



CHINA: A NATURAL PARTNER FOR RUSSIA'S
AMBITIONS TO SHAPE A NEW
MULTIPOLAR WORLD?

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay the question of China, as Russia's natural ally in Russia's ambitions to shape a new multipolar world will be examined. Russia and China have been able to overcome ideological differences from the past and have established a firm working relationship with regards to trade and military cooperation. Whether this working relationship is sufficient enough to become allies in establishing a multipolar world, at a time when Russia is facing increasing isolation, its super power status is threatened and altogether is appearing to be less significant as an ally for China, is a point of argument. Countless arguments for and against the viability, future, durability and even sincerity of the relationship have been made of which some before and against will be analyzed in this essay in several steps:

An initial background of the working relationship between Russia and China and their mutual interest in establishing a multipolar world will be discussed firstly, after which the other side of the coin is revealed. This other side is the third player on the stage, the one who both nations are rooting against, the United States, as the unipolar world power. For it is the United States that determines the extend of cooperation between Russia and China in establishing a multipolar world, as both nations, when given the chance, would rather work with the United States, were it not for the at times political difficulties or differences. This counterargument touches upon the durability and sincerity of Russia with China as its natural ally in establishing a multipolar world, and continues to argue it is rather a pragmatic convenience marriage that allows for both nations to secure their back in domestic or international affairs against a larger world power.

Combined arguments will be summarized in the conclusion to provide a brief oversight of the arguments, likeliness and tendencies of China being Russia's natural ally in establishing a multipolar world.

CHINA & RUSSIA: NATURAL ALLIES?

During the cold war, when China and Russia, natural communist allies, were rallying against the United States, ties were difficult and tension existed until the fall of the soviet union: "Moscow made a critical mistake in expecting that Beijing would acquiesce to its leadership, accepting a role as a junior partner. China's leadership did not accept that role, given its obsession with ideological superiority" (Rozman 2014). The relationship normalized after the fall of the Soviet Union: from a constructive relationship in 1992 to a strategic relationship in 1996 and an official declaration of cooperation and friendship, which was signed in 2001 (Nye 2015). Both nations were struggling with different issues, Russia had its massive economical decline under Yeltsin and the Chechen war under Putin's first term, while China was trying to compete economically and attract investors in an increasingly globalized world. Hence, economy was where the two nations met. Starting with arms sales from Russia to China in the early nineties. The significance of these sales is two sided, they provided Russia with much needed income, but they also backed the Chinese regime after the Tiananmen square massacre, continuing sales despite a UN arms embargo, proving to be equally critical to China (Gabuev 2015, 2). A precedent for support in difficult domestic situations with international consequences was set. Except

that wasn't the only thing that was set, mutual economic dependency was established. Despite being the major output factor in the nineties, military exports began to halt halfway in the 2000's after China was found copying the Russian equipment and manufacturing it themselves, not only to use, but to sell it to third countries in Africa (Page 2010), naturally, Russia grew rather wary of selling more sophisticated weaponry and the trade relationship increasingly turned towards energy.

PIVOT TO ASIA OR PIVOT TO CHINA?

After the Ukraine crisis and annexation of Crimea, Russia made a calculation of sanctions it could expect from the West, three major weak points were identified: "critical dependence on the European energy market, critical dependence on Western capital markets, and critical dependence on important technologies" (Gabuev 2015, 3) A natural ally to turn to, was China. After holding back Chinese contractors from 'strategically determined' industries controlled by the Russian state, the Russian's were ready to give way and secure some energy deals to prevent total economic decline. The Chinese, in a politically challenged position themselves with their pursuit of territories and interests in the South China Sea, to much criticism of the US, could be the distraction. As claimed by a Chinese expert involved in the matter: "This (Ukraine) conflict will give us an additional 10 years of breathing space" (Gabuev 2015, 4). With the earlier precedent set, and a history of backing each other in security resolutions on Libya and Syria, the Chinese remained stumm, or ambiguous on the Ukraine conflict, Russia backed the Chinese in the Hong Kong Protests and both signed a \$400 billion gas deal with Russia.

Whether natural allies or not, both China and Russia share an interest in creating a multipolar world and maintain a world power status. This shared interest manifests itself in being against a unipolar world headed by the United States in particular, whom both China and Russia have the above-established political issues with. Equally so, the strong EU- US and especially for China, the Japan – US relationship, provides ample base for a friendly cooperation between Russia and China in economic, security or any other form. And according to Rozman: "There are at least six reasons to believe that this tacit partnership between Russia and China is durable" (Rozman 2014).

One of the arguments put forward by Rozman is that both nations over time have put their ideological differences aside and have found a similar repressive method to legitimize their rule through censorship and the vast effort of increasing nationalism among the population, of which the effect has been that both nation's nationalist feeling has not been as strong as it is today since the Cold War. With the nationalist feeling well established; an important factor in trying to be multipolar, the unipolar state still needs challenging, which is why "...both countries increasingly argue that the West never changed its imperialist Cold War mind-set (as evidenced by its alleged support for so-called colour revolutions in Ukraine and Hong Kong). This rhetoric implies that China and Russia are still obliged to resist its influence and help create a new international order (Rozman 2014). This popular rhetoric manifests itself in proclamations of

Western Spies destabilizing the region, trying to make Ukraine a puppet state and gain influence in the region. Obviously the leaked phone call of Victoria Nuland, US assistant secretary of state discussing the future leader of Ukraine does not particularly help.

The seemingly imbalanced relationship with regards to economic cooperation, with China being a major regional player, allegedly able to push down the price of the \$400 billion gas deal immensely and having a far more diversified economy than Russia as a major tech exporter to the US have led to the notion that Russia, as a Chinese gas station has switched roles and has taken on the part of junior player rather than major world power in an equal relationship (Swanstrom 2014, 489). This popular argument as to why the West should not be afraid of a Sino-Russian relationship of Cold War era proportions is only partially valid, because even if the Russians are a junior partner in the Chinese Russian relationship, that does not automatically mean a decline in status or power for the Russian state. Sometimes forgotten in these articles is the excellent relationship with Latin American countries, which are more than happy to sign deals and trade with the Russians especially Venezuela and Cuba, as well as Iran and Japan, which is likely to pay more for Russian gas than the Chinese. Since the Ukraine crisis and sanctions, China was not the only option for economic relief, Africa is an excellent market for the weapon industry, and as Putin stated in January 2015: ““we need to make maximum use of Russia’s competitive advantages, including our reputation...as a reliable, predictable partner who fulfils its obligations irrespective of any tactical preferences and the current political situation”

NATURAL ALLY OR MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE?

In other words, why the Sino-Russia relationship is not durable, based on economic or political pragmatism and does not provide a credible alternative in the form of establishing a multipolar world as both nations, in a more politically friendly climate with the US would rather work with them than against. China’s dominance in the far east, which has been highly neglected now seems to be a major issue of interest to the Russian’s who fear Chinese migration and influence in the region which houses only few Russians and millions of Chinese just across the border. The fear being that Russia’s far east could become China’s near north has led to tensions and competitive influence gaining. Chinese interest in the Arctic, which Russia has made a huge effort in militarizing in the past few years, is another reason for tension. Despite being economic allies, and public declarations of cooperation and mutual interest paint a picture of a durable friendship, the friends have not been shy to stab each other in the back economically and even strategically when convenient: “The permission granted by Vietnam to use Cam Ranh Bay means that Russia gains a foothold to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. The South China Sea is important for not only its abundant resources but also its strategic significance” (Blank 2013, 137). In the meantime, China has been expanding its economic influences and trade agreements in Russia’s back yard; Central Asia.

Both Russia and China know that they can raise their bargaining power vis-a`-vis the US and the post-Soviet successor states (as well as Taiwan) by speaking in concert or as close as they can come. But this is often as far as it goes, as deep distrust and fierce bargaining is a bitter reality (Swanstrom 2014, 483) Swanson even goes as far as saying the issues between the two countries are so big that really the only thing why they are still allies is because of external factors, such as political issues with the US, which then suggests that upon revival these external relations, the Russian-Sino alliance would cease to exist. And despite the South China Sea issue causing tensions between the US and China, overall China is still seen as a power for good, that is leaving the Hong Kong protests aside, where as due to the Ukraine conflict, Russia is far from that positive picture and closer to being compared to Hitler by British royals.

The one common factor in all the counter arguments as to why the Chinese Russian relationship is not viable, durable, let alone a natural partner for a multipolar world is the economic inequality and Russia's role of junior partner which could be easily ditched if better circumstances or opportunities with the West arose. The biggest flaw in this thesis is the underestimation of the historical alliance, common political goals, leadership and regime survival tactics in which they enjoy each other's support and backing on domestic levels and international issues. The mutual threat to their political ideologies and leadership is threatened by the same western influences and interference in domestic issues such as the Hong Kong protests and the Ukraine Crisis (or Chechnya, or Georgia). This interference has not only led to mutual support but even joint strategies to counter colour revolutions, which are often believed to be financed and staged by western actors. As a Chinese expert stated: "It is not only because the conflict in Ukraine drives our countries closer, but because the Kremlin became more anti-Western on an emotional level" (Gabuev 2015, 7)

CONCLUSION

Going through all the counter and for arguments of the Chinese Russian alliance and back to the research question of China being a natural partner for Russia in establishing a multipolar world, there is only one thing that stands out, which is the ultimate realist political perspective of regime survival which is the end state of no matter what political game for either nation. This survival is ensured through support from like-minded states and allies in countering influences that could threaten that status. Economic equality is not the issue, Russia can be a junior partner or not, it can secure contracts from two other continents in the world and its Middle Eastern neighbours. The real alliance here is a political and ideological one, in which the best way to counter threats to domestic rule is to challenge the largest force trying to interfere: The United States as a unipolar entity. And what better way to do this than to form an alliance with a likeminded ideological political partner with substantial military or economic might, to challenge the world order collectively through the establishment of a multipolar powers. As long as both nations and systems are ruled by its current leaders, the nationalist ideology and ultimate regime survival will be upheld, and the need to challenge a unipolar world power that threatens that position will remain in place, just as the partnership and multipolar objectives will.

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