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The Chinese Dragon and the Russian Bear: The Course and the Future of their Relationship

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Abstract

The tumultuous China-Russia relationship looks back in time. The history of Chinese-Russian relations during the historical journey reflects the existence of two hostile forces that have developed a mutually beneficial cooperation in the shadow of an unsuccessful shared history, a cultural and racial bias of political misunderstandings, ideological differences and geopolitical competition. Although their relationship has been steadily improving during the 1990s to the present day, attitudes have remained highly ambiguous. Moscow and Beijing have reaffirmed their "strategic cooperation" and commitment to a new "global multipolar order," although senior Russian officials have continued to speak openly about the "Chinese threat". The passage from a constructive to a strategic Sino-Russian partnership took place along the historical path, based on a new cooperative vision that formed the cornerstone for the conciliation of the Chinese dragon and the Russian bear. The key question that emerges is the dynamics of this approach and its future. The development of China-Russia "strategic cooperation" can serve the following possibilities: strategic convergence, political and military alliance, the end of history, confrontation and strategic tension. As unique certainty, the relationship between these two countries traverses the emerging horizon, affects Eurasia and far beyond its limits, defining history's route.

Keywords: A Strategic Partnership, an Axis of Convenience, China, Russia, the History of Sino-Russian Relations

1. Introduction

The degree of political, strategic and regulatory convergence achieved in the China-Russia relationship is impressive. The crucial question is whether the two countries will lock their partnership into limited cooperation, a fragile friendship or even the creation of an axis of convenience. Our tracking stations will be: the recording of the historical course of the relationship between the Chinese Dragon and the Russian Bear, the reasons for rapprochement, the thorns that hinder cooperation, an attempt to outline a first account of their partnership and possible scenarios for the development of the strategic cooperation.

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The early history of the Chinese Communist Party in relation to Bolshevik Russia has been rather unfortunate. China plunged into a violent civil war in the 1920s, with a common front of nationalists (Guomindang) and the Communist Party against the post-imperial government in Beijing. Stalin deliberately supported the nationalist body under Sun yat Sen and after his death in 1925 under Chiang Kai Shek and the Communist Party was encouraged by the Communist International to cooperate with the nationalists (Nadkarni, 2010:53).

Mao Zedong challenged the USSR as a party to the resistance against the nationalists and the strengthening of the Communist Party leadership until the 1930s. During World War II, the Communist Party of China joined forces with the nationalist side (Guomindang) in the fight against the Japanese. However, the alliance was short-lived and China became embroiled in a second civil war, this time between nationalists and communists. Subsequently, a 1946 truce mediated by the United States failed to stem the tide of violence, despite US financial support for the nationalists, as the Communist Party under Mao gained control of Beijing and the surrounding area in January 1949 and then on. Chiang Kai Shek and his followers retreated to the island of Taiwan, with Taipei as their temporary capital. The People's Republic of China was recognized on October 1, 1949.

Looking back, in June 1896, China and Russia signed the Li-Lobanov Treaty in Moscow, also known as the Sino-Russian Secret Treaty, which is the first official alliance in the history of Sino-Russian relations, following Russia's proposal for defence against Japan. On August 14, 1945, the Chinese nationalist government and the Soviet Union signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship and Alliance in Moscow. In February 1950, the Soviet Union and China signed the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Aid, the last formal alliance between the two countries (Huasheng, 2021).

In his memoirs, Qian Qichen states that the period before Gorbachev's famous visit to Beijing in 1989 consisted of ten years of dialogue, starting from 1959 to 1969, ten years of confrontation from 1969-1979 and ten years of negotiations from 1979 to 1989 (Lo, 2008: 173). During the "ten years of dialogue" an ideological and political confrontation prevailed, while the ten years of negotiations were turbulent years, with issues of friction over the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, Moscow's support for the Vietnamese Cambodian operation and increased mobilizations along the Sino-Soviet border. In July 1986, in Vladivostok, Gorbachev articulated a new cooperative vision, which formed the basis for the Chinese-Russian reconciliation.

2. China-Russia Cooperation Framework

During former President Boris Yeltsin's official visit to China in December 1992 and the joint declaration of mutual relationship, also signed by the Chinese President, Yang Shangkun pledged to extend the China-Russia relationship to a higher degree to serve "the fundamental interests of the two peoples" and to "promote peace and stability in Asia and the world".

Other separate agreements include the Joint Declaration signed by Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin in April 1996 in Beijing, reaffirming the two countries' willingness to further reinforce friendly contacts between their armed forces at various levels and to develop cooperation on the basis of equality (Tan, 2008: 234).

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The continuing concern for US policy was reflected in the proposal of the 1997 Beijing Joint Declaration calling for the promotion of "world multipolarity and the establishment of a new world order", based on the observation that in the post-Cold War era a growing number of hegemony and chose "dialogue and cooperation instead of confrontation and conflict". Indicative of the best point of the post-Soviet Relationship between China and Russia is the Treaty of Cordial Friendship and Cooperation, signed in July 2001, during President Jiang Zemin's visit to Russia. Russia-China's mutual promise to develop a relationship on the basis of friendship rather than persisting on a hostile attitude reflects the lessons the two countries have learned from the past. The Joint Declaration on the 21st Century World Order, signed by President Vladimir Putin and President Hu Jintao in July 2005, reflected Moscow's concern about the global challenge of international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the difference between the rich and the poor, environmental pollution, infectious diseases, criminal offences and drug trafficking (Tan, 2008:235). The situation has changed since the US intervention in the region and China is much more interested in cooperating with Russia, especially now that it is considering the relatively good relations between the United States and India (Marketos, 2009: 5).

In the recent past, Sino-Russian relations have improved significantly, so that the countries' relations become closer and more meaningful than at any other time in their history, going through a golden age (Kulintsev, 2018). After all, every aspect of the relationship has expanded and taken on a full multidimensional character. The 4,300 km border demarcation agreement is a fact and there is no obvious bilateral disagreement. Moreover, the two sides provide each other with strong moral and political support on priority issues: Moscow supports Beijing in Taiwan, Tibet, the Xinjiang region, while the Chinese support Russian positions on Chechnya and North Caucasus. China has refrained from criticizing Russian intervention in Ukraine (Faltaich, 2018) and Russia has implicitly supported China in its naval conflicts by participating in military exercises in the South China Sea and the Sea of Japan. Both powers have long shared a common position on the North Korea issue, supporting a double freeze and voicing opposition to U.S. missile defense in the region. Common components of the Sino-Russian rapprochement are complementary economies, concerns about American power, fears of "Color Revolutions", and common interests in the Middle East and Africa (Marketos, 2009: 98). In fact, the two countries are effectively coordinating their action to repel Western criticism of domestic human rights practices and policies.

Over the next few years, any tensions between Moscow and Beijing are likely to be contained for two reasons. First, the bilateral relationship is too important to risk regional influence in Central Asia, a second priority for China in particular, as long as the United States remains in the region, Russia and China will have a common focus.

3. Sino-Russian rapprochement

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The reasons for China-Russia rapprochement include the following factors: After the events in Tiananmen Square, China fell into western disfavour, with the latter imposing an arms embargo on the former. The strong commitment of non-communist Russia to the West in 1992 was soon tempered by the demystification that took place. The end of the Chinese-Soviet ideological conflict over the issue of the leadership of communist dynamics stemmed from the fact that China had now embraced economic liberalisation. Moscow's move toward centralism and central nationalism was in line with Beijing's post-Maoist ideology. The change from constructive to strategic cooperation occurred in the course of the historical route (Nadkarni, 2010:56).

On the positive side, the most remarkable achievement of China-Russia cooperation is precisely the agreement on the "opening of borders" that safeguard against violent disruptions along the long-term border lines that separates China from Russia, and on the other side, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Border arrangements have allowed Russia and China to focus on their immediate security problems in Eurasia and East and South Asia respectively. Also, the geographical proximity between the two countries facilitates Russia to develop closer trade and economic ties with China. Besides, in recent years, Russia's cooperation with China has expanded in the field of scientific and technical cooperation. In addition, energy coalition is another area that has attracted growing attention from Russian and Chinese leaders. A large gas pipeline to China, Power of Siberia was built in 2019.

Although their commercial activity has increased, China's general trade with Russia represents a relatively small proportion of its external trade, and there have also been difficulties in developing the China-Russia oil-producing program (Li, 2009:161). However, at the meeting of the two leaders, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, in June 2019 in Moscow, more than \$ 100 billion in trade was reported in 2018, which indicates a 30% increase over 2017. These actions enhance cooperation between the two countries while consolidating their strategic priorities and complementary objectives with Russia to promote Eurasian Economic Union in a wider context that is encountered with the ambitious plan of the "Belt and Road Initiative", BRI (Cheila, 2020:114). Moscow and Beijing have also declared their intention to work together on the "Polar Road of Silk" for the development of the Arctic, part of its broader initiative, formerly known as "One Belt - One Road". Other aspects are the Information Silk Road to promote information by creating common platforms and Digital Silk Road intertwined with Internet, e-commerce, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum computing, large data, cloud computing, blockchain, smart cities (Revinova, 2020). Space Silk Road (Dotson, 2020) reveals Russia-China cooperation so that the Beidou satellite network is exploited as a global alternative for the US GPS network. The main exports of Russia to China consist of weapons and energy, while the share of industrial exports, commercial ties is likely to create friction, as the leaders of the two countries have expressed dissatisfaction with the nature and volume of transactions (Nadkarni, 2010:79). China has invested in region denomination weapons (including ultrasonic missiles and "smart mines" that threaten the viability of US regional intervention (Campbell & Doshi, 2021). It also has the opportunities for amphibian and power projection that Beijing could use for aggressive missions against India, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam and others. China has approached Russia for early warning systems (Trenin, 2019), making its defense "invincible". Russia has sold to

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China the latest version of the most advanced anti-aircraft missile defense system S-400 (Aron, 2019) and the well-known for the performance of the Su-35 fighter aircraft (Korovinis, 2017). More than 3,000 Chinese troops took part in the Vostok 2018 exercise - the first time a country that is not an ally under a treaty with Moscow in a military exercise with significant potential on Russian territory. However, overcoming any differences constitutes a real challenge for the two countries.

Beijing's pursuit in Central Asia is to ensure a stable geopolitical environment. Although the view reflects Moscow's assessment, the understanding of geopolitical stability differs. Russia, meanwhile, is projected as the undisputed regional leader, with Chinese leadership geopolitical stability implying more equal regulation.

Besides, it is a common finding that they emerge objectively significant obstacles to the closest cooperation between Russia and China (Marketos, 2009:98). The biggest weakness in the relationship lies in Russia's concern for China's sovereignty over mass immigration, especially to Siberia, which fears it could fall victim to China's reversal of Manchuria.

In a long-term perspective, especially in the case of reduced US interest for Central Asia, the region can be an area for competition between Russia and China. For most of the post-Cold War period, Central Asia has been largely left to Russia for historical reasons and because Russia has demanded it. The future of Sino-American relations is perhaps the biggest conundrum for current politics as well as the theory of International Relations (Gofas & Tzifakis, 2017:17). The burning strategic question, but also the most complex analytical challenge of our time is not just the rise of China, but if its world-class perception and its implementation will encounter or deviate from the global order and ideas produced during the period Transatlantic sovereignty (Gofas & Tzifakis, 2019:85). According to the White House report on the new US National Security Strategy (NSS, December 2017, as well as the reports on the National Defense Strategy (NDS, January 2018) and the reformed Nuclear Posture Review-NPR, February 2018, published by the US Department of Defense, Russia and China are included in major threats (Tsirigotis, 2018), due to different worldviews (Weitz, 2015). The complex question that arises: can the US devise a strategy that achieves two conflicting goals - competition and cooperation at the same time (Medeiros, 2021)? The domination of a single power in either of the two main spheres of Eurasia - Europe or Asia - remains a good definition of strategic risk for America, with or without the Cold War (Kovalenko, 2020: 416).

The China-Russia strategic convergence is a clear trend that will gain further momentum. Strategic convergence should not be equated with an alliance where China and Russia are perfect strategic partners. Developments within China and Russia are crucial to how this relationship develops. Although Beijing and Moscow have a common interest in limiting the power of the United States, building a fully anti-Western alliance is impossible to prove viable in the short term. Besides, Russia and especially China depend on open access to Western markets, supporting its rise. However, Moscow and Beijing in the economic sector are geared to their own system of interbank payments, an SPFS-channel for the transmission of electronic messages into financial transactions, SWIFT analogue (Greek-Russian Chamber

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of Commerce, 2021) and in the abandonment of the dollar for their financial transactions (Capital, 2021). It is an indisputable truth that if Beijing and Moscow find that US hegemony does not give them the space they need, as they re-emerge as world powers, they will have strong incentives to deepen their strategic ties. The resulting tension between Russia and the United States could lead Russia to its embrace with China.

4. The future of cooperation

The first and perhaps most important point of cooperation between the two countries is that it is surprisingly "normal", as there is a strong public commitment to expand cooperation, but this positive mentality is undermined by prejudice, lack of political will, its issues agenda and dysfunctional decision-making, especially on the Russian side. "Strategic cooperation" is not a "relationship of a new type", but it is quite conventional in structure, style and thought.

The driving forces of cooperation lies on the common goals and values (Sutter, 2018), in the perceived vulnerabilities (Friedman, 2018) of Russia - oil price reduction due to sanctions regarding Ukraine and "Russian interference" in the US election- China, (export problems, due to an increase in customs duties, in view of US and West pressures) and in opportunities for action.

Much of the difficulty in translating rhetoric into practice stems from the growing asymmetry in perspectives, interests, and abilities, which hinders more than any other factor the development of a long-term common sense of purpose (Lo, 2008: 178).

Russia and China express very different views, assumptions, expectations in "strategic cooperation", as they emphasize the identity of their positions on the bilateral and international issues that arise, but there is virtually no area of relationship where the two sides are "in total agreement". Moscow and Beijing identify the need to challenge American "hegemonic power," but not how it will be carried out. Meanwhile, China-Russia's relationship is characterized by numerous gaps, misconceptions and dividing lines. The Russians and the Chinese maintain ambivalence on both sides, but they have managed to overcome these concerns for the sake of mutual benefit.

Strategic competition in Central Asia is at an early stage, and the issue of "Chinese demographic expansion" has been resolved for the time being. Public solidarity will be expressed in most international issues and the United States will remain a suitable focus on anti-hegemonic emotion. It is not clear that Sino-Russian cooperation will develop beyond the next decade. Trying to view the longer-term trends is a theoretical venture, because predictions depend on a multitude of variables, whose effect is difficult to approach. Five long-term scenarios emerge for their relations (Lo, 2008: 183). The development of China-Russia "strategic cooperation" can serve the following possibilities: strategic convergence, political and military alliance, the end of history, confrontation and strategic tension.

Strategic convergence ensures coherence, as it is based on the assumption that Moscow and Beijing will strengthen their cooperation in all spheres and at all levels of relations between the two countries. Deficiencies that hinder their relationship and undermine mutual trust will

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be gradually reduced and eventually eliminated. Russia and China would not only work together with other powers to end American "hegemonic" power, but each country would find its place on the Eurasian continent. After all, there would be no new "big game" between Moscow and Beijing, because both would neutralize any tensions through the increasingly effective multilateral institutions. China and Russia behave very differently in achieving their foreign policy goals, but the combined effect of their actions is often greater than the sum of its parts (Kendall-Taylor & Shullman, 2019).

However, while the strategic convergence scenario seems plausible, it underestimates a number of serious factors. The first is the growing asymmetry of Russian and Chinese competence. Given that China is nine times more populous than Russia, it is clear that the conditions for an equal and comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries are inadequate and, above all, bear no resemblance to those that define the German-French cordial alignment within the EU (Fakiolas & Fakiolas, 2004:393). Besides, the Russian elite, but also the people, are interested in the fate of the "empty" eastern provinces. Meanwhile, China could return to an empire mentality, so that it could spontaneously treat Russia as a reservoir of raw materials, serving neo-colonial fashion. The second disruptive element results from internal developments in Russia and China. Strategic convergence presupposes a stable and prosperous future in both countries, although there are many doubts about the outcome.

The next scenario envisages the China-US "conciliation" to include the comprehensive development of relations and even the strategic convergence, which would be of particular concern to Russia. Moscow's priority in international politics is to extend its influence by exerting its foreign policy. With China refraining from completing its transition from a regional to a global power and America's leadership on the world stage being undermined by recent developments, Russia can exploit the partial gap in the international arena by projecting itself as "inevitable" power. However, in the event of either an open conflict or the stabilization of the global geopolitical environment, the limits of Russian influence would be brutally exposed.

Assuming that there is still steady progress in relations between the two countries, the question that arises is - will it evolve into an alliance, based on China-Soviet relations in 1950 or a "more modern" organization-structure, such as "additional US relations enjoyed by the United Kingdom and Japan? Moscow and Beijing have consistently denied any intention to enter into a formal alliance, which would signal a return to grouping policies which they are publicly criticising, although such assurances may or may not exist. Having Russia as an ally would not enhance China's competence, but rather overstate it. The alliance is a double-edged sword (Huasheng, 2021), because there are two major concerns: one is the fear of being abandoned by the allies when they are in a state of crisis, the other is the fear of being dragged by them into an unwanted war. Reference is made to the destructive failure of the original Treaty between China and the Soviet Union in 1950 and the 1969 border disputes, which almost led to a nuclear crisis.

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In his essay "The End of History" in 1989, the political philosopher Francis Fukuyama noted that "with the universalization of Western liberal democracy, the world is turning to the final form of human government". Today more than ever, Western rules are challenged by other value systems: Islamic fundamentalism, authoritarianism and semi-authoritarian models of modernization, even the revived radical socialism in Latin America. At present, decision-making regimes in Moscow and Beijing have managed to impose a distinction between economic modernization on one aspect and democratic political rights and civil society on the other, without this always being feasible.

Unlike "End of History", the coping scenario has a historical precedent to support it. The Sino-Soviet rupture and the 1969 border disputes showed how quickly and drastically the relationship could deteriorate. A repetition of such disturbing developments seems impossible until one recalls that confrontation must have seemed an extremely distant possibility when the original Sino-Soviet treaty was signed in 1950. The first critical factor is the pending situation in Central Asia and the Russian Far East, as in the previous case there is an obvious conflict of interests between Moscow's determination to reaffirm regional leadership and Beijing's desire to maximize Chinese influence. The second possible source of problem comes from intense nationalist pressures. Moscow perceives the conceptual threat of Chinese expansionism by adopting a hostile strategic stance, which challenges Beijing to respond. Proponents of confrontation theory point to another possible source of the problem: The intense political and economic crisis in China, resulting from the failed modernization process. The collapse of China's theory is popular among some Russian writers (Li, 2009:161), who predict the collapse of the communist regime and the consequence of the country's descent into chaos, as it would no longer be able to control China's vast population. Additionally, the rise of the Chinese in the Russian Far East would create an inflammatory situation, as low-level local unrest could escalate into something much more serious. Although the confrontation scenario contains signs of truth it is highly theoretical and is based on suspicious assumptions. Second, both countries have far more effective means of power and influence than military action. Besides, the "chaos theory" underestimates the resilience and ingenuity of the regime.

The non-likelihood of a conflict does not mean that their relationships will be without problems in the coming decades, as weaknesses and constraints will become more obvious in the future. Bilateral tensions will remain, even if the controversy does not escalate to the point of conflict. Strategic tension is the direct opposite of strategic convergence, which dictates a steady improvement in relations, while strategic tension predicts the strengthening of negative elements and a gradual alienation between Moscow and Beijing. Strategic tension provides for a lack of institutional movement in key areas, such as energy and infrastructure cooperation (Lo, 2008:192). This scenario predicts that the main threat in the relationship would not be conflict or confrontation, but indifference.

4. Conclusions

The interaction between Moscow and Beijing is neither as impressive as the two sides demand, nor as threatening as Western critics claim. It is a relationship and a distribution of a

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traditional type great power, determined by cracks and "constraints", such as its strengths and capabilities. The big question in the coming decades is not whether such cooperation will undermine the established international order, but whether it can adapt and prosper in an ever internationalized and interdependent world (Lo, 2008:195). A unique certainty emerges on the horizon, defining the route of the relationship of these two countries, by affecting not only Eurasia, but far beyond its limits, setting its seal in the course of history.

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