

## ***Russia and China: A Political Marriage of Convenience—Stable and Successful***

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Reviewer: Dr Gregory Raymond

For many, the relationship between contemporary China and Russia is a partnership in crime between revisionist powers bent on undermining the liberal rules-based global order. Certainly it is shared opposition to the West, rather than cultural affinity, mutual respect or shared values, that sustains the Russia-China quasi-alliance

While this insight is fundamental, it is insufficient to encompass the breadth, history and subtle dynamics of this distinctive relationship providing Michal Lubina the opportunity to work systematically through each of these. One aspect of the bilateral relationship is its 'top-down' character. The senior leadership in each country are well-known to the other, but thereafter, warmth and familiarity falls away rapidly at the middle and lower levels of officialdom. At the community level, the two countries remain as alien and unknown to each other as they are to their Western interlocutors. A second characteristic is what Lubina terms their 'sinusoid' rise and fall in relations. Some of this variance derives from changes in relative power. In the latest phase, Russia has become the subordinate partner but has decided to make a virtue out of the asymmetric win-win share of gains. Foreign policies with respect to the United States are also important; there was cooling when Russia accepted President Obama's offer of a reset in 2010, there was warming when the United States commenced its Pivot. A third characteristic is that each country is more oriented to the West than to each other; culturally, Russia is far closer to Europe than to China, while for its part China looks more to the West than Russia for technology and trade. What their partnership delivers, in the end, is a sense of safety in their rear areas, such that they can oppose the West's liberal interventions and pursue their own irredentist projects (Crimea for Russia, Taiwan and South China Sea for China).

The book traces the development of the quasi-alliance from the time of Russia's post-Cold War disappointment with the West, especially after the enlargement of NATO. Mutual non-interference on difficult problems like

Chechnya and Tibet became a source of friendship, with Russia becoming for China a 'Tiananmen proof partner'. China returned the favour during the 2014 Ukraine crisis, abstaining on a UNSC resolution condemning Russia. Despite discomfort with the sovereignty implications of the Crimea referendum and annexation, China saw *realpolitik* advantages. It obtained Russian gratitude, security in its rear, and another crisis to distract the West from the Asia Pacific.

Military relations are the most important part of the strategic partnership. This was initially centred on trade in arms, with the 1990s becoming an arms trade win-win. Sale of arms to China allowed Russia to maintain its military industrial complex while China modernised its military. Military drills started after 2005, but there was little real contact between Russian and Chinese soldiers; they exercised separately at the same location. Exercises amounted to a statement against US hegemony rather than real cooperation. Naval drills since 2012, too, have been political gestures, like in the South China Sea where Russia repaid China for its support in the Ukraine crisis. Nonetheless, the joint maritime exercises in the Yellow Sea in 2012 were China's largest ever, enabling some transfer of learning and knowledge. But trust should not be exaggerated. The Far East of Russia is the Achilles heel of the relationship, a source of Russian xenophobic fear.

A key argument of the book is that China has gradually become the dominant partner. The trajectory of the post-Cold War economic relationship is a good example. Apart from the arms trade, the 1990s was a stagnant period economically due to the legacies of the Sino-Soviet split and their command economies. In 1997 almost three-quarters of bilateral trade was still being done through barter transactions. A PRC trade spokesman noted drily that "between China and America there is cooperation without friendship; between China and Russia there is friendship without cooperation". Then in the 2000s and 2010s energy became the primary theme in the relationship. Russia became the 'energy appendix' of the Chinese economy, with energy making up 80 per cent of Russian exports to China while machinery comprised only 5 per cent. With global changes in patterns of energy consumption lessening the advantages of being an energy supplier, Russia's subordinate position in its relationship with China was exacerbated. Russia's weaker bargaining position and greater reliance on China ultimately forced it to sell its technological 'crown jewels', including its SA400 surface-to-air missile system and Sukhoi SU-35 combat aircraft. Overall there is a growing asymmetry in economic relations, with China far more important to Russia economically than vice versa.

In terms of theoretical framework, the book imposes a hard realist perspective in its interpretation of events and intentions. At times, this reaches this reaches points of ridiculousness. Every aspect of China's policy is interpreted in instrumental terms—even its protest of the bombing of its embassy in Belgrade is portrayed as a cynical ploy to rebut the West's

critique of its human rights record. The book also flirts with strategic culture. For example, Russian elites have drawn on the story of thirteenth-century prince Nevsky who maintained a tributary relationship with the Mongols in order to be able to fight Western intruders. This enabled Russia to keep its own faith and autonomy.

The book provides useful comparisons in terms of national style and inclination. China is far less, and Russia far more, inclined to use of force. Russia is more given to short-term sharp gestures to assert itself, China focused on a long-term strategy of acquiring power quietly.

In the final analysis this is a very strong and worthwhile analysis of a very important geopolitical relationship. It is let down only by an absurd number of typographical errors that would have been picked up by a standard spellcheck.

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