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**Взаимоотношения России и Китая: вызовы, риски, сценарии развития и приоритеты в странах постсоветского пространства<sup>1</sup>****С.В. Венцель, Н.А. Тадевосян**

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**Аннотация:** Две соседствующие силы – Россия и Китай – играют важную роль в мировом обществе, и в особенности, в Азиатско-Тихоокеанском регионе. Индикатором нового уровня наших взаимоотношений стал Договор о Добрососедстве Дружбе и Сотрудничестве между Российской Федерацией и Китайской Народной Республикой. Нынешняя ситуация соединила вместе эти два огромных по территории и количеству людей государства. Санкции против России толкнули страну повернуться лицом к Востоку и Китай считается главным партнером там. Но в то же время России не должна забывать о том, что Китай может легко повернуть свой вектор в сторону Запада. Но теперь США усилились в Тихом океане, а Япония так и осталась угрозой. До тех пор, пока все эти угрозы существуют для Китая, он будет сотрудничать с Россией. И, до тех пор, пока Китай получает экономическую выгоду и решает свои проблемы, он будет заинтересован в таких отношениях с Россией.

**Ключевые слова:** взаимоотношения России и Китая; стратегическое партнерство; один пояс один путь; Евразийское экономическое сотрудничество; Азиатско-Тихоокеанский регион; энергетические взаимоотношения; военное сотрудничество.

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**Russia-China relationships: challenges, risks, development scenarios and priorities in the countries of the post-Soviet dimension****Sergey V. Ventsel, Narine A. Tadevosian***Sothern Federal University, Rostov-on-Don, Russia*

**Abstract:** neighboring two powers - Russia and China - play an important role in the world community, and especially in the Asia-Pacific region. . An indicator of a new level of our relationships was the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation. The current situation brings together these two enormous in their area and quantity of people countries. Sanctions against Russia forced the country to make a turn to the East and China is considered as its main partner. At the same time Russia must not forget that China can also easy turn its vector to the West. But now the US has intensified in the Pacific, and Japan is a threat. As long as these threats exist for China, he will cooperate with Russia. As long as China gets a specific economic benefit and solves its problems, he is interested in this relationship with Russia.

**Keywords:** Russia-China relationships; strategic partnership; belt and road initiative; Eurasian Economic Union; Asia-Pacific dimension; energy relations; Military Cooperation.

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## Introduction

Neighboring two powers - Russia and China - play an important role in the world community, and especially in the Asia-Pacific region.

The bilateral relations between them have always occupied a significant place in the foreign policy of each country, because there are close ties between them not only geographically, but also in terms of geopolitics, geo-economics and cultural exchange, due to history.

A new level of bilateral relations began in 2000 with the coming of the new President of Russia Vladimir V. Putin. An indicator of this level was the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation.<sup>2</sup> The agreement was signed in Moscow in July 2001 for a period of 20 years with an automatic extension for another 5 years.

The Russians met the Chinese about 400 years ago. They met in the Far East. Their states were the largest neighbors in this region. For four centuries of relations between the Russians and the Chinese, there have never been large-scale wars. At the same time, the relationship is sometimes complicated and exacerbated.

In recent years, Russian-Chinese relations have developed beautifully. The peoples and leaders of our countries have a common opinion that relations are now experiencing the best period in the entire history of our relations. The current situation brings together these two enormous in their area and quantity of people countries, namely, there is a complementarity between the high energy demand from China and the availability of such resources from Russia. In addition, both countries have a mutual desire to reduce the impact of the US dollar on national economies and promote the internationalization of their national currencies.

It seems that all situations nowadays gather Russia and China together. Sanctions against Russia forced the country to make a turn to the East and China is considered as its main partner. A thriving developing country with a huge population, a member of the UN Security Council, can provide support if the interests of Russia are infringed. China is a member of the SCO and BRICS, which makes the prospect of a multipolar world real, and besides, China does not interfere in the internal politics of other states. As said A. Maslov, Director of the School of Oriental Studies: «Russian-Chinese relations will be pragmatic». And according to A. Ostrovsky, Director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Russian-Chinese relations in the political sphere will not only develop, but also strengthen, and for their more successful implementation, it is necessary to develop economic relations.

But I think Russia must not forget that China can also easily turn its vector to the West. As long as China gets a specific economic benefit and solves its problems, he is interested in this relationship with Russia. Moreover, the US has intensified in the Pacific, and Japan is a threat. China is very concerned that Japan has abandoned the article of the constitution on the debarment of its own armed forces. As long as these threats exist for China, he will cooperate with Russia.

## China-Russia Relations Before 2014

China and Russia have largely formulated their economic and political relations based on an evolving series of strategic partnerships. While there is no "model" strategic partnership, in the sense that the terms are negotiated individually with a partner state, both countries have incorporated certain core principles into each partnership.

In 1992, President Boris Yeltsin visited China. In 1993 the two countries signed a military agreement, followed in 1996 by their first strategic cooperation

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<sup>2</sup> Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, July 24, 2001

agreement, and by a number of other agreements: the 2001 Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation; the founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization; and the 2012 Strategic Partnership, further upgraded in 2014. Meanwhile, a close personal relationship has developed between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Following two partnership agreements in 1994 and 1996 and a Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in 2001, the 2012 comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation (the 2012 Strategic Partnership), underlined the principles of mutual benefit, mutual trust, and equality in addition to setting specific economic targets in China-Russia bilateral relations.

Notably, although the 2012 Strategic Partnership, signed by President Hu Jintao, China's president at the time, and Russian President Vladimir Putin, was intended to provide the basis for implementation of relations over a ten-year period, it was prematurely superseded by the 2014 agreement calling for a new stage in the comprehensive strategic partnership of cooperation, the 2014 Strategic Partnership.

In this case, China's President Xi Jinping, was the co-signatory. The involvement of Xi, who came to power in 2013, a year after Putin's re-election as Russian president, has become a key driver in the intensification of bilateral relations.

The closer ties marked by this expanding and complex network of agreements and personal relationships have come to fruition, in particular, in the areas of arms sales, military technology transfers, and energy deals. Important progress was made also in the area of military relations where, despite the need to keep a credible level of deterrence, China and Russia have shown an unprecedented level of mutual trust, as confirmed by China's ambassador to Russia, Li Hu, and by the

growing number of joint military exercises between the two countries.

But what really epitomizes the increasing trust the two countries have toward each other was the signing of an agreement for the integration of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), Putin's pet project, and the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). If successful, the BRI-EEU in Central Asia will mark one more step toward the consolidation of Sino-Russian relations, with important implications for both Asia and the West (*Enrico Cau, 2016*).

### **After the Ukraine Crisis**

The 2014 Strategic Partnership, ratified shortly after Russia's annexation of Crimea, amid the launch of U.S. and EU sanctions against Russia, is widely regarded as the most enhanced in terms of depth and breadth of economic, political, and security relations of any one of China's or Russia's network of strategic partnerships.

Some of the much-publicized and high-profile deals emerging from the 2014 Strategic Partnership included a 40-year gas supply agreement between Gazprom and China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC). The landmark gas supply deal, including plans to build the "Power of Siberia" gas pipeline, was indirectly referred to in the 2014 Strategic Partnership as a measure aiming to "strengthen the Sino-Russian energy partnership."

A further deal with Russia's largest oil company, state-owned Rosneft, involving financing deals with CNPC to supply oil worth up to \$500 billion from Russia's largest oil field, was also established shortly after, prospectively enabling Russia to surpass Saudi Arabia as China's main supplier of oil.

Also in 2014, the People's Bank of China (PBOC) and the Central Bank of Russia signed an arrangement for a currency swap worth 150 billion yuan and 815 billion rubles (\$24 billion at the time). The first such Chinese currency swap to be announced for any country outside of

Asia, the deal was meant to facilitate settlement in national currencies and boost bilateral trade.

Since 2014, and particularly in 2015, Russia has become one of the five largest recipients of Chinese outbound direct investment in relation to the Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) connecting Asia with Europe. Meanwhile, China was Russia's largest bilateral trade partner, in 2015; in spite of declining overall bilateral trade in U.S. dollar terms (mainly due to sharp declines in the ruble as well as the yuan), relative to 2014, trade flows continued to expand in terms of volume.

In this context, it was significant that Russia's exports of mechanical and technical products to China rose by about 45 percent over the course of 2015 possibly signifying an important trend in the diversification and competitiveness of Russia's non-energy sector in terms of bilateral trade prospects with China.

Importantly, the economic relationship between China and Russia has been driven by a variety of bilateral inter-governmental commissions, including 26 subcommissions. According to Putin, in spite of often slow progress in reaching agreements, both sides invariably maintain a common goal of cooperation to eventually find a solution on a wide range of complex issues.

### **China after the collapse of the Soviet Union**

One of such regions of "special attention" of China is Central Asia. The neighboring countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) have a number of problems inherited from the USSR (geopolitical, territorial, ideological, the problem of ethnic and religious minorities) in relations with China. It would be a simplification to say that these controversial moments arose only in the Soviet era. However, the collapse of the Soviet Union actualized them. The appearance on Chinese borders of new subjects of interna-

tional relations made Beijing re-formulate the agenda of its foreign policy. In the opinion of the Russian authors A. Voskresensky and S. Luzyanin, despite the fact that all official documents of the Chinese government at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries showed an equal and friendly attitude to all new Central Asian states, the trend towards a certain differentiation of relations with the states of Central Asia: "priority states" appeared, which were given primary importance in terms of developing political and economic ties related with China's common According to the general and general problems of maintaining mutual national security, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the republics of the "second echelon," with whom the necessary level of official contacts was maintained (*Воскресенский А., 2004. С. 387 – 401*). As V. Borovoy notes after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the problem of Uygur separatism has become much more acute, since conditions have arisen for relatively free cross-border contacts in the region. On the other hand, with the collapse of the USSR and the independence of Central Asian states, China has again had the opportunity to return to the region as one of the active players. The rapid economic development of China, combined with the desire to declare oneself as one of the poles of the modern world, became a prerequisite for the revival of Chinese influence in Central Asia (*Боровой, 2004. С. 57-60*). It seems appropriate to single out the period from 2002 to 2005. At this time, China began to gradually shift its focus from short-term strategic objectives to long-term goals, in particular, to the intensive expansion of trade and economic cooperation and penetration into key sectors of the region's economies. The economic interaction between China and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (especially after the opening of the Sino-Tajik border post in 2004) increased significantly, and there was also an increase in the investment activity of Chinese state-

owned companies in the oil and gas sector of Kazakhstan. According to Kazakhstan researcher K. Syroezhkin, for 1993-1998. China's total foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan was only 411.7 million dollars. USA, in 2004 it reached 393.5 million, and in 2005 - 1.2 billion dollars. Thus, on the basis of the analysis performed, three stages in the evolution of relations between China and the neighboring countries of Central Asia can be distinguished: 1992–2001. - search for solutions to border issues and problems of mutual national security, the designation of the economic interests of Beijing; 2002—2005 - activization of Beijing in connection with the American military presence in Central Asia, as well as the build-up of the Chinese economic presence in the region; 2005—2009 - entry into the major sectors of the national economies of neighboring countries and the energy “linking” of the region to the economy of the PRC.

It seems likely that in the future, the main priorities for China will remain the development of hydrocarbon and other raw materials, the formation of an appropriate transport infrastructure to ensure exports of industrial raw materials to China, as well as an increase in imports of industrial goods and services to the countries in question. (*Турарбекова Роза, Татьяна Шибко, 2010*) Such a strategy is necessary in the context of both increasing economic growth and ensuring security. China will continue to invest in the economies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, however, it is hardly possible to speak about the dynamic development of relations between China and Kyrgyzstan, China and Tajikistan in the near future. As large projects are implemented, the significance of the countries in question, especially Kazakhstan, will increase for China. But overall, in the near future, a certain status quo will most likely remain in bilateral relations between China and the countries in question, and in the foreseeable future, Central Asia will occupy an “honorable second” place compared to

East Asia in the hierarchy of priorities of the PRC regional policy.

### **Integrating of High-Level Political Interests**

Since the 2014 Strategic Partnership, amid a strengthening of personal ties in the Putin-Xi relationship, there has been an extensive broadening of bilateral relations beyond merely focusing on economic interests. This has centered on mutual support concerning each country's “core interests,” including “strengthening close coordination in foreign policy.” They have also jointly advocated for reform of the international financial and economic architecture to accord with the rapidly-changing global real economy.

The relationship between China and Russia has, therefore, evolved into intensified cooperation in political areas in the last couple of years. Chief among those developments was the announcement on May 8, 2015 in Moscow, on the occasion of the annual parade commemorating the end of World War II, of the planned integration of the Chinese-led BRI with Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU).

The BRI comprises the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, with the objective of developing a trade and infrastructure network connecting Asia with Europe and Africa along the ancient Silk Road routes. The EEU groups Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia in an inward-focused trading network.

Beijing's policy of integrating the BRI, its flagship international development program, with Moscow's EEU stood in sharp contrast to the European Union's Eastern Partnership program with former Soviet states. The latter program required these countries to sign up to EU economic and political associations and to relinquish their trade agreements and political affiliations with Russia.

When Xi announced the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013,

both Russia and the West were caught off guard. In particular, a sanction-stricken Russia seemed to have good reason to worry that the BRI could further weaken its position in Central Asia, Russia's backyard. Various assessments have pointed in the same pessimistic direction, especially in the light of the fact that the two initiatives appear to differ remarkably in terms of institutional setup and strategic goals. The two initiatives are indeed very different. The BRI is a global open trade-focused project, embodying the essence of the Chinese "going out" strategy and a herald of globalized trade and multipolarism with Chinese characteristics. The EEU instead is an "inward-looking" trade integration project devised to allow Russia to keep hold of its Central Asian neighbors, and contain the expansion of the EU or the United States in those regions. Despite the pessimistic outlook, the relationship between China and Russia has, nonetheless continued to thrive, and so have their plans to create an area of co-prosperity under Sino-Russian control in Central Asia.

Further evidence of the growing high-level political relations between China and Russia was manifested in the international financial markets under the co-arrangement of up to 6 billion yuan in "Baikalbonds" (a yuan-denominated Russian government bond issued in Russia). The co-arrangers were China's ICBC and state-owned Gazprombank — Russia's third-largest bank, which has been under U.S. sanctions since July 2014. This issuance of offshore yuan foreign sovereign bonds was the largest ever undertaken, exceeding the U.K. government's earlier 3 billion yuan sovereign bond issue.

Both Putin and Xi reiterated the significance of their growing bilateral political relations at the BRICS development summit in Goa, India, in October 2015, where they noted that China and Russia should strengthen coordination and cooperation within global and regional multilateral institutions.

### **Benefits from the start**

The nature of the Sino-Russian entente appears to rest on a high level of complementarity, reciprocity, shared interests, and common threats. In this relationship, China and its BRI play the role of the global enabler, with China advancing its model while also providing a much-needed lifeline for Russian economy and the EEU. The role of Russia, instead, is seemingly shaping to be that of a regional stability provider, to the mutual benefit of both countries.

For China, Russian support in Central Asia offers multiple advantages. First, Russian influence and knowledge of regional dynamics can translate into a substantial mitigation of risks and the removal of several obstacles for BRI projects, reducing costs and maximizing benefits. China would also enjoy direct access to Central Asia, providing a unique opportunity to develop new markets, manufacturing centers, and even new cities along the path of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). Second, Russian acceptance of Chinese intervention in Central Asia will allow the Middle Kingdom to play a direct role in the securitization and regime formation of the region, especially with regards to counter-insurgency initiatives aimed at preventing Uyghur from establishing safe havens in the region. Finally, this model of relationship has the potential to lay the foundations for the establishment of a core geopolitical space under exclusive Sino-Russian control in Eurasia, beyond the reach of EU and American influence, in a region strategically positioned between the developing markets of South, East, and Southeast Asia and the wealthy European markets.

What's in it for Russia? The sanctions imposed on Russia by the United States and the European Union as a consequence of its annexation of Crimea, and the ongoing actions against Ukraine, combined with a downturn of oil prices, have caused enormous damages to Russian trade and to its relations with Europe and

the United States. The resulting downward spiral is pushing Russia down the path of a political-economic isolation. This has forced Russia to shift away from the West and find alternative markets in other regions of the world, to bypass the sanctions and find new outlets for the Russian economy.

For these reasons, Russia has started to look at the Asia-Pacific as a viable way to expand its markets and those of the EEU. In this perspective, integration with the BRI can offer the EEU a privileged trade channel to the markets of Asia-Pacific, providing Russia with a unique opportunity to boost its “going east” strategy. Helped by a relative decline of the United States, whose vacuum is being filled by growing Chinese influence in the region, Russia’s shift toward the Asia-Pacific has resulted in a row of successful deals. That includes the signing of several important trade agreements with the Philippines and Indonesia; an important free trade agreement between the EEU and Vietnam; as well as closer trade relations with South Korea, one of the countries that has refused to enforce sanctions against Russia, a decision that has provided a boost to South Korean-Russian trade relations.

The Russian expansion in the Asia-Pacific has occurred with the friendly support of China. This mutual interpenetration in the two countries’ areas of geopolitical influence, on a seemingly equal basis, seems to point at a relationship marked by symmetry, complementarity, and reciprocity.

In the structure of the Russian-Chinese trade there is a serious imbalance. Russian exports are 80% represented by mineral raw materials. Chinese exports to Russia represent ready products with a high degree of elaboration. It becomes obvious that China is not accidentally buying up natal places of oil and gas, ores of non-ferrous metals, and looks at Russia as the potential supplier, mainly hydrocarbons of the Far Eastern and Sibe-

rian birth places. Russia considers the long-term practice of supplying raw materials beyond the limits as a reliable source of financial resources both to the state budget and to the accounts of mining companies, therefore China is a promising market for hydrocarbon supplies for Russia. Also, China is the main source of financing for Russian enterprises and the first country to purchase C-400.

### **Intensification of Bilateral Cooperation in Multilateral Institutions**

At the Hangzhou G20 Summit, held in September 2016, the China-Russia dialogue was accorded a high-level agenda by both leaders. The dialogue focused, especially, on principles such as the “rule of law” in promoting tax and legal concepts for enhancing investments, investment protection, privatization, and the provision of state guarantees on finance for projects. There was also dialogue on how to bridge each side’s differing interpretations of legislative concepts, such as public-private partnerships and concession agreements (*Shannon Tiezz, .2018*).

At the level of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Putin and Xi’s proposals for integrating China’s BRI with the Russian-led EEU played a key role in significantly elevating the status of the SCO. Although the SCO is a separate institution to the BRI and EEU, it is increasingly viewed by governments across the world as an organization reflecting the political and economic ascendancy of the Eurasian region.

At the recent November 2016 summit of SCO prime ministers, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, China’s Prime Minister Li Keqiang proposed a free trade area among SCO members. The proposal was supported by Putin, who stated that the long-term economic interests of China and Russia should outweigh national protectionist sentiments to protect local producers.

The Russia-India-China (RIC) trilateral grouping is considered by its participants as an important arrangement in

securing political stability, both globally and in the region. India and Russia's relations have remained strong for several decades, with Russia being India's largest defense and nuclear energy partner. However, while China's and Russia's relations have clearly improved in the last few years, the China-India relationship has somewhat lagged the development of the other two legs of the triangle. Consequently, Russia has played a role in bringing both sides closer together through its interactions in the RIC grouping. (Huasheng Zhao, 2006)

At the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum held recently on November 2016, in Peru, Putin and Xi further reiterated their close cooperation and ongoing communication on policy matters with an international dimension. They agreed to promote the APEC bloc by fostering regional and economic growth strategies. This included their support for an Asia-Pacific free trade area for all 21 member states. Their joint support for regional free trade came on the heels of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump seeming to back away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade agreement – an exclusive U.S.-led trade bloc including 12 states on both sides of the Pacific Ocean.

At the summit, Putin and Xi also affirmed their common interest in upholding security and stability in Central and Northeast Asia, as well as regions neighboring their countries' borders.

### **Energy Relations**

In 2001, the total energy supply from Russia to China amounted to \$ 0.5 billion, in 2007 this volume exceeded \$ 6.7 billion. «Given the overly personalistic nature of Russia's policymaking community, institutional gaps in knowledge pose serious risks. Supply deals worth hundreds of millions of barrels of oil. State oil giant Rosneft has emerged as the country's de facto leader for much of its China policy because of its importance in delivering the Kremlin necessary budget revenues. But

Rosneft and its CEO Igor Sechin's policy influence hit a big snag recently with news about CEFC China Energy, a key partner, and a shift in China's institutional landscape» (Nicholas Trickett, 2018).

### **Intensifying Cultural Exchanges**

An important element of China-Russia relations, beyond the political and economic dimensions, has been the countries' promotion of sociocultural integration at various levels of society. In this regard, toward the end of the APEC summit, Putin and Xi stated their interest in holding a 2017 China-Russia Media Exchange Year, wherein the media has become the most direct channel for communication between the two sides. Additionally, the two leaders stated their support for other cultural and people-to-people exchanges in the coming year.

The important role which the media increasingly plays in cultural matters was highlighted by recent headline reports about the gift of Russian ice cream by Putin to Xi, who declared it to be his favorite Russian dessert. The purpose of the media coverage was not only to portray an ever-closer personal relationship between the two leaders, but also to convey the idea of a growing friendship, built on a greater understanding of mutual cultural awareness, between Chinese and Russian peoples. Consequently, Xi's interest in Russian ice cream has reportedly spawned a craze of interest for the dessert across China.

In early 2016, Putin and Xi urged that both countries' legislative bodies enhance exchanges and mutual learning so as to further elevate China-Russia ties. Accordingly, Russia's Federation Council and Russia's State Duma, the upper and lower houses of the Russian parliament, respectively, and China's National People's Congress agreed to strengthen their cooperation on legislative initiatives and supervision to enhance coordination on regional, municipal and industrial development policies and plans.

Moreover, two brilliant events have shown the level of our interaction - the Year of Russia in China and the Year of China in Russia. Both of these years - and they included about 500 events - demonstrated both friendship and special kindheartedness that connect the Russian and Chinese people, were marked by very interesting programs and simply introduced the Russians to the life of China and Chinese to the life of Russia. (*Bob Savic.2016*)

### **Joint Military and Security Cooperation**

A major feature of China's and Russia's defense and geostrategic interests has been rising levels of official support for each other's security, increasingly pitched as common defense concerns. The most prominent recent affirmation of this position came in the form of China's and Russia's stated opposition to the deployment of the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea, a decision made in mid-2016. Both governments have warned that THAAD risks igniting an arms race in the Asia-Pacific that could potentially destabilize the region.

In this vein, China and Russia have been accelerating their joint military drills including holding their first joint naval drills conducted in the South China Sea this year. According to senior officers at China's Central Military Commission and Russia's Defense Ministry, since both sides are faced with a more complex international security environment, closer mutual cooperation has been widely considered a necessity.

The Russian government has also voiced its support for the Chinese government's position in the South China Sea, backing Beijing's call opposing interference by powers outside the region. In turn, China has increasingly provided verbal support intimating its sympathy with Russia's annexation of Crimea (mainly attributing the move to Crimea's historical links as part of Russia), in addition to

backing Russia's intervention in Syria, while calling for a political settlement to the war.

Russia's Vostok 2018 exercise officially commenced on September 11 and concludes September 17. One of Russia's major military maneuvers held every four years, this year's Vostok is of special significance because Russia has not held an exercise of this scale since 1981 — reportedly, some 297,000 personnel, 36,000 pieces of ground force equipment, 1,000 fixed and rotary-wing aircraft, in addition to 80 ships and support vessels are in participation. Although this number is likely inflated, it is quite obvious that Moscow is sending a message to Russia's opponents and friends alike that the Russian military stands ready in defense of its Far East territories.

Vostok 2018 takes place during a time of deteriorating relations between Russia and the West. However, Russia's Zapad 2017 exercise in its western defense sector only involved a total of 12,700 Russian and Belarusian troops, an insignificant number when compared to Vostok 2018.

### **Longer Term Headwinds**

Possibly the most serious undermining of the China-Russia relationship could come from its very success. As both countries integrate more quickly and as migration flows expand, there is likely to be mounting concern in Russia of a "Chinese takeover" of the sparsely-populated Russian Far East and other regions of Siberia.

Should this pose China's and Russia's greatest challenge going forward – in light of the popularity of Russia's opposition nationalist party in the Far East and Siberian regions during the 2016 Duma elections – then both sides will need to need to consider jointly upgrading the regulation and monitoring of migration flows. Detailed satellite mapping of the two countries' common border, in addition to having resolved all outstanding

border disputes in 2005, should facilitate the necessary cooperation in managing migration across Russia's politically-sensitive regions.

### Conclusion

The United States' readjustment of its global strategy is pushing China and Russia closer together. Yes, there are chasms and distrust between a militarily powerful yet economically weak Russia and an economically sound China with an increasingly able military. While Russia is cautious of growing Chinese influence in its "backyard" — i.e. Central Asia and the Middle East — Beijing is dissatisfied with continued Russian arms sales to China's rivals such as India and Vietnam. (As a matter of fact, a weapons deal between Russia and Vietnam totaling \$1 billion was inked days before Vostok 2018's commencement.) Yet political necessity and common interests are bringing the two capitals and their respective militaries closer to present a united posture towards the United States, while each has an interest in showing the other its full capability in defending their own sovereignty.

In sum, certain analysts and media outlets' exaggeration of Vostok 2018 as the start of a new Sino-Russian military alliance suits the interest of Beijing and Moscow perfectly in projecting a strong

and unified image despite the existence of mutual suspicion (*Zi Yang, 2018*).

Driven by strengthening personal ties between Putin and Xi, the breadth and depth of China-Russia relations have spilled over into multiple spheres of governmental and institutional policymaking. This has included both countries' central governments, as well as regional and municipal governments, in addition to the increasing role played by state and private companies and various sectors of civil society.

As a result, the speed and scale of the relationship may be more aptly described as "revolutionary" rather than evolutionary. Clearly, external factors such as the Ukraine crisis were pivotal in turning the Russian leadership away from its post-Soviet relations with western Europe. The degree to which the Russian public were going to back their government's shift from West to East, however, was more questionable. Nevertheless, Chinese and Russian state-led activism in supporting this process has, thus far, brought some degree of success.

*"Both sides become comprehensive strategic partners of coordination, which is not an act of expediency but each other's deliberate decision"*

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