

RUSSIAN-SINO RELATIONS IN POST-COVID ASIA – MOSCOW’S PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: From the Kremlin’s perspective, the global great power rivalry has intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which will result in a US-Chinese bipolarity. Moscow would like to avoid being in a situation where it needs to choose a side because Russia would either become a junior partner or become marginalized. Therefore, the Kremlin will develop its bilateral relations with Beijing and other countries on the Eurasian continent, and it will try to find multilateral cooperations and international organizations (SCO, EEU, UN) to preserve its room to manoeuvre and protect its own strategic autonomy in global politics. The pandemic has shown the deficiency of the cooperation between Russia and China, although no strategic-level disagreement has occurred. A military alliance still seems impossible between the two countries, with Russia’s economic ties overly focused on the export of raw materials, although there are promising projects, for example, in the Arctic region. In the long term, a flexible strategic partnership could be the most suitable way of cooperation for the parties, but their bilateral relations will be greatly influenced by their respective relations with the West.

Keywords: Russia, China, asymmetry, dependence, post-COVID Asia

The Significance of Sino-Russian Relations for Moscow Before the Pandemic

Many sources can be used to provide a brief summary of how Russia looks at its territorially largest neighbour, the People’s Republic of China, which is simultaneously the most populous country in the world and the strongest country in terms of its economic potential. These sources include speeches

of members of the political elite, results of surveys about regular citizens' opinion, or diplomatic declarations. The most straightforward way, however, is to read the description on Russian – Chinese strategic relations of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (MFA) (2020). The MFA considers the relations between Russia and China “strategic and comprehensive”, which is based on the Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed in 2001. However, more than 300 other mutual agreements also exist between the parties. The MFA highlights the fact that deepening relations with China is a priority for Russian foreign policy. Since BRICS and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are mentioned, these multilateral initiatives must be considered more important than others (for example, the United Nations [UN], the Shanghai Cooperation Organisations [SCO], etc.). China is currently Moscow's most important partner on the global scale, since they want to see the same type of international system, their goals are aligned, they share challenges at the international level, and they strive to reach resolutions in a similar fashion. In other words, both support the multipolarity in which they are to be regarded as sovereign great powers, and they firmly believe in the principle that global stability and security can only be achieved through multinational, democratic institutions like the UN and through international law. The pragmatism of this approach is immediately clear: no emotions, no ideologies, only common interests, without even referring to the word “alliance.”

Since the signing of the above-mentioned treaty in 2001, the two countries have sorted out their border disputes in an exemplary way, they have developed their economic cooperation, and often provided political support to each other. From a Western point of view, these years can best be described as an “axis of convenience” (Lo 2008). Moscow and Beijing, however, consider this period their return to global politics as great powers and demanding more influence in the world order – without changing its fundamental institutions, but turning into a multipolar one.

The increased need to transform the world order has been clear since President Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007. However, the most tangible turning point, with the most long reaching effects, was without doubt the year 2014, with the annexation of Crimea by Russia, the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, the shooting down of the MH17 passenger flight, and the beginning of the Western sanctions. This period is usually called “Pivot to Asia”, and it was announced by President Putin in

late 2013 (Interfax, 2013), deepening political, economic, and military ties with Asian countries, primarily with China. Top leaders of the political and military elite have frequently visited each other, and these meetings have often resulted in key agreements. Chinese President Xi Jinping visited the 70th anniversary of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in 2015, where the top Western leaders were absent due to the Russian role in the Ukrainian conflict. Furthermore, in 2015 President Putin and President Xi outlined that their main geopolitical projects, the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) are considered to be complementary initiatives. Russia was more than satisfied with the possibility to expand its economic ties (especially in the energy sector) towards China, whose flagship project was the Power of Siberia pipeline, which started to operate in 2019. The Kremlin even acknowledged Beijing as a “near-Arctic state.” Between 2019-2020, personal and online meetings were scheduled between heads of states and foreign and defence ministers at both the multilateral and the bilateral level. Regular joint strategic-level military exercises have taken place, for example, Vostok 2018, Tsentr 2019, Joint Sea 2019, and Kavkaz 2020, just to mention a few.

The increasing pressure from the West did not simply result in Russia's turning towards Asia, but the US-China trade war also deepened the above-mentioned “axis of convenience.” However, as tempting as it would be to declare the strengthened Chinese-Russian cooperation as a result of the pressure from the West, it might not be completely accurate. While it is probably true to some degree, as it is difficult to question the effects of the sanctions and the trade war, at the same time, this might also be an approach that focuses on the West too much, not taking the developments during the 2000s into account, or the existing complementary potential stemming from their geographical closeness, the characteristics of their intertwined economies, as well as their shared view of sovereignty, global security, and the criticism of the current world order.

Signs of Cooperation and Glitches During the Pandemic

Even though the leaders of both Russia and China often praise their high-level cooperation, the COVID-19 pandemic has had an unexpected effect on it. They have not only faced challenges in domestic issues, but their bilateral ties have also shown their vulnerability and limitations.

To begin with some of the positive developments, the first cases of the new virus were officially confirmed in Russia on 31 January, 2020, about one month after its discovery in Wuhan. During the first weeks of February, the Ministry of Health of the Russian Federation sent 23 tonnes of medical supplies to the affected Chinese regions, while the Rospotrebnadzor and other institutions sent experts to Beijing to share their expertise about disease control (RIAC, 2020). From April, when the number of cases in Russia started to grow quickly, China also helped by sending medical supplies and experts. On the last days of 2019, President Putin announced the “Year of Russian–Chinese Scientific, Technical and Innovation Cooperation in 2020–2021” (Tass, 2019), which officially opened on 28 August, 2020. Under the circumstances, this mostly meant online meetings, which still became a useful tool in fighting the pandemic and sharing experiences. Even though Beijing was later able to successfully control the pandemic, China’s failure to stop the spread of the virus in the early weeks was critical. Overall, the epidemic has had more devastating effects on Russia than on China. Nonetheless, on 16 April 2020, President Putin reassured President Xi during a phone call that it was “counterproductive” to blame China for not being able to stop the virus from crossing the border (Kremlin, 2020a). The two leaders have repeatedly shown respect and support for each other, and the state media in both countries has also communicated this message. The Sino-Russian cooperation has also been remarkable in terms of digital propaganda. During the pandemic the officials of both sides spread the theory that “US biology warfare” was the source of the virus (Tass, 2021) and even tried to sow mistrust in Western vaccines (Emmott, 2021). The high point of their relation in the last period was obviously 19 May, 2021, when after a video conference between the two Presidents, President Putin told the media that “We can say that Russian–Chinese relations have reached the highest level in history” (The Moscow Times, 2021a).

The new situation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has caused some seemingly serious disruption in the trust between China and Russia. Both sides lacked sophisticated norms and mechanisms for disease prevention, particularly in border-crossing. Despite the good relations, Russia was among the first countries in the world to unilaterally close its border with China on 30 January, stopping all commercial flights on 1 February. It is important to note that Moscow was much slower to do the same with its European partners, making the same decisions only

in the second half of March. In April, the Chinese propaganda criticized Russia for the insufficient measures (Izvestia, 2020), but neither this nor the fact that Beijing also closed its border crossings could stop the Kremlin from continuing to praise the Chinese success combating the pandemic. In fact, a kind of amplification of the Chinese propaganda was visible in the Russian media outlets, blaming the Western countries for being unsuccessful in prevention (Frolova, 2020). There was an outcry when Chinese nationals were deported for violating sanitary and epidemiological regulations, saying that they had experienced racial discrimination (RIAC, 2020), and the same was reported by Russians in China (RIAC, 2020). The most visible glitch between the two countries, however, was China's reluctance to give a live coronavirus strain to Russia, which could have resulted in developing a vaccine earlier (RIAC, 2020). Learning from the pandemic, one of the main future fields of cooperation could be taking full advantage of the Years of Russian-Chinese Scientific, Technical and Innovation Cooperation, founding joint companies to deal with virus testing, diagnosing, manufacturing medications, etc. It is also possible that new intergovernmental bodies will be created to deal with information sharing, developing processes to avoid the difficulties caused by closing borders or the discrimination against each other's citizens.

However, at a strategic level, these glitches have had no serious consequences for the relationship between the two countries, since they were short-term in nature, and no broad anti-Chinese or anti-Russian sentiments have emerged. The regular contact between the two leaders, who have shown support for each other, has also served to reassure that despite some disruptions, the strategic partnership has not suffered any damage. Looking at the number of deaths and the number of cases (Worldometer, 2021), China has been much more successful in combating the virus, while the pandemic has hit Russia very hard. This clearly highlights the differences between their ability to monitor their respective societies and enforce strict measures (Shevchenko, 2020).

What Can Russia Expect in the Post-COVID Era?

From the Russian perspective, the most important development is that the global COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the US-Chinese rivalry (Trenin, 2020a). In this narrative, global politics is heading towards bipolarity,

which is not as welcome in the Kremlin as it might seem. At the moment, the deepening cooperation with Beijing since 2014 seems to have been quite helpful because it has made it possible for Russia to consolidate its economy and avoid a collapse. Moscow has even been able to pursue its geopolitical aims, or at least show its teeth in conflicts like Ukraine, Syria, Libya, and other African countries. This might not have happened without indirect support from China. This trend does not seem to be different in the short term, and Russia is still likely to benefit from this cooperation. However, in the long term, there are clearly visible concerns regarding this process of bipolarity. There is a real danger that Russia will find itself in a situation where the Kremlin has to choose a side, which should be avoided. Moscow is aware of its limited capabilities, and in a situation like this its strategic autonomy would dramatically suffer, and it would inevitably become a junior partner on either side and/or become marginalized. This is why it is a top priority for the Kremlin to avoid this and find an equilibrium between China and the US. There are of course ways to do so, such as strengthening Russia's involvement in multilateral cooperations and international institutions; using their existing ties with China more effectively; and the Kremlin can also find new strategic partners on the Eurasian continent, for example, in India, Japan, or some member states of the European Union. Since managing the possible power transfer in 2024 is another top priority in the Russian political elite, we cannot expect any 180-degree turn in US-Russian relations, but in dealing with the West, there are visible opportunities for Russia in manoeuvring regarding its relations with the EU as well as Asian countries.

Moscow's Geopolitics vs. the Chinese Influence – Interests and Counter-Interests

Examining the potential vectors of the Sino-Russian relations, we have to take a look at some regions that are of crucial geopolitical importance for Russia. For a clearer picture, it is necessary to list some of the possible cooperations within regional organizations such as SCO, and outline the expected reactions after the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Sino-Russian relations will probably not suffer any damage on the issues that are most important for Russia, such as Ukraine, Belarus, or the Baltic states. China is mostly present in the region through its economic influence and multilateral platforms, such as the BRI or Cooperation

with Central and Eastern Europe (16+1). However, these countries export raw materials or easily replaceable goods to China (Samorukov, Umarov, 2020). No real Chinese advance can be expected in the military arena, even if there is limited cooperation in security-related issues. Ukraine, however, has benefited from these ties after losing the Russian market and its sources for military equipment, although Kiev's hands are tied by the West. Although Minsk and Beijing have worked together on the Plonez multiple rocket launcher system, this project must be considered symbolic, as are their military personnel exchanges or participation in multilateral joint exercises. The Baltic region is different due to its NATO membership and the pro-Western attitudes of its countries. But because the region is as sensitive for Moscow as Ukraine or Belarus, it is expected that in the future China would support the Russian world view in its rhetoric (Bērziņa-Čerenkova, 2020) while not giving up its own economic goals. Beijing has no geopolitical goal in the region, and it just is not worth getting involved in Russia's local adventures; therefore, non-alignment can be expected.

The pandemic has also had some direct geopolitical side-effects. Regarding Central Asia, the unwritten but solid rule that Russia shapes the region through its security ties while China does so through its economic influence, is showing some cracks. Concerns have been articulated by experts about China possibly gaining further ground in the Central Asian states, which region the Kremlin considers an area of Russian influence (Izvestia, 2020b). These claims are based on the fact that Russia is the main destination of local migrant labour, but since the deteriorating pandemic the borders are closed, many people are left without a proper income. However, this economic power has not had any spillover effect, especially at the strategic political level, so the balance between Beijing and Moscow has been assured. Until 2020, China had almost exclusively supported local presidents and of course tried to convince them about the benefits of turning to China. This policy also involved corrupting the elites. Last year, however, protests and political events resulted in a change of leadership in Kyrgyzstan, and the new President, Sady Japarov seems to long have had ties to China. Experts say that, if this is not a coincidence, it could mean that Beijing is slowly moving away from its early policies and not only working with incumbent leaders, but also helping new ones to power (Umarov, 2021). It is difficult to measure how the pandemic has affected this process, but in the long term, Moscow can

expect some new challenges in this geopolitically sensitive area, losing some influence in favour of Beijing despite the widespread anti-China sentiment in these countries.

Another aspect of the China-Central Asia relations that is causing more headache for Russia is Beijing's attempts to build surveillance systems. Before the pandemic, in 2019 Kyrgyzstan was the first country in the region to sign an agreement with the China National Electronic Import and Export Corporation to install a facial recognition system, and the company claims that it has provided the system for free (Markotkin, 2021). Later that year, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan also held a meeting with Chinese companies, but to date only Tashkent has signed agreements. Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, during a visit in China, following a meeting with high-tech company Hikvision, called upon the Kazakh government to follow the Chinese way in digitalizing the country (Markotkin, 2021).

This highlights another asymmetry between China and Russia: the latter does not have either the capabilities or the technology to compete in digital surveillance, the tech sector, or digitalization. Moscow's failure to control the pandemic has partly been due to its inconsistent and barely sophisticated surveillance system and digitalization (Shevchenko, 2020). This incompetence has drawn attention to serious disparities. Since from the Russian perspective the global great power rivalry is intensifying, there is a serious risk of decoupling from China and the West in the information technology sector, one of the most important emerging areas. The Western sanctions, which are also affecting the Russian IT sector, further aggravate this process. Although Russia and China have been cooperating in the high-tech area for almost two decades, the main hindering factor for deeper ties is that Russia has been integrated into to global internet, and the Western standards and platforms are widespread (Sinkkonen and Lassila, 2020). The current situation is a real Gordian knot: while Russia needs more digitalization to modernize its economy, this is not possible for security reasons while the Western sanctions are on, but the Chinese option is simply not attractive for the Russian users, and for state security this dependency would also be undesirable. If the Russian-Western relations do not improve, the dependence on Beijing will further grow in the tech sector, and with it Russia's vulnerability, too. However, being dedicated to mutual, but partly symbolic, projects like the Sino-Russian Big Data Headquarters Base, the Sino-Russian Joint

Innovation Investment Fund, and the 2020-2021 Russian-Chinese science cooperation, from Moscow's point of view in the long-term this question could easily turn into resistance or even confrontation. Furthermore, it is impossible to predict whether Moscow will ever be able to come up with alternative IT systems abroad like Washington or Beijing already can.

Despite the Sino-Russian relations being substantially realized on the Eurasian continent (SCO, EEU, BRI, the Greater Eurasian Partnership), and the fact that Russian geopolitical thinking is also almost exclusively focused on land (with the exception of the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea), this might easily change in the near future. Two factors should be taken into account: the growing importance of the Arctic and the Pacific Ocean, both of which have much to offer for Moscow if it wants to avoid becoming a junior partner.

Russia has been developing its abilities to protect its maritime interests and return as a great sea power since 2001 (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018). China has also been expanding its capabilities to support its foreign policy priorities, for example, securing sea trade routes and protecting Chinese interests in the East China Sea. Despite having no formulated strategic maritime partnership, the two countries have conducted several cooperations in this sphere. This includes the Arctic, joint military exercises, the Pacific, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean, but also the Mediterranean and the Baltic Sea. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership could be complemented by mutual recognition of each other's maritime interests, especially in internationally disputed waters, besides the expansion of the ongoing "land" projects at the same time. This would fit in with the changes in global politics, in which both regular and alternative sea routes will become more important. This could make it possible for Russia to be more visible on global issues, it could serve its economic interests, strengthen its military security, and even create highly visible ways of cooperation, for example, mutual Russian-Chinese patrolling could happen near the straits, and Chinese ships can visit exercises in the Baltics, like during the Zapad-2021. Moscow could easily return mutual patrolling, and by doing so also join China's fight against semi-encirclement. Being able to become a new actor in distant waters and cooperating on oceans from Iran to Japan could increase Moscow's regional influence, balancing its ties with China. Of course, the Russian-Chinese mutual activities could involve other countries

and could further strengthen the ongoing “land” projects, as well as ultimately increase Moscow’s global influence. This would inevitably cause disapproval from the US and its allies, but staying away would not have any positive consequences, such as easing sanctions.

From the Russian perspective, the Arctic has the greatest potential, and building a Silk Road on ice would serve Moscow’s economic interests and give it more room for manoeuvre. Acknowledging China as a near-Arctic country does not pose any threat to Russia, since Beijing has no territorial claim there. There is simply no alternative than cooperate with Russia in the region, especially when the China-US relations are where they are right now. Moscow wants to protect its strategic autonomy in the Arctic as well, although it is aware of its dependency on foreign capital and technology to exploit the local resources and execute crucial developments. Beijing can participate in this process, but Moscow can find alternative non-Western partners as well. However, the Russian concept of a Greater Eurasia is still land-focused and urgently needs a maritime strategy (Trenin, 2020b). As Dmitri Trenin suggests (Trenin, 2020b), a Murmansk-Mumbai trade route, which connects the Arctic with the Indo-Pacific region, would closely link Russia and its Asian partners. This would offer alternatives and avoid further dependency on China, but of course this project can only be achieved by allowing Beijing to play an active role.

On the other hand, Russia may defuse its growing dependence on China via its new ties with India. New Delhi is a negligible economic partner for Russia at the moment, their cooperation covers the fields of energetics (nuclear energy) and selling military equipment. Moscow tries to carefully balance its relations with India, trying to avoid them becoming too deep and sensitive for China, but not withdrawing completely. Building stronger ties would cause disapproval from China, thanks to its own rivalry with India, which has resulted in a deadly border clash in June 2020. A real Russia-India-China triangle would be more than welcome in the Kremlin, and it could be formulated within the SCO, BRICS, and in other international forums

Their different evaluations of the coup in Myanmar in February 2021 may show a hidden disagreement between Russia and China. While the former looks at the development as a purely domestic affair of a sovereign state,

the latter expressed its concerns early (The Moscow Times, 2021b). The Kremlin seems to have secured its ties in the country going forward, since they have already signed an agreement on shipping high-tech Russian military equipment, and even the Sputnik V vaccine was approved after the coup (The Moscow Times, 2021b).

Although the recent developments in Afghanistan make the future unpredictable, for Russia and China it will probably help to find new ways of cooperation along their interest-based relations, as well as their shared view of the world. The US withdrawal, as has been emphasized by the Russian media and leaders, is a sign of the failure of the unipolar world led by the US and the West, and along their Chinese counterparts, they refer to this by promoting a multilateral, more democratized global order. In other words, Moscow and Beijing stand for their increased role in global politics, using their positions in international organisations such as their permanent seat in the UN Security Council. In post-NATO Afghanistan, however, Russia is facing several challenges. Moscow has no resources to get involved in the country, nor has it any direct interest to do so (Trenin, 2021). For both Russia and China, the number one priority is to fight the extremists, to stop the inflow of illicit drugs and arms, and to secure the stability of the region while promoting non-interference in the domestic politics of Kabul. For Moscow the current situation means possible future inconveniences, given the fact that the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) shares a border with Afghanistan, but it also serves as an opportunity to increase its influence using diplomatic ties in the region and beyond. It is possible that an evolving situation will easily reshape the unwritten roles of Moscow and Beijing in the broader Central Asian region. Surely the Sino-Russian security cooperation will strengthen to some extent. This will not only concern bilateral relations, but the CSTO-China, SCO cooperation may also be expanded. Moreover, tackling the problem with local actors is an excellent opportunity for the Kremlin to widen its relations with Pakistan and India, and it also confirms Russia's criticism of the Western world view. At the moment, it is difficult to predict the outcome of the Taliban's takeover in Kabul, but it certainly has the potential for Russia to re-energize its diplomatic arsenal with China and other countries in Asia.

Using its traditionally extensive diplomatic toolset, the Kremlin can increase its weight in global politics, secure its geopolitical interests, deepen its ties with Beijing, and avoid unhealthy dependency at the same time. As the *Russia-China Dialogue: The 2020 Model* presents (RIAC, 2020), the Kremlin has countless opportunities in the post-COVID era. The SCO will stay the cornerstone of multilateral relations in the development of economic cooperation, transportation, logistics, infrastructure, healthcare, science and technology, as well as education, sport, and tourism (RIAC, 2020). In the new security reality created by the Taliban takeover in Kabul, the SCO platform can be used to resolve crisis situations, fight against extremists and drug trafficking, and even peaceful settlement and economic restoration in war-torn countries such as Syria (RIAC, 2020). Using the opportunities provided by the BRICS membership, it is possible to focus more on global issues such as cooperation in trade, economy, and finance. This platform can solve security-related issues in Asia and beyond, but it can also be a tool to promote world views that differ from those of the West in institutions like the UN. Russia's EEU project, which has not been especially successful, can probably be re-energized to some extent. However, Moscow's security-focused CSTO has a window of opportunity to boost military-security ties due to the current situation in Kabul.

Economic Partnership: Perfect Match or Temporary Solution?

It is a well-known fact that Russia's economy heavily depends on the export of raw materials, especially hydrocarbons such as oil and gas, and there has not been any serious development in the last few decades that would decrease this exposure. This generates three problems. First, the Kremlin's annual budget is exposed to the volatile fluctuation of global energy prices. Second, since 2014 it has increasingly relied upon the non-European market, including China, which has a better position in negotiating in the current circumstances. Third, in the long term, Russia is facing a more serious threat, since more and more countries make announcements about achieving zero net CO₂ emission in the upcoming decades. While Russia officially still shows little worry about this, this trend could be a game changer, since even Beijing has made announcements in this regard (Bloomberg, 2021). At the moment, exporting raw materials is still a fruitful cooperation because China will still be a resource-dependent economy in the upcoming decades.

In the last few decades, we could witness dynamic growth in terms of economic relations. As a result, China had become Russia's largest foreign trade partner by 2020. This still means that only 13.8% of total export is heading to China (considering the EU members as separate entities) (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020a). However, for mineral products, which account for 43.7% of total exported goods (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020b), there is a much bigger dependency on the Chinese buyers: more than a fifth of these products are exchanged in this direction, surpassing all other countries (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020c). In 2019, the last pre-COVID year, the bilateral trade exceeded USD 110.9 billion, with a tiny surplus in favour of Russia (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2020). 62.2% of this bilateral trade was realized in exchanging minerals such as oil and gas (Russia: Foreign Trade Statistics, 2020d). Right after the Western sanctions in 2014, the two sides agreed on building the 2,159-km "Power of Siberia" pipeline, which was completed in 2019 and will probably reach its working capacity in 2024.

The current underdeveloped Russian economic structure is clearly visible in these numbers, showing dependency on mineral export and growing dependency on China at the same time. This makes Russia vulnerable not just to the fluctuation of the global price of minerals, but increasingly also to Beijing. Since last year's commitments by Western and Asian leaders, among them by President Xi Jinping, Moscow has to face the changing reality of a possible degradation of its oil and gas products on the global market. The withdrawal of the US from the region and the future Chinese investments in Iran and Iraq will make it easier to change its Russian energy sources. For the Kremlin, continuing exposure to this quasi-monocultural trade structure could cause further lagging behind the world economy, but it also represents some opportunities for increasing room for manoeuvre. New trade partners can be found in this field, such as Vietnam or India, which could be surprisingly lucrative if Russia was able to ship LNG through the Arctic region.

Finding alternative energy-related projects to prepare for the post-oil era could offer new fields of influence for Russia, mainly through its nuclear know-how. This year at an online conference the two Presidents agreed to Russia building new nuclear power plants in Tianwan and Xudabao (The Moscow Times, 2021a). According to the plan, these facilities will be functional by 2026-2028. The decision further deepens their strategic

partnership and can further increase Moscow's influence in the global energy sector. President Putin has praised this meeting as the best in the history of Sino-Russian relations.

China's influence in the financial sector has also increased, as Western sanctions allow Beijing to replace former Western countries in Moscow's capital needs. Despite this assumption, we see a decline in foreign direct investment from Beijing. Despite the growing numbers in trade in general, since the beginning of "Pivot to Asia" in 2014, there has been a massive outflow of Chinese investment from Russia, with investments decreasing by 250% (Sukhanin, 2021). Many factors may have caused this. Presumably there are companies that do not want to be subject to Western sanctions because they contract with Russian parties. Of course, the global pandemic has also had a negative impact. In addition, the Chinese investors are also looking for profits, and the Russian economy, which has been growing more slowly than the world economy for years, is not the most attractive destination in this respect. Only in the first three quarters of 2020, these amounts were halved (Sukhanin, 2021). This is particularly sensitive for Russia's infrastructural projects. Although Chinese companies are the only foreign actors receiving permission to participate in developing the infrastructure, a sector which is strongly controlled by President Putin's circle, to date their cooperation has mostly resulted in symbolic projects (e.g. developing infrastructure in the Crimea). Generally speaking, Beijing's state-owned companies are not willing to invest in its neighbour, simply because the previously arranged, land-focused plans seem to be unattractive, and there are fears of further Western sanctions (Sukhanin, 2021). This question will be crucial in the near future, since Russia's plan to develop its Arctic regions needs more capital, more actors, and high-tech capabilities, which are not available at the moment. Of course, considering the sea-focused nature of some plans, China's behaviour could be different in the future.

China's reluctance to cooperate with Russia is illustrated by the fact that Beijing is showing no interest in any plans setting up alternatives to the SWIFT system – in case there is a disconnection from the West (Sukhanin, 2021). It is probable that Chinese financial experts are thoroughly examining every aspect of the Western sanctions toward Moscow and are trying to prepare for suffering the same steps in the near future.

The fourteenth five-year plan has many opportunities for the next fifteen years, and it may have some opportunities to offer for Russia in the short and medium term. This plan has two strategic goals, to double China's GDP by 2035 compared to 2020, and to become a high-income economy (Spivak, 2021). More gas and oil will surely be needed to achieve these, and Russia is in a good position in this regard. Even though Moscow will need to compete with other countries in Central Asia, Middle East, and Africa, its annual budget probably will not suffer losses as the global trends are turning to green technologies. The five-year plan also has prospects for the agricultural sector, and most importantly, ones for the high-tech sector as well. Experts predict that the latter will cause growing standardization in the sector globally, which makes it possible for Russia to connect to various producing lines and avoid choosing a side or becoming decoupled (Spivak, 2021).

Media and Disinformation

Cooperation on the information sphere had started long before the pandemic. The two sides agree that the Western media outlets are influencing domestic politics both in Russia and China and support the opposition, for example, Navalnij or the Hong Kong protesters. The main state-run companies Sputnik and the China Media Group (CMG) have signed agreements to mainly target the domestic audiences (Markotkin, 2021). At the official level, many personal meetings have been scheduled: since 2015 there has been an annual forum organised by the CCP Propaganda Department and the Russian Presidential administration; Maria Zakharova met her Chinese counterpart in 2019 to discuss the current issues regarding the global media and to clarify common interests and cooperation between the foreign ministries (Markotkin, 2021). In 2017, Sputnik and the Global Times signed a cooperation agreement with the purpose of showing the international community their shared positions and concerns on various international issues (Eu vs Disinfo, 2020). The coordination had clearly been visible long before 2020, and the two countries already supported each other's disinformation projects. The period of the pandemic has also offered a lot of opportunities to work together in the informational sphere. The most important among these include the source of the virus, vaccination, human right violations in Xinjiang, and narrating the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The

main goals were the same as before, to keep opposition voices as quiet as possible while amplifying pro-government messages and challenging the Western narratives.

According to an EU report (Emmot, 2021), finding themselves on the same side of “vaccine diplomacy”, Russia and China state media outlets started to spread disinformation. Both countries attempted to amplify the side-effects of the Western vaccines while offering their products as alternatives. These allegations have been denied by both countries, but the EU report shows clear signs of well-organized and coordinated information campaigns on social media sites and online platforms. These actions are particularly conspicuous in the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and partly in the Caucasus countries, where the Western-Russian geopolitical struggle is mostly concentrated (EU vs Disinfo, 2021a). As mentioned earlier, even the origin of the virus is questioned in the Russian media. Parallels are drawn between the Western allegations of poisoning Sergei Skripal in Salisbury and the theory of leaking the virus from a laboratory in Wuhan, suggesting that Moscow and Beijing are victims of the unjust accusations of the West (EU vs Disinfo, 2020).

Remarkable coordination could be observed on other issues as well. China has been defended by the Russian state media on the human right records in Xinjiang (EU vs Disinfo 2021b). The pro-Kremlin news outlets simply reproduced the Chinese narrative and accused the West of unjust allegations. This fits in the long articulated Russian narrative claiming that human rights are a tool of the West to interfere in domestic politics and violate sovereignty. China and Russia have released a common statement condemning such steps (MID 2021).

After the withdrawal of the NATO troops from Afghanistan, similar narratives seem to have appeared in the state media of both countries. This new approach says that the West in the future may “betray” Ukraine and Taiwan in the same way, whose existence is strongly based on its support (EU vs Disinfo, 2021c). This not only undermines Kiev’s and Taipei’s legitimacy but also mocks the global world order led by the West. Again no clear proof can be detected, but the similarity of the approaches and how they were disseminated is telling.

Cooperation in informational warfare has been highly active during the pandemic. Since it is not expected that the stance of Moscow or Beijing on the question of sovereignty will change, or that one of them will give up their policy on Ukraine or Taiwan, the developments of the last two years in terms of disinformation are important and forward-looking.

Military Alliance: “Maybe” is Better Than “Surely”

Just weeks before the US election in 2020, one of the most remarkable moments of the Sino-Russian relation during the pandemic was when at the Valdai Discussion Club President Putin, answering a question on a possible military alliance, said that “It is possible to imagine everything... We have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either.” (Kremlin, 2020). Not saying no unequivocally is part of the toolset the Russian President is working with, since in the West the realization of a military alliance between Moscow and Beijing would be a nightmare and could easily be a game changer in global politics. There are calculations which say that even the combined defence budget of Russia and China is less than half of that of the US, but if everything is taken into account and all costs are normalized, the budget of the former two in reality exceeds that of the latter (Champion and Krasnolutska, 2021). Although the Kremlin in reality indeed cannot rule out this happening, there is probably only one case in which Moscow and Beijing would form a military alliance: in the unthinkable situation where the West would attack them both at once. Despite all the events of the pandemic, this possibility remains theoretical.

There are several reasons why we should not expect any military rapprochement after a certain point. National sovereignty being one of their main values, the symbol of their independence for both China and Russia, they are reluctant to give it up. An alliance would obligate the parties to get drawn into conflicts over the interests of the other. To date, Beijing has not even recognized, for example, the annexation of the Crimea, or Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and similarly Moscow has no real interest in defending Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea. Not to mention the fact that Beijing still has no intention of abandoning its non-alignment policy, one of the basic principles of its foreign policy. Signing such a pact would further deteriorate

their relations with the West to an unpredictable extent, which is utterly undesirable. Signing a pact but not supporting the other side in an armed conflict would also dramatically throw back Sino-Russian relations.

The Russian leaders and the Russian documents all use the expression “strategic partnership” to describe their relationship. Although this is not as high-standard a cooperation as an alliance, it has huge flexibility. Being allied not only has a strategic security concept, it also has a spillover effect in the economic, political, and diplomatic ties as well. A strategic partnership model needs no sacrifice endangering the parties’ ties with the West, it needs no political commitments which are not in harmony with the domestic political environment, and it definitely needs no isolation in diplomatic terms in favour of the other; therefore, it is the best way for Moscow and Beijing to work together (Huasheng, 2021). From this perspective, speaking about a possible alliance has three meanings. The first is to dispel all doubts caused by minor disagreements in Sino-Russian relations during the pandemic, the second is to send the message to the West that Russia has the right to choose even to sign a treaty that is of main concern for the West, and third, it is likely that the Kremlin, following the US presidential campaign, wanted to send the message that a pro-Russia president would be a wise choice. In this regard, the Sino-Russia military alliance is more about the West than about the two parties. The joint military exercises of recent years, strategic bomber patrolling, and even Russia’s selling Su-35 fighter aircrafts and the S-400 missile system (which was rather symbolic) might all be alarming for the West and must be interpreted in this sense.

Conclusion

In summary, another, less-discussed factor regarding the future of Sino-Russian relations concerns the limits of the cooperation resulting from economic and strategic political differences. We cannot overestimate the pragmatic approach of the two sides, but there is also a real possibility of ideologic opposition. The close Sino-Russian relationship is mostly explained by the West and its world view: challengers of the free, liberal world will inevitably unite. However, this is again a very Western-centred opinion, in which the fault lines are drawn by ideologies formulated according to the twentieth-century dichotomies of democracy-fascism and democracy-communism. However, the Chinese historical perspective

focuses on the grievances that occurred during its century of humiliation by the West. As Maxim Trudolyubov notes (Trudolyubov, 2021) in this regard, Russia is also part of the West – at least historically. While the Kremlin's point of view encompasses the last decades, Beijing's goes back to the last two centuries. At the moment, it is difficult to imagine their relation to deteriorate so quickly that China would start to classify Russia as part of the oppressing, "imperial" West, but the ideological foundations are clearly there.

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