China and Russia: strategic partners or strategic rivals?

By LEUT Alexandra Morthorpe
China and Russia have a highly complex and variable relationship that is ultimately one of strategic ambivalence and convenience rather than true strategic partnership or rivalry as has been suggested in the past. An interesting dynamic between the two countries is the tension between rhetoric and reality.

Russian policy toward China in particular is driven not by China’s actions but by its relationship with the West, the United States in particular. It is important to examine this strategic relationship from both the Russian and Chinese perspectives as their differences in opinion highlight their key policy differences and, in turn, their effect on the world.

Chinese foreign policy is relatively consistent, with three overt aims as well as their more subtle ones. China is the clear winner in the Sino-Russia relationship, which is influencing the way that the two countries interact with each other and the rest of the world. The Russia-China gas pipeline deal and the newly developed BRICs bank proposal are useful in analysing the policy of these two countries while also separating rhetoric from reality.

Ultimately, while the Sino-Russian relationship is inconsistent and built upon fragile and unstable foundations, it is crucial in providing bi and multilateral defence against the US hegemony and ultimately the individual desires of the countries are outweighed by this joint goal, making this a strategic relationship of convenience but also very important for their long term national interests.

Seaman Communications Information Systems Christiaan Rijkaart (left) and Able Seaman Communications Information Systems Alex Cramp use one of HMAS Ballarat’s signal lamps to send a message to USS Curtis Wilbur as the ships sail through South China Sea, 2021. Photographer: LSIS Ernesto Sanchez.

The strategic relationship between Russia and China is a complex mix of balance, partnership and rivalry, both regionally and on an international scale. While some analysts describe the Sino-Russian relationship as having developed from "good neighbours to constructive partners to
strategic partners in the Post-Cold War period, the concept of ‘strategic partnership’ is too limiting as it has the potential to encourage analysts to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the relationship without properly considering what it actually results in. Rather “we should simply view China-Russia relations for what they are: a pragmatic relationship that is based on shared common interests, but is not without its fault lines”.

When examining the Russian perspective on its relationship with China one must consider the tensions in the relationship and their historical influences. In order to assess the strength of the relationship between the two countries, two key areas need to be addressed: “the issues that have troubled relations [and] are still likely to disturb a trajectory of continued improvement in ties” and the Sino-Russian relationship in the context of regional and global strategic triangles. The main issues from the Russian perspective are the border dispute, strategic imbalance and a fear of dependency.

Russia and China share the largest border in the world, and for the Russians the area near it is sparsely populated, and the fear of the ‘yellow threat’ restricts how far their economic and diplomatic relationship can go. A problem for Russia is that the border region of the country is “sparsely populated and stuffed with commodities, [with the close] Chinese side full of people”, and it is significantly closer to China than to Moscow, and the Kremlin is afraid of losing its influence over the area. This fear is a representation of the fear of ‘quiet expansionism’, and while the Chinese likely do not have any inclination to invade, the threat and the unbalanced composition of their forces and influence in the region is a significant factor in Russian hesitancy.

History shows that for Russia, as their relationship with the United States and Europe cool, their relationship with China will become more important, with evidence to support the reciprocal as well. For example, “with the collapse of the Soviet Union... Sino-Russian relations deteriorated in response to Russia’s preponderantly Western focus. This meant that China occupied rather a low position in Russian foreign policy”. The current climate is one of Russia versus Europe with the Ukraine crisis, and so Russian policy is once again in favour of China, however, this support is limited by the fear of Chinese economic supremacy and influence.


The issue for Russia is that they are facing a paradox; they are afraid of Chinese economic and military supremacy, but they rely on them for the stimulation of their economy. By 2006, “China was... Russia’s fourth largest trading partner... [and] China accounted for approximately 42 percent of all Russian arms exports”, a key part of the Russian economy. This military and economic cooperation is in a way a response to US hegemony and is characteristic of...
the "US-Soviet-Chinese ‘strategic triangle’ and triangular diplomacy\textsuperscript{8}". This relationship was defined by the “choice of band wagoning with US power or balancing against it... [While] neither Russia nor China has made a clear choice... both have preferred to hedge by balancing and band wagoning simultaneously\textsuperscript{9}”.

This relationship is one of political convenience in the current strategic climate, and unless Russia can overcome these concerns and prejudices in policy, this relationship will continue to be both unstable and driven by the political climate of the day. On the whole, “Russia is certainly hugging China close, but is keeping her guard up as she does so\textsuperscript{10}”. While this strategic ‘ambivalence’ is not necessarily a bad thing for the Russians it does need to be managed and considered in foreign policy for the unstable nation.

*HMAS Anzac (III) anchored in Marmaris Bay, Marmaris with other foreign navy ships from around the world including Russia, America, Spain, Germany, Turkey, England, France, Italy, Greece, Bulgaria, Ukraine, Romania and Israel. Photographer: Petty Officer Damian Pawlenko.*

The Chinese view on the strategic relationship with Russia is similar, but with some fundamental motivational differences. While Russia provides border security from ‘US encirclement’ and “is a geographically convenient source of raw materials”, China is conscious of the fact that Russia is an ‘unreliable’ strategic partner, as her policies will shift with the Western tide, not so much around actual relations with China\textsuperscript{11}. While in theory there are three pillars supporting the Sino-Russian relationship – the Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation (signed 2001, and ratified in 2008), the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, and the “commitment to a multipolar world\textsuperscript{12}” – these pillars are built upon a fragile base of mistrust and inequality.

The concept of the “The Wounded Bear and the Rising Dragon\textsuperscript{13}” is indicative of one of the main tensions between the two nations. Russia, a formerly great but now arguably declining power particularly in their region, "likes to act and be treated like a great power in the world, while China [for now] ... still continues to follow Deng Xiaoping’s dictum of maintaining a modest foreign policy of a ‘developing nation’ and not taking the lead on major international issues\textsuperscript{14}",
instead focusing on their soft power influence both regionally and more broadly in areas such as
the African region.

The Sino-Russian relationship is built on “an agreement on what the two sides do not want
(expansion of US influence and liberal values) but lacks a common vision for the world15”. This is
a weakness in their relationship, and highlights the fragility of the relationship, particularly
considering Russia’s inconsistency in its foreign policy, in that despite the rhetoric surrounding
their relationship very few long term benefits can be seen. The inconsistencies in particular are a
problem for the region and for global economic and diplomatic reactions, as these two nations are
so influential their decisions influence the world as a whole. While much of the recent scholarship
is emphasising the deals being made between the two nations and the health of their relationship,
the reality is that there is significant tension between the rhetoric and reality, and this fragile
strategic partnership is far from stable.

Russia is China’s largest military equipment provider, and over the years the Russians have made
billions of dollars through this relationship. However, this situation is changing, and “ironically,
the biggest losers in the long run could be the Russians themselves’, [Reuben Johnson, a
Ukraine-based aerospace and technology analyst and consultant said]. “Having made billions by
selling every conceivable weapon and technology to Beijing, they now find themselves facing the
possibility that they will lose control over the far eastern regions of Russia -- including the city
where all the Su-27/30 models sold to China are manufactured”16.”

Without their support initially China would not be in the position to pose a military and strategic
threat to that region, yet as Chinese military purchases account for more than forty percent of
Russian exports, the Russian economy would be severely depleted without this injection and that
would make them equally vulnerable to attack.
The paradox is just a part of the tensions between the nations; as sense of mutual need and mutual distrust which contributes to this sense of strategic ambivalence. Another interesting part of this relationship and an example of the tension between rhetoric and reality is the Gazprom Russia-China gas supply deal. While “this gas agreement [should have cemented]... an increasingly important relationship between Russia, the largest energy exporter, and China, the largest energy consumer behind the United States”, this has not necessarily been the case in reality.

The talks for this gas pipeline began in 2004, with negotiations having supposed to have concluded by 2005 with product delivered in 2008. However, China’s refusal to import “in accordance with the European pricing formula, which is linked to the oil price” meant that “the Extended Major Terms and Conditions of Natural Gas Supplies from Russia to China” was not signed by the two nations until 2011, with gas still not being pumped on the line today. Despite the rhetoric surrounding this economic cooperation and the strength of their relationship, their disagreements delayed the project by nearly six years. The Chinese and Russians have a strained strategic relationship with tension between rhetoric and reality, which further highlights the weakness and overall ambivalence of this partnership.

A welcoming ceremony for HMAS Arunta (II), to celebrate her first visit to Vladivostok, Russia, 2004. Photographer: Able Seaman Karen Bailey.

Despite their disagreements and differences of opinion and policy, Russia and China play key roles in balancing American unilateralism and global supremacy. One of the most recent and arguably one of the most important examples of this is the development of the BRICS alliance New Development Bank, whose equal-share, equal-split financial base will be “used to finance infrastructure and... sustainable development projects in BRICS countries initially, [with] other low- and middle-income countries... able to buy in and apply for funding” as required.
Notwithstanding the shortcomings of the system particularly in its current form, with fear of Chinese supremacy from within the organisation limiting the amounts of money each nation is able to contribute, this agreement is an important indicator for the future international order for three key reasons. Firstly, “it demonstrates the viability and dynamics of the BRICS despite all the scepticism and criticism in recent years... [secondly, it] demonstrates China’s global leadership [and how they balance this power without ostracising the other BRICS nations, and thirdly] ... because it is a direct challenge to the global order led by the West\textsuperscript{20}.”

While there is a perception that this is an attempt to create a global system to overtake the IMF and World Bank and destroy the economic and therefore military support of the West, especially America, the reality is that this system is unlikely to ever be in a position of that much power or influence. This is because this system is designed and targeted for developing nations, and “even when the NBD’s capital eventually rises to $100 billion... it would leave most of the developing world’s needs unmet\textsuperscript{21}.”

The relationship between the NBD and the IMF “is a complementary relationship rather than a conflicting one. [However], in the long run the competition between the two will intensify and the final outcome will depend on the balance of power between the two blocs: the developing world and the developed world\textsuperscript{22}”. Ultimately, despite tensions between rhetoric and reality and fundamental disagreements on policy, Russia and China play an important role in balancing the US in the Asia Pacific region and subsequently more broadly.

The strategic relationship between Russia and China is too complex to fit within classifications of partner or rival. The understanding of the partnership for each country, while ultimately one of strategic ambivalence and convenience, depends on the global and regional contexts and differs in some fundamental ways between the two countries. For Russia, the partnership is highly malleable and realistically depends on what their view is on the West at the time. China has become the more successful of the two, and their rise is indicative of Russia’s fall, which is a cause of great tension between the two.

Russia faces a paradoxical relationship with China, as military exports to China make up over forty percent of Russia’s total arms exports, and subsequently their economy, but the more they provide the less China will need them in the future. Their current economic policies are undermining their future prospects. China has a much broader strategic relationship with Russia and while a positive relationship between them is convenient in terms of preventing US encirclement, China is aware of Russia’s inconsistency as a strategic partner and has spread more broadly across the region and the world. Ultimately, despite the tensions between rhetoric and reality in their partnership, in the current strategic environment and in the future more broadly, Russia and China are important strategic partners, and this ambivalence and inconsistency is a threat to their own security long term.

In terms of strategic significance in the Australasian- Asia Pacific regions, it is important to consider the 'so what' factor; how will this arguably ambivalent, unstable relationship effect Australia’s strategic environment? It is also important to consider the increasingly volatile dynamic between China and India, and India’s relationship with the two nations and the rest of the world. For example, India is diplomatically ‘friendly’ with both Russia and NATO, which may become a point of tension for China. As India rises, will China shift their focus from land to sea based to counteract the perceived threat?
While their relationship with Russia remains relatively amicable, they have a large, arguably under-defended border, their sea border with India. This shift in strategic thinking can already be seen with the reshuffle of personnel from the PLA to the People’s Liberation Army Navy, and the rapid development of naval infrastructure and platforms. This shift is not only designed as a physical defence but also as a perception and balance of power act.

By rapidly developing their naval capability, China is sending a message not only to India, but to the rest of the region and the world that they are capable of maintaining their supremacy in the region and more broadly. While it is impossible to determine with one hundred percent accuracy what China will do in this space, it is now increasingly important to monitor and manage our relationships in the Asia-Pacific region, in order to respond to this growing and unstable threat effectively.

**Bibliography**


Endnotes

1 Helen Belopolsky, ‘Russia and the Challengers: Russian Alignment with China, Iran and Iraq in the Unipolar Era’, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, p. 68.
6 Helen Belopolsky, ‘Russia and the Challengers’, p. 66.
7 Ibid, pp. 72-73.
9 Andrew Kuchins, ‘Russian Perspective on China: Strategic Ambivalence’, p. 36.
11 Ibid, p. 239.
13 Helen Belopolsky, ‘Russia and the Challengers’, p. 65.
19 Paul Jay, Michael Hudson and Leo Panitch, ‘Is the New BRICS Bank a Challenge to US Global Financial Power?’, in *The Real News*, 03 October 2014, Viewed on 16 October 2014, http://therealnews.com/t2/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=31&Itemid=74&jumival=12123. Paul Jay is the Senior Editor of TRNN, Michael Hudson is a Distinguished Research Professor of Economics at the University of Missouri Kansas City, and Leo Panitch is the Canada Research Chair in Comparative Political Economy and a distinguished research professor of political science at York University in Toronto.
22 Dingding Chen, ‘3 Reasons the BRICS’ New Development Bank Matters’.