

1. SECURITY AND GEOPOLITICS

CAN RUSSIA AND CHINA FORM AN ALLIANCE TO BALANCE THE UNITED STATES?

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ABSTRACT

The recent decade has seen an intensification of Russia-China cooperation, also in the military field. Both countries share the view that the current international order with the US hegemony in the centre of it is unjust. The Western sanctions towards Russia after the war in Ukraine in 2014 and the US pivot to Asia has given even more incentive for both countries to cooperate. That raises the question whether Russia and China can form an alliance to balance the US power and if there is any potential to form such an alliance.

KEY WORDS

Russia, China, Alliance, Balance of Power, Soft Balancing.

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Introduction

Both China and Russia see the current world order as unjust. They believe that the US hegemony should be replaced with a multipolar world order where countries like China and Russia have more saying on how the international order works and to whom it is beneficial. However, China and Russia possess not only the idea on how the international order should look like but also a significant economic, military and political power (although disparate) to influence that. Today, almost every major geostrategic threat can be found in these two countries – cyber attack, nuclear weapons, military capabilities, political power etc. (Boland, 2014, p. 36). This decade has shown that China and Russia have often aligned their policies to oppose the West, and the USA in particular, and intensified their cooperation, also in economic and military domains.

This has become especially important after Western sanctions on Russia, starting with 2014 war in the Ukraine and after the US more active engagement in Asia to find partners in order to balance China.

This paper will explore whether China – Russia partnership can evolve into an alliance against the USA. To answer this question, firstly, the alliance forming in the post-Cold War order will be explained through the balance of power theory. Following that the paper will look at the potential for alliance between China and Russia by analysing their position in the international system (threat perception, challenges, and regional interests) and their internal dynamics (history and culture, bilateral cooperation). Lastly, the paper will explore how the US policy affects China – Russia relations.

The paper argues and puts forward a thesis that Russia and China engage in a soft balancing against the USA, however there are too many diverging factors to form a credible military alliance.

The theory of balance of power

The realism concept of balance of power aims to explain how power shifts in global politics occur and why states maximize their power, therefore it is useful in explaining also the alliance formation. As the founder of neorealism, Kenneth N. Waltz argues that the states are unitary actors who will, at minimum, preserve their existence and at maximum try to dominate. The international system is a self-help system where those who will not help themselves will fail. The system is what pushes states to maximize their power. The states can both internally and externally maximize their power: internally they can, for example, build up their military strength, while externally the state can align with other states (creating alliances) and balance against a stronger state (or perceived threat) (Waltz, 1979, p. 271).

The balance of power concept was criticized mainly by liberalism because it became irrelevant in the post-Cold War world. Non-state actors become more and more influential in shaping policies of states, making states willing to cooperate in fight against them. Economic interdependency and globalization make it costly to engage in aggressive competition, and international institutions have proven to be more or less effective to solve collective action problems. The empirical example used the most often by liberals is that there has been no evidence of hard balancing against the dominating US power (Paul, 2004, p. 1-2).

However, the balance of power in essence means reducing or matching the capabilities of a stronger state. And in this regard, it should not matter what kind of means are used. The political scientist T.V. Paul broadens the traditional concept of balance of power and distinguishes between hard balancing, soft balancing and asymmetric balancing. Hard balancing is the traditional realist argument of forming military alliances, while soft balancing is more tacit non-offensive coalition building, ad-hoc collaboration and cooperation in international organizations. The asymmetric balancing refers to balancing of states against indirect threats by non-state actors (Paul, 2004, p. 3).

In a world where the power of state is no longer mainly influenced by military strength but also by economic and environmental considerations, the concept of balance of power should also be interpreted more broadly. The power disparity between the USA and its potential challengers is still too big for others to openly and aggressively challenge it. Also, the economic costs because of the economic interdependence would be too high. Even more, the USA acts as a world police in the fight against terrorism, which has become a common struggle for all major powers (Paul, 2004, p. 3-4). The concept of soft balancing that is no more limited to realism and focuses not only on crude military balancing is therefore more useful in explaining the current global politics, and will be used also in this paper while analysing China – Russia cooperation.

Potential for the China – Russia alliance

To explore the potential for the China – Russia alliance and to see how much their partnership has evolved, this part will take a look at their position in the international system and bilateral dynamics.

Position in the international system

One of the things that steers nations towards an alliance or partnership is the perception of a common threat since states tend to balance against a perceived threat. Russia – China relations in the last decade has been shaped by a common perception of external threat, the US. While after the collapse of the Soviet Union both states were more focused on containing each other, reducing uncertainties and suspicions, then after the 2008 Georgia War and the US 'pivot towards Asia' the relations with the USA and the West in general deteriorated, and China and Russia found more closely intertwined also in their foreign policies (Feng, 2015, p. 19, 30-31). The US actions (its policy towards China and Russia) matter, but what matters more is China's and Russia's perception of the US intentions and whether they are threatening.

The perception of a common threat has resulted in more high-level bilateral meetings and statements about a 'comprehensive strategic partnership between both states. China and Russia as the permanent members of the UN Security Council have also often taken the same position on many security issues, more recently on Syria, and vetoed West-proposed resolutions (Trenin, 2012, p. 28). Russia and China have also been a 'silent supporter' to many issues that have been of importance to one of the countries. For example, in the case of Russia's war with Ukraine in 2014, China chose to align with Russia, although it would rather avoid antagonizing its relations with Ukraine who became an important economic partner. In the case of Ukraine, China did not openly criticize Russia or join other Western nations in sanctions against Russia, but just

demonstrated vague rhetoric in calling for 'peaceful solution' (Weitz, 2014b). While this does not constitute an open support, it still shows a value that China puts to its relations with Russia.

Russia and China also face similar challenges in the international system, especially vis-à-vis the USA. Internally, both China and Russia have diverse religious and ethnic minorities who challenge or could challenge the legitimacy of ruling regime. As a result, they are sensitive to influences from other states on their political systems as the US efforts to promote democracy and freedom (Gelb and Simes, 2013, p. 6). This comes in addition to already deep-rooted feeling that the global political and economic system is designed to favour the US and the West in general, and that the USA treats China and Russia as a threat that needs to be contained (Gelb and Simes, 2013, p. 7).

Some political scientists such as G. Chang and R. Kaplan argue that China and Russia act out of the positions of weakness in the international system and their closer alignment is the result of that. Despite outside appearance, both China and Russia are weak states. Western sanctions after Russia's invasion in Ukraine have crippled already undiversified, oil-dependent Russian economy (Chang, 2014, p. 17-18). Also, in China the economy is steadily worsening – its GDP growth went from double digits to an official figure of only 6.9% in 2015 after the housing and stock market bubbles in China burst. The economic problems caused fears of domestic insecurity and political instability in both countries. Russia and China also hold a potential of separatism in their vast and ethnically diverse countries. To mitigate that, China and especially Russia turned to nationalism in hopes to distract dissatisfied citizens, resulting in more aggressive

stance towards the West. Russia did it very bluntly in Ukraine, while China was more sophisticated in East China and South China Sea (Kaplan, 2016, p. 33-39). However, it will take some time to see whether China's economic problems will result in more aggressiveness in its foreign policy.

At the regional level, China and Russia decided to approach the less powerful regional partners together by creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)¹ in 1996. The areas of cooperation mainly focus on countering terrorism, extremism and separatism in the region, however the SCO conducted several military exercises in the recent years, also between China and Russia. Although the SCO is not a defensive alliance (no mutual defence clause), it moved into the direction of regional security alliance. For more extensive defence cooperation in the region Russia uses the Collective Security Treaty Organization² of which China is not a member (MacHaffie, 2011, p. 30-31). It shows as well that Russia does not want China to tie its hands in the regional security matters, but understands the need to include China. Hence the existence of two almost duplicating organisations.

On the other hand, despite established regional frameworks, Russia's interests in the region could run against China's. For example, Russia sells arms to many Southeast Asian countries like Vietnam, Malaysia, and Indonesia, which fear rising China. Russia has also close ties with former Soviet republics in Central Asia like Mongolia, which also is concerned about China's influence (Trenin, 2012, p. 21-23). In the region Russia has been trying not to be over-reliant on the Chinese market, which results in promoted cooperation

with other countries in the region. So far it has not caused any tensions with China, but if these countries become adversaries of China, it surely will. The competition about regional power goes also the other way – also Russia has concerns that China's 'silk road' aimed at integrating trade and investment in Central Asia will threaten Russia's power in Eurasia (Feng, 2015, p. 36). In the regional relations with other countries, Russia and China are more competitors than partners, but they have put an effort to work together through regional frameworks just because of their value to each other. This limits the potential for formal alliance, however does not exclude the soft balancing.

Even with the commonalities between Russia and China in the perception of a threat, challenges in the international system and approach to the regional environment, aren't the West and the USA too important for Russia and China to form an alliance against it? The power disparity and interdependence may make it just too costly. There is no overt hostility with the USA, like it was during the Cold War. In the long run, China and Russia may need from the USA more than they need from each other. Although China and Russia have intensified their economic cooperation in recent years, still European and American markets are more lucrative for them than for each other (Trenin, 2012, p. 37-38), which is reflected also in the bilateral cooperation between China and Russia.

Internal dynamics between China and Russia

Russia's and China's recent history has been difficult and characterized by mutual distrust. Although during the Cold War both shared Soviet ideology, their interests differed. The split came after the Stalin's death in 1953, when the new Soviet

¹ China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

² Russia, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Union leader Nikita Khrushchev started de-Stalinization. China was in favour of more pure Soviet ideology rather than the new international socialism pursued by the Soviet Union. During the existence of the Soviet Union, China felt that too much was controlled by Moscow. The low point of this was the armed clashes between China and the Soviet Union in 1969 over border issues (MacHaffie, 2011, p. 25-26). This uneasy history is still felt in the leadership of both countries.

Also as regards culture, Russians and Chinese are not very close. Historically, most of Russia associated itself more with Europe, especially starting from the 18th century when Europe was the centre of the world. The only exception of Russia's cultural division with China is the Far East of Russia, which most likely feels closer cultural ties with China than Moscow (MacHaffie, 2011, p. 24-25). This is shown also in the fact that cultural interactions, tourism and people-to-people contacts in general lag far behind from the official, government-level cooperation (Weitz, 2003, p. 48).

Yet, if there was mutual distrust and no real cultural/ideological connection between the states, why did they choose to put aside some grudges and make effort to cooperate after the collapse of the Soviet Union? For one thing, they share a considerable land border of over four thousand kilometres (MacHaffie, 2011, p.22). Also, they often found themselves in need of cooperation with the other state, however this need is still handled with a level of suspicion and vigilance.

In 1990s the cooperation was more driven by the necessity to set a peaceful border between Russia and China so that both could focus on their domestic challenges and economic growth. A deeper cooperation was still in large part non-existing, limited to arms sales and regional partners.

In this decade, this has changed: the perception of a common threat has put the countries more closer together, also in the economic domain (Feng, 2015, p. 19-30).

Russia and China have complementary economies: China's economy is focused on manufacturing while Russia has vast natural resources that China lacks (Chang, 2014, p. 29). An oil and gas market is of particular focus, but the intensification of cooperation is moderate because of high politicization of this sector in Russia and because Western markets are still more beneficial for Russia. Also China fears that the Russia's market is not trustworthy and it avoids being over-dependent on one source (Swanström, 2014, p. 482-488). Despite that in 2014 Russia (energy company Gazprom) and China (China National Petroleum Corporation) concluded a thirty-year, 400 billion \$ deal on import of Russian gas. This is the latest and certainly biggest deal between both countries in an energy sector, and adds to other previous oil trade agreements (as construction of oil pipeline to China). While Russia might prefer more lucrative Western markets, it may be forced more and more to intensify its trade with China, especially when it needs investments in more remote gas and oil fields like in Siberia, close to China's border (Weitz, 2014a, p. 80-86). In the economy, Russia holds the energy card towards China, however China still has some freedom to choose its energy sources.

Russia also is a market for Chinese goods, but just as for Russian energy, the Western market is much more important for China. Russia would like to see more investment in high-technology industries rather than only an energy sector (Weitz, 2014a, p. 86). Weapons sales from Russia to China have a long-standing cooperation tradition, but it experiences a negative

trend now – Russia is not able or even willing to distrust to provide the high-technology weaponry to China. Moreover, China is starting to become a seller of weapons and could become a competitor in the region (Swanström, 2014, p. 491-492). It can be seen that the economic cooperation has not reached full integration and is governed by self-interest not least because of their competition and distrust.

While Russia and China are getting closer in their foreign policies, economies and even militaries, their power status in the international order is getting further apart. China's economy surpasses Russia's and its military might is growing, leaving Russia a junior partner in these relations (an unusual position for Russia). For Russia, the rise of China is a source of suspicion and distrust. A good example of that is Russia's Far East region, which is scarcely populated and has cultural ties with China. With China expanding, Russia fears that the Chinese might immigrate to the Far East and take also economic control over still unused vast natural resources in the region (MacHaffie, 2011, p. 27). While this is yet to materialize, it illustrates just one of the areas where Russia fears China's expansion (others being China's military growth and economic competition).

Despite China's growth, it still politically needs Russia. China already faces difficulties in finding partners in the region, especially since the USA is very focused on building partnerships in the region. Russia's alignment with the USA³ would mean a 'strategic encirclement' for China while it would rather have it as a 'safe rear'. For both China and Russia, the other acts as a 'strategic cushion' against the Western world (Trenin, 2012, p. 2, 21). In this triangle both Russia and China prefers to

cooperate with each other rather than to be left out by other's closer alignment with the USA.

US factor in the China – Russia relations

US policy towards China and Russia has changed over time and so have the power relations in this triangle. To see what is the role of the US factor in China – Russia relations, this part will look at the recent US policy towards these countries.

The US president Barack Obama set the tone of recent US policy towards China and Russia. His election came at a time of global economic crisis and after the US failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Therefore, he was more willing to adopt accommodating policies towards China and Russia to gain economic and political partners. This was formulated in a form of 'G-2 proposal' for China and 'reset policy' for Russia (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 120-121). The different responses to these proposals and later dynamics in relations show the different power positions that Russia and China hold towards the US.

Since 1972 when US president R.Nixon normalized US-Chinese diplomatic relations up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, US and China were the 'allies of convenience'. Afterwards they became strategic competitors balancing between competition and cooperation (Pehrson, 2006, p. 15). When in 2009 Barack Obama offered China to form a 'G-2', that would become a form of global leadership, China declined, feeling in a position of strength after coming out of economic crises largely unharmed. China felt no pressure to be confined to US-led international order and also in the following years, China adopted a more assertive stance (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 121-122).

³ Although now it seems unlikely, in 2008 after B.Obama's restart policy it was a possibility

However, Russia chose a different approach and between 2009 and 2010, there was a 'reconciliation' between the USA and Russia. The USA revised their missile defence policy and abandoned their plans to deploy a missile defence system in Poland. Russia and the USA held nuclear-arms-control talks, and organized dozen working groups on issues like energy and civil society. However, as it is known, the 'reset policy' in the end failed as both states were not ready to change their strategies and perceptions of each other (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 121-122).

This shows the different power positions that Russia and China hold as compared to Moscow, Beijing feels more powerful towards Washington. First, because of US and Chinese economic interdependences and second the Middle Kingdom considers itself as the only state which could seriously challenge the US hegemony in the future. The USA recognizing China's rise to power has adopted a more accommodating policy allowing China to play a role in the international environment, hoping to ensure that China's growth does not destabilize the international system. The USA are willing to allow China to change some things in the international system that it sees as unfair. For example, to be part of the creation of international laws and regulations in the cyber security domain (Glaser, 2014, p. 80-81).

While China holds the material power, Russia is very assertive in using its political power, as seen in Georgia and Ukraine. It is no longer the 'Soviet Union' threat to the USA, but it is certainly anti-West and can create risks directly threatening the US interest. It is important for the USA at least because it holds a huge amount of nuclear arsenal (Boland, 2014, p. 38-39). It might be a declining power in comparison with China, but still needs to be taken into account by the USA.

Despite their differing policies towards the USA, the China – Russia cooperation during this time (2009-2010) did not minimize, but even increased (Kaczmarek, 2015, p. 125). It shows that China – Russia relations are more than just countering the USA. They stand on their own in the many common interests described in previous parts. However, it is also true that after 2012 when the USA started its pivot to Asia and abandoned its 'reset policy' towards Russia, China – Russia relations intensified even more since now they were bolstered also by the perception of a common threat (Feng, 2015, p. 30-33). Although China – Russia relations cannot be reduced to the US factor, the US policy towards Russia and China matters greatly in how close these countries shape their cooperation.

Conclusion

Russia and China have many reasons to cooperate and build a partnership: they have common threat perception, they face common challenges in the international system, have similar domestic regimes and have both economic and political interests to have each other as a partner. This has resulted in practical cooperation, also in the military domain and closer alignment in their foreign policies. However, it would certainly be very unusual if neighbours with such a long border would not cooperate at all and this could be actually considered a strategy to balance the USA. The Russia – China cooperation is driven by self-interest and there are distrust and many suspicions about each other's intentions in the region. It is especially true for Russia who for the first time in the history is a junior partner to China. In this triangle, Russia and China want to avoid the other side getting closer to the USA and to be left out. Particularly,

Russia fears to become a second-tier power while the USA and China shape the global strategic environment.

All this implies that potential for a formal, credible military alliance between China and Russia is low. Yet they do engage in soft balancing: not forming an alliance, but rather establishing strategic partnership in economic, political, and military domains. Their cooperation is fluid enough to keep the room of manoeuvre and to allow them not to cut relations with the West, which they need economically and also politically. The very idea of a potential alliance between China and Russia has enough weight to keep the West and the USA on their toes.

The fact of soft balancing does not mean that it could not turn out harmful for the USA. Although China – Russia relations cannot be reduced only to the US factor, the US policy in the region determines how close China and Russia develop their partnership. And even an ad hoc, tactical alignment between China and Russia could be very harmful to the West. This can happen not only in the East Asian region where China and the USA have many points of friction, but also in the future possibly in the Middle East where China and Russia have taken a common stance on Iran and Syria and China is becoming more assertive in need of natural resources (Dorsey, 2016).

Consequently, the US policy should be shaped so that it continues to balance between cooperation and competition with China, does not needlessly provoke China and Russia, however it also sets clear red lines that cannot be crossed. The USA would want to keep China and Russia engaged in global politics and work to change the perception that the USA wants to contain China and Russia. In the future, much of the potential of a formal alliance between China and Russia depends on the

US policy and its ability not to create a perception that such an alliance is a necessity for China and Russia.

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