

Views from the Pivot Point: Chinese Perceptions of Russia's 'Go East' Strategy

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Summary

The relationship between China and Russia is again making international headlines, as China and the Asia-Pacific region have become central in a new Russian strategy to establish Moscow as a 'Euro-Pacific Power'. This new momentum on the Eurasian continent, given impetus by the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions against Russia, plays into Chinese hands an opportunity to further strengthen the historically significant Sino-Russian relationship. Nevertheless, even though the Chinese political elite is welcoming the economic dimensions of Russia's 'rebalance' as an opportunity to strengthen their own development strategies in the region, Beijing appears ambivalent to prospects of further alignment in international politics. Although internal Chinese debate on the issue can be traced, the stated views of the Chinese foreign policy elite are suggesting a policy of maximising China's economic gains from Russia's 'Go East' strategy, while seeking to avoid too strong political ties which might engender risks for China's relations to its main markets in the US and Europe.

Introduction

Russia's 'Go East' strategy, a rebalancing of the Russian posture on the Eurasian continent, has been spurred on by the recent conflicts with Europe and the United States over the situation in Ukraine. The Russian initiative comes at a point when relations between Beijing and Moscow are at a historical high, and both in political and economic terms this latest chapter in the volatile Sino-Russian relationship carries significant potential for altering the political realities of Norway's largest neighbour. China and the Asia-Pacific are at the centre of a global redistribution of economic and political clout. Accordingly, the region has over the last couple of years been the focal point of a set of 'Eastern strategies' from other core members of the international system. Russia's intention to pivot to the Asia-Pacific has, for some time, been an effort undertaken in relative obscurity, as the overwhelming majority of global attention has been allotted to the Obama administration's 'Pacific Pivot'. However, the Ukraine crisis has spurred on not only Russian efforts to turn east-

wards, but also given rise to increased interest about the Russian drive to establish itself as an increasingly Asia-oriented 'Euro-Pacific' power. An important factor in shaping any pivot strategy is how it is perceived by the countries towards which the pivot is sought. China's new role as an increasingly important political partner and economic linchpin for a more Asia-oriented Russia harbours both opportunities and challenges for the Chinese side, in the latest chapter of an often conflicted historical relationship. The Chinese understanding of the character and potential of Russia's 'Go East' strategy is set to have notable impact on both the outcomes of Russia's regional development plans, and the broader economic and geopolitical environment in Eurasia.

The Uneasy History of Sino-Russian Relations

Russia is arguably the European country that has influenced China the most. As the pioneer of the Communist system, the impact of Russia has been profound on the Chinese societal, economic and political models. The Sino-Russian relationship has, however, been anything but a stable partnership, in spite of the related nature of the two countries' path to modernity. During the initial years of the Cold War the cooperation between the two giant countries of the Eurasian landmass was of grave concern to the Western camp, particularly in the aftermath of the Korean War. However, as a set of political and ideological disputes lead to the famous Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s, the relationship turned into open hostility, involving border clashes, and such strong fears of an imminent nuclear strike that the Chinese leadership at one point felt compelled to decamp from Beijing. The otherwise eventful year of 1989 was also remarkable in that it witnessed Mikhail Gorbachev's Beijing visit. This was the first summit between the countries in three decades, and symbolized a sea-change in the cooperation between the parties. Over the next decade, the relationship continued to be limited in economic terms, although Russia found China a useful partner during downturns in their relationship with the West. Moscow and Beijing would in 1996 sign documents establishing a 'strategic partnership' between them. As Putin entered office in the year 2000, he built relations first with Chinese leader Jiang

Zemin and then his successor Hu Jintao, and the Sino-Russian relationship saw considerable development in the new millennium. Most notably, under the Hu-Putin leadership a final agreement on the demarcation of the two countries' common border was achieved in 2005, with the last details solved in 2008. Simultaneously, the tension over the issue of immigration from China's Northern provinces in the Far East was reduced, in another act conducive to the "Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation" signed in 2001. From 2003 onwards Putin would increasingly seek to strengthen the relationship with China, the newly established Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) becoming an increasingly important forum. Simultaneously, the bilateral trade between the countries would see a steady growth, increasing with as much as 44,3% in 2007 to a grand total of US\$48,17 billion. Much of this rapid growth in trade value came, however, as a consequence of the rapidly rising prices of hydrocarbons, Russia's main export to China. The trade relationship between the parties is furthermore still dwarfed by China's total trade with the US, at US\$562 billion in 2013.

In recent years, a number of common interests have driven the development of the Sino-Russian relationship. Both parties share the wish for domestic stability and economic development, a goal that for China's part is made more attainable with the input Russia can provide of energy, raw materials and arms. The shared concern that Islamic extremism and insurgency in Central Asia since the 1990s might spill over into their respective border provinces, has also been a driver for cooperation, particularly within the context of the SCO. Simultaneously, Russia has been regarded as an important ally for the stated Chinese wish to achieve a 'more democratic world order', by standing up to US unilateralism and perceived Western attempts to undermine the countries by fermenting political protests. As such, it was both symbolic, and hardly surprising, that Xi Jinping's first official state visit was to Moscow. China and Russia have now established regular summits, and the range of exchange mechanisms between the two countries is on a wider level than China has with any other country, while the flow of trade in weapon systems and joint military exercises adds yet another dimension to the partnership. In spite of the discomfort with which China regarded Russia's policies in Ukraine, Beijing would, instead of joining in on the sanctions regime, sign a landmark long-term US\$ 400 billion gas agreement with Russia in May 2014. Such actions are paired with the continuation of increased Sino-Russian coordination in multilateral fora such as the UN, and in an increasingly proactive common stance in the BRICS group. In addition the countries have been cooperating in creating institutions such as the New Development Bank which offer alternatives to the economic support and regional public goods provided by Western controlled institutions. In a high-profile 2014 interview with Rossiya TV during his Sochi Olympics visit, Xi Jinping would hail Sino-Russian relations as having reached "the most solid foundation, the highest level of mutual trust and the greatest regional and global influence ever."¹ The Xi-Putin era, the latest chapter of a long and volatile relationship, has recently seen the advent of a Russian initiative with the stated potential to alter the relation between the countries, as well as

the wider geopolitical environment of Eurasia; namely the Russian 'Go East' strategy.

Russia's Turn to the East

In his 2013 state-of-the-nation address, Vladimir Putin declared that the development of Siberia and the Far East would be, after a long period of neglect, Russia's national priority for the entire 21st century. Based on the realization of the growing economic dynamic of the Asia-Pacific region, calls for Russia to focus more attention on the Eastern part of its continent-spanning landmass had for a time been heard from academic and policy circles. Spurred on by Western sanctions, and Russian concerns about the possibilities of a new Cold War with the West limiting access to important economic resources, the importance of developing economic and political ties with the Asia-Pacific became an urgent priority. The challenges of an economic rebalance are, however, illustrated by the scale of Russia's current dependence on the European markets, total trade with the European Union in 2012 reached 267,5 billion euro, while its bilateral trade with China, as its second-largest trading partner, stood at a comparatively low EUR 64 billion. These deeply rooted economic structures are neither easily, nor quickly, altered. Nevertheless, the current political crisis between Russia and Europe have changed the political realities of Russia, and driven them to more urgently seek to embrace their south-eastern neighbour, with a central goal being to expand Sino-Russian trade to US\$100 billion in 2015. Moscow is currently enacting a range of investment plans and political strategies aimed at stimulating the economy and building infrastructure in Siberia and the Far Eastern Federal District, tying the Western part of Russia closer to the Asia-Pacific through its Eastern regions. Simultaneously, closer political cooperation with Beijing is sought in regional and international fora. While the American 'pivot' lends itself easier to be considered as competing with Beijing, the Russian pivot eastwards is implicitly based on cooperation with Beijing. It is however, important to take note of the Russian efforts to balance their relations with a range of East-Asian countries to avoid becoming too dependent on China. Russia's neutrality on a range of Chinese territorial neighbour-disputes demonstrates this approach, and highlights some of the limitations of the bilateral relationship. The question is how this new strategy of pivoting eastwards, and the increased Russian need and wish for a closer relationship, is perceived from Beijing?

Views from the Pivot Point

Despite a history that has at times seen a lot of tension, the current Chinese public opinion of Russia is of a very positive hue. The Chinese public is furthermore singular amongst global opinion in that their view on Russia has become significantly more positive during last year. While 35% of the Chinese sample would report unfavourable views of Russia in 2013, in the aftermath of the Ukrainian crisis only 23% of

¹ Xinhua, "Xi Hails Development of China-Russia Ties," February 9, 2014, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2014-02/09/c_133100705.htm; Sheng Zhong, "为发展中俄关系注入新动力 (To Infuse the Development of Sino-Russian Relations With New Strength)," *People's Daily (Chinese Edition)*, January 27, 2014, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/0127/c1003-24238089.html>.

the Chinese public opinion was negative, while approval rates leapt to 66%.² As such, the Chinese leadership could be confident, as Xi Jinping recently remarked to Putin,³ in the public backing for embracing Russia more closely. Nevertheless, given the nature of the Chinese regime, the public opinion is a far less potent signifier of policy than are statements from the upper echelons of the government. Based on Chinese leaders' speeches, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Ministry of National Defence (MoD) communications, as well as relevant media editorials, from the beginning of Xi's leadership in 2012 throughout the Ukraine crisis till today, the view of the Chinese leadership on Russia's 'Go East' strategy can broadly be subdivided into two main strands: One strand regards China's support for the economic aspects of Russia's rebalance. Another main strand concerns the political and military dimensions implicit to the Russian strategy.

Regarding the economic aspects of Russia's 'Go East' strategy, the official attitude has been one of welcoming it as a contribution to the recent Chinese efforts to launch a grand scale developing project, seeking to bind Western China closer to Europe through the creation of a 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (丝绸之路经济带) crossing Central Asia. Tellingly, the public launch of Beijing's New Silk Road initiative by an extensive webpage, originally showcased an interactive map that drew the New Silk Road directly to Europe by Istanbul, whereas the same official map would later change to suddenly also include Moscow *en route*. In the words of Xi Jinping during his Sochi visit; "China welcomes Russia to participate in the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Maritime Silk Road".⁴ In editorials written by the CCP mouthpiece People's Daily under the alias 'Zhong Sheng' (钟声), being a homophone for 'Voice of the Central', and regarded as conveying official views of the Chinese government⁵, the invitation to the Russians to join in building the silk road economic belt "hand in hand" with the Chinese, is reiterated as one of the main pillars of the relationship.⁶ This attitude is further underscored by, for example, Premiers Dmitry Medvedev and Li Keqiang, as they met in mid-December this year. Li explicitly declared China's willingness to contribute to the development of Russia's Far East in cooperation with the Russians, as well as pointing out the potential gains to be made as cooperation is intensified on areas such as high speed rail infrastructure, energy and raw materials.⁷

In terms of the political dimensions, and the internationally much-hyped prospect of a closer alliance-style relationship between the parties, the tone is slightly more restrained, and there are more differing views to be heard. China's official stance towards the Ukraine crisis is namely "it's complicated"⁸, neither giving full support nor condemning Russia on their actions, on what is for domestic reasons a contentious issue in China. The *Global Times*, having earlier argued that US encroachment of Eurasia on both fronts would lead to a Sino-Russian alliance⁹, was in March 2014 voicing an assertive stance of Chinese support for Russia: "Russia's resistance against the West has global significance. Supporting Russia consolidates China's major strategy (...) This way, we will make more friends."¹⁰ It is however important to note that the English language *Global Times* is considered a mouthpiece for the most conservative part of the Communist party. As such, their editorials can hardly be seen as authoritative for Chinese foreign policies, but nevertheless serves to show that there are differing views amongst the higher ranks of the CCP about Russia's current and future role in Chinese foreign policy. The authoritative Chinese outlets have expressed a more cautious approach. Although a spokesperson for the Chinese MFA would in May 2014 underscore the need for closer Sino-Russian ties as a "necessary choice in the pursuit of global multipolarization"¹¹, the MFA also takes care to reiterate that no such thing as an alliance between the countries would happen. The Sino-Russian ties are instead framed as an example of the "new style of great power relations" (新型大国关系) based on mutual interests and not directed against anyone. Interestingly, as the year 2014 progressed, and the relationship between the West and Russia reached new depths, the MFA seemingly felt the need to state more often that although beneficial for both parties, the Sino-Russian relationship is a "non-alliance" (不结盟), that is not directed against any third party.¹² Similarly, any notion that the bilateral relations might develop into something akin of an Eastern NATO (东方北约) was vehemently denied, reiterating how China is opposed to the old concepts of military alliances and power blocs.¹³ A recent *Global Times* editorial from mid-December also reflects a considerable change in tone regarding Chinese support to Russia,

2 Pew Research Center, *Pew Research Center's Global Attitudes Project: Russia's Global Image Negative amid Crisis in Ukraine*, July 9, 2014, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/09/russias-global-image-negative-amid-crisis-in-ukraine/>.

3 MFA of the PRC, "Xi Jinping Meets with President Vladimir Putin of Russia - Statements," November 9, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/ytjhzzdrsrcldrfzshyixghd/t1209538.shtml.

4 MFA of the PRC, "Xi Jinping Meets with President Vladimir Putin of Russia - Statements," July 29, 2014, <http://za.china-embassy.org/eng/zgxw/t1178741.htm>.

5 Michael D. Swaine, "Chinese Leadership and Elite Responses to the US Pacific Pivot," *China Leadership Monitor* 38 (2012): 1-26.

6 Sheng Zhong, "邻居朋友来贺喜 中俄更浓人情味 (Friendly Neighbours, China and Russia Growing Even Closer)," *People's Daily (Chinese Edition)*, February 10, 2014, <http://opinion.people.com.cn/n/2014/0210/c1003-24306706.html>.

7 Xinhua, "李克强会见俄罗斯总理梅德韦杰夫 (Li Keqiang Meets With Russian Prime Minister Medvedev)," December 15, 2014, <http://politics.people.com.cn/n/2014/1215/c1024-26210771.html>.

8 MFA of the PRC, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference on September 15, 2014," September 15, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1191291.shtml.

9 Global Times Editorial, "US Actions Make China-Russia Alliance Appealing," *Global Times*, January 20, 2012, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/692969.shtml>.

10 Global Times Editorial, "Backing Russia Is in China's Interests," *Global Times*, March 5, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/846263.shtml>.

11 MFA of the PRC, "2014年5月21日外交部发言人洪磊主持例行记者会 (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference, May 21, 2014)," May 21, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/fyrbt_602243/jzhsl_602247/t1158169.shtml.

12 MFA of the PRC, "2014年7月2日外交部发言人洪磊主持例行记者会 (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hong Lei's Regular Press Conference, July 2, 2014)," July 2, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/fyrbt_602243/jzhsl_602247/t1170767.shtml.

13 MFA of the PRC, "2014年11月27日外交部发言人华春莹主持例行记者会 (Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Chung Ying's Regular Press Conference, November 27, 2014)," November 27, 2014, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_chn/fyrbt_602243/jzhsl_602247/t1215033.shtml.

even from the newspaper traditionally reflecting the more hawkish side of the Chinese political elite. Pointing out that China does not want Russia to collapse, it does however take care to emphasize that “[a]lthough it has the capability to offer help to Russia at critical moments, China does not have to act in a proactive manner. (...) With many uncertainties, China also faces challenges about how to lead its relationship with Russia to a reciprocal end.”¹⁴

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Chinese view of the Russian ‘Go East’ strategy’s political dimensions, may be summed up as a strategy of combining limited assertiveness with reassurance. Recognizing the urgency of Russia’s turn East as a result of the country’s soured relationship with the West, China seems conscious to avoid engender opportunities for themselves to end in a similar situation. It is important to note the signs of an internal debate going on. However, it is equally important to consider that the more radical the support for Russia, the more peripheral and less authoritative is the publication.
- Regarding the prospects of Sino-Russian economic cooperation, on the other hand, the political leadership has expressed warm support, particularly about the prospects of cooperation in developing infrastructure and energy extraction in the region. This aspect of Russia’s ‘Go East’ strategy is regarded as dovetailing with the Chinese strategy of developing stronger economic links westwards.
- The Chinese relationship with Russia may be regarded as pragmatically oriented, a means to secure China’s strategic depth and exploit Moscow’s strained relationship to the rest

of the world to their own advantage. However, in sharing a range of concerns about the nature of current international relations, Sino-Russian relations also share the potential for a deeper engagement. One of the main common themes of Chinese and Russian domestic foreign policy debates is the fear of being surrounded and hemmed in, by the US and its European allies for Russia in the West, and by the US and its Asian allies for China in the East. It should be regarded as pivotal not to stoke Sino-Russian fears of a shared destiny of Western powers surrounding the Eurasian heartland, by ensuring and communicating that sanctions and political repercussions towards Russia are kept separate from the West’s policies as they pivot to the Asia Pacific. Western nations should do their best to avoid providing the *raison d’être* for a potential Sino-Russian alliance, but instead seek to shore up the pre-eminent economic and political importance of the West for China.

- China is walking a fine political line between the West and Russia, while simultaneously seeking to define their identity as a world power. This dynamic is deserving of far closer study than what has to date been allotted to the subject. Recent history has demonstrated to us both the volatility of Sino-Russian relations, the relationship’s importance for the wider regional and global political development, and the Western penchant for letting too shallow a knowledge of Chinese policy debates result in unexpected changes in the Sino-Russian relationship. More research on the topic would benefit not only the regional great powers, but also Norway, which economic interests in the region have been growing at a rapid pace over the last decade.

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¹⁴ Global Times Editorial, “China Needs Clear Strategy to Help Russia,” December 17, 2014, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/897151.shtml>.



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