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Review essay

The Sino-Russian relationship: fellow travellers in the West-dominated world

Books reviewed in the essay:

- [*China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics*](#) by Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross, Oxford University Press 2018
- [*China and Russia: the new rapprochement*](#) by Alexandr Lukin, Polity 2018
- [*Russia and China. A Political Marriage of Convenience – Stable and Successful*](#) by Michal Lubina, Barbara Budrich Publishers 2017
- [*A Wary Embrace. What the China-Russia relationship means for the world*](#) by Bobo Lo, Penguin and Lowy Institute 2017

Introduction

A decade ago, Beijing's relations with Moscow were of marginal interest to China scholars. Such topics as growing Sino-American interdependence-cum-rivalry, engagement with East Asia or relations with the developing world overshadowed China's relationship with its northern neighbour. Scholars preoccupied with Russia's foreign policy did not pay much attention either, regarding the Kremlin's policy towards China as part and parcel of Russia's grand strategy directed towards the West. The main dividing line among those few who took a closer look ran between sceptics and alarmists. The former interpreted the post-Cold War rapprochement as superficial and envisioned an imminent clash of interests between the two states. The latter, a minority, saw the prospect of an anti-Western alliance in the making.

Today, Sino-Russian relations have returned to the top of research agenda in international politics. A sharp political conflict between Russia and the West over Ukraine, Sino-American tensions as well as a recent backlash against China in the West rekindled interest in the 'strategic partnership' that had been publicized by Moscow and Beijing since the late-1990s. The question whether China and Russia might become allies began to loom large.

Leading European and American think-tanks produced a number of reports in recent years, with the aim to explain the post-2014 surge in Sino-Russian cooperation (e.g. Bond 2016, Duchâtel and Godement 2016, Stronski and Ng 2018, Chase et al. 2017). Journal articles explored distinct aspects of the relationship, such as security and defence cooperation (e.g. Røseth 2018) energy and economy (e.g. Locatelli, Abbas, and Rossiaud 2017, Silvius 2018) as well as competition and cooperation in adjacent regions (e.g. Odgaard 2017). Scholars drew from the IR theory repertoire, reaching out to realist (Korolev 2016, Krickovic 2017), constructivist (Wishnick 2017) and domestic-level explanations (Wilson 2018) in order to

determine the causes and implications of closer ties between Moscow and Beijing. They interpreted Sino-Russian cooperation not only in terms of balancing the US, but also as an expression of status anxiety and national identity (Flikke 2016).

The books discussed in this essay promise to add to this growing body of literature and shed new light on the Sino-Russian relationship from a variety of viewpoints: Western Europe, the US, Russia and Central Europe. This review essay starts by briefly introducing key arguments of each volume. It proceeds by analysing how the four books address the most fundamental questions concerning contemporary Sino-Russian relations: (i) how to interpret contemporary Russia-China relations; (ii) what are the key drivers that bring both states closer together; (iii) what are the limitations and obstacles to deeper cooperation; and (iv) what the relationship means for the West and the liberal international order. I conclude by exploring a broader relevance of these works for China Studies and International Relations.

Interpreting Russia-China relations today

All four authors agree that the Sino-Russian relationship does not constitute a fully-fledged political-military alliance. Neither Beijing nor Moscow are ready to take on extra obligations and support one another in case a conflict with a third party. Preferring flexibility and retaining room for manoeuvre, Russia and China avoid getting involved in the other side's conflict with the West, be it over influence in Eastern and Central Europe or territorial claims in the South or East China Seas. If there is no Sino-Russian alliance, how to define the relationship? The answers that the four volumes bring are located along the spectrum: from a 'partnership of convenience driven by concrete priorities and interests' (Lo 2017, xiv-xv) and a 'complicated, ambiguous, yet truly successful relationship' (Lubina 2017, 283) to a 'useful partnership with strong momentum that shapes international politics' (Bolt and Cross 2018, 2) and a 'close strategic partnership' (Lukin 2018).

In *A Wary Embrace. What the China-Russia relationship means for the world*, Bobo Lo presents the most sceptical approach towards Sino-Russian relations. Lo argues that incremental changes in the relationship, observed for the last decade, have not had a transformative effect. The bilateral relationship remains subordinated to each state's policy towards the West. At the same time, inequality between the two parties increased significantly, making their relations more difficult to manage.

In Michał Lubina's *Russia and China. A Political Marriage of Convenience – Stable and Successful*, the asymmetry of the relationship becomes the central point of analysis. In its relations with Moscow, Lubina argues, Beijing aims to build a stable long-term asymmetric relationship, in which both sides gain but China benefits more. Lubina speaks of a 'positive asymmetry', by which he means that Russia accepts China's growing power. He describes the current state of Sino-Russian relations as a 'return to the past', a modern version of the 17-18th centuries model of *modus vivendi*. At that time, the Qing China had the upper hand but Russia derived political and economic benefits without complete subordination.

In *China, Russia, and Twenty-First Century Global Geopolitics* Paul Bolt and Sharyl Cross point to the growing scope of common interests between the two states and emphasise the

gradual broadening of the relationship. Simultaneously, they point to a number of limitations that persist and prevent the relationship from evolving into an alliance.

In *China and Russia: the new rapprochement*, Alexandr Lukin presents the most optimistic assessment of the relationship. Lukin dismisses the growing power gap between Russia and China and portrays the relationship as pragmatic and shaped by what he sees as objective developments in global politics. Lukin prioritizes geopolitical and strategic aspects, while considering other dimensions of the relationship, including the economic one, secondary.

The analyses of Lo and Lukin are located at the opposite ends of the spectrum with regard to how they assess the depth of Sino-Russian relations. What links their interpretations is the emphasis on continuity. They both argue that the general ramifications of the Sino-Russian relations have not changed much for the last two decades. The building blocks of today's relationship were laid down in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with Gorbachev's attempt at normalization and Yeltsin's embrace of 'strategic partnership'.

Two other volumes pay more attention to changes in the relationship that have been taking place since the early-2000s. Their authors see the renewal of Vladimir Putin's presidential mandate (2012), the emergence of Xi Jinping as China's new leader (2012), and the Russian-Western conflict in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea as having generated new impulses for Sino-Russian relations and resulting in accelerating cooperation.

Key drivers of the relationship

All the interpretations proposed by the four volumes emphasise that the contemporary Sino-Russian relationship is driven by common interests, as opposed to ideologies, emotions, sentiments or values. From this perspective, cooperation is first and foremost pragmatic. It is a way for Moscow and Beijing to achieve their respective goals in the international realm.

All authors identify the United States as the fundamental driver behind the Sino-Russian rapprochement in the post-Cold War period. Russia and China's key shared objective is to limit the Western primacy in international politics. Geopolitical and strategic considerations are of vital importance for decisionmakers in Moscow and Beijing. The elites in the two states understand that mutual cooperation 'holds the potential to serve as a counterbalance to the United States on specific global and regional issue areas' (Bolt and Cross, p. 155).

The role of the West as a key driver is dual. Firstly, all authors see the role of structural factors. It has been US material domination and the 'unipolar moment' that paved the way for Sino-Russian rapprochement after the end of the Cold War and continues to serve as a glue for the relationship. Even if it diminished over the last decade, the Western predominance continues to push Russia and China closer together (Lukin, p. 175-176). Secondly, particular policies of the West have potential to reinforce or slow down Sino-Russian collaboration. Every time tensions between either Russia or China on the one hand and the US on the other, emerge, Russian-Chinese cooperation goes a step further. 'Playing the Chinese card' is as useful for Moscow in its bargaining with Washington, as 'playing the Russian card' is for Beijing. Alexander Lukin argues that, without Western pressure on Russia in the form of sanctions,

Moscow would be a bit more restrained towards Beijing, but it would still take ‘no commands from the Euro-Atlantic political center’ (Lukin, p. 92-93).

Even though Moscow and Beijing concurrently reject the US primacy in global politics, authors vary in their assessments of the extent to which both states remain dissatisfied with the liberal international order. Lubina interprets their shared worldview in terms of embracing multipolarity, which leads him to the conclusion that both states envision a future global concert of great powers (Lubina, p. 284). Lo, in turn, argues that Russia and China differ significantly in their attitudes towards the post-Cold War order, their understandings of multipolarity and related policies towards the US (Lo, p. xx). Both states have ‘contrasting visions of their respective places in the twenty first century global order’ (Lo, p. xv-xvi). While Russia is on the ‘losing’ end, China has vested interests in the preservation of at least some part of the international system. Bolt and Cross speak of ‘common views on most major world issues’ (p. 1), but notice that Russia’s and China’s dissatisfaction with the liberal order is selective and differentiated (Bolt and Cross, p. 154-155).

Common interests that bring Russia and China closer together cannot be reduced to power-political and strategic considerations. The factors of regime security and regime survival have gained on importance as a driving force behind the Sino-Russian relationship. Bolt and Cross emphasise that both states strive to establish the ‘legitimacy of authoritarianism’ (Bolt and Cross, p. 290) and attempt to prevent what they regard as Western interference in their domestic politics. Russian and Chinese ruling elites share similar views on what constitutes national security and recognize the link between internal and external threats. The criticism of colour revolutions, as coups sponsored by the West, exemplifies almost identical views prevailing in Moscow and Beijing. Lubina recognizes shared interests in regime survival but argues that Russia and China represent two distinct types of authoritarianism. The Russian version gives citizens more social freedom and less economic efficiency, while the Chinese – more economic and less social freedom (Lubina, p. 284). Lo remains most critical of alleged authoritarian convergence. In his view, such interpretation of motives behind Sino-Russian cooperation ‘overstates the degree of like-mindedness and policy coordination’ between the two states (Lo, p. 98-99).

Trying to explain the recent surge in cooperation between Russia and China, the authors point to the role of two states’ leaders, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. Bolt and Cross draw attention to their strong-leadership styles and nationalistic credentials, while Lubina stresses the ‘Bismarckian style’ of Putin and Xi. The two statesmen’ appetite for unconstrained power and close personal ties they had established have certainly given the relationship a higher profile. Only Alexandr Lukin emphasises the ‘objective’ continuity in Russian-Chinese relations and claims that the relations are independent from personalities.

While both states struggle to overcome what they regard as humiliation suffered from the West, the role of status in mutual cooperation remains ambiguous. Lukin makes an explicit link between Russia’s dissatisfaction with the West and the failure to gain what Moscow perceives as an equal standing on the one hand, and closer cooperation with China on the other (Lukin, p. 175). Lo, in turn, recognizes China’s skilful approach to Russia and Beijing’s capability to respect Russian great-power ambitions as an element that facilitates cooperation. He does,

however, see China as exploiting symbolism to achieve concrete results in dealings with Russia (Lo, p. 21-22).

Durability of current cooperation, its prospects and limitations

The discussed books identify numerous flaws of Sino-Russian relations and obstacles to their transformation towards a fully-fledged alliance. Each of the authors identifies different challenges to the relationship. When we analyse them together, a long catalogue of weaknesses permeating the Russian-Chinese relationship appears. This list illustrates potential difficulties Moscow and Beijing face when attempting to forge closer cooperation. These weaknesses include: the legacy of past mistrust, Russia's pivot to other Asian states, China's growing assertiveness, Beijing's increasing foothold in Central Asia, lingering threat perceptions, the situation in the Russian Far East, unbalanced trade, economic openness of China versus Russia's protection of domestic industries, the competition for foreign investments, mutual ignorance, poor understanding of each other's culture and a lack of true empathy, the absence of reciprocity in particular spheres, the unwillingness to support each other's territorial claims.

The most serious in the long-term perspective is the growing asymmetry between two states. Bobo Lo pays considerable attention to this issue: 'one of the biggest tests facing Beijing and Moscow is to square notions of their strategic convergence and "equality" with the reality of an increasingly unequal interaction' (Lo, p. xiv-xv). Still, he does not envision a scenario leading to an open clash of interests: 'the Sino-Russian relationship seems set fair for continued cooperation' (Lo, p. xxi). Bolt and Cross mention the power gap repeatedly (Bolt and Cross, p. 26, 42-43) but they also do not see it as sufficient to derail the relationship. For Lubina, the asymmetry has turned into an essential feature of the relationship. Lukin, in turn, argues that the asymmetry refers only to the economic realm, whereas Russia enjoys primacy in the military sector and 'global political influence' (Lukin, p. x). In his view, the relationship is much more balanced than one might expect comparing both states' economic indicators.

Despite having identified so many weaknesses of the Sino-Russian relationship, all authors regard it as more resilient today than during the 2000s. None of the authors sees the conflict as plausible in the short- to mid-term perspective. Both states have more to lose from rivalry and remain conscious of the fate of the twentieth century failure of relations between communist 'brothers'. As a result, Moscow and Beijing take intentional steps to dissolve potential conflict in advance, as was the case of the Eurasian Economic Union and the New Silk Road. Even if solutions they propose might be deemed superficial and do not engage with the matter of the problem, they are still able to reduce potential tensions.

Should the West be worried?

Close ties between China and Russia have gradually turned into a growing headache for Western observers and policy-makers, especially in the aftermath of Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Russia and China managed to limit the West's domination in international politics, sometimes coordinating their actions, more often giving each other tacit but indirect support. In the case of Syria and Ukraine, China provided Russia with 'strategic background',

which allowed Moscow to successfully challenge the US and ‘the major tenets of the liberal international order’ (Bolt and Cross, p. 202). Both states checked the US hegemony, ‘thus advancing a vision of an international system that would legitimize authoritarian sovereignty over concerns with values of the liberal world order, including promoting democracy and human rights’ (Bolt and Cross, p. 204).

All four books discussed in this essay warn against alarmism with regard to the Sino-Russian relationship. The authors agree that it would be difficult to speak of an anti-Western alliance in the making and point to a number of obstacles to closer cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. While ‘Moscow realizes that ... China is a more reliable partner than the West’, a formal alliance remains unlikely, argues Lukin (Lukin, p. 190-192). Any such alliance would limit both states’ freedom of manoeuvre. It would not sit easily with their different policy styles and the desire to retain flexibility with regard to the US.

At the same time, there is not much the West can do to weaken Sino-Russian ties. As long as the US remains the only superpower, Beijing and Moscow will strive to maintain close ties. The Western states have some potential to slow down Sino-Russian cooperation with specifically tailored policies, but it does not seem plausible that they are able to reverse the existing alignments and to drive a wedge between Russia and China. Furthermore, Bolt and Cross welcome the relationship as inducing a certain degree of stability into international politics, if only by diminishing the plausibility of conflict between two major non-Western powers. They also claim there is room for cooperation between Russia and China and the West (Bolt and Cross, p. 275). While the two states have potential for counter-balancing the West, they remain critical to addressing transnational security challenges (Bolt and Cross, p. 291). Lukin subscribes to this view and argues that the Sino-Russian partnership remains ‘one of the pillars of the emerging multipolar world order and a linchpin of global and regional stability’ (Lukin, p. 193).

Conclusions

The books discussed in this essay explore numerous aspects of Sino-Russian relations and offer differing interpretations. At the same time, they share important assumptions about international politics that influence their assessments of the relationship.

First, all authors regard Russia and China as strategic and rational actors, fully conscious of and able to clearly define their national interests and to cooperate on the basis of those. As a result, the volumes pay scarce attention to domestic factors that have potential to influence foreign policy. While top leadership in Beijing and Moscow retains control over strategic direction of their respective foreign policies, the implementation depends on a number of domestic actors (see for instance Hameiri and Jones 2016). While discussing developments in Russian-Chinese relations in the 1990s, Lukin’s book paid a lot of attention to different domestic players and the role of their parochial interests. When analysing the developments in Putin’s era, Lukin portrayed Russia’s policy towards China as a purely rational and strategic undertaking.

Secondly, the Sino-Russian relationship appears to be predetermined by structural factors, leaving little place for both states' agency. The US primacy binds them together but there are insurmountable obstacles that prevent Moscow and Beijing from forming a fully-fledged alliance. This creates the impression that regardless of particular steps taken by Russia or China, both states remain stuck in the early-1990s model, in which cooperation keeps expanding but they are unable to transform it into an alliance. The Russian-Chinese relationship has turned into a structural element of global international politics. As a result, we should expect continuity rather than change.

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