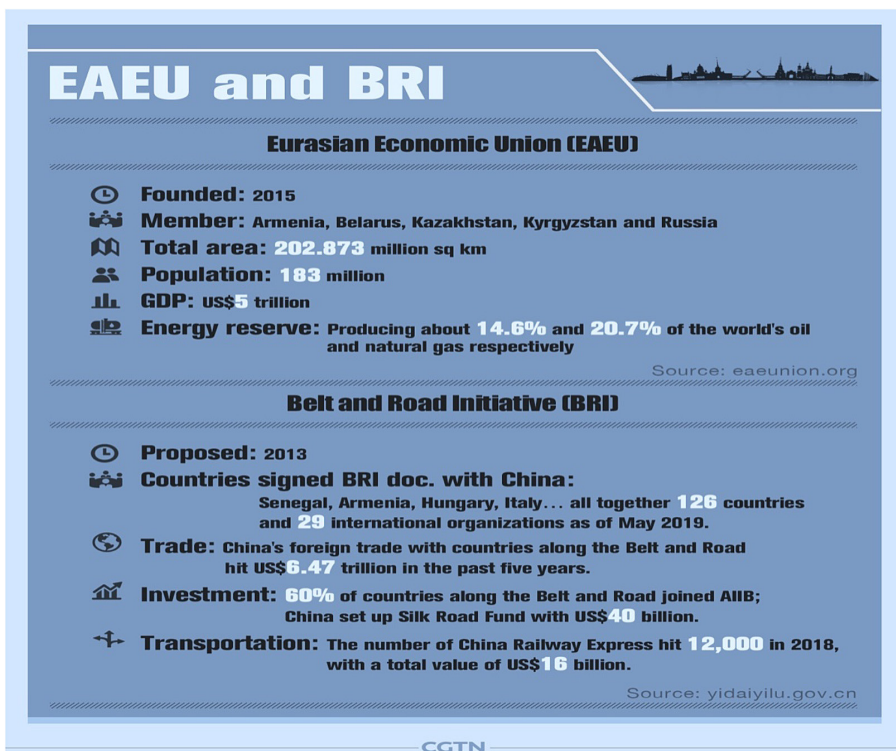


Figure 2. Source: Luo Yingjie, BRI-EAEU cooperation: a boon for Asia’s long-term growth. CGTN, June 6, 2019. Available online at <<https://news.cgtn.com/news/3d3d674e7951544d35457a6333566d54/index.html>> Accessed on 13.05.2023 (Yingjie 2019).

CGTN 2019). But the two projects are different in scope, practice, outreach, and in approach. BRI is an inclusive and flexible project that, China claims, promotes global trade, and encourages every state into its orbit through financing and developmental assistance with a greater aim of expanding the volume of the market for Chinese goods and services. EAEU, on the other hand, is considered as an inward-looking economic and trade integration framework designed to maintain Russian influence in the member states (Sheng, Xiao, and Jinfu 2013). It seems that China's aim is to expand its influence in Eurasia through BRI which would resultantly downgrade Russia to the second position in the geopolitical hierarchy. Besides, the establishment of BRI and EAEU (the first established in 2013 and the second in 2015) itself reflects Moscow's uneasiness regarding China's predominance. Through EAEU it attempted to counterbalance China's rising influence.

Moreover, both states have taken steps to align their interests and to prevent conflicts and mistrust. In 2015, President Putin offered to 'coordinate' the integration of BRI and EAEU to foster regional prosperity (Shakhanova and Garlick 2020). He started developing a concept of a 'Great Eurasian Partnership' in the following years (Köstem 2019). It indicates that Russia is willing 'to lead' and intends to balance and regulate Chinese economic growth inside Eurasia.

3.4. Legacy of the historical animosities and threat of contemporary migrants

China and Russia share an almost 2600-mile long border, an endless length of birch woodland, largely dividing the Russian Far East from Chinese Manchuria. The Russian state remains weak in a few regions of the Far East. It is believed that the region houses only around 6 million ethnic Russians. China covers this underpopulated region which is rich in natural gas, oil, wood, diamonds, and gold. Chinese migrants are moving gradually towards the north. Tselichtchev notes that this northward movement of Chinese migrants is creating tensions in Russia's Far East. Some Russian media outlets are making films and documentaries about the rising China threat – an example is 'an apocalyptic film *China – a Deadly Friend* (in the series "Russia Deceived")', released in 2015 and which was an instant hit on the internet (Tselichtchev 2017). Xenophobic sentiments in Russian Far East are based upon the threats that Chinese migrants will tag-along the Chinese investment. Figure 3 shows that the Chinese northern provinces house around 123 million people. Russian Far Eastern Siberia – which is thinly populated and is having only 14 million inhabitants (Horvath 2022) – is fearful of a Chinese migrants' onslaught from its Northern provinces.

It should also be noted that it was only in the 19th century – when the Qing empire was dying – that China lost part of that territory to Russia. Russia grabbed around one million square miles of Chinese territory in the mid-19th century (Horvath 2022). The rest of the Chinese territory was captured by Russia in the 20th century, while also ensuring that China accepts Mongolian independent status – which was part of China earlier. It also annexed Tuva – a semi-autonomous region – which earlier was also part of China (Horvath 2022).



Figure 3. Source: Csaba Barnabas Horvath, “Was China betting on Russian defeat all along?” *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 25, 2022.

3.5. Ideological cleavages and the ‘big brother’ dilemma

Soviet support was necessary for the establishment and thriving of the communist party in China. Russia provided technical, tactical, and moral support along with training the communists belonging to China. Stalin tried to ensure the Chinese movement remained under the leadership of the Moscow-trained communists. By that Chinese communists could have remained under the umbrella of ‘big brother’, Russia. But the slow, steady, and continuous rise of Mao Zedong indigenised the movement which was centred in the rural areas – unlike the Russian communism which was based in the urban centres. Thus started the ideological differences between the Chinese and Russian communists. Still, the victory of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949 was welcomed by Russia. The relations between the two warmed a little bit after the Chinese Revolution. Mao met Stalin and demanded every type of assistance – military, economic, technical, and moral – to rebuild war-torn China. In their first meeting, Stalin refused a formal Soviet alliance

with China, thus infuriating, or ‘humiliating’ (Kraus 2020) Mao Zedong. After tough negotiations, China was successful in getting the friendship deal in February 1950. Schuman noted that the deal was signed on ‘humiliating terms’ for China (Schuman 2022). It is considered “the last of the ‘unequal treaties’ in the history of modern China” (Lowenthal 1971). This created mistrust and resentment between the two. Though the 1950s are considered the best time for China-Russia relations when Russian experts trained Chinese in almost every domain, yet they were not the ‘contended’ bedfellows. Differences between the two increased in the post-Stalinist era.

The region that was annexed by Russia in the far east, again became a bone of contention that ultimately resulted in border skirmishes between the two in 1969. By 1969, the deployment of about 30 Soviet military divisions and 59 China’s divisions furthered the hostile attitude between the two (Chukwu 2021). It allowed President Richard Nixon to open up to China, with Mao Zedong responding positively (Logevall and Preston 2008). It is only after the fall of the Soviet Union that the relations between the two warmed up. But still the mistrust is rampant, especially when it comes to the geopolitical entanglements and the migrants’ movements.

The Trump administration’s unisolationist policies (Mirza, Abbas, and Qaisrani 2022) offered China a chance to further expand its ambitious BRI to Europe. Not only Chinese gains diminished America’s position in Europe, but Russian influence there also declined. Greece, for example, should have moved closer to Russia because of its difficulties with the European Union, but it got attached with the Chinese ‘sticky power’. China Ocean Shipping Company (Cosco) bought the major shares of Piraeus port and linked it with the BRI (Kidera 2021). China is also vying for nuclear power projects and other energy infrastructure in Bulgaria, Romania, Poland and the Czech Republic. While Russia under Putin is antagonising the world, especially the Western states, and the United States under Trump had already infuriated western European states, China under Xi Jinping is marching forward in the economic sphere of the world.

3.6. *Asymmetrical power distribution: Russia as a ‘junior’ partner*

Growing asymmetry in the respective power potentials of China and Russia creates mistrust between the two. With China’s growing military and economic potential, Russian apprehensions may continue to rise. At present Russia is considered stronger militarily compared with China but its comparative economic growth has been very low. China has global ambitions and considers Russia as a regional player (Brown 2022). Alexander Gabuev, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center, notes that China wishes to see Russia as its junior partner in the *PaxSinica* (Schuman 2022). “China is, so far, not in the position to force Russia to do it. But 10, 15 years down the road, [that’s] totally possible, and that’s the risk [for Russia]” (Alexander Gabuev, quoted by Schuman 2022).

China is supporting Russia economically, but it remains very cautious while endorsing Putin’s ambitious actions in the region and beyond. For example, it does support the legitimate security concerns of Russia, but ‘abstained’ from voting in

the United States Security Council as well as the UN General Assembly against the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Nichols and Pamuk 2022, Fromer 2022). The mere fact that China abstained and did not cast a negative vote tells that it is calculating in its dealings with Putin's Russia.

4. Conclusion

China and Russia have centuries of experience in dealing with each other. It is the anti-Americanism, Russian economic and military needs, and Chinese aspiration to achieve global status, that brought the two together. Their strategic cooperation has entered a new era of comprehensive partnership under the duet of Jinping and Putin. Dynamism in their strategic relations is witnessed in all the potential fields; from economic, trade, geopolitical, and diplomatic to security and military arenas. Their mutualism is based on the convergences of interests on global, regional, and state levels. But the divergence of interests has restrained the formation of a defence alliance and created challenges for the long-term relationship. This study assessed that in the short run, the convergence of interests between the two exists because of systemic and regional stimuli, and domestic economic compulsions. But the rise in Chinese power and resultant asymmetry between the two, coupled with the efforts of the US to create discord, would challenge their long-term relationship.

Various factors contributed to the development of mistrust between the two. Most conspicuous are the diverging views about the proposed regional and world orders that the two intend to pursue; rampant threats about China's intrusion in the Russian spheres of influence; geoeconomic divergence in the form of development of China's Belt and Road Initiative, immediately followed by Russia sponsored Eurasian Economic Union; the legacy of historical animosities and the potential threats presumed by the Russians living in its Far East (a region historically claimed by the two) from the onslaught of Chinese migrants who are coming along with the Chinese investment; ideological differences between the two and the Chinese fear that Russia tried, and would try again, to become a big brother, that ultimately led to the border skirmishes in 1969; and finally the asymmetric power potentials of the two with the Russian fear, this time, of becoming a junior partner with the big brother China. Though Russia is embroiled in the Ukrainian crisis at the moment demanding it to focus on cooperation with China, yet in the long run with the continuous rise of China the differences are bound to emerge. These historical patterns of cooperation and competition lead to the rise of mistrust between the two.

These differences are difficult for them to avoid in the long run. Russia's limitation to reform the international strategic environment and China's continuous rise to establish its place in the global political economy in the wake of ever-increasing asymmetry in trade would hamper the ascending trajectory of the strategic relationship between the two. Russia's inward-looking policies and aspiration projected to establish (half or full) control in the near abroad and in its sphere of influence is seen as a challenge by China. China in response has incentivised the regional states, including Russia, to be its potential partners. While Russia has happily accepted

those incentives, it is still to be seen how it would react to the Chinese intrusions in its sphere of influence.

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