

# EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA-CHINA BILATERAL RELATIONS

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The conduct of sovereign states in international relations is determined on several premises such as coexistence, interdependence, national priorities, competition, clash of interests, and struggle for superiority in global affairs. The very nature of these attributes leads to foreign policy goals through which a country either displays its competence, or addresses its inadequacies. This, in turn, leads to the traditional balance of power theory where nation-states develop strong comprehensive partnerships either at the bilateral level or the multilateral level, cooperating to limit the rise of adversaries/competitors, and to establish hegemony in regional/international geopolitics. The two World Wars comprise a classic example of how countries allied with each other to establish status quo in international politics. The post Cold War era, and the end of bipolar politics led to the emergence of a unipolar world led by the United States. Notwithstanding the dynamic nature of international relations, alliances among countries continue to exist to create a balance of power either to challenge the existing system or to preserve the status quo. In the current great game of world politics, the growing proximity between Russia and China finds a special mention as (a resurgent) Russia and China (an Asian power with global aspirations) with shared interests, common goals and mutual concerns have set out to change the global architecture much in their favour.

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**A resurgent Russia and an emerging world power, China, have reinforced their strategic partnership as a result of the developments that have taken place in the post Cold War era.**

The two countries, based on their individual capabilities, have emerged as crucial economic, defence, and strategic actors in world politics. With Russia being isolated by the Western allies post Ukraine imbroglio and accession of Crimea, and sanction politics affecting its economic growth, Moscow realised the need for stable and long-term engagements and reliable partners for sustainable growth and influence in global affairs. Hence, the Kremlin announced the “pivot to Asia” strategy to further proliferate its influence in the

region. Besides, Moscow is aware of the shifting global economic balance of power towards Asia, and understands that engaging in the geo-politics of the region is essential for Russia’s successful long-term development.

The current international relations moreover are witnessing a power transition which is taking place from West to East or North to South. Strategic thinkers have been presenting their arguments in this regard based on the developments taking place in the Asian region in particular. Many have gone to the extent of defining the current international system as the “Asian Century”. With China being one of the epicentres of the “Asian Century” concept due to its economic growth, military modernisation, huge global market potential, infrastructural development and global outreach, the current developments in relations between Russia and China are seen not as “pivot to Asia” but rather “pivot to China”.

A resurgent Russia and an emerging world power, China, have reinforced their strategic partnership as a result of the developments that have taken place in the post Cold War era. Additionally, the policies of the US-led Western allies have mostly signalled curtailing the rise and influence of both Russia and China in global affairs. However, much to the irony of the West, this has reassured the relevance of the bilateral relations with a clear-cut agenda i.e, form an alliance against the United States-led international system, establish a multipolar world order, promote global stability and security, and combat non-conventional

threats. Understandably, the rest of the world is reviewing and assessing this formidable partnership

Nevertheless, relations between the two countries have been vigorous yet filled with complexities and pervaded by asymmetries. *The Economist*, for example, refers to the strategic partnership between the two countries as “Frenemies”. Concurrently, many in the academic community are of the opinion that Russia-China bilateral relations in the current

international milieu comprise more a “Potemkin village”<sup>1</sup> than a true alliance because, although the bond is multifaceted, the relationship is defined by numerous ambiguities and contradictions in which positive engagement is consolidated with strategic competition and commonalities of policy counter-balanced by suspicions about ulterior agendas.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, there is a shifting trend in the strategic partnership as China is becoming aware of its global status in the 21st century and its progress in the international arena. Many believe that as China marches forward in its economic development, defence power and global outreach, there is a likelihood that it would lead to a ‘role reversal’ between the two countries.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the two strategic partners are balancing the partnership delicately between strategic convergence and suspicion. It is in this context that one has to investigate whether the partnership will survive the test of time or face an uncertain future. Hence, a thorough historical analysis is required to explore the relations between the two states from several standpoints as past events will assist in explaining

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1. The phrase “Potemkin village” was originally used to describe a fake portable village, built only to impress. According to the story, Grigory Potemkin erected the fake portable settlement along the banks of the Dnieper river in order to fool Empress Catherine II during her journey to Crimea in 1787. The phrase is now used, typically in politics and economics, to describe any construction (literal or figurative) built solely to deceive others into thinking that some situation is better than it really is. Some modern historians claim the original story is exaggerated. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potemkin\\_village](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Potemkin_village)

2. Ibid., p. 3.

3. Bobo Lo, “The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia’s Evolving China Policy”, *International Affairs*, vol.80, no. 2, 2004, pp. 295-309.

the current foreign policy interests, issues, conflicts, priorities, concerns and challenges that may emerge in the partnership in the future.

This article evaluates the evolution of Russia-China bilateral relations in the modern world, based on political ties, strategic interests, economic interactions, military dealings and domestic policies to determine the realities of choices and actions made in the past. The historical patterns of Russia and China are, thus, an important aspect for understanding the relations, taking into consideration whether there is scope for a repeat of differences that existed in the past and whether asymmetries or clash of interests impact the future prospects of the relations? If yes, then does history show the key to solve any future conflicts between the two countries? And, more importantly, what will the strategic relationship between Moscow and Beijing look like in the future?

Let us first explore the factors that have historically steered the foreign policy goals of Russia, as it is crucial to fully understand its aspirations, interests and goals in the global arena, and its engagement in contemporary international relations.

### **EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

Russia as a country has had a unique history and identity which has influenced its behaviour towards its neighbours and also in international affairs. It was a decisive player in the Seven Years War, the land power that vanquished the Napoleonic Army, and a leading member of the Concert of Europe. Russia was the main protagonist in the Crimean War and subsequent crises that arose from the collapsing of the Ottoman Empire in the later 19th century. Russia's alliance with France in the 1890s is widely viewed as one of the first steps on the road to World War I. The October Revolution destroyed the Tsarist autocracy and paved the way for the creation of the world's first self-proclaimed socialist state and eventually the Soviet Union. The year 1917, thus, was the year of big changes in the Russian culture, economy, military, political and social spheres. The Soviet role in World War II was significant and post World War, Moscow ruled much of Europe

through the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact for half of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup> One narrative of understanding the factors that has driven Russian foreign policy is by understanding the relevance of the “Heartland Theory”.

### *The Heartland Theory*

The ‘Heartland Theory’ by Halford Mackinder in 1904<sup>5</sup> led leaders to formulate foreign policy goals that revolved around the relevance of the Eurasian landmass. Mackinder’s theory stated that political history is a continuous struggle between land and sea powers, with the ultimate victory going to the continental power. The determining factor in this struggle was geography. The “world island” according to Mackinder comprised the landmass of Euro-Asia-Africa.<sup>6</sup> One of his predictions was that there was an excellent chance that a nation which could gain monopoly over the Eurasian landmass could extend its political control over Eastern Europe which would be a prelude to domination of the world. The heartland, hence, gave rise to competition and conflicts between powerful countries to gain access and control of the region. The most evident of them all was during the Napoleonic Wars. The defeat of Napoleon by Tsarist Russia eventually led the landmass to become the ‘pivot states’ of Russia.<sup>7</sup>

Like all countries, geographical aspects such as geographical location, climatic conditions, demography, natural resources, etc, thus, played a major role in formulating Russia’s foreign policy goals. Geographical proximity that stretches across Europe and Asia has assisted Russia in vacillating

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4. Olga Olikier, [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE144/RAND\\_PE144.synopsis.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/perspectives/PE100/PE144/RAND_PE144.synopsis.pdf)

5. Mackinder predicted that “Whoever rules East Europe, will rule the Heartland Whoever rules the Heartland, will rule the World Island.” Whoever rules the World Island, will rule the world.”

6. Ronald Hee, “World Conquest : The Heartland Theory of Halford J. Mackinder”, *Pointer: Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces*, vol.24, n.3, 1998. [http://www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer/back/journals/1998/Vol24\\_3/8.htm](http://www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer/back/journals/1998/Vol24_3/8.htm). Accessed on March 21, 2016.

7. Ronald Hee, “World Conquest : The Heartland Theory of Halford J. Mackinder”, *Pointer: Journal of the Singapore Armed Forces*, vol.24, n.3, 1998. [http://www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer/back/journals/1998/Vol24\\_3/8.htm](http://www.mindef.gov.sg/safti/pointer/back/journals/1998/Vol24_3/8.htm). Accessed on 21 March 2016.

between periods of geo-political engagement between the two regions.<sup>8</sup> It was this geographical perception that led the Soviet Union to take control of the Eurasian region to such an extent that it created 'satellite states' that remained under Soviet leadership for many decades. Hence, Russia's foreign policy towards Eurasia coincided with its economic policy and geo-political status and the space which it wanted to reclaim.

Historically and in the contemporary physical outlay, Russia's extensive border has created a natural strategic challenge as the nation has been vulnerable to external threats. Clash of interests and fear of penetration of their respective 'zones of influence' between the two imperial powers—the Soviet Union (Eurasia) and the British colonial power (South Asia)—became a 'bone of contention' during the 'great game politics'. Mackinder warned of the rise of Russia after the defeat of Germany in World War II, as a land power, for the first time, was in control of both Eastern Europe as well as the heartland. The fear of Soviet Russia magnifying its global outreach led the West to believe that the Moscow Administration had to be "contained" within the heartland; the notion being that the world island had to remain at least partially safe for democracy. In the 1980s, Zbigniew Brzezinski, once the National Security Adviser (NSA) under the Carter Administration, echoed the words of Mackinder; "Whoever controls Eurasia, dominates the globe. If the Soviet Union captures the peripheries of this landmass ... it would not only win control of vast human, economic and military resources, but also gain access to the geostrategic approaches to the Western Hemisphere—the Atlantic and the Pacific...."<sup>9</sup>

As for the influence of the international milieu in Moscow's foreign policy goals, the rise of threats during the Cold War politics between the two superpower blocs led to a clash of interests, hostility, an arms race, ideological confrontation, building up of the nuclear arsenal, and the struggle to establish status quo in Third World countries all exacerbated the Kremlin's security concerns. The Soviet Union feared that the expansionist policies of the US led North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) attempted to encircle

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8. Olikar, n. 4.

9. Hee, n.6.

the socialist power in its 'sphere of influence'. If Russia did not enlarge its empire, the logic went, other states would do so at its expense, thus, the Soviet Union established the Warsaw Pact and also 'Russification' of the population in its satellite states.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect driving Russia's foreign policy is what George Kennan in his famous 1946 "Long Telegram" referred to as a "traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity."<sup>10</sup> Echoing Kennan, many Western scholars have argued that Russian (and Soviet) expansionism is driven by insecurity. Insecurity, especially in terms of physical turf which contributed to a tendency to view other states as threatening, regardless of whether they had hostile intentions (even despite limited capability) against Soviet or Russian interests. It has tended to view the greatest threats as those on the periphery. In doing so, this attitude became largely defensive. The collapse of the Soviet Union increased the Russian sense of insecurity by leaving many states that had historically been under its influence outside it—in addition to the diminishing Russian power overall on the world stage.<sup>11</sup>

However, expansion cannot to be confined to the idea of insecurity alone as the struggle for 'identity' is another key aspect for Russia to carve a niche for itself in world politics, with a unique history, identity, culture, economic, ideology, social and political system. Elaborating further, Soviet Russia's identity was distinct from that of the rest of the European countries which made it pursue an autonomous identity after the Bolshevik Revolution. According to some scholars, the October Revolution caused Russia to create its own identity that included a new value system and ideology which was against the general value system of the rest of Europe which stood for democracy and liberalisation. Another argument presented in this regard is that the Soviet Union was not part of the events that led to the modernisation of Europe. For instance, Soviet Russia was untouched by the Renaissance, Reformation, Enlightenment and Industrial Revolution. Thus, Russia's involvement in the Eurasian geo-politics and its control in terms of social,

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10 Olikier, n.4.

11. Ibid.

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political, economic, security and geo-politics led to the creation of the 'Eurasian' identity.

Ideology also played a crucial role in the formulation of Russia's foreign policy and creation of a unique identity. Since the Bolshevik Revolution, Soviet Russia adopted the Marxism-Leninism ideology that guided both its domestic and international affairs. The socialist ideology defined the parameters of its international behaviour and decisions that emphasised on ensuring national security, promoting economic well-being with equal opportunity and enhancing the

national prestige of the state. In fact, Soviet Russia had rigorously established an ideological base in all its periphery states. Moreover, the Soviet leadership also ensured that whenever and wherever socialism was under threat, the collective security interests of the Eastern bloc were put above the country's national objectives. Any liberalisation movement in Eastern Europe aimed at compromising Soviet hegemony was responded to by the Soviet authority by an essentially defensive approach to preserve its ideology and also prevent threats from NATO's expansion. Such efforts were also seen in Hungary, Cambodia, and Vietnam. The Brezhnev Doctrine, announced in 1968, retroactively affirmed the military invasion of Czechoslovakia. After Gorbachev came to power, his foreign policy called "new thinking" came up with three concepts, namely: (1) socialism with a human face; (2) the idea of a common European home; and (3) de-ideologisation of international relations. Thus, the new policy thinking introduced democratic principles in the socialist ideology across the Soviet Union. It led to democratisation of the entire Eastern Europe.

The Russian foreign policy was determined not merely to overcome the drawbacks of its geographical proximity in search for warm water ports or a desire to establish a world of Communism—rather, it stood for an interlocking and mutually reinforcing influence that manoeuvred the Russian leaders'



and policy-makers' behaviour, especially for the maintenance of status quo in the Eurasian region and preservation of its national interests. For, defining the international behaviour and engagement of Russia in global politics is mostly conditioned by the vision of the leaders in charge of the decision-making process. The Bolshevik Revolution opened a new chapter and the new foreign policy under the leadership of Lenin was based on anti-imperialism. The end of the Stalin era brought immediate liberalisation in several aspects of Soviet foreign policy thinking, as he confirmed a Soviet commitment to "peaceful coexistence" with the capitalist countries. For his part, Khrushchev wanted peaceful coexistence with the West, not only to avoid a nuclear war, but also to permit the Soviet Union to develop its economy. The main point of Brezhnev's foreign policy was the Brezhnev Doctrine, which stated that the Soviet Union had the right to intervene in its satellite countries whenever there was a threat to socialism, and relied heavily on military force. But, at the same time, a period of détente, or relaxation of tensions, between the two superpowers emerged under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev. Although Brezhnev's aggressive foreign policy could be considered successful in maintaining order among the satellite nations, it caused the Soviet Union's economy to suffer as Brezhnev focussed much of the nations' money on building up a successful military and reaching the same level as the US in nuclear weaponry. This resulted in a poor economy during Brezhnev's leadership.<sup>12</sup> Gorbachev's new vision and ideas had implications for the Soviet foreign policy. As the Soviet Union was undergoing a massive economic crisis, Gorbachev believed that in order to continue economic reforms and implement his policies, namely, *perestroika* and *glasnost*, the Soviet Union needed the costly Cold War competition

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12. Matthew J. Ouimet, *The Rise and Fall of the Brezhnev Doctrine in Soviet Foreign Policy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), p.59.

between the superpowers to slow down. As long as it was engaged in an expensive arms race and supporting Third World revolutionaries, there could be no economic revitalisation at home. Therefore, he negated the Brezhnev Doctrine that pledged Soviet intervention where Communism was under threat, choosing instead to loosen Soviet control over the countries of the Eastern Bloc and allow them freedom to navigate their own futures, a policy that became known popularly as the "Sinatra Doctrine" because it allowed the Eastern European states to "do it their way".<sup>13</sup> Although Gorbachev had set a new direction and forged new relationships, the foreign policy challenges facing Yeltsin presented a unique opportunity of defining a new national identity for Russia and establishing the basic concept for its national security. The primary aim of Yeltsin was similar to that of Gorbachev i.e, to create a non-threatening external environment that would be most conducive to the country's internal economic and political development. Post Soviet disintegration, the early 1990s produced a profound sense of national humiliation as Russia was a combination of a loss of national mission, wounded national pride, and a confused national identity. As the US became the leader of the unipolar world, the official foreign policy of Yeltsin was a 'pro-Western' one as he believed that no country was better positioned to aid and assist the new administration than the United States.<sup>14</sup> Putin's assessment of national security interests is markedly different from Yeltsin's. Cooperation with the US, therefore, is not necessary for Putin to achieve Russia's long-term goals; it intends, instead to diversify its position, by reaching out to countries such as China, India, Libya, and Iraq. Since 2000, the change in Russia's view of itself and the rest of the world coincided with the transformation of Russian foreign policy priorities which became more open to international cooperation. The 2000 Concept declared relations with the European Union as its foreign policy priority. However, unhappy with the developments in the relations

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13. "Gorbachev and New Thinking in Soviet Foreign Policy, 1987-88", US Department of State Archive, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/108225.htm>

14. Robert H. Donaldson, "Boris Yeltsin's Foreign Policy Legacy", Presented to the 41st Annual Meeting of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, California, March 18, 2000. <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~robert-donaldson/yeltsin.htm>

between Russia and the US, Putin stressed on reassertion of power in the international arena by Russia and a renewal of its attempts to reshape the international environment in accordance with its own vision of the world. Nevertheless, after Vladimir Putin ascended to power in 2000, the country undertook grandiose foreign policy projects in an attempt to delineate its place among the world's superpowers.<sup>15</sup>

The other key determinants of the Russian foreign policy have been the demonstrations of force, the arms race, competitive military research and development, and intelligence operations, for which the Kremlin allocated huge funds for the development of the defence sector. In the Cold War era, Western economists devoted serious attention to the Soviet economy in general and to the Soviet military expenditures in particular. The powerful military industrial complex had an overall positive effect on the economy of the Soviet Union during the Cold War period. Against this backdrop, it can be stated that the economic development of Soviet Russia was co-related with its military potential and arms exports.<sup>16</sup> Profits from exports of arms and military equipment were put into the state budget and made up one part of state revenues.<sup>17</sup>

Then the efficiency of the defence industry of the Soviet Union slackened and the effectiveness of priority protection diminished and the defence industries experienced crises due to shortage of funding. Because the USSR was in effect a Military Industrial Complex (MIC) writ large with a militarised economy, since 1991, this sector consistently failed to deliver to Russian forces the needed weapons and technologies<sup>18</sup> until the revival reforms and programmes introduced by the Putin Administration in 2000.

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15. Robert Nalbandov, "Not by Bread Alone: Russian Foreign Policy under Putin", University of Nebraska Press, 2016, pp. 6-10. [http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/Supplements/excerpts/Fall%2015/9781612347103\\_excerpt.pdf](http://www.nebraskapress.unl.edu/Supplements/excerpts/Fall%2015/9781612347103_excerpt.pdf)

16. Paul Rivlin, "The Russian Economy and Arms Exports to the Middle East", Memorandum no. 79 (The Jaffee Centre for Strategic Studies, Tel Aviv University. 2005).

17. KirshinYuriy, "Conventional Arms Transfers During the Soviet Period", in Ian Anthony, ed., *Russia and the Arms Trade* (Oxford: SIPRI, Oxford University Press, 1998).

18. A Keenaway, Conflict Studies Research Centre, "The Military Industrial Complex", Federation of American Scientists C98 - March 1998 <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/industry/docs/TheMilitaryIndustrialComplex.htm>

*Russia Since 2000*

In the 1990s, Russia, during its fledgling stage, plunged into deep internal political and economic crises. As a desperate initiative to ameliorate its deplorable condition, the Russian political elites underwent a radical transformation by adopting a democratic political system, a free market economy and a pro-Western foreign policy approach. Unfortunately, the tilt towards the West for financial aid and support to revive the country failed in reinvigorating the country's lost prestige. This was the third time (Krushchev's peace coexistence initiative, the detente in the 1970s during the Cold War period and the initial pro-Western foreign policy in the 1990s) that an effort to coexist with the US failed which left a deep scar on the psyche of both Russia's political elites and its people. Long-standing beliefs about Russia's rights within its region were exacerbated by a consistent post-Soviet view that Western efforts at integration comprised a mechanism for controlling and weakening Russia.<sup>19</sup> Hence, Russia's behaviour has been in pursuit of its respective goals which are well-aligned with its historical interests. For instance, the Chechnya War, the Georgian conflict and the accession of Crimea reflect the trend of the Kremlin's national interests and foreign policy goals. Thus, the motives of Russia's foreign policy have been to challenge NATO's expansionist policy in the former Soviet space and the US-led international system.

Geographical impediments continue to haunt the Russian Federation among which access to warm water ports is seen as an unpleasant reality. The accession of Crimea has brought the region to a critical juncture in international affairs. Crimea has always been of prime importance as Russia's Black Sea naval fleet is based at Sevastopol and has been there for nearly 230 years and it is the only important warm water port for Russia.<sup>20</sup> This has also ensured Russia's naval control in the Black Sea. When the Russians annexed Crimea in 1783, they did so because of the enormous opportunity to project

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19. Olikier, Olga, Christopher S. Chivvis, Keith Crane, Olesya Tkacheva, and Scott Boston. 2015. Russian foreign policy in historical and current context. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. <http://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE144.html>

20. Askold Krushelnysky, "Democracy Lab: Crimea's War of Nerves", 4 March, 2014, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04). Accessed on 17 March 2014.

their power into the Black Sea region, and also because they could build warm water naval bases.<sup>21</sup>

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the foreign policy priorities of Russia have stressed on the protection of ethnic Russians across the globe. Russia feared that the local ethnic conflicts could eventually lead to the targeting of Russian minorities in the region. In making this case, the Russian doctrine and official statements in the 1990s referenced dangers from “local conflict”. Putin also made clear how boundless this ambition might potentially be, pointing out that “when I speak of Russian people and Russian-speaking citizens I am referring to those people who consider themselves part of the so-called broad Russian world, not necessarily ethnic Russians, but those who consider themselves Russian people.”<sup>22</sup> This foreign policy priority continues as the unrest during the breakaway movement in Chechnya, the Georgia conflict and Crimean accession (2014) justified Russia’s claim of protecting its ethnic Russians wherever they are under threat. Russia continues its insistence on influence in the near abroad that was crystallised in a speech in 2008 by President Dmitri Medvedev, who defined Russia’s interests in the neighbourhood as “privileged.” The speech came on the heels of a five-day war with Georgia (2008) over two breakaway regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have been supported by Moscow since the 1990s.<sup>23</sup>

From the year 2000 onwards, the world witnessed a new period in Russia’s contemporary history—what the national elites call “the age of revival”. With the new-found confidence, some elites also believe that the prospect of marginalisation that the country faced during the 1990s has disappeared. Russia today, with a resurgent image, is experiencing a new society and new economic growth (though fragile and unstable) which is, in turn, shaping its global image. Currently, the Russian economy continues to be similar to the Soviet economy as the main resource of revenue is “one-

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21. Askold Krushelnysky, “Democracy Lab: Crimea’s War of Nerves”, March 4, 2014, [www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/03/04)

22. Bjorn Alexander Duben, “Can the China-Russia Warmth Last?”, *The Diplomat*, March 8, 2015, p. 2.

23. Olikier, n.4.

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dimensional", as rightly pointed out by Dmitri Trenin. He described the Russian economy as relatively progressive but "one-dimensional": oil and gas have replaced tanks and nuclear weapons. Moreover, a high share of national revenue from resource exports has time and again created the wrong incentives which has, in turn, impacted its foreign policy as well. Thus, Russia's revival so far lacks a solid basis as seen, post Crimea accession by Russia, which led to sanction politics and a fall in oil prices. The Russian economy has once again

nosedived and is struggling to recover from the impact of the fall in oil prices.

Let us focus on the factors that steered China's foreign policy and how far Russia has succeeded in shifting away from the historical components in contemporary world politics.

## **EVOLUTION OF CHINA'S FOREIGN POLICY**

China is the second largest country by land area and borders extending to the East China Sea, Korea Bay and South China Sea. It shares borders with 16 countries, including Russia. It has 23 provinces, 5 autonomous regions which include Guangxi, Inner Mongolia, Ningxia, Tibet (Xizang) and Xinjiang. After the war of 1947, and the victory of the Communists, Mao Tse Tung, on October 1, 1949, established the People's Republic of China (PRC). His Marxist-Leninist theories, military strategies, and political policies are collectively known as Mao Zedong's Thought<sup>24</sup> which was widely applied as the guiding political, and military ideology of the Communist Party of China (CPC), and as the theory guiding revolutionary movements around the world. The main target of an independent PRC was to protect its national security with a strong defence force, reestablish its national power, and

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24. The essential difference between Maoism and other forms of Marxism is that Mao claimed that the peasants were the real revolutionary class instead of industrial working "comrades".

promote strong and stable economic progress.<sup>25</sup> The history of the PRC is often divided distinctly by historians into the “Mao era” and the “post-Mao era”. His supporters argue that under Mao’s regime, China ended its “century of humiliation” and resumed its status as a major power on the international stage.

Deng Xiaoping, who was the paramount leader of China from 1978-92, became instrumental in China’s economic reconstruction following the Great Leap Forward<sup>26</sup> in the early 1960s. During

Deng’s period, the goals of his reforms were summed up by the Four Modernisations, those of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and the military. The Four Modernisations, in fact, laid the foundation for China to emerge as a great economic power by the early 21st century. These reforms essentially stressed economic self-reliance. On the foreign policy front, he practised a pragmatic approach on how China ought to manage its international affairs: that is, “observe carefully, secure our positions, cope calmly, conceal our capabilities and bide our time, keep a low profile, never take the lead, and make a contribution”.<sup>27</sup> Deng’s “reform and opening” policies comprised a process of integrating China, for the first time, into the international system.<sup>28</sup>

**China has also gone from a position of receiving virtually no foreign investment and having a low level of international trade to one where it has begun to play a major role in the economic sphere globally.**

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25. *Towards the End of Isolationism: China’s Foreign Policy After Mao* by Michael Yahuda, Reviewed by Donald S. Zagoria, *Foreign Affairs*, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/1984-06-01/towards-end-isolationism-chinas-foreign-policy-after-mao>

26. The Great Leap Forward of the PRC was an economic and social campaign by the CPC from 1958 to 1961, led by Mao Zedong and aimed to rapidly transform the country from an agrarian economy into a socialist society through rapid industrialisation and collectivisation. “Great Leap Forward Explained”, [http://everything.explained.today/Great\\_Leap\\_Forward/](http://everything.explained.today/Great_Leap_Forward/)

27. Peter Ferdinand, “Sino-Russian Relations: An Analytical Overview”, in Arkady Moshes and Matti Nojonen, eds., *Russia-China Relations Current State, Alternative Futures, and Implications for the West* (The Finnish Institute of International Affairs), p. 26.

28. Erwin Blaauw et. al., “The Driving Forces Behind China’s Foreign Policy: Has China Become More assertive?”, This is the outcome of an internship by Myrthe van der Stelt at the Country Risk Research team at Rabobank Nederland. October 23, 2013. <https://economics.rabobank.com/publications/2013/october/the-driving-forces-behind-chinas-foreign-policy-has-china-become-more-assertive/>

Over a period of time, China's foreign policy became closely linked to its self-perception of self-superiority/self-inferiority dualism.<sup>29</sup> This also brings us to the concept of the 'Middle Kingdom' on which China has promoted its foreign policy interests, territorial claims, counter-claims and priorities. Based on this concept, there was no distinction between domestic and foreign affairs mainly because the outer world was seen as an extended internal world, with the same rules and responsibilities. This is where the argument of self-superiority dualism comes in, i.e., China has the mentality of being superior, being the "Middle Kingdom" with the natural right of ruling the world. Not just the Chinese foreign policy thinking but its territorial claims are closely linked to this core of perception of the superiority identity.

As the Chinese supremacy began to recede, the question of Chinese identity and the course in which it should evolve became a constant theme as China lost its centrality in Asia, from being the centre of power to which others paid tribute, to becoming a semi-colonial country in the mid-19th century. In fact, some scholars argue that China's rise has gone hand in hand with a confusing multitude of overlapping ideas and principles about what China is and what it should be.<sup>30</sup> During the initial stages, the key element of China's foreign policy thinking in the Communist Party of China (CCP) sought to regain for it the respect and dignity of being a great nation that had been lost after what the Chinese perceive as a "century of humiliation," when external powers dominated the region. Furthermore, post its independence, China was not in a position to play a decisive role in regional geo-politics, especially in Asia. In fact, after Deng Xiaoping assumed power in 1978, there was an awareness that China's military and economic capabilities lagged behind those of the superpowers the US and the Soviet Union.<sup>31</sup> Due to this, the country had to look up to either of the two superpower blocs during the Cold War period and decided on the Soviet Union which played the role of a 'big brother'. As it gained momentum in regional geo-politics, especially gaining

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29. Mikael Weissmann, "Chinese Foreign Policy in a Global Perspective: A Responsible Reformer 'Striving For Achievement'", *Journal of China and International Relations*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 151-154. <http://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:817328/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

30. Blaauw, n.28.

31. Ibid.



hegemony in Asia, China began to see India as its potential competitor, as India too was emerging as an influential actor in Asia. The end of the bipolar world saw the unipolar movement led by the US which caused anxiety to China. Overall, China's participation in the global system was extremely limited. The idea of sharing space, inter-dependence or coexistence with other players in regional and international politics in a way led China to develop the perception of self-inferiority dualism.

In the 1980s, compared to the years earlier, under Chairman Mao Zedong, the idea of reform and opening up of the country after the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party in December 1978 represented the mainstream of China's economic and development strategy, as well as its foreign policy. The economy changed from a field in which market forces were virtually non-existent in organising economic activity to one in which these started to play a larger role. China has also gone from a position of receiving virtually no foreign investment and having a low level of international trade to one where it has begun to play a major role in the economic sphere globally.<sup>32</sup>

In recent years, the over-arching driving factor behind the foreign policy in China, and the common denominator to most of its global activities, is its economic development. China has emerged as a key actor in the world economy through its geo-economic foreign policy. As the country's economic power increased, China's foreign policy too has become more assertive and visible to the outside world. Some countries and a few in the strategic community have even looked fearfully at future developments in this regard. China, today, has moved from being an isolated country to having become one of the world's major powers. It has also shifted from an ideology driven foreign policy to a more pragmatic way of international behaviour, aims and engagements.

China has spread its tentacles of engagements for a comprehensive development and also to succeed in its aspiration of becoming a global power. In the early years of the 21st century, China actively developed foreign policy

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32. Ibid.

concepts that would comply with the traditional core principles, namely, non-intervention and non-conditional behaviour and promoting the idea of the country's peaceful intentions. The first concept, "the peaceful rise of China" (*Zhongguo heping jueqi*), was launched in 2003. The concept was publicised in the same year in a speech given in the Boao Forum for Asia by Zheng Bijian, the then vice principal of the Central Party School. Zheng pointed out in his speech that, historically, the rise of new powers often caused major changes in the global political structures, even through warfare. He reaffirmed that the PRC was pursuing a peaceful foreign policy and would not take the hegemonic path. The Premier of China, Wen Jiabao, used the same concept in 2004 in his speech, thus, giving it the official seal of approval. Nevertheless, the term "rise" proved to be too controversial and it provoked critical responses from neighbouring countries and international observers alike. Consequently, Beijing reacted quickly and changed the term in 2004 to the more neutral "peaceful development of China" (*Zhongguo heping fazhan*).<sup>33</sup>

China, which often remains passive in addressing international security challenges or global governance issues, does not, however, keep a low profile on issues that may directly or indirectly impact the troubled autonomous regions in China—Tibet, Xinjiang and including Taiwan, human rights and its maritime territorial claims.<sup>34</sup> In the past years, China's foreign policies have become more assertive on a range of issues such as the maritime border disputes along China's periphery, and other major foreign policy drivers, such as maintaining the dominance of the Communist Party, to defend sovereignty and territorial integrity and ensure the maintenance of economic development, have remained unchanged. In 2010, China's foreign policies became more forceful in regard to relations with countries in the region and relations with the US. This has triggered strong reactions in the region, and some remain 'hotspots'. The conflict with Japan about the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands has increased tensions. And since China has also become economically important to the region, the existing tensions

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33. Matti Nojonen, "Introduction: Adjusting to the Great Power Transition", in Moshes and Nojonen, eds., n.27, , p. 11.

34. Blaauw, n.28.

may not be alleviated in the coming years either.<sup>35</sup> On the international front, the desire has, thus, become to keep things stable in and around China's territorial space, including the maritime region.

As a global power, being a permanent member of the UN Security Council and a member of the G20, China, as an emerging global power, seeks alliances and partnerships with other dissatisfied international actors, most clearly seen in the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, China, India, South Africa). In fact, it is also seen as a quasi-superpower, second in the global system only to the United States – a position that creates expectations. It is also clear that China is already a regional power, closely watched and a key focus point for its regional neighbours' foreign policy strategies and security concerns. Not surprisingly, an extensive debate has evolved about China's foreign policy strategy.<sup>36</sup>

One important point to be noted here is that the aspiration of the Chinese administration during the Cold War period was confined to establishment of its hegemony in the Asian region. However, though China's immediate objective was to become the hegemonic power of Asia, with sustainable economic prosperity and defence capabilities, its ambitions in the current world system are no longer confined to the Asian region but have a global connotation, and it is keen to challenge the preeminence of the US and achieve influential status in world politics in parity with the US. Maritime security has also gained relevance which can be seen in its aggressive posturing in the South China Sea.

After achieving regional dominance, China has gone to great lengths to prevent other great powers from controlling its 'pivotal regions', especially the US. However, in Southeast and Southwest Asia, Beijing is at a disadvantageous position as it has (a) long standing territorial disputes with many of these states; (b) its aggressive posturing in the South China Sea has caused anxiety

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35. Erwin Blaauw and by other authors, "The driving forces behind China's foreign policy - has China become more assertive?", This Special is the outcome of an internship by Myrthe van der Stelt at the Country Risk Research team at Rabobank Nederland. October 23, 2013. <https://economics.rabobank.com/publications/2013/october/the-driving-forces-behind-chinas-foreign-policy-has-china-become-more-assertive/>

36. Ibid.

**Similar to Russian worries, Beijing is also concerned about the global supremacy of the US, especially with regard to its 'rebalancing strategy', aimed primarily to halt Beijing's global ambitions. This has given way to inevitable competition between the US and China.**

among these nations towards China; and; (c) the presence of the US and its engagement with the countries of these regions have all led to Beijing looking towards the South Asian region and the Central Asian region, 'the heartland' in particular to create a 'comfort zone' to sustain its growth and to achieve its perennial goals.<sup>37</sup> Some of these include internalising the task to create an image of China as a "responsible great power", or "responsible stakeholder" while facilitating for continued regional and global economic prosperity.<sup>38</sup>

After years of focussing heavily on Europe and the broader West, Russia's strategic posture is currently undergoing a fundamental reorientation towards Asia. Russia has announced plans to 'turn East' but on this occasion, however, the circumstances are different. First, an Asian pivot has become an imperative for Russia rather than a choice. Russia like many other countries and policy-makers believes that the 21st century is clearly Asian in character, with a centre of gravity located around Beijing and New Delhi. The motives behind Russia's rebalance to Asia consist of both 'push' and 'pull' factors that include the fact that a rebalance is necessary for the Kremlin to secure a place in the 'Asian Century'. The relative transfer of influence and power from West to East means that Russia must establish a stake in the evolving regional order if it is to benefit from new power configurations.<sup>39</sup> The Kremlin is, thus, in need of a partner that shares similar concerns and has the capability to counter the preeminence of the US in the existing global order. Hence, it has begun reviewing its focus on the Asian region, more importantly, towards China, which has made remarkable growth in international relations. Similar to

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37. John Mearsheimer, "Why China's Rise Will Not Be Peaceful", September 17, 2004, <http://mearsheimer.uchicago.edu/pdfs/A0034b.pdf>

38. Weissmann, n.36.

39. Mathew Sussex, "Russia's Asian Rebalance", Lowy Institute for Foreign Policy, December 2015. <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/files/russia-asian-rebalance.pdf>

Russian worries, Beijing is also concerned about the global supremacy of the US, especially with regard to its 'rebalancing strategy', aimed primarily to halt Beijing's global ambitions. This has given way to inevitable competition between the US and China. In this context, the Sino-Russian relations possess great geo-political weight in the current international relations.

In order to understand the current strategic partnership between Russia and China, interpretation of facts and events that took place historically would add value to the arguments presented in determining whether the partnership will survive the test of time in the future.

**China began to question the de-Stalinisation process and peaceful coexistence movement initiated by Khrushchev and raised questions on the ideology, security, and economic development of the Soviet Union and saw these principles as a betrayal of Stalin's vision of the USSR and a means to appease the West.**

### **PROGRESSION OF RUSSIA-CHINA BILATERAL RELATIONS**

In its nascent stage as a new republic, unlike India, China did not opt to stay away from bloc politics during the Cold War period. Although some of the Chinese leaders believed that balancing the Sino-Soviet close relationship with some ties with Washington was possible, Mao Zedong knew that China had no choice, but to "lean on one side" i.e, with the Soviet Union, as close as possible. Thus, Beijing took the Kremlin as the model for development in which Soviet design, equipment and skilled labour was set out to help industrialise and modernise the PRC. In 1950, the two countries negotiated the "Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance" which gave the Soviet Union the right to continue the use of a naval base at Luda, Liaoning province, in return for military support, weapons, and large amounts of economic and technological assistance, including technical advisers and machinery. Additionally, China's participation in the Korean War (1950-53), especially after the UN-sponsored trade embargo on China, further strengthened the Sino-Soviet relations. Although there was a Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950-60s, the

alliance appeared to unite Moscow and Beijing after the Soviet dissolution in 1990. China became more closely associated with, and dependent on, a foreign power than ever before.<sup>40</sup>

### *Trouble in Paradise*

After Stalin's death, the bilateral relations between the countries began to deteriorate as Nikita Khrushchev, who took over the reins from Stalin, formulated a foreign policy that aimed at "peaceful coexistence" with the Western world, which China refused to accept.<sup>41</sup> China began to question the de-Stalinisation process and peaceful coexistence movement initiated by Khrushchev and raised questions on the ideology, security, and economic development of the Soviet Union and saw these principles as a betrayal of Stalin's vision of the USSR and a means to appease the West. By 1964, Mao was asserting that there had been a counter-revolution in the Soviet Union, and that capitalism had been restored such as the disavowal of the Marxist-Leninist tenet developed by Stalin regarding the dictatorship of the proletariat,<sup>42</sup> thus, announcing the end of the Cominform and (most troubling to Mao), de-emphasising the core Marxist-Leninist thesis of inevitable war between capitalism and socialism. Mao and his supporters argued that traditional Marxism was rooted in an industrialised European society and could not be applied to Asian peasant societies. Relations between the Chinese Communist Party and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union broke off, as did relations with the Communist Parties of the Warsaw Pact countries.<sup>43</sup> The Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s was a result of an ideological dispute which lasted almost until the collapse of the Soviet Union. But the main reason for China opposing the Soviet Union was somehow deeper: it was the time when real competition between Moscow and Beijing started; competition over influence in the Third World and

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40. Robert L. Worden, et.al, *China: A Country Study* (Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987), <http://countrystudies.us/China/>. Accessed on October 12, 2014.

41. n.25.

42. Liu Yunhai, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?lang=en&id=108648>, June 2005

43. "Sino-Soviet Split", <http://www.ibiblio.org/chinesehistory/contents/03pol/c05s04.html>. Accessed on September 25, 2014.

the International Communist Movement. China was, thus, attempting to displace the Moscow regime as the ideological leader of world Communism. The USSR had a network of Communist Parties it supported; China created its own rival network to battle it out for control of the left in numerous countries.<sup>44</sup> By the end of the 1960s, China, in the Soviets' official view, turned into a bitter enemy, and the Moscow leadership began to think about a possibility of an outright war with its former ally. Beijing too saw an inevitable confrontation with the Soviet Union, probably even a nuclear confrontation. A large Soviet military group was deployed in the Russian Far East.<sup>45</sup>

In 1963, the boundary dispute had come into the open when China explicitly raised the issue of territory lost through "unequal treaties" with Tsarist Russia. After unsuccessful border consultations in 1964, Moscow began the process of a military build-up along the border with China which continued into the 1970s.<sup>46</sup> On March 2, 1969, there was a violent confrontation on the Ussuri river, where dozens of Russian border guards were killed by Chinese soldiers. The Russians retaliated on March 15, with an artillery barrage that left the landscape on the Chinese side of the border looking like the Moon's surface.<sup>47</sup> Over the next decade, relations stabilised in an implacable confrontation. There was always a danger of renewed border clashes over disputed territory escalating into more serious conflict. The Soviet Army massively expanded its forces in Siberia and the Far East, posing a continuous threat to Beijing. Until at least the mid-1980s, the official line in Beijing remained the inevitability of war, with the Soviet Union seen as the most likely adversary.<sup>48</sup>

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44. Harold P. Ford, "[[https://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/winter98\\_99/art05.html](https://www.cia.gov/csi/studies/winter98_99/art05.html) Calling the Sino-Soviet Split]", *Studies in Intelligence*, Winter 1998-99.

45. Alexander Lukin, "Perceptions of China Threat in Russia and Russian-Chinese Relations", Written for the International Conference "China Threat Perceptions from Different Continents," Hong Kong, January 11-12, 2001.

46. Worden, et. al., eds., n.40.

47. Keith Suter, "1969: Russia and China- The War That Did Not Happen", *Global Directions*, <http://global-directions.com/Articles/Global%20Politics/China-Russia.pdf>. Accessed on September 27, 2014.

48. Ferdinand, n.27, pp. 31-34.

With Pakistan as the mediator, Mao responded to overtures from President Nixon and turned towards the US for hard balancing against the Soviet Union. In connection with Nixon's visit to China, the Soviet Union severely attacked the "Sino-American rapprochement". With Nixon's visit, most anti-American propaganda disappeared in China. The US was still criticised for imperialism, but not to the degree it had been before 1972. Instead, Soviet revisionism and "social imperialism" were now seen as China's main enemy. Furthermore, the triple alliance among Islamabad-Washington-Beijing against India forged the proximity between India and the Soviet Union as New Delhi received unqualified support from the Soviet leadership. The 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War resulted in a significant shift in the Cold War power balance in the South Asian region and the Soviet Union faced an alliance which was a force to reckon with in the South Asian security landscape. This further accelerated the tension between Beijing and Moscow.

The divide in the partnership fractured the international Communist movement and opened the way for the warming of relations between the United States and China under Nixon in 1971. Moreover, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan exacerbated Chinese concerns about possible Soviet expansion in Asia and kept them on high alert.

### *Post Cold War Relations*

The second half of the 1980s brought a 'wind of change' in the relations between Russia and China. Mikhail Gorbachev, last secretary of the Party understood that maintaining a good relationship with China would work in favour of the Soviet Union and, thus, announced the "China First" policy and, hence, in 1986, the Soviet Union decided to fully reestablish ties with the PRC. Gorbachev proposed agreements on a border railroad, joint hydropower development of both countries and even cooperation in space.<sup>49</sup>

By 1989, the process of rapprochement was complete when Gorbachev visited Beijing which resulted in a steady strengthening of relations. As a

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49. Ibid.



gesture of extending support to its ally, Gorbachev refused to involve the USSR in the sanctions the Western powers imposed on China following the Tiananmen disturbances.<sup>50</sup> Gorbachev was the first to seek détente, and proposed mutual withdrawals of troops from the border, and this quite quickly evolved into relieved reconciliation. However, this process was disrupted by the collapse of the Soviet Union, but as early as 1992, China and Russia signed an agreement on friendly relations, and this was consolidated with a Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation in 2001.<sup>51</sup>

Post the Soviet collapse, Boris Yeltsin, the first president of the Russian Federation, too remained a firm advocate of good relations with China and worked to build on the breakthrough achieved in the 1980s despite the strong pro-Western orientation of his government. In 1998, the two countries acted for the first time openly in concert in the Security Council to oppose the US bombing of Iraq ("Operation Desert Fox"). Subsequently, both countries strongly opposed the US-led attacks on Yugoslavia in 1999 and on Iraq in 2003. Since then, their cooperation in political, economic and security matters has intensified.<sup>52</sup>

In the early 1990s, however, it briefly appeared that the Chinese were becoming concerned as Moscow could become Washington's strategic ally, which was being interpreted as an engineered encirclement of the PRC by the US. Fortunately for the Beijing Administration, the failure of the Russo-American strategic partnership became evident over the dispute over NATO enlargement in the former Soviet space, the war in Kosovo, and the development of national missile defence capability. In 1996, Moscow and Beijing agreed on a formula for a long-term partnership.<sup>53</sup> Since 1991, a series of agreements has been signed which led to the delimitation, demarcation and partial demilitarisation of the border. Of its entire length, only three

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50. Dmitry Trenin, "Russian-Chinese Relations: A Study in Contemporary Geopolitics", [http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf\\_pool/publikationen/03\\_jb00\\_46.pdf](http://www.bundesheer.at/pdf_pool/publikationen/03_jb00_46.pdf)

51. Ferdinand, n.27, p. 22.

52. Anatoly Karlin, "A Very Brief History of China-Russia Relations", *Da Russophile*, May 2014, <http://darussophile.com/2014/05/a-very-brief-history-of-chinese-russian-relations/>

53. Trenin, n.50.

**The most visible manifestation was the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which emerged out of President Yeltsin's impulsive offer of "strategic partnership" with China in 1996 when he felt that the West, especially the US, was not granting Russia the respect and equality that it deserved.**

river islands currently controlled by Russia, remain contested. Beijing is no longer raising claims to some 1.5 million sq km of territory annexed in the 19th century by Tsarist Russia through "unequal treaties".<sup>54</sup> The rapprochement was, thus, based on a number of mutually shared solid strategic interests:

- Sufficient trust had emerged to enable Moscow and Beijing to tackle the complicated border and security issues.
  - The countries acknowledged their different modernisation paths and understood that closer economic and strategic cooperation would benefit them both.
- The geo-political and security constellations were changing for both countries. Moscow witnessed how the previous Eastern bloc and the newly independent states of the old Soviet Union were actively engaging with the European Union and NATO. After Yeltsin's short-lived dalliance with the West and NATO failed, Russia turned to China in the East which was seen as a reliable partner. China was simultaneously facing the growing presence of the US in the Asia-Pacific region. Furthermore, as Beijing analysed the impact of high-tech weapon systems and war technology deployed by the US in the first Iraq War, China understood that it needed to quickly upgrade its military capabilities. Due to the post-Tiananmen arms embargo imposed by the Western powers, Russia was the only potential source for the purchase of military high-tech.
  - Post Cold War era, Beijing and Moscow became concerned about the hegemonic position and influence of the US and strongly opposed the unipolar world order of the Western countries.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the establishment

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54. Ibid.

55. Nojonen, n. 33, p.14.

of a new world order and the new situations made China and Russia reshape their foreign policies.

Both countries, therefore, looked to each other for a stable regional environment, economic cooperation and strategic pay-offs. The most visible manifestation was the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) which emerged out of President Yeltsin's impulsive offer of "strategic partnership" with China in 1996 when he felt that the West, especially the US, was not granting Russia the respect and equality that it deserved. This struck a chord among Chinese leaders who were also concerned about

the security threat to Xinjiang from Afghanistan and possibly the rest of Central Asia. They initiated a process of regional cooperation at a meeting in Shanghai, which attracted most Central Asian states that were worried about the potential threats to their new-found independence. In 1998, this was turned into a formal diplomatic mechanism, and in 2001, they held the inaugural meeting of the SCO.<sup>56</sup>

The other important factor that led to strengthening of ties between the two countries was China's need of Russian defence equipment. Due to the deplorable condition of Russia post the Soviet break-up due to the huge economic crisis, and the crippling of the defence industrial complex, Russian military enterprises were constrained to sell their products to China as Russian military exports plummeted after 1991, and China became the most important client.

**Russia's and China's displeasure with the unipolar movement led the two countries to declare that the new international order should be based upon "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual advantage, peaceful coexistence and other universally recognised principles of international law."**

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56. Ferdinand, n. 27, p.20.

### *Relations Since 2000*

Post President Yeltsin's resignation, his successor Vladimir Putin's foreign policy initially was seen more as Europe and America centred, but he did not forget about the relevance of China in Russian foreign policy interests. In 2001, one of the most significant treaties was signed, the Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation between the PRC and the Russian Federation. This 25-Article document outlined the basis of Sino-Russian cooperation for the next 20 years. The treaty highlighted that there are no more territorial demands between the states, and that the countries will hold negotiations over the final demarcation of some common border areas set up already in 1991. For future existence and for the international scene, the most important were Articles 8 and 9 in the scope of the treaty. Article 8 guarantees peaceful cooperation between the two states: "Neither party will participate in any alliance or bloc which damages the sovereignty, security, and territorial integrity of the other party, and will not adopt any similar action, including not concluding a similar treaty with any third country. Neither party to the treaty will permit a third country to use its territory to damage the national sovereignty, security and territorial integrity of the other party". Article 9 is the core of Sino-Russian cooperation: "If one party of the treaty believes there is a threat of aggression menacing peace, wrecking peace, and involving its security interests and is aimed at one of the parties, the two parties will immediately make contact and hold consultations in order to eliminate the threat that has arisen". At the turn of the century, Russia signed a treaty with China which was the most significant as the term "strategic partnership", was used to describe the late 1990s and 21st century Sino-Russian relations.<sup>57</sup>

### *Convergence of Interests*

The contemporary relations between Russia and China have strengthened due to the convergence of interests and mutual concerns. Thus, the factors that have led to the rapprochement between the two countries are based on a number of mutually shared strong strategic interests. Russia's and

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57. Ibid., p. 24.

China's displeasure with the unipolar movement led the two countries to declare that the new international order should be based upon "mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual advantage, peaceful coexistence and other universally recognised principles of international law." This underlying overlap of views on international affairs was crystallised in 1997 when China and Russia signed a "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order". The two countries have also reaffirmed the intention to work towards the strengthening of the UN and along with India, Brazil and many other countries, anticipate the emergence of a more multipolar world, to which an increasing number of developing countries would also contribute.<sup>58</sup>

The Russia and China borders are on a potentially very unstable region of the former Soviet Central Asia. The new states in the region are all too fragile, with the post-Soviet regimes remaining vulnerable to domestic unrest that may result in ethnic and religious conflicts. In addition, like Moscow, Beijing sees the growth of Western influence, intra-state rivalry, and the spread of political extremism, coupled with the exponential growth of drugs trafficking in Central Asia as a cause for concern or even a threat. However, the Western geo-political "trespassing" in Central Asia and its participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, including the staging of joint exercises, is being read as a sign of growing American and European political and security attention being given to the region.

The other main factors bolstering Russia-China relations in contemporary global politics are: (1) Russia is an export oriented country which depends mainly on the energy and defence markets for sustaining its economic growth; (2) China is a huge market as the country is 'imported oriented', especially in terms of energy and defence markets. Therefore, China's demand for energy resources will enhance Russia's energy security as Moscow is in search of geo-political diversification of energy markets, apart from the European

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58. Ibid.

Union nations. Moreover, China's growing infrastructural development and economic prosperity has, in turn, led to growing energy demands. The Russian energy market is the key to China's energy consumption. Conventional wisdom holds that a potential Sino-Russian deal could raise the impulse on both sides to form a robust Eurasian continental energy-centred entente.<sup>59</sup> Additionally, as both countries are permanent members of the UN Security Council, the veto power holds key importance to each other which can be manoeuvred in their favour in the future.

### *Inferences*

In order to advance their strategic cooperation further, China and Russia have realised very well that historical baggage such as border disputes should be resolved. Therefore, the two countries have overcome impediments which could have otherwise caused a dent in the durability of the strategic partnership. Currently, the Russian political elites perceive that their main security challenges emanate from Western Europe, the US and the Middle East. China is not regarded as a genuine military threat to Russia and vice-versa.

Both China and Russia believe that they were unfairly treated in the past, and in the contemporary geo-political architecture, the Western allies' policies aim at curtailing their growth and influence. Hence, the two countries are pushing for national rejuvenation and global image building, at the individual as well as bilateral level, to emerge as powerful global actors.

Although the countries are inter-dependent on each other, they also have alternative sources as they both understand that over-dependence means potential vulnerability as was seen during the Sino-Soviet split phase.

Tellingly, Richard Weitz stresses that the relations have not blossomed into a "formal military alliance" or into closely coordinated policies on regional security matters. It is a partnership of convenience wherein both remain competitors rather than true partners as national interests may lead to opposing views in the international realm, as seen historically.

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59. Morena Skalamera, "Pipeline Pivot: Why Russia and China are Poised to Make Energy History", This policy brief is based on "Booming Synergies in Sino-Russian Natural Gas Partnership: 2014 as the Propitious Year," published May 2014 by the Belfer Centre for Science and International Affairs, p.4.

Nevertheless, let us explore these arguments based on a few hypothetical scenarios, taking into consideration the historical engagements and challenges that existed in Russia-China relations and how they may impact the core mutual interests which, when compromised, may justify the predictions of the academic community. Some hypothetical situations are:

**Scenario 1: China Becomes Self-Reliant and is No Longer Dependent on Russia**

China has become stronger than Russia and is leaving no stone unturned to be less dependent on Russia and become more self-reliant in spheres such as defence cooperation. In its efforts, China has made great advances in developing its own military equipment since 2005, with the indigenisation of its defence industries. If and when China reaches enough independence from Russia in military technology, Beijing might well 'dump' Russia as a 'strategic' partner. The answer is: the interaction between the two countries is limited to mainly three items: oil, gas and arms, apart from the strategic aspect in which Russia clearly has an upper hand. For China to completely decamp itself from Russian dependency for advanced military technology is improbable in the foreseeable future, at least until the Europeans or the Americans remove their boycott on arms sales to China, as this would, over time, undercut Russian companies' dominant position as suppliers.

**Scenario 2: Russia Loses Control in the Eurasian Space to China**

Russia is aware that the Central Asian states are more dependent on China. Central Asia is the strategic backyard of Moscow but China is becoming the decisive player through the SCO. However, as China has outperformed Russia in many spheres, especially in economic development, Moscow sees the presence of China in Central Asia more as a 'caretaker' as it is the major economic investor and market in the region and, more importantly, the presence of China as a major player will keep the US at bay in the region which Russia for now is unable to do.

**Scenario 3: The Equation With the US Changes**

The future of Sino-Russian relations still depends largely on the policies of

the United States and Europe towards China and Russia at the individual level. Although Russia and China see the US as anathema, China would continue to coexist with the US in the international system as long as the US respects Chinese interests and gives scope to its growth in global politics. As for Russia, historically, its preferred option is to lean towards the West. Moscow has made efforts and continues to make efforts, to strengthen its ties with Washington. In other words, although both China and Russia may despise the West, China cannot sacrifice the US market, and Russia will not give up on a reset of relations with the US.<sup>60</sup> However, threat perceptions regarding the US policies to encircle the growth of China and Russia in global politics will continue to push China and Russia to form a “soft alliance” against the US. For instance, fear of a US-China military conflict over Taiwan, or countries of the former Soviet space becoming members of either NATO or the European Union or a more aggressive US posture which confronts Russian interests in the post-Soviet space.

#### **Scenario 4: Demographic Asymmetry and the Rise of a Border Dispute**

In fact, the problems with a Sino-Russian alliance run even deeper. With its economic, military, and demographic heft, China generates considerable unease in Russia. Consider the demographic situation in Siberia which is now Russia’s new frontier. Siberia floats on an ocean of gas fields.<sup>61</sup> Its eastern provinces are very sparsely populated while China has 10 times the population of Russia. What is worse, the Russian population is declining while the Chinese is growing. Many are afraid that illegal Chinese immigrants will simply settle in Siberia and the Far East, and that it is simply a matter of time before China will want to grab official Russian land. An ascending China is certainly a problem for, and a rival to, Russian influence in that area, but military adventurism by China in the Russian border territories holds too little of value to even consider going to war over it.<sup>62</sup>

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60. Huiyun Feng, “China and Russia vs. the United States? Just How Likely are China and Russia to Ally Against the U.S.?” *The Diplomat*, March 2, 2015

61. Suter, n.47.

62. <http://www.city-data.com/forum/history/943542-china-russias-historical-relationship-ancient-war.html#ixzz415mzazH8>



Another important driver in the Russian-Chinese strategic relationship will be the development of the Russian oil and gas sector. China, the fastest growing petroleum consumer in the world, has viewed Russia as an important alternative source of oil—and to a lesser extent, gas—for the past decade or so.

Undoubtedly, the China-Russia strategic relations today are better than ever. Both countries, despite sharing common factors in the past, pursued different paths in terms of ideology, national interests, diplomatic ties, economic relations, etc until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Currently, the partnership is united by wide-ranging mutual interests and mutual concerns with a common goal to challenge the preeminence of the US and establish a multipolar world, enhance global security, and combat non-conventional threats. The partnership is also one of mutual suspicion and competition.

Based on their past behaviour, and the historical developments in the bilateral relations between the two countries, in the context of contemporary international politics, the strategic community has submitted various outcomes of the strategic partnership between Russia and China, one of which is the 'role reversal' argument in which Russia will play the junior partner in the alliance. Another argument presented is that the partnership is here to stay, while some predict that relations between the two countries are transitory as it is a partnership of convenience, and the mutual interests and mutual concerns are in response to the current developments in international politics and based on the national interests and global aspirations of the two countries.