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## CHINA AND RUSSIA: CONVERGENCE OF INTERESTS IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

GIORGI BILANISHVILI

109

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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In recent years scholars of international relations have been closely observing the Sino-Russian cooperation. This interest is not without reason given that the excessive activity of these two states in international politics indeed stands out. They are feeding their ambitions of enhancing their own influence as both of them aspire to be recognized as global superpowers by the international community.

The last 2017 National Security Strategy of the United States of America serves as clear proof of Sino-Russian foreign political aspirations and their enhancing influence. The document focuses on China and Russia as the main rivals of the USA in the modern world.<sup>1</sup>

Taking into account the recent policy being pursued by the United States; in particular, after the new Donald Trump presidency, China and Russia may become closer partners.<sup>2</sup> Due to external pressure, both states will need more support and cooperation from and with each other.

For Georgia, Sino-Russian relations are interesting and important in many aspects. The partnership between these two countries has a global as well as a regional dimension for our country. On the one hand, attention should be paid to how their cooperation is reflected on the international political agenda; on the other hand, we should closely watch the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations in the entire post-Soviet space, especially when the economy of China has rushed into our region.

Thus, it is important to correctly assess where the interests of these states coincide and what the agenda of their relationship is at this stage.

### **Convergence of Interests**

When we are talking about the convergence of interests between China and Russia, it should be mentioned first and foremost that both states pursue the policy of a pragmatic partnership based on mutual interests while seeking the preservation of authoritarian governance at home.<sup>3</sup>

Their relationship can be described as a flexible alliance of two powers dissatisfied with the current international order but, at the same time, having divergent views on certain issues.<sup>4</sup>

The formation of the alliance started in the 1990s. In 1997, China and Russia signed a Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation

of a New International Order, pledging equal partnership and strategic cooperation in a multipolar world.<sup>5</sup>

The main factor uniting China and Russia is that they see the United States and its alliances as the most serious threat to their interests. Both Beijing and Moscow believe that the strong resistance coming from the United States and its allies constrains China and Russia from shaping their regional environment (first of all, in the “near abroad”) in their interests which they perceive as a vital challenge for their security.<sup>6</sup>

Both countries strive to expand their influence; however, while China focuses on its economic potential, Russia mainly uses its rough military power and thereby persistently and blatantly violating international law.

One resemblance between the two countries is the displaying of weakness and strength at the same time. On the one hand, China has the mentality of a great power but, simultaneously, it also suffers from an inferiority complex. Russia, in turn, also perceives itself to be a great power but sees threats coming from all directions and has a constant fear of domestic instability.<sup>7</sup>

Although China and Russia share some common characteristics, they have political systems and economies which are very different from each other. Despite this fact, they see eye-to-eye more with each other than with the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Domestic political stability is important for both China and Russia for ensuring regime survival.<sup>9</sup> The interest in preserving their domestic political stability dictates that each of them seek to limit the free flow of information which threatens their grip on their populations.<sup>10</sup>

Russian and Chinese interests converge on another matter: both perceive that the United States is interfering in the internal political affairs of sovereign states. For example, Chinese leaders were convinced that the United States was behind the Arab Spring and they acutely criticized these events because they knew that they were also vulnerable to such instability.<sup>11</sup>

The Russian government’s very negative attitude not only towards the Arab Spring but also towards the so-called Colored Revolutions in the former Soviet Republics is also very widely known.

Based on common interests, China and Russia frequently coordinate their United Nations Security Council votes. The major areas where they supported each other and thwarted the West are the Balkans, Iran, North Korea and Syria.<sup>12</sup>

Both China and Russia express discontent towards US-dominated global financial institutions and are trying to change this situation. Both perceive the BRICS<sup>13</sup> format as a good opportunity to whittle down US domination in the international financial system.<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, both states have a common interest in the de-dollarization of international trade. For this reason, China and Russia are trying to use their national currencies in transactions of bilateral trade.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, China and Russia are supporting a space arms-control agreement which will disadvantage US superiority in this sphere.<sup>16</sup>

Special attention should be paid to the good personal relationship between the leaders of China and Russia which favors the cooperation of these two countries on the international arena. Soon after his third turn election as President of the Russian Federation in 2012, Vladimir Putin paid a visit to China. It is worth mentioning that before this, he cancelled his visit to Washington within the G8 summit framework. According to the Kremlin, President Putin changed his mind as he was too busy forming a government after his inauguration.

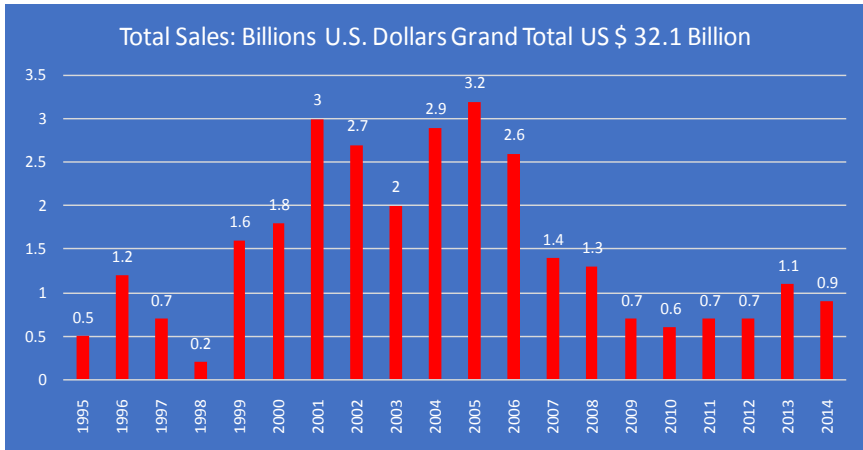
Similarly, President Xi Jinping made his first foreign trip to Russia in 2013.<sup>17</sup> By the end of 2014, President Xi Jinping and President Putin had met ten times,<sup>18</sup> an impressive number for such a short period.

Both leaders have the ambition to improve their position on the international arena and to limit the influence of the United States on the global as well as regional levels.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, both states have the perception of an ongoing competition between liberal democracy and a centralized political system.<sup>20</sup>

## **Main Topics of the Bilateral Relationship**

Military cooperation holds the lead place in the Sino-Russian relationship. Since the Cold War, Russia has become the major arms and technology provider for China; as a result, it helped to improve the capabilities of China's maritime forces.<sup>21</sup> Since China has developed its own military

capabilities, it has started purchasing only the most advanced Russian military technology. China started posing the technology transfer demands in terms of military purchasing. As China is advancing its military capabilities, Russia seems more restrained to provide advanced military technology.<sup>22</sup>



Source: SIPRI Arms Transfer Database

A sign of the expanding military cooperation between China and Russia is seen in the recent and frequent joint military trainings. In 2017, Chinese naval forces entered the Baltic Sea for the first time in history to engage in Russian military drills.<sup>23</sup> Before, Russia was taking part in Chinese naval exercises in the South China Sea in 2016.<sup>24</sup> These two seas have an obvious geopolitical connotation.

Sino-Russian cooperation is very active within the framework of the One Belt, One Road Initiative despite the fact that Moscow was initially relatively skeptical towards the project. From Beijing’s point of view, the use of routes that run through Russia is of major political importance because this factor weakens Moscow’s objection.<sup>25</sup>

In addition, the state-owned Russian Railways is acting as a lobbyist in favor of close cooperation with China within the activities of Russian domestic politics.<sup>26</sup> According to data published by Russian Railways, the number of containers transported via Russia on the route from China to the EU is gradually rising. In 2014, the number reached 44,200, in 2015 – 81,100 and

in 2016 – 153,000. However, these volumes remain modest as compared to maritime transport. For example, more than 10 million items of cargo were shipped from China to the EU using cargo ships in 2016.<sup>27</sup>

It is worth mentioning that according to some scholars, the construction of the trans-Caspian corridors has clear political motives for China, including the intention of bypassing Russia.<sup>28</sup>

Bilateral trade is increasing dynamically but the trade patterns differ considerably between Russia and China. China exports mainly manufactured goods (94% of its export) while Russia is specialized in fuels and mining products (71% of its export).<sup>29</sup>

China remains Russia's biggest trade partner<sup>30</sup> but, in turn, Russia is not among China's main trade partners. However, Russia did significantly raise the amount of crude oil supplied to China in the last two years and became China's top supplier, bypassing Saudi Arabia.<sup>31</sup>

Along with cooperation, scholars often speak about disagreements in the Sino-Russian relationship. One of the issues in their relationship is the Russian Far East which remains under China's shadow. There are 7.5 million Russians in the Far East facing 112 million Chinese in the bordering three provinces.<sup>32</sup>

Against this background, the threats coming from China's migration potential in the Russian Far East are periodically discussed in different publications. But based on different evaluations and statistics, there is only limited migration from China. The Chinese represent only a small segment of the migrant population in Russia.<sup>33</sup> Based on expert assessment, the number of Chinese migrants is between 400,000 and 550,000. More than half are in the European part of Russia and not in the Far East.<sup>34</sup> A Russian migrant is a category of individual who lives and works on the territory of Russia for a minimum of one year.<sup>35</sup>

One of the issues of possible discord between Russia and China is Central Asia. It is worth mentioning that with the launch of infrastructural projects during the last years, China has replaced Russia as the main importer of Central Asian energy resources. This is particularly true when speaking about Kazakhstan's oil and Turkmenistan's gas imports.<sup>36</sup>

These infrastructural projects were launched in the 2000s with Chinese initiative and, thus, the dependence of Central Asian countries on Russia as



a transit route has significantly decreased.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, based on 2016's data, China has replaced Russia as a major trade partner in every Central Asian country except Kazakhstan. In addition, the amount of Chinese investments in these countries is rather impressive.<sup>38</sup>

Generally, China and Russia are so far successfully managing to frame their rivalry in Central Asia. Russia retains the major political influence over the area, taking into account the linguistic, cultural and personal ties between Russian and Central Asian elites. As for China, it is the number-one economic power with its energy needs and investment projects.<sup>39</sup>

## **Conclusion**

China and Russia and represent the main strong and influential revisionist powers in the modern world pursuing the goal of the formation of a multipolar world order. In this regard, they are natural allies and both of them perceive the West and, in particular, the United State as the main adversary and major source of threat.

However, this is not enough to consider China and Russia as strategic partners. It should be noted that in the Russian Federation's main conceptual documents, such as the National Security Strategy and the Foreign Policy Concept, the relationship with China is described as a Strategic Cooperation (стратегическое взаимодействие). At the same time, the same documents describe the relationship with India as a Strategic Partnership (стратегическое партнерство) - the term having a much stronger connotation than just a Strategic Cooperation.

Since the annexation of Crimea and the aggression in Eastern Ukraine resulted in a severe confrontation with the West, Russia attaches great importance to the relationship with China. Thus, there are more arguments as to why Moscow should adapt to the augmented Chinese economic influence over the post-Soviet space starting from Central Asia and now covering the whole area. Despite the close cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, Russia should not be satisfied with China's increased influence over this area which it considers as its own sphere of influence. Furthermore, Moscow does not engage actively in the area where Chinese interests are predominant.

Despite the close Sino-Russian cooperation, Chinese activity in our region should be assessed positively as this process allows Georgia to receive new

and significant economic benefits. The Chinese presence is also politically important for our country as it will enhance stability - the interest which China will have naturally based on its investments and different projects in our region.

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