

## The Future of Sino-Russian Relations: Why China Shall Not Rely on Russia as on a Strategic Ally

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### Abstract

*Today China and Russia declare the strategic partnership between each other and confidently assure each other in the consistency of their actions and commitment to the mutual growth and win-win cooperation. However, if China's commitment is visible and evident, same cannot be said about Russia: it has been stagnating for over a decade while China's fast growing economy has been conquering the markets throughout the world; Russia has been spoiling its relations with all European states, that are obviously, at now, an economic and political power, and even with the former allies (Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus); and Russia is not only unable to solve the domestic problems but even worsening them, considering the racism, xenophobia and poverty problems.*

**Keywords:** *China, Russia, Cooperation, Putin, Partnership*

### Introduction

The relations between China and Russia had ups and downs through the last 200 years, beginning with the unfair Convention of Peking of 1860 and then close collaboration following with the military clash (Sino- Soviet border conflict 1969) and again cooperation within regional and international structures (SCO, UN Security Council, CSTO, etc.). The close cooperation between these two states in different epochs might be explained by different reasons: the shared communist idea, the common enemy (Nazi Germany, Japan), the common rival (the United States of America). However the problems between these two states were never given too much attention due to the fact that China needs Russia as a supplier of natural resources including woods and gas, but also due to the constant presence of a common opponent or a rival in the region. These days the two states also try to fight the "three evils" set by SCO and counteract the U.S. and Europe initiatives in the Security Council.

One might find only the positive sides of the cooperation between China and Russia but how beneficial it is to China? Although China is assertive in its statement with regard to cooperation with Russia, considering the ongoing “Gazprom” and “CNPC” cooperation on building the project called “Sila Sibiri” or the Power of Siberia aimed at transporting gas from Yakutia region of Russia to the East Asian states, to China first of all; or the future collaboration on BRI, the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor and so forth, but one should take into consideration the problems both the possible and the real ones that might face China when dealing with Russia.

Under the continuous presidency of Vladimir Putin, Russia has changed from what it used to be, and it has positive as well as negative sides with the obvious prevalence of the latter in the last decade. A weak and a backward economy of Russia that has been stagnating since the first economic crisis (Falyakhov, 2017) may hinder the fast and adaptive Chinese economy when China will have to rely on its partner. The unstable political system of Russia; the lack of support on the international arena when most of influential actors have restrained relations with Russia; the corrupted and bribed system when every single project launched by the government is then given to the friends and the relatives of those in charge – all these and myriad of other reasons make the cooperation with Russia be extremely unreliable.

In the meantime, most of scholars believe that the relations between both states will stay in the close relations as it has been. In many aspects, China and Russia are moving towards cooperative behavior. This includes companies’ joint ventures, arms trade, as well as independency from the dollar and use own currencies for mutual transactions (Malle, 2017). In the current geopolitical strategy, it is reasonable to make close relations since a mutual confrontation would only give benefit to the US and its allies in Asia and Europe (Muraviev, 2014). However, some argue that Beijing and Moscow seem to be competitors rather than allies (Cox, 2016). This is because having an alliance does not necessarily mean irreversible in geopolitics, particularly when in some cases China showed its reluctance in supporting Russian interests (Korolev & Portyakov, 2018). In this case, the degree of their relations with the US and Europe would define the Sino-Russia relations (Korolev, 2018). Although the relations between both states might be dynamic, this paper, however, attempts to explain some consideration for China in furthering its relations with Russia.

To understand the scope of the possible cooperation with Russia Chinese party should first take into scrutiny all the reasons that might affect the cooperation negatively and then decide in which fields it can collaborate (those that represent the

core domestic interests) with Russia and in which it should be careful when signing an agreement.

The present paper is designed so to give a general overlook of the processes ongoing within the domestic and the international frameworks of Russia under the presidency of Putin and suggest a behavior Chinese party should choose when interacting with nowadays Russia.

The main limitation of the paper is the lack of data and references due to the lack of access to the documents that might serve as evidences. Nevertheless, the paper is based on the expert views of professionals in the fields of international relations and economics and includes the accessible references.

### **Russia Under the Presidency of Putin**

To be able to characterize the behavior of modern Russia on the global arena one should note that today Russia is a presidential state, where the power belongs to the head of the government, that leads not only the executive branch through its de-facto single-party system but also has its leverages on the legislative branch. The only implication one might get from this statement is that the behavior of Russia on the global arena, the way it solves its domestic problems – they all are highly dependent on one person, that is to say – the president of Russian Federation, Mr. Vladimir Putin.

The year 1999, when Mr. Putin was represented to the people of Russia as an acting president, and the following 2000s may be called the best years of Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union in the sense of economic development and the fast grow of industrial sector of Russia, due to the rise in the prices of crude oil, that disguised the problems Russia had at this period and made many people in and out of the country believe that Putin brought positive changes into the Russian economy (Adelman, 2002). But in fact, since the sudden fall of the oil prices in 2008 the economy of Russia is continuously going backwards, that firstly implies the high resource-dependence of the economy of Russia, secondly that reaffirms the fact that Putin as a governor did not do anything to boost the economy, it is just the time when Putin and the party he belongs to “United Russia” were falsely believed and credited to the economic boost.

However, one should not omit the role Putin played in maintaining the indeed united Russia, that is to say he stopped the process that was unconsciously launched by B. Yeltsin when he said his famous phrase “Take as much sovereignty as you can swallow...”, despite the fact that this phrase is just a half of the whole phrase – many

republics and the autonomous republics of Russia embraced secessionism idea. Putin, according to the last leader of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, saved the country from collapse, as it happened to the USSR. Nevertheless, later, last two decades Mr. Gorbachev has been harshly criticizing Putin for “suffocating” democracy in Russia and leading it to nowhere, where Russia has no future (BBC News, 2011). Thus, a very controversial role played by Putin at the beginning of the Russian history had a detrimental impact on his future reelections as of the President of Russia.

One might want to know why the present paper considers Putin to be the main figure leading Russia to the current state of affairs. The answers are simple, first - as it was mentioned above, Russian Federation is a country with the semi-presidential system *de-jure*, but with strongly autocratic system *de-facto* that means that the decisions of Putin are of higher importance; secondly, the proven connections of him with the organized crime elements that control the state in bypass of any state law, including Constitution (OCCRP Report, 2014); thirdly, the actual transfer of national assets (considering the state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to the friends and relatives of Mr. Putin, moreover these SOEs then accumulate the finance, even take subsidies from the government (Sputnik News, 2010), and then serve the interests of Putin - when he needs to use these sums all he needs to do is to call all oligarchs owning the enterprises and call for their financial aid of the projects Putin is aimed at launching (these projects are usually at low-profile, cannot be traced and are not reported anywhere, because they are not financed by the government) (Vidal, 2018).

Speculations on how these amounts of money are used are countless, may be proven or reported only by non-profit media organizations such as OCCPR (the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project) or can be revealed by the investigations made by the continuously prosecuted by the Russian government opposition group ACF (Anti-Corruption Foundation - the only Russia based NGO)<sup>1</sup>. These speculations include the connection of the SOEs of Russia with the Trump administration (Dickinson, 2018), finance of the Taliban fighters in Afghanistan (Андрей, 2015) and other unproved yet suspicious activities of Russia or Putin himself.

If proven the connection and finance of Taliban activity in Afghanistan, China shall reconsider its relations with Russia, as this will definitely have serious aftermaths. One of the crucial standing points of China’s core interests is stability and the rise of Taliban will never facilitate this process, on contrary hindering it on the Western borders of the region in Xinjiang Autonomous region, and also putting the China-

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<sup>1</sup> For more details, see Anti-Corruption foundation - about: <https://fbk.info/english/about/>

Pakistan Economic Corridor under the risk as Taliban not only exports its militants and fundamental Islamism to other states but also is notorious for robberies and loots in Pakistan. China that has invested a lot into the creation of SCO, into the boosting the Xinjiang's security, into the peace accords with Taliban (GBTIMES, 2014) might one day face these problems right on the border and be distracted from the economic development it is striving for.

The main conclusion that might be made by the abovementioned statements is that Russia cannot be an ideal partner for China due to the high dependency of Russian foreign politics on a personality of its president. Although at now Putin is friendly towards China, no one can affirm he will still be a president in future, or that he will prolong the vector he has set up before, since his pivots to the West and East are always of a temporary character (Khlebnikov, 2018).

### **Russia Not The Best, Yet Favorable Partner**

Nowadays Russia remains to be the only country supportive to China in many affairs of a global level, taking into account that China is the only partner Russia can rely on due to the spoilt relations with the western countries. The latter are mostly frightened of the China's growth and also prefer the U.S. as a partner, thus are reluctant to cooperate with China, and even reorganize the structures that were once shut down, and now they are reviving it again (FIIA, 2018).

Nevertheless, Russia cannot be the finest partner for China due to many reasons. First, these days Russia is acting as a warmonger, trying to intimidate actors on the global arena, the reason though can be the backwardness of Russia. If putting this in simple words, one might suggest that the arms race present during the Cold War era is now the mentality of today's Russia. The winner in this "race" is the one who shows off his most advanced weapons and the way they are utilized. The NATO allies are known to be supreme in the world's "PowerIndex" according to the Global Firepower ranking (2018) that takes into account over 55 individual factors (GFP, 2019), thus Russia having the mentality of the Cold War, which makes it strive for the military strength supremacy, decides to engage into the conflicts throughout Middle Asian region. By doing this, Russia, firstly shows off the newest weapons and technologies that are used when combating, and secondly - it changes the perception of a weak Russia that has lost an ally (Ukraine) to the U.S., thus continuous to be the main rival of the U.S (National Interest, 2015). What this might imply for the Chinese party? The main conclusion drawn from this is that being still focused on firepower and military strength Russia cannot be ready for close collaboration with the China that focuses on

the economic cooperation, economic development and win-win cooperation. Russia will, most likely, keep pulling China into the conflicts or will keep requesting from China to support its military activities on the Security Council (Westcott, 2018). If China follows Russia it might lose the possible income it might get if cooperating with the states Russia is struggling with now.

Second, Russia is not the best destination for the Chinese workers and specialist to go and work on the fields due to the high level of racism and xenophobia among Russian population. According to the data, provided by SOVA Center for information and analysis that conducts researches and information work on nationalism and racism in Russia, although the level of racially and ideologically motivated people assassinations has decreased in comparison to the situation at the beginning of 2000s, still the xenophobic and racial attacks on those who come from Asian countries take place (CSIS, 2018). The important implication of this is that the close collaboration between Russian and Chinese people is possible only on high levels, the lower the level is – the more problems the cooperation might get. Thus the building of infrastructure projects might get problems and hinder the future development. This, however, is applicable to the Western part of Russia (Ovshieva, 2013), to the west of Ural Mountains; the Eastern part is less problematic in this sense (Hays, 2016).

Third, high level of corruption and bribery might halt any development of joint cooperation between China and Russia. According to the evaluation of the Corruption Perception Index conducted by Transparency International in 2016, Russia is occupying 131 positions (out of 143 possible) which indicates the perception as more corrupt (highly corrupted) (Transparency International, 2017). Whereas China in this ranking occupies 79<sup>th</sup> position, which is way better than what is in Russia, generally speaking the score is “perceived as less corrupt”. To the most Chinese SOEs (state owned enterprises) coming to Russia it will be hard to deal with all level corruption, and it is most likely the Chinese party after several complaining will simply withdraw from the contract, taking into account that all state bids (government contracts) on building of infrastructure projects are simply given to the Putin’s friends and relatives, oligarchs that can set up their own rules when dealing with the counterparts (Гыцев, 2016).

Fourth, the overall political instability in Russia makes the cooperation between two states unpredictable. At now, since Putin became the president for the 4<sup>th</sup> time in 2018 it is quite stable, although Russian people are frequently going for protests and

demonstrations against Putin<sup>2</sup>. Yet his rating of approval is very high as the majority of his electorate is represented by old men and women, who believe in Russian TV propaganda (Geukjian, 2018), and even those, after the approval of the notorious Pension Reform in Russia in 2018, are turning their backs to the party to which belongs Mr. Putin. Thus, when a sudden change happens, which is less likely to happen, and then the whole political situation of Russia might change, just as it happened in Georgia, Ukraine, and Armenia. These days these states are skeptical about strategic alliance with Russia, but are very eager to cooperate with European countries (Kuzio, 2017).

Yet, not the finest partner but the best natural resources provider. Russia is indeed very rich in natural resources, and China, the country that is striving for oil, gas and woods needs these resources in order to maintain the current pace of development. Russia is aware of this and that is why it is confident enough in building the huge infrastructure projects on gas transportation to China. Even though, Russia, having troubles on its western borders, having no ally, where even Belarussian president, Mr. Lukashenko made an official statement saying that Russia might lose the only ally it has on the West (Лукашенко, 2019); and having no other option may only export its gas to China. Knowing this China may request beneficial conditions, as it is highly possible that the conditions on which the two countries agreed are more in favor of Russian party due to the stalemate of China, when it has no more options. But having stable supply from Iran and Turkmenistan in future, stable provision of oil from Africa, China may change its rhetoric to the more demanding one.

Besides that, with the more aggressive behavior of the U.S. under Trump administration, it would always be useful for China to have another Security Council member partner, who would back China's decision on vetoing or supporting certain decisions Chinese government might have in future.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, one might suggest that present Sino-Russian relations are of a complex character, and to understand them one shall consider many factors. At now Russia may be a good partner but in a long-run it is highly possible that China will opt-out close or strategic partnership with Russia due to the reasons mentioned above and may even claim the lands that were taken from China (Outer Manchuria) in an unequal treaty (Convention of Peking, 1860). This is already an aggressive behavior which China

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<sup>2</sup> During anti-Putin protest in Moscow ahead of Russian president's inauguration More than 1,600 arrested. This included opposition leader Alexei Navalny who was carried away by police. See (Associated Press, 2018).

is actively trying to avoid. However, this might happen in case if the states decide to solve their border issues with an aim to boost mutual trust and future cooperation.

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