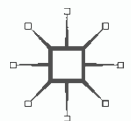


Edited by Jo Inge Bekkevold and Bobo Lo



SINO-RUSSIAN

Relations in the 21st Century



Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century

Jo Inge Bekkevold · Bobo Lo
Editors

Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century

palgrave
macmillan

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ISBN 978-3-319-92515-8 ISBN 978-3-319-92516-5 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-92516-5>

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018943641

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer International Publishing AG part of Springer Nature
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The inception of this volume was the “New perspectives on Sino-Russian relations” conference organized at the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies (IFS) in Oslo in September 2014, in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis. The analyses presented in this volume have since evolved in tandem with developments in Sino-Russian relations over the last few years. We want to express our sincere thanks to the participants at the conference, the contributors in the book, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments that have helped us sharpen our arguments along the way to preparing the final manuscript.

The original conference and this book would not have been possible without generous financial support from the Norwegian Research Council through its NORUSS research programme on The High North/Arctic and Russia, and the support of the Fridtjof Nansen Institute as well as the Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies. Finally, Sarah Roughley and her staff at Palgrave Macmillan deserve special thanks for their patience and in believing in the project and guiding it through the publication process.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	Anti-access/area-denial
ABM	Anti-Ballistic Missile (Treaty)
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank
AL-31	Saturn AL-31 Russian aircraft turbofan engine
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BCM	Billion Cubic Meters
BP	British Petroleum
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRIC	Group of Brazil, Russia, India and China
BRICS	Group of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
CAGP	Central Asia-China gas pipeline
CASS	Chinese Academy of Social Sciences
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CFSP	Common Foreign and Security Policy (EU)
CHNL	Centre for High North Logistics
CIC	China Investment Corporation
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CNOOC	China National Offshore Oil Corporation
CNPC	China National Petroleum Corporation
COSCO	China Ocean Shipping Company
COSL	China Oilfield Services Ltd

CPSP	Comprehensive partnership of strategic cooperation (between China and Russia)
CSCE	Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSDP	Common Security and Defence Policy (EU)
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
CTBT	Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty
D-30	Soloviev D-30 Russian aircraft turbofan engine
DF-31AG	Dong Feng 31 (Chinese mobile ICBM)
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea)
E3 + 3	EU Three + 3 (See P5 + 1)
EC	European Community
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zones
ESPO	East Siberia-Pacific Ocean
EU	European Union
EurAsEC	Eurasian Economic Community
F-22	Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor (fifth-generation fighter aircraft)
F-35	Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II (fifth-generation combat aircraft)
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTA	Free Trade Agreement
G-7	Group of Seven (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States)
G-8	Group of Eight (G-7 + Russia)
G-20	Group of Twenty
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GICNT	Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism
HADR	Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief
ICBM	Inter-continental Ballistic Missile
IL-76	Ilyushin Il-76 (Russian transport aircraft)
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
IPO	Initial Public Offering
IRBM	Intermediate Range Ballistic Missile
IS	Islamic State
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham)
IT	Information Technology
J-11B	Shenyang J-11B (Chinese fighter aircraft)
JASDF	Japan Air Self-Defence Forces
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (on Iran's nuclear program)

JGSDF	Japan Ground Self-Defence Forces
JMSDF	Japan Maritime Self-Defence Forces
JSDF	Japan Self-Defence Forces
K2	Karshi-Khanabad (military base in Uzbekistan)
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MD	Missile Defense
MENA	Middle East North Africa
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
Mi-17	Russian transport and combat helicopter
MOD	Ministry of Defence
MOFCOM	Chinese Ministry of Commerce
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MTCR	Missile Technology Control Regime
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDB	New Development Bank (formerly BRICS Development Bank)
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission (China)
NFU	No First Use (Nuclear Weapons Doctrine)
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NOCs	National Oil and Gas Companies
NPT	Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons
NSG	Nuclear Suppliers Group
NSR	Northern Sea Route
NSS	National Security Strategy
NWO	New World Order” (Declared by US President George H. W. Bush in 1990)
OBOR	One Belt One Road (Belt and Road Initiative)
ODA	Official Development Assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ONGC	Indian Oil and Natural Gas Corporation
OPEC	Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
P5	Permanent Five (the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council)
P5+1	Permanent Five plus Germany (P5 and Germany joint diplomatic efforts with Iran with regard to its nuclear program)
PESCO	Permanent structured cooperation (EU)
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PLAAF	People’s Liberation Army Air Force
PLAN	People’s Liberation Army Navy
PPP	Purchasing Power Parity
PRC	People’s Republic of China

PYD	Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure
RFE	Russian Far East
ROK	Republic of Korea (South Korea)
S-400	Russian mobile surface-to-air missile system
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SLOC	Sea lines of communication
SOE	State Owned Enterprise
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SRF	Silk Road Fund (China)
Su-27 Flanker	Russian fighter jet
SU-30MK2	Russian multi-role fighter aircraft
Sukhoi Su-35	Russian multi-purpose fighter
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (missile defense system)
TNK-BP	Tyumenskaya Neftyanaya Kompaniya (Tyumen Oil Company)—British Petroleum
TPP	Trans-Pacific Partnership
UN	United Nations
UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea
US	United States
USD	United States Dollar
USGS	United States Geological Survey
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWI	World War I (First World War)
WWII	World War II (Second World War)
YJ-12	Yingji-12 (Chinese anti-ship cruise missile)
YJ-18	Yingji-18 (Chinese anti-ship and land attack cruise missile)
ZTE	ZTE Corporation (Chinese telecommunications and information technology company)

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Introduction

Bobo Lo

It is hard to imagine a warmer political relationship in recent times than that of Russian president Vladimir Putin and Chinese president Xi Jinping. The two not only see each other more frequently than any other pair of international leaders, but their meetings are a publicist's dream, supplementing warm affirmations of friendship with a stream of bilateral agreements. The Putin–Xi dynamic, and Sino-Russian partnership, suggest a world where common interests, mutual trust, and shared purpose are more than just slogans.¹

This is also a relationship between two of the world's leading powers. In just three decades China has transformed itself from a regional backwater in East Asia into a global actor whose heft is exceeded only by the United States. While Russia's claims to great power status are more debatable, its actions can have global resonance, as we have seen over Ukraine and Syria. The significance of Sino-Russian interaction has been further highlighted against the backdrop of an international environment more turbulent than at any time in the last three decades.

For some observers, the 'strategic partnership' between Beijing and Moscow represents the most serious challenge to the world order.² For others, it offers a practical template for a more effective and equitable

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global system. Either way, Sino-Russian engagement asks real questions about constructs that have long been taken for granted: the nature and structure of global governance; the universality of norms and values; the role of international institutions; understandings of sovereignty; the meaning and application of power; and interpretations of security, globalization, and regionalism.

There is, however, a danger of being caught up in all the hype. Should we take the professions of likemindedness in Beijing and Moscow at face value? Does the substance of their partnership match up to its ambitious rhetoric? We may indeed be witnessing the evolution of a new type of relationship, one that transcends historical suspicion and much of the conventional wisdom of international relations.³ But it is legitimate to ask whether the edifice of Sino-Russian partnership is more fragile than it looks, sustained by the suspension of disbelief and sublimation of tensions for the sake of short-term geopolitical goals.

We have, after all, been down this path before. During the Sino-Soviet ‘unbreakable friendship’ of the 1950s, the two countries maintained a strategic and ideological alliance against the United States and its allies. However, this lasted barely a decade, before relations lapsed into a 30-year period of cold, and occasionally hot, confrontation. We are told that things are different today, that Sino-Russian partnership rests on much more secure foundations. This may be true, but if so it raises real questions about how the two sides arrived at this point. What has changed to create a new reality, both in the relationship itself and its broader international context? And how resilient is this new paradigm?

The collection of essays in this volume sets out to answer these questions by examining recent developments across the whole spectrum of the relationship—from the macro level of grand strategy and geopolitics down to bilateral interaction in specific areas, such as energy, military ties, Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Arctic. The picture that emerges is complex and often contradictory. On the one hand, the Sino-Russian relationship boasts major achievements, and is certainly more effective than many. On the other hand, significant differences and uncertainties remain, notwithstanding determined efforts by both sides to address these. The result is an interaction characterized by ambiguity and fluidity, in which little is decided and much remains possible.

TWO LINES OF ARGUMENT

The open-ended possibilities of the Sino-Russian relationship are reflected in the debate over its current condition and future prospects. In essence, there are two schools of thought, which might loosely be described as ‘believers’ and ‘skeptics’. This division, of course, is imperfect. Even the most bullish view of the relationship would recognize the existence of disagreements and tensions within it. Conversely, most skeptics would admit that there are areas where Beijing and Moscow cooperate quite effectively and to their mutual satisfaction. The difference in evaluation is often one of emphasis, and there are gradations of view within each category. Inevitably, too, assessments are susceptible to the impact of external factors—be it the global financial crash of 2008, Moscow’s annexation of Crimea, fluctuating oil prices, political instability in the United States and Europe, or the contrasting fortunes of the Russian and Chinese economies. No relationship operates in a vacuum or develops in strictly linear fashion.

Accentuating the Positive

The main thesis of the believers is that the overall direction of travel in the relationship is one of strategic, economic, and normative convergence. This is reflected not only in the proclamations of leaders, but also in measurable outcomes. In the UN Security Council, for example, Russia and China have worked closely and successfully to counter Western actions aimed at unseating the Assad regime in Syria. Elsewhere, their cooperation has given impetus to emerging international institutions, such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) framework, the SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organization), and the AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). And bilaterally, the two countries have stepped up their interaction, especially following the sharp deterioration of Russia-West relations post-Crimea. They have concluded major energy agreements; their troops participate regularly in large joint military exercises; and high-level arms sales have resumed after a hiatus of several years.

No less importantly for this narrative, the two sides have transcended a difficult past. The territorial issue—and the question of China’s ‘lost one and a half million square kilometers’—has been resolved.⁴ Chinese ‘illegal migration’, which had been a major source of tension in the

1990s, is off the agenda.⁵ And Sino-Russian engagement in Central Asia is characterized more by cooperation than competition, defying the predictions of many Western commentators.

None of this is to suggest that partnership is without its problems. The point, however, is that both sides understand that their core interests are served by ever closer cooperation. Russia needs China as a geopolitical counterweight to the United States; a primary market for its energy and commodity exports; a buyer of high-tech weaponry; and as its principal partner in building a new world order. Beijing values the partnership for similar and compatible reasons: to constrain US ‘hegemonic’ power; to strengthen China’s strategic position in the Asia-Pacific in the face of American and Japanese attempts at containment; and to manage a highly unstable security environment in Eurasia. In the face of these imperatives, such problems as there are in the relationship, such as the unbalanced nature of bilateral trade, are minor and soluble.

The Counter-Narrative

Where the believer sees achievement and opportunity, the skeptical view focuses on continuing contradictions in the relationship. While it acknowledges that this has expanded considerably over the past two decades, it identifies two major problems. The first is that the results of Sino-Russian cooperation are much less impressive than advertised; there is a marked disjunction between rhetoric and substance—whether it is in relation to the BRICS, a common commitment to a new world order, or energy and infrastructural development.

Second, much of the progress in the relationship is brittle. Despite strenuous efforts to minimize tensions, these remain significant and long-term. There is no denying the increasing asymmetry between the two sides, in terms of their individual national development and within the bilateral relationship. China has emerged as the second global superpower, while Russia suffers from slow growth (1.5% in 2017), political atrophy, and social anaesthetization.⁶ Beijing, not Moscow, sets the terms of their interaction—expanding Chinese influence across Eurasia; resisting Moscow’s lead in confronting the United States; and determining the extent and nature of bilateral energy ties. Well might the Kremlin look to China to alleviate the consequences of the crisis in Russia-West relations. But Chinese leaders have been careful not to align themselves too closely with Putin.

There is little expectation among skeptics of an early crisis in the relationship. Beijing and Moscow evidently recognize that their interests are best served by maximizing the positives and underplaying any disagreements. This is especially so in the current international environment, which resembles more a new world disorder than order.⁷ Nevertheless, structural weaknesses in the relationship show little sign of being rectified. Quite the contrary: since early 2014 the balance of power and influence has tilted further toward China, one of the unintended outcomes of Putin's Ukrainian adventure. As Beijing pursues a more ambitious, increasingly globalist foreign policy, the long-time 'division of labor' between Chinese economic primacy and Russian political leadership in Eurasia is being eroded.⁸ The public image of closeness and shared interests will become more difficult to sustain in the face of widening inequalities and competing priorities. Instead of strategic convergence, we could see a gradual accumulation of tensions and an increasingly problematic interaction.

THE BIG QUESTIONS

The main lines of the debate have been apparent for much of the post-Cold War era. What has changed is the wider context of the relationship. In recent years, a striking contrast has emerged between the comparative normality of expanding Sino-Russian cooperation, and the growing unpredictability of outside events. In these circumstances, some observers argue, the self-declared 'strategic partnership' has attained a new level. With many of the old certainties having evaporated, Moscow and Beijing are turning to each other more than ever for support and reassurance. And instead of being an outlier, their relationship has become central to the international system, one of the few pillars of stability in an otherwise chaotic world.⁹

The logic of this argument is plausible. What could be more natural than two authoritarian regimes, whose suspicion of the United States and of international disorder is well-documented, working together to promote a common vision of stability, security, and prosperity? The case for convergence is all the more compelling given that China and Russia are two of the world's leading powers, share a 4200 km border, and abhor Western liberal internationalism.

Yet rationality is a subjective—and selective—phenomenon. Just because convergence 'makes sense' does not mean that it is actually happening. Other factors can come into play to bring about a different

calculus (and outcomes). It is vital, then, to disentangle the reality of Sino-Russian interaction from its rhetoric and sometimes specious logic. And this means addressing a number of key questions.

Views of the International System

Perhaps the most important of these is how the respective leaderships in Beijing and Moscow view the international system. It has become axiomatic that they are of one mind, and indeed there is much to support this claim. Both are highly critical of American unilateralism and hegemonism; oppose Western moral interventionism and democracy promotion; and call for a new world order in which the emerging powers of the non-West enjoy greater influence and status. Moreover, as noted earlier, they have backed up this talk with concrete actions—such as close policy coordination in the UN Security Council, and expanding the activities of the BRICS and the SCO.

However, it is one thing to agree that the US-led international system is unsatisfactory in many respects; it is quite another to reach a consensus on what to do about it. Should the current system be scrapped altogether, as many in Moscow wish, or merely reformed? And how would a new or reformed world order look? Standard formulations such as the ‘democratization of international relations’ are scarcely enlightening, for they can mean anything—and nothing. Similarly, the notion of a ‘multipolar world order’ or ‘polycentric system’ poses more questions than it answers. The Kremlin is inclined to see the world in triangular terms, dominated by the interaction between America, China, and Russia, in which the latter plays the part of a global ‘swing’ power.¹⁰ But influential voices in Beijing regard the United States as the only true counterpart to a rising China, and still the global leader¹¹; doubt the utility and reliability of Russia as a geopolitical ally; and espouse the virtues of multilateralism rather than great power multipolarity. How are such contrasting perspectives to be reconciled? And, if differences do remain, can they be managed so as to maintain the generally positive trajectory of the relationship?

The Bilateral Relationship in Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy

This leads to another critical question: the role and relative importance of each country in the other’s foreign policy. Over the past decade,

the Sino-Russian partnership has become much more significant to both parties, as well as for international society in general. Yet the picture remains unclear. In many respects, China is the centerpiece of Putin's foreign policy—the key to an emerging world order, the chief instrument for counterbalancing the geopolitical and normative influence of the United States, the centerpiece of its 'turn to the East', and a means of reinforcing the legitimacy of the Putin regime on the basis of authoritarian solidarity. Yet despite this, the world-view of the Russian elite remains overwhelmingly Westerncentric. The United States continues to be the primary point of strategic reference, the European Union is still Russia's largest trading partner by far,¹² and the generic 'West' exerts considerably greater influence on Russian society than an illusory 'China model' or 'Asian values'.

The dichotomy is even starker when it comes to Russia's place in Chinese views of the world. On the one hand, Beijing sets great store by a good relationship with Moscow. Despite misgivings about Russian behavior over Crimea and the consequent crisis with the West, the Chinese leadership has largely kept these to itself, and prioritized the expansion of bilateral cooperation. On the other hand, partnership with Russia is a second-order preoccupation compared to domestic modernization, relations with the United States, developments in East Asia, or even trade and investment ties with Europe. This, in turn, raises the question of how committed China is to active cooperation with Russia, or whether its priority is more to keep Moscow onside so that it does not obstruct or undermine Chinese goals elsewhere. Tellingly, one of the enduring themes in Beijing's discourse on the relationship is defensive: emphasizing the importance of securing China's 'strategic rear' in the north (Russia) and west (Central Asia), and maintaining strategic flexibility.

The Challenges of Asymmetry

The question of the relative importance of the relationship leads to another recurrent motif: the growing imbalance between a fast rising power and one that is declining in many respects. In 2017, China's GDP was more than eight times larger than Russia's, and the gap is likely to widen. Events have conspired to accentuate the asymmetries of power. The Ukraine crisis, in particular, has shown that China is the closest thing Russia has to a friend, and that Putin has far greater need for Xi

than the other way around. At a time when Russia's geopolitical options are constrained, China retains abundant strategic choice, courted by suitors from the West and non-West alike.

To date, Beijing and Moscow have fudged the issue of inequality, mainly by claiming a *de facto* division of labor and capabilities—Chinese economic primacy alongside Russian political and security ('hard power') leadership. But such has been the spectacular expansion of Chinese influence across post-Soviet Eurasia that one wonders how long this artificial distinction can be sustained. Economic power of the magnitude exerted by Beijing has inescapable geopolitical and security consequences, and will test the long-term resilience of Sino-Russian partnership. Farther afield, the globalization of Chinese foreign policy has implications for Russia, particularly if Xi's vision of China 'moving closer to center stage' in world affairs is realized.¹³

In theory, it should not matter whether a relationship is asymmetrical or 'unbalanced' if both sides benefit from cooperation.¹⁴ Who cares then who is the 'senior' or 'junior' partner (or 'elder' or 'younger' brother¹⁵)? Russian attitudes toward China have also matured in recent years. The 'threat' of a Chinese demographic invasion has receded, while few believe that the sale of weapons to the People's Liberation Army (PLA) endangers national security.¹⁶ On the contrary, the United States is seen to pose a greater existential and normative menace.

Yet this is not to say that the Putin elite has adjusted to Russia being a junior partner of China. The imbalance of power within the relationship remains a source of anxiety to some in Moscow, who worry about over-dependence on China.¹⁷ They are concerned, justifiably, that this will allow Beijing to dictate the terms of their bilateral engagement—whether in the energy sector, the Russian Far East, or post-Soviet Eurasia. The feeling of strategic dependence has been heightened by the crisis between Russia and the West, and the reluctance of the Chinese to step into the vacuum left by the fall in European trade and investment. It may be that Russian anxieties will be alleviated only by a corresponding and definitive deterioration in China's relations with the West.¹⁸

There is also a critical psychological dimension to asymmetry. Over the past decade, Putin has staked his legitimacy on the idea of a resurgent Russia second to none. This applies mainly *vis-à-vis* the United States, but is also relevant to China. Indeed, the stigma of a neo-colonial dependency is all the greater given that Russians have historically harbored a sense of superiority toward their southern neighbor.

And while they have moved on in important respects, old attitudes have not disappeared. It grates that the economic relationship, with the obvious exception of arms exports, closely resembles China's ties with developing countries in Africa and Latin America—natural resource exports in return for manufacturing imports.

Bridging the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality

These hang-ups have undermined cooperation in the past. The protracted negotiations over major energy deals testify to the 'drag' effect of non-commercial factors, on top of the usual differences over pricing. A wary conservatism also helps account for the slowness of cooperation in Central Asia, where Russian anxiety over Chinese influence has, until recently, restricted the development of regional structures such as the SCO. There are signs of a more flexible and welcoming stance since 2014, but it remains to be seen whether this is a product of particular circumstances—namely, the crisis in Moscow's relations with the West—or whether its signals a structural shift in Russian thinking.

Chinese attitudes toward Russia are even more difficult to track. Beijing talks up Russia's stature in the world ('greatness') and Putin's policies. He himself scores very well with the Chinese public, who admire him as a strong leader willing and able to put the United States in its place. But it is important to distinguish between admiration for Putin the man, and more critical views of Russia as a stagnant polity and non-modernizing economy. It is commonly asserted that the support Beijing and Moscow give each other reinforces the legitimacy and stability of their respective regimes. But the evidence to back up such claims is sketchy. While some in Beijing criticized the West for provoking the initial crisis with Russia over Ukraine, there is concern that Moscow's actions since then have further destabilized the international order. In short, as with many other aspects of the relationship, Chinese views of Putin's Russia are marked by ambiguities and contradictions. It is by no means clear whether positive feelings toward Putin will translate into a broader and lasting likemindedness.

Reconciling Chinese and Russian Interests

Much will depend on the synergies between Chinese and Russian interests—in energy and military cooperation, Central Asia and the Middle

East, the Arctic and Northeast Asia (including the Russian Far East). On the face of things, there is considerable scope for progress across the board. In energy, for example, Russia is the world's leading oil and gas exporter, and China the largest importer. Both countries have an obvious interest in managing conflicts in central Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific. Russia is in sore need of foreign direct investment, while China has dramatically stepped up its overseas economic activities in recent years. In Northeast Asia, Beijing and Moscow are keen to limit the exercise of American power, while also containing North Korean excesses. And in the Arctic, there are possibilities—albeit in the longer term—for cooperation in connection with the Northern Sea Route (NSR) and the development of Russia's natural resources in the far north.

Yet for every plus there is a downside, real or potential. Thus, in energy China and Russia have a complementary relationship, which they wish to develop. But they naturally aim to do so in the most advantageous way for themselves, notwithstanding talk of 'win-win' outcomes. Energy security for one side is not necessarily the same for the other. Each aspires to dominate the Asian (and global) energy market: Russia through its control of pipelines and sale of resources, China by exploiting low oil and gas prices and diversifying supply. Each uses the other as leverage with other partners, meaning that their own cooperation is necessarily complicated by external and often non-economic considerations. These are not necessarily deal-killers, but they challenge optimistic forecasts about the linear growth of energy ties.

Similarly, in Central Asia the perceived benefits of Sino-Russian cooperation are counterbalanced by the heightened risk of tensions between them. Cooperation, yes, but on whose terms? Beijing and Moscow have tried to finesse this question by denying the existence of any potential conflict and instead proclaiming consensus. Thus, during Xi's visit to Moscow in May 2015, they agreed that China's Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB)—part of its overall Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—and Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) were complementary projects. But the proof lies not in such motherhood statements, but in actions on the ground. So far, the scorecard reads unimpressively. In the first two years of the agreement, Beijing received some 40 infrastructural project proposals, all of which it rejected as unviable.¹⁹

This raises larger questions about Sino-Russian interaction. If China's strategic as well as economic footprint in Eurasia continues to grow at its present rate, how will the Kremlin react? Will it reconcile itself to the

apparently inevitable, or will it take vigorous measures to reassert its once dominant influence in the region? There is much talk about a Greater Eurasia, in which China and Russia effectively co-manage a vast strategic space extending from Central Europe to East Asia.²⁰ But so far this vision appears aspirational at best, a somewhat desperate attempt by Moscow to sustain the EEU, manage Chinese influence, and talk up Russia's credentials as a game-maker. What if Greater Eurasia suffers the same fate as previous attempts at Moscow-led integration? Would the Putin regime then still believe that uniting against the United States was more important than containing Chinese influence?

There are few clear answers at this stage. But perhaps that is the point—there are plenty of opportunities in the Sino-Russian relationship, but also significant limitations and risks. Potential does not equate to achievement. And public declarations of unity do not necessarily reflect consensus, but may simply paper over the cracks.

Strategic Shocks and the Strategic Partnership

One of the biggest challenges the Sino-Russian relationship faces over the next decade is to sustain cooperation in the face of strategic shocks. Sometimes these may give impetus to closer convergence, as in the case of the global financial crisis and the Russian annexation of Crimea. But there are also factors that could inhibit partnership or give rise to serious tensions between Moscow and Beijing. In 2015–2016, the combination of recession in Russia and the slowing of the Chinese economy had a damaging impact on bilateral trade and investment.²¹ Similarly, the slump in global energy prices during that period delayed progress in implementing key agreements. If prices stay low over the next few years (as many forecast), one of the pillars of Sino-Russian cooperation will be severely weakened.

Ongoing instability in the heart of Eurasia also opens up plenty of possibilities, both for enhanced cooperation and more intense competition. Moscow and Beijing may make common cause in regional security management—against Islamist radicalism or grassroots democratic movements. But their interests could come into conflict in the event of an unstable political succession in, say, Kazakhstan.²² The separation of political and economic interests, increasingly tenuous today, may become non-existent in a few years' time. And, as already noted, a globally assertive Chinese foreign policy could change the whole dynamic of their interaction.

The single most important variable could be the state of the US–China relationship. If Washington and Beijing are able to reach a long-term strategic accommodation, the gains of the Sino-Russian partnership over the past two decades may turn out to be increasingly limited and somewhat fragile. Conversely, if the current cycle of US–China tensions degenerates into open rivalry, the pressures for strategic and normative convergence between the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai could become irresistible. Washington’s decision to identify *both* China and Russia as geopolitical foes,²³ and Donald Trump’s public desire for a trade war with China,²⁴ are likely to prove highly counter-productive, giving impetus to a bona fide authoritarian alliance between Moscow and Beijing.

THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

This volume is divided into four parts. It begins with an examination of the role and influence of grand strategy in Sino-Russian relations—how Russia fits into Beijing’s evolving thinking about the world, and the place of China in Putin’s ‘polycentric system of international relations’. **Li Mingjiang** and **Angela Poh** emphasize that a common desire in Moscow and Beijing to challenge US hegemony has brought them closer despite lingering problems of mistrust and asymmetry. The steady institutionalization of ties, bilateral and multilateral, has moved their relationship from an ‘axis of convenience’ to a fully fledged strategic partnership.

Alexander Gabuev highlights the impact on Sino-Russian partnership of the conflict in Ukraine and the consequent crisis in Russia’s relations with the United States and Europe. With no prospect of a return to ‘business as usual’ with the West, Moscow has gravitated toward Beijing—and far more quickly and comprehensively than anyone anticipated. And although Russia has become the junior partner in a relationship characterized by ‘asymmetric interdependence’, it now recognizes this as both unavoidable and manageable.

The second part of the book explores a number of bilateral and regional aspects of Sino-Russian engagement. **Morena Skalamera** focuses on the pivotal energy relationship, in particular the mega-deals in oil and gas concluded in 2013–2014. She argues that even before the Ukraine crisis Moscow was already ‘looking East’, as much for economic as geopolitical and security reasons, while Beijing was keen to diversify its

energy imports. As in other areas of the relationship, China increasingly calls the shots. Yet this has not precluded constructive engagement.

One of the boom areas of Sino-Russian partnership has been military cooperation, where there has been an upsurge in sales of hi-tech weaponry as well as ever more ambitious joint military exercises. **Paul Schwartz** views such developments as evidence of a growing alignment between Russia and China, based on increased trust and a common desire to counter Western strategic pressure. Although a true military alliance remains improbable, international circumstances suggest that this alignment will remain for the foreseeable future.

Sino-Russian interaction in Central Asia has become an increasingly significant part of their larger relationship, with both positive and negative aspects. Both sides have talked up their cooperation, yet such rhetoric masks significant contradictions. In his chapter, **Alexander Cooley** speaks of ‘public cooperation and private rivalry’. He differs from several other contributors to this volume by arguing that Beijing ‘does not share Moscow’s fundamental counter-hegemonic disposition toward the West.’ This disjunction reinforces a growing asymmetry in Central Asia, with Russia’s acute need for a non-Western geostrategic partnership enabling China to set the terms of their engagement.

Jo Inge Bekkevold’s chapter considers a hitherto neglected area of Sino-Russian relations, the Middle East. He identifies a major strategic shift whereby the once hegemonic position of the United States is giving to a new great power triangle in the region. He agrees that Russia and China have more in common with each other than with the United States, but observes nevertheless that their goals and tools of influence differ substantially. This, he notes, could become a source of tension between them.

The change in Russian attitudes toward China is reflected in their increasingly positive engagement in the Arctic, the subject of **Christopher Hsiung** and **Tom Roseth’s** chapter. Whereas Moscow had previously been reluctant to accept China as a legitimate player there, it now recognizes the vital importance of Chinese investment, especially in energy ventures such as the Yamal LNG project. The ongoing crisis in Russia-West relations could give further momentum to Sino-Russian cooperation in the Arctic, as elsewhere, although significant challenges remain.

Part III explores some of the larger international issues, such as Chinese and Russian attitudes to global order and governance.