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The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: An *Entente* Between Great Powers

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INTRODUCTION

The Sino-Russian partnership has become one of the most ground-breaking systemic changes that have affected the post-Cold War era. The "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era" is set to advance a new pattern of interaction between great powers, "based on mutual respect, fairness and justice, and win-win cooperation[1]". Sino-Russian diplomatic relations have achieved their highest point since the mid 1950s, when their Communist alliance was formalised. Both countries' leaderships are apt to spread the message of an unprecedented convergence between two great powers. The Sino-Russian shared desire to sustain and promote this positive convergence is perfectly embodied in both leaders' "deep personal friendship[2]". A personalization of politics which is even reflected in the frequency of their meetings; thirty times in the last six years. On the other hand, western policymakers view China and Russia's rapprochement as a significant threat and direct challenge to the liberal world order, stirring up an American declinist narrative, viewing the decline of the West and the rise of the East. The announced "End of History" now seems a thing of the past, a Sino-Russian balancing alliance is now thought to be developing, equipped with a significant transformative potential of world affairs.

Such oversimplifications are inevitably misleading and incredibly more persuasive in a time of global disorder and increasing non-polarity. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to investigate the nature and the driving forces informing the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Can this be defined as a true alliance? Are both powers eager to cooperate in order to propose an alternative model for global governance? Is the China-Russia partnership a a pragmatic relationship, an axis of authoritarians, a soft entente, a cohesive balancing coalition or even a full-fledged alliance?

Against Francis Fukuyama's claim about "the end of history", the current international environment is characterised by fragmentation and the erosion of the US led international liberal order. In such a non-polar international environment[3], China and Russia have risen to unprecedented prominence. The strengthened cooperation between Beijing and Moscow bears some crucial implications for the international order because of their counter-hegemonic and transformative potential. Accordingly, it is of the utmost importance to devise a broader understanding of the nature of their relationship and its long-term sustainability. Indeed, while the distribution of power at the systemic level signals its resilience and capability to counterbalance the US led order, its widening asymmetry, its manifested pragmatism, and Sino-Russian divergent priorities will likely increase a latent feeling of mutual alienation.

The extremely wide scope of the argument has been reflected in the debate over the nature and the future prospects of China-Russia relations. Consequently, we can observe a stark division between scholars'

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[1] Lo, B. (2020) The Sino-Russian partnership and global order, *China International Strategy Review*, 2:306-324
[2] Ibidem
[3] Haass, R. N. (2008). *The Age of Nonpolarity*, Foreign Affairs, May/June 2008, published by the Council of Foreign Relations

opinions. On the one hand, we find descriptions of a Sino-Russian "quasi-alliance[4]", a military-alliance or even the genesis of an "Eastern Rapallo[5]". On the other hand, the partnership is viewed as an "Axis of Convenience[6]", a pragmatic relationship, emphasizing observable trends towards increasing asymmetry, highlighting a latent feeling of ambiguity, mistrust, and the primacy of autonomous strategic calculus. Finally, other scholars advance a more moderate analysis, thus arguing for a "limited defensive strategic partnership[7]", an "soft[8]" or "outright" entente, which are still inevitably slightly tilted toward one of the two poles, in between sceptics and believers. Moreover, all assessments are inherently susceptible to external factors, and by the choice of emphasis. On the other hand, all scholars would admit that there are aspects of mutually beneficial convergence, as well as the existence of certain tensions, geopolitical frictions, and disagreements.

The choice is often one of emphasis. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to derive a more systematic and coherent approach. Accordingly, the research will be based on a two-level pattern of action, an interplay of different causal forces occurring at different levels of analysis, distinguishing between systemic variables and inter-state relations occurring at regional level. The thesis will be framed in a neo-realist paradigm. Accordingly, the relevant unit of analysis will be the state, immersed in an international self-help system. However, lessons from constructivist theory and geopolitics will likely complement and refine the analysis. Indeed, the research will not focus exclusively on systemic pressure and the global distribution of power. Status considerations, perceptions, historical grievances, grand strategies, and geographical constraints will play a major role. Indeed, non-systemic causes are crucial to explain the daily evolution of foreign policy, great powers' behaviour, the interaction with the other in the self/other dialectic as well as the long-term objectives. Moreover, the balance of power theory will be refined, emphasizing the notion of threat, rather than power, as well as considering the afore mentioned explanatory variables. Finally, taking into account some inconsistencies and contradictions in Sino-Russian relations, alliance politics won't be exclusively based on the neo-realist two-fold typology, which sets forth the primacy of balancing or band-wagoning as the predominant patterns of interaction and root causes of alliance formation.

In the first place, the research will reconstruct the history of Sino-Russian relations until the early 1990s, so to understand how the "weight of history" informs both countries' strategic culture, their reciprocal perceptions and their relationship. Secondly, an analysis of Sino-Russian contemporary will highlight both countries' enduring commonalities and divergences in their contemporary relations since the start of the New

[4] Lukin, A. (2020) *The Russia–China entente and its future.* International Politics, Springer Link
[5] Nguyen, H.P. (1993) *Russia and China: the Genesis of an Eastern Rapallo*, Asian Survey, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 285-301, University of California Press
[6] Lo, B. (2008), *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*. London and Washington DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press
[7] Chenghong, Li (2007) *Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino–Russian rapprochement and the driving forces*, Journal of Contemporary China
[8] Gabuev, A. (2016). Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis. Carnegie Moscow Center, 29 June

Millennium. Then, the proposed two-level pattern of interaction, preferred to an analysis based on causal forces occurring at a single level of analysis, for instance at the inter-state level or at the systemic one, will portray a more coherent outline of the China-Russia strategic partnership, observed both at a global level and at a regional one. Finally, the proposed two case studies will follow the same analytical path. The Syrian War and the R2P doctrine will elucidate the emergence of the Sino-Russia global consensus, analysing which factors drive their convergence as well as whether both countries share the same concerns, adopt the main behavioural patterns, or attempt to provide a commonly defined anti-liberal alternative. Then, the interplay between the Eurasia Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative will serve as an important case study to understand the Sino-Russian interaction at a regional level, namely in Central Asia. In conclusion, the nature of China and Russia's constructive partnership will be given an analytical definition, while pointing out the most probable future scenarios and how Sino-Russian relations could be affected by them.

Through a qualitative analysis, this work scrutinizes the nature of China and Russia's contemporary relationship. The work will heavily rely on secondary sources, ranging from academic articles, papers, journals and books, with a remarkable preference for Chinese and Russian views on the topic, so to take into account their own ethnocentric understanding and perceptions of international politics, to understand their own normative policy suggestions as well as their related concerns, yet without renouncing to Western experts' contributions on the topic. Furthermore, newspaper articles will help us to get a more contemporary understanding of current evolutions and trends affecting China, Russia and the other major actors. Primary resources instead will serve as useful tools to understand the main political narrative and messages that political leaders want to convey as well as to get a sense of people's perceptions and reactions to recent events.

Chapter I: The Weight of History

History cannot be easily transcended. As stated by E.H. Carr, "the great man is at the same time the by-product and the agent of the historical process, creator and representative of the social forces transforming the world"[9]. Accordingly, I would argue that we cannot exempt ourselves from trying to assess the role that historical legacies play in the way we give meaning to reality. Indeed, through pedagogy, public and elite attitudes are channelled by history[10]. Before carrying out an analysis, based for instance on the military might, the economic power or the structural constraints set by geography, it is of the utmost importance to analyse the "weight" that history plays in the interaction between Russia and China. In order to investigate the true nature and the sustainability of the Sino-Russian "strategic partnership", it is crucial to understand how both great powers have been perceiving themselves and conceiving the other throughout the time, their distinct strategic priorities, their peculiar political cultures and their normative understanding of global order, as elements inevitably intertwined with their historical past.

China and Russia's current convergence marks an unprecedented event. Historically, until the 19h Century, "the notion of a barbarian threat from the East, together with climate and geographical distance being natural obstacles to their rapprochement, have led to only sporadic interactions"[11]. Furthermore, besides few exceptions, a mutual sense of alienation has marked their past encounters until the end of the Cold War, originating from Russian expansionism, conflicting security concerns, ideological disputes and divergent grand strategies.

The Golden Horde and the Collapse of the Mongol Empire

While the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation now share a border covering an area of more than 4200 Km^2, both countries indirectly came into contact only with the expansion of the Mongol empire. Mongol rule began in North China in 1213 and ended in 1363, while the Golden Horde ruled Russia from 1237 to 1480. Therefore, for almost 140 years Russia and China were part of the same empire, thus establishing some first contacts between Chinese and Russians. However, with the collapse of the Mongol central rule, the basis for Russian expansion toward the Pacific was set, leading to the initial penetration into Siberia, primarily undertaken by private explorers. Indeed, a private army consisting of 800 Cossacks reached the Irtysh river[12], an important drainage basin in Western Siberia, near the Altai mountains, offering the Tsar Ivan the Terrible the newly acquired territories. After defeating the resistance of native local tribes, Russia

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9 Carr, E. (2000). Sei lezioni sulla storia. Torino: Einaudi, p. 60.
10 Caracciolo, L. (2019). "Umanità della Geopolitica", Limes, Il Fattore Umano. n. 8/2019 pp 7-28
11 Bobo, Lo. (2017). A Wary Embrace. A Lowy Institute Paper. Melbourne & Sydney: Penguin Random House Australia, p. 33
12 Cheng, T. (1957). *A history of Sino-Russian relations*. Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 11-12

was finally able to start a colonization process in Western Siberia, sending peasant families to cultivate the land and to develop the first urban centres. Thus, from 1581 to 1648 they were able to extend Russian territory from the Urals to the Pacific and Siberia[13], finally reaching Cape Čukotskij and Kamchatka, penetrating into a no man's land characterised by the harshness of the climate, not conducive to a productive agriculture, and by the native tribes' weak political organizations.

Russian penetration into Eastern Siberia

Russian penetration into Eastern Siberia coincided with the rise of the Manchus, rising in power subjugating local tribes in Manchuria and then entering Beijing in order to establish the Manchu Dynasty. Proceeding their exploration along the Amur river, the Cossacks attacked local villages compelling the natives to swear their allegiance to the Tsar and obliging them to pay a tribute. Powerless, native tribes of the Amur region, under the protection of the Manchu empire, appealed to the Manchu authorities. Thus, the first direct contacts between China and Russia were established, with the Tsar increasingly more interested in taking control of the fertile Amur region and the Emperor Kan-Shi ordering the military preparations for a large-scale war so to push back Russian forces. Military and diplomatic disputes constantly emerged for the control of the Amur, crucial for its strategic value, being a natural artery of transportation. Finally, in 1689, the first treaty between a European power and China was signed, the Treaty of Nerchinsk, establishing the boundary line along the Argun river. A period of relative peace along the Siberian-Machurian border was set to begin, lasting for around 170 years[14]. Shortly after, Peter the Great even sent an envoy to Beijing, obtaining the Chinese permission to send small trade missions to the city as well as the privilege of having duty free imports and exports for certain limited products. Finally, in 1725, under Tsarina Catherine, the Count Vladislavich Ruguzinsky was appointed "Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary" to the Court at Beijing, under the instructions of: concluding a commercial treaty, fixing the Mongol-Siberian frontier and obtaining the permission to build a Russian Church in China[15]. The so called "Treaty of Kiakhta" was signed, highly favourable to Russia since it acquired a large portion of territory near the Sayan Mountains. Returning in 1728 to St Petersburg, Vladislavich even laid down a plan to eventually conquer China.

The first significant encounters occurred in the 19th Century. However, they were marked by Russia's territorial acquisitions, profiting from the declining Qing dynasty. Indeed, as long as the Chinese Empire retained its strength and central power, Russia tolerated the previous treaties and kept friendly relations with China[16]. Yet, while European powers and the United States were engaging in prosperous trade activities in

[13] ivi, p.13
[14] Ivi, p. 25
[15] Ivi p. 28
[16] Ivi p.31

South China, Russia could only retain its "privilege" of trading with Peking only by land. As soon as the Opium War and the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 showed the fragility of the Asian Giant, Russia restored its expansionist foreign policy in the Far East in order to reap some benefits from Chinese weakness. Profiting from the internal chaos, further exacerbated by the Taiping Rebellion, Russia established a series of town and forts along the banks of the Amur River, violating of the Treaty of Nerchinsk. Canton was occupied by the British forces in 1857, consequently, the Tsarist Empire pressured their Chinese counterparts, threatening them to resort to the use of force so to obtain their signature for the Treaty of Aigun. The latter established that "the left bank of the Amur River, from the Argun to its mouth at the sea, belonged to Russia, while the right bank down to the Ussuri was part of China"[17]. On the other hand, with the Treaty of Tientsin (1858) Russia was able to further extend its commercial influence, enlarging Russian trade to the seven ports that had been opened to European powers as well. Nowadays, Chinese schoolbooks still refer to the "loss of one-and-a-half million square kilometres"[18] as a consequence of the inequal treaties and the "century of humiliation", which started in 1842 with the First Opium War. This is evidence of how history has characterised and still today affects Chinese political and strategic culture. "Topics such as bupingdeng tiaoyue (the Unequal Treaties) and guochi (national shame) have comported with Chinese perceptions of its relations with the world"[19].

Russian territories in the Amur region were practically uninhabited. Migration was not practicable due to the distance from Russia itself, the lack of any transport connection and the difficult living conditions. Therefore, Russia's strategic priority in the East shifted towards the populous and fertile lands of Manchuria and Korea, seeking to build "an ice-free port and naval base in the Liaotung peninsula or in Korea"[20]. Accordingly, Tsar Alexander III commanded the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1891 with the aim of developing a system of transport and communication facilities connecting the European part of Russia and the Far East, a project deeply embedded in strategic calculus since it laid down the infrastructure for a faster displacement of military troops. In the meantime, Japan was illustrating its imperialistic pretensions, in line with its plan to annex Korea and Manchuria. Thereafter, with the signature of the Treaty of Shimonoseki in 1895, China recognized the independence of Korea, renouncing to any kind of revindication, ceding the Liaotung Peninsula, Taiwan and Penghu islands to Japan as well as opening its ports and rivers to Japanese trade. Russian, German and French ministers put pressure on Tokyo to withdraw its military forces and pretensions from the Liaotung Peninsula, representing a direct threat to the stability of the Far East and to Chinese security. A diplomatic victory which halted Japanese ambitions as well as increasing Russia's influence in China. Thus, the Tsarist Empire aimed at the construction of a railway system connecting China

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[17] Ibidem

[18] Bobo, Lo. (2008), *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*. London and Washington DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press, 21

[19] Wang, D. (2003), *The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in Modern China*. Pacific Affairs Vol 73, N. 3, p. 401

[20] Cheng, T. (1957). *A history of Sino-Russian relations*. Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 51-52

and Vladivostok via Manchuria. Russia was finally given the permission to launch this project with the signature of the Sino-Russian Secret Treaty of alliance, signalling the first significant Sino-Russian convergence with the formal codification, although kept secret until World War I, of their obligation to mutually support each other in case of Japanese invasion and interference. In 1903, although formally jointly owned, the de-facto Russian railway started operating.

China on the Verge of Disintegration and the US open-door policy

Following US proposals, namely by the then US Secretary of State John Hay, the open-door policy was announced, affirming the need to adhere to the principle of equal opportunity concerning trade in China. Indeed, the United States, an increasingly more relevant actor in the Pacific, feared Chinese repartition between the different Great powers and were concerned about their trade interests with Peking. Shortly after, the Boxer Rebellion sparkled, signalling a latent feeling of oppression and a desire for national revanchism. China was on the verge of complete disintegration, however, the US diplomatic intervention proved crucial in settling the conclusion of the Boxer uprising. Yet, Russian invasion of Manchuria disrupted the status quo. Realising the danger in the Far East, Britain and Japan signed the Anglo-Japanese agreement in 1902, establishing their alliance and mutual protection of their interests in China and Korea. Unable to reconcile their conflicting ambitions, Russo-Japanese relations quickly escalated, leading to a war for the hegemonic control over Korea and Manchuria, resulting in Moscow's debacle. Finally, according to the Peace Treaty of Portsmouth, Russia recognised Japan "paramount political, military and economic interests"[21] in Korea, the transferral of the lease of Port Arthur and Dairen to Japan as well as the Southern part of Sakhalin.

Moscow's expansion in the Far East was halted in Norther Manchuria. However, Outer Mongolia represented another valuable territory for its imperialistic claims. Russia started playing an increasingly more important role in the region. On the one hand, it began instigating the local elite. On the other hand, it tried to foster the separation of Outer Mongolia from China, helping Mongolian troops to occupy Hovd in 1912 and deterring a potential Chinese attack through its military presence[22]. The Mongolian leadership asked Moscow to recognise Mongolia's independence and to help it with the subsequent annexation of Inner Mongolia. In the end, although China kept its nominal sovereignty over Outer Mongolia, the country was to become jointly managed by both Moscow and Beijing, with the Outer Mongolian territory being significantly enlarged. The Mongols soon felt the lack of any real autonomy and political improvement regarding their independence, becoming a de-facto Russian protectorate.

[21] Ivi p. 70
[22] Ivi p. 76

WWI, The October Revolution and The Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship

With the outbreak of the First World Conflict, Russia's attention dramatically shifted towards the West. Moscow was suffering heavy losses in Poland. As soon as the 1917 October Revolution successfully led to the seizure of the central power by the Bolsheviks, Lenin started negotiations with the Germans, resulting in the humiliating Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.[23] Accordingly, Russia lost 27% of its population and 26% of its arable land together with an extremely large payment of war indemnities. Moreover, the Chinese Eastern Railway Company's lost its previous political character, conducive for Russian privileges and control of the company, restoring its commercial nature. Furthermore, Russian influence in Xinjiang, where Moscow's strategic interests were strong until 1914, gradually disappeared. The Soviet Government lost the trade privileges the Tsarist Regime had gained in terms of migration and duty-free imports/exports entering Xinjiang. Since the Soviet Government had not yet been formally recognised, China was able to pursue its revisionist aims in commerce. Indeed, profiting from the expiry of the "Treaty of St. Petersburg and the Overland Trade Regulation of 1881" all duty privileges related to Russian goods were abrogated.

In 1919, the Soviet Government made a historical declaration to the Chinese people, marking a new phase of Sino-Russian relations, laying the foundation for a Sino-Soviet convergence. The Soviet offer signalled the beginning of a new narrative, geopolitical discourse and political culture based on an anti-Western and anti-Imperialist sentiment. The document "hailed the liberation from the foreign gold, which is strangling the enslaved peoples of the East, and first among them the Chinese nation"[24]. The soviets "pledged to annul all Tsarist Treaties, proclaiming an anti-imperialist policy of non-annexation and the self determination of the people"[25]. Shortly after, a second declaration was transmitted to the Peking government, proposing a Sino-Soviet treaty of friendship, to be based on the 1919 first declaration's principles. Accordingly, Moscow would have renounced to Chinese indemnities resulting from the Boxer Rebellion, it would have established regular trade and economic relations, it would have declared null and void all previous treaties concluded with China by the Tsarist Regime, it would have renounced to Chinese territories and to its rights of extra-territoriality in the Chinese Republic. The Railway system. completed in 1902 by the Tsarist Regime according to a concession provided by the Qing dynasty, had a strong strategic value since it connected Vladivostok in the Far East with Porth Arthur and the rest of Northern China. While Moscow previously proposed to cede it without any further compensation, the matter was simply postponed in order to be settled through a new Special Treaty.

Chinese resentment, which even today informs its foreign policy discourse, the direct by-product of

[23] Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "*Treaties of Brest-Litovsk*". Encyclopedia Britannica
[24] Whiting, A. S. (1951), *The Soviet Offer to China of 1919*. The Far Eastern Quarterly 10 (4), pp 355-364
[25] Cheng, T. op. cit. p. 355

the then-going "Century of Humiliation", was even further exacerbated by the Treaty of Versailles. Indeed, article 156 of the 1919 Treaty envisaged the transferral of the Shandong Peninsula, formerly controlled by the Germans, to Japan. To Chinese People, the Russian declaration "sounded like a Magna Charta"[26]. Especially university professors and students "praised the new idealistic and anti-imperialist Soviet foreign policy"[27]. The USSR and China's convergence, as marked by the 1919 and 1920 Russian Declarations, could give us a first hint of what will be their "unbreakable friendship" once the Chinese Communist Party will ultimately seize the power in 1949. However, we cannot but take into consideration the domestic instability, the tremendous losses suffered by Russia in WWI, as factors inevitably dictating a new temporary shift in its foreign policy. Indeed, once the USSR firmly stabilised the internal political situation and, therefore, it was able to restore its Great Power status, a new structural imbalance and widening asymmetry would have emerged in Sino-Russian relations. While the USSR was firstly internationally recognised by Great Britain in 1924, China was at the mercy of incessant civil conflicts among the warlords. Outer Mongolia, characterised by Soviet military presence, and the Chinese Eastern Railway "soon became the stumbling block"[28] of any possible Sino-Soviet agreement. Indeed, negotiations stalled, and the Sino-Soviet Conference was never resumed.

After the October Revolution, the Bolsheviks expected the beginning of a world proletarian revolution. However, workers in Western countries did not follow suit, therefore its attention shifted to colonised and semi-colonised countries, especially the bordering China. Chinese domestic political scenario had been consisting of a series of internal clashes and conflicts between warlords and militarists since the proclamation of the Republic of China in 1912. Dr. Sun Yatsen had tried to oppose them, without any positive outcome. National resentment and anti-imperialist feelings, as signalled by the May Fourth Movement, were increasingly rising. The Chinese Revolutionary Party, led by Dr. Sun was reorganized in the Kuomintang. As Maurice Meisner writes, "the Western ideas and ideologies that became most prominent after the May Fourth Incident were ones critical of the existing order in the West."[29] In the meantime, Lenin decided to start spreading communist ideology in China. Firstly, a Society for the study of Marxism was founded in Peking. Then, the first Chinese Communist cells were organized. "Comintern agents were sent from Moscow to provide the necessary Leninist party apparatus for effective action"[30]. However, the USSR soon realised that Communism was unknown to Chinese people and that it was necessary to involve the Kuomintang and to make use of the widespread nationalist sentiment as a leverage to spread Communism and expand Moscow's influence. Moreover, the structural conditions, informing either the success or the failure of a Communist

[26] Ivi p. 109
[27] ibid
[28] Cheng. T. (1957) op. cit. p. 114
[29] Meisner, Li Ta-Chao and the Origins of Chinese Marxism, p. 99.
[30] Lüthi, L (2008) The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press

Revolution in China, were different from the ones that had characterised Russia. Indeed, Chinese Communists obtained their first successes when they "abandoned the Comintern strategy of urban uprising, appealing to the peasantry. In the famous argument of Chalmers Johnson, mobilizing nationalist anti-Japanese sentiment"[31]. Conscious of their still limited strength, the CCP CC adopted a resolution, kept under secrecy, to adopt "from the very beginning the tactic of divide et impera"[32]. Accordingly, Chinese Communists were able to grow in size and influence, until they even started openly criticising the Kuomintang from within.

The CCP's victory and the Sino-Soviet Friendship, Alliance and Mutual assistance Treaty

Japanese ambitions in Manchuria, while being previously halted by the Nine Power Treaty, were rising once again as China was showing signs of convergence towards political unity. The Japanese Kwantung Army, created to protect the South Manchurian Railway, decided to push even further its military ambitions easily bringing the entire Manchurian region under its control. The League of Nations was unable to transform its words into pragmatic actions and the US did not want to exacerbate the situation, fearing the outbreak of a Second World War. In the beginning, the USSR followed a policy of appeasement. However, Moscow was compelled to resist and should have done everything to prevent another defeat. Moscow opted to heavily increase its military strength in the Far East, establishing a huge military contingent of around "400000 men and 2000 planes"[33], acting as a crucial deterrent and curtailing a possible escalation of border conflicts. Vis a vis the League of Nations and the Western Powers' appeasement and inability to halt Japanese expansion, the USSR came to be viewed as China's natural ally, conquering the minds of Chinese people with its anti-imperialist stance and discourse. Meanwhile, the Chinese Communist party was exploiting internal and external pressures afflicting China in order to recruit members to increase the size of their military groups. Besides the 4th and 5th Red Armies, such militias groups were small and had little strength. "Acting on Li Lih San line"[34], the CCP CC asserted that the time had come for a revolutionary tide. Yet, Communist offensive soon proved to be premature. Communist forces suffered heavy casualties and their initial successes were short lived. The National Government decided to send a consistent military division to suppress Red Forces. Finally, Mao Tse Tung was able to demonstrate its military genius, proving to be a "great student of Sun Tzu[35]", the 400 BC author of the "Art of War". Conscious of the superiority of the government troops in terms of training and equipment, Mao announced its four slogans regarding the tactics to be undertaken in guerrilla

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[31] Friedman, J. (2015). Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press p. 9

[32] Cheng. T. (1957) op. cit. p. 126

[33] Cheng. T. (1957) op. cit. p. 189

[34] Cheng. T. (1957) op. cit. p. 194

[35] Ghandhi, R. K. S. (1965). Mao Tse-Tung: his military writings and philosophy. Newport, Rhode Island: U.S. Naval War College Review 17(7)

warfare: a) when the enemy advances we retreat b) when the enemy halts we harass c) when the enemy seeks to avoid battle, we attack d) when the enemy retreats we pursue. "The similarity with Sun Tsu writings is too obvious to be accidental[36]", indeed the Chinese General of Ho Lu's army in the 400 B.C. wrote: "If the enemy is taking his ease, he can harass him; if well supplied with food, he can starve him out; if quietly encamped, he can force him to move[37]". Through "deception" and "surprise" attacks, Communist troops were able to almost annihilate government troops. After a second misconceived attack, a third final offensive was led by the Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. Mao decided to retreat so to avoid a clearly unbalanced military confrontation, "giving up space for time". As soon as the situation in the Shanghai-Nanking area, affected by Japanese pressure, became more stable, the Generalissimo decided to focus on the fight against the enemy acting within China, namely the CCP. Moreover, government troops, learning from their previous costly mistakes, were able to induce the Red Army "to abandon Guerrilla warfare for positional warfare[38]" in which the Communists suffered many casualties. Following Moscow's advice as well, Mao began an evacuation and the famous "long March".

"The military and political ineptitude of the Guomindang made up for the lack of significant Soviet aid; by late 1949, the CCP swept to victory in China[39]". The Chairman viewed the US from the beginning as an imperialist threat, supporting the Kuomintang and admired from East Asian countries as the liberators from Japanese Imperialism. Conversely, the Soviet military, political and diplomatic support for the CCP was minimal. Furthermore, Moscow "had tried to extract territorial and economic concessions in Manchuria and Xinjiang from the Guomindang government"[40] through the Friendship and alliance Treaty signed in 1945. Since 1946, Mao had been asserting the theory of the "intermediate zone". Accordingly, there was a global united front against American imperialism, with the USSR as the defender of this front, fighting for peace in their conflict for the control of countries of West Europe, Africa and Asia. It was precisely the role of the US that determined Mao's decision to "lean on one side" and to determine a Sino-Russian rapprochement based on an anti-imperialist narrative and strategy. Yet, Beijing from the beginning emphasized its necessity to preserve its own space of manoeuvre, a loose partnership, far from being an "unbreakable friendship", that bears a certain resemblance with contemporary Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Not a mere coincidence but a reminder of how cyclical historical patterns can help us to make sense of the present and to scrutinise certain structural variables that inform great powers' encounter.

The Sino-Soviet Friendship, Alliance and Mutual assistance Treaty, signed in 1950, marked the beginning of the new Sino-Soviet partnership, characterized by asymmetry. Indeed, China needed Soviet

[36] Ivi p. 8
[37] Minford, J. (2002) The Art of War. New York: Penguin Group. p. 21
[38] Cheng, T. (1957). A history of Sino-Russian relations. Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 199
[39] Lüthi, L (2008) The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press p. 29
[40] Ivi p. 99

economic aid and security guarantees against US imperialism while Stalin's was not willing to jeopardise US-Russian relations for a full-fledged revisionist and anti-imperialist alliance with Mao. Yet, the pact retained its historical importance as well as its transformative potential to shape the Global order. Stalin's ambiguous stance towards its relations with China, especially when the latter entered into conflict with the US, was evident during the Korean War, when the Soviet leader slowed down the promised air cover and then "obstructed all attempts to bring war to an end[41]". On the other hand, the PRC resisted all attempts to achieve a complete form of military integration, especially in 1955 when the Warsaw pact was founded. The Korean war "encouraged Mao to break China's international isolation by turning toward the intermediate zone"[42]. China approached India, their diplomatic encounters were fruitful and led to the Pancha Shila – the Five Principles of Coexistence. Accordingly, China's invitation to the Bandung Conference in 1955 signalled Beijing's ability to curtail its own standing in world affairs which was not exclusively tied to the alliance with the Soviet Union. Stalin mainly used economic aids and military assistance as bargaining tools to extract concessions from the Chinese counterpart, namely the "lease of Dalian Harbor, the Lushun Naval base on Liaoning peninsula as well as mining, oil and railroad concessions in Manchuria and Xinjiang[43]". Moreover, Mao had to recognise the sovereignty and independence of Outer Mongolia. "Mutual trade increased 6.5 times from 1950 to 1956. By 1955, over 60% of China's goods exchange was with the Soviet Union"[44]. Finally, Soviet support was expressed also in terms of know-how, sending Soviet advisers and experts.

The "Honeymoon Period", The Sino-Soviet Split and Kissinger's triangular diplomacy

After Stalin's death and Khrushchev's ascent to power, a new phase of Sino-Soviet relations was inaugurated, defined by historians as the "Honeymoon Period". During his visit to Beijing, Khrushchev provided Mao with a list of Chinese KGB agents in the PRC, as well as recognising his predecessor's exploitation of his allies through trade. As argued by Luthi, "Chinese memoirs of Stalin's Janus-faced policies during the Korean War and his insistence on unequal treaties were difficult to dispel"[45]. However, it was precisely Mao's ideological radicalization and Khrushchev de-Stalinization process in 1956 that set the roots for an ideological antagonism that would finally undermine the alliance in 1966. De-Stalinization indirectly threatened Mao's leadership domestically, especially since the Chinese Socialist High Tide was then proving to be a complete failure. Their ideological divergence was even further exacerbated by Moscow's decision to follow a foreign policy of "peaceful coexistence" vis a vis the US, to soften the economic burden of their confrontation. Conversely, Mao decided to reject this policy, observing the worsening of Sino-American

[41] Lüthi, L (2008) The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press p. 36
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ivi p. 37
[44] Ibid.
[45] Lüthi, L (2008) The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press p. 45

relations over Taiwan where the US even decided to install nuclear tactical missiles. The events of Poland and Hungary led the Chairman to turn against Khrushchev even more firmly: “The so-called de-Stalinization thus is simply de-Marxification, it is revisionism”[46]. While the two superpowers tried to negotiate and find a compromise to solve the issues related to Germany and nuclear armament and proliferation, China maintained his crude Marxist-Leninist understanding of a fight against capitalism and imperialism. “It becomes clear that the divide between the Soviets and the Chinese ran deeper than personal rivalries or domestic politics. It reflected a much more profound tension between two different revolutionary agendas”[47]. Moreover, Mao instigated the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations with domestic aims, as a political tool to marginalise the reformers Liu and Deng Xiaoping. The Chinese Chairman was also able to gather political support from international events as well. Firstly, the failed stationing of SS-4 and SS-5 nuclear IRBMs in the Caribbean, eventually leading to the Soviet retreat under US pressure. Moscow’s risky policy responded to a strategic necessity, namely, to counterbalance American IRBMs along Soviet borders, especially after China’s refusal to set up a joint Sino-Soviet submarine fleet in the Pacific, signalling once again Beijing’s desire to maintain its strategic independent room of manoeuvre. Secondly, the Second Sino-Indian Border War offered Mao another opportunity to rally support against the USSR and to “instill revolutionary consciousness against Revisionism in China’s masses[48]”, in line with Mao’s slogan “Fanxiu Fangxiu” (oppose revisionism abroad, prevent revisionism at home)[49]. Finally, the USSR stationed troops and heavy weaponry along the Chinese border. Since 1967, border skirmishes had been occurring, rising over time in intensity and frequency. Beijing soon found out to be internationally completely isolated, in the words of its leader: “We are now isolated. No one wants to make friends with us”[50]. The situation quickly escalated; the USSR even threatened nuclear war. A “war psychosis” affected Chinese leadership, which was preparing its army for an eventual attack, even though the Soviets had proposed to undertake negotiations.

After the threat of a major war with the Soviet Union and the failure of border negotiations, Mao was forced to change his foreign policy from a stark confrontation against the US and an anti-imperialist main narrative to a reconciliation with Washington. The CCP’s refusal to attend the 23rd CPSU Congress is evidence of Mao’s intention to strengthen anti-Sovietism. Conversely, the USSR was trying to resist Chinese effort to divide the Communist movement or to gather its own sphere of influence within it, uniting the majority of Communist parties. Finally, the Cultural Revolution was launched to oppose revisionism at home, fighting the USSR at the same time precisely served this purpose. Mao undertook its own path to lead an independent international force, supported and encouraged by leaders of the Third World. As argued by Jeremy Friedman,

46 Ivi p. 63
47 Friedman, J. (2015). Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press p. 6
48 Lüthi, L (2008) The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, p. 228
49 ivi p. 244
50 ivi. p. 341

Chinese policy in the 70s was "clearly focused on building the broadest possible base of support, and the widest front of Third World Unity, to oppose Soviet hegemony[51]". In the meantime, Nixon deeply wanted to get the US out of the Vietnam quagmire and to achieve this aim it promoted the improvement of relations with China. Kissinger triangular diplomacy proved to be successful over time while Soviet fears about US-China rapprochement were mounting. At the end of Nixon's trip, China and the US signed the Shanghai Communiqué. Thus, without forming an alliance, they were able to reach a tacit agreement "on opposing international Soviet Hegemony[52]". However, Mao became soon aware of US upper hand in world affairs while observing US-Soviet frequent summits leading to positive outcomes.

The normalization of Sino-Soviet relations and the emergence of the "constructive partnership"

An historical process of normalization of Sino-Soviet relations can be traced back to 1979, with the beginning of diplomatic talks about the termination of the 1950 "Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance". Such a process was developed in parallel with competition at both regional and global levels. Deng suggested that the two sides hold negotiations and conclude a new accord. Beijing was mainly concerned not to jeopardise its relations with the US. Indeed, Deng even informed their American counterparts about the nature of the strategy adopted to deal with Sino-Soviet negotiations, referring to their precondition, namely the removal of the main obstacle: "Soviet expansionism and Hegemony[53]". The negotiations were finally suspended in the aftermath of Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Yet, visits at other levels and exchanges between both countries continued. A decisive moment occurred in 1982, with Brezhnev's speech in Tashkent. The speech illustrated Soviet intentions to improve their bilateral ties with China. Firstly, Brezhnev "no longer placed its hopes for better relations with Beijing on the possibility of internal changes in China". Secondly, Moscow denounced the US Taiwan Relations act and its "two-Chinas policy", therefore profiting from Sino-American disputes. Thirdly, the Soviet leader referred to USSR's readiness "to hold border negotiations immediately[54]". Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs decided to seize the opportunity to ease tensions. Accordingly, China would have been able to widen its room of manoeuvre in the US-USSR-PRC triangular relations. Both countries held different views that prevented them from finding a point of convergence. However, the stalemate regarding security, strategic and political considerations did not hinder a positive rapprochement and development in other sectors such as trade, economic cooperation, technology,

[51] Ivi p. 321

[52] Li, D. (2019) The Breakdown of State Relations and the Sino- Soviet Military Confrontation, 1966–1973 in Z. Shen (ed.), A Short History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917–1991. Singapore: Springer p. 320

[53] Niu, J. (2019) The Issue of "Normalization" in Z. Shen (ed.), A Short History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917–1991. Singapore: Springer p. 339

[54] Niu, J. (2019) Embarking on "Normalization" in Z. Shen (ed.), A Short History of Sino-Soviet Relations, 1917–1991. Singapore: Springer p. 344

culture and science favouring and “pressuring for an effective solution to the political dilemmas[55]”. Finally, in 1989, when Gorbachev made an official visit to Beijing, both sides issued a Sino-Soviet joint communiqué composed of 18 articles, symbolising the normalization of their relations. After the first phase focused on promoting integration with the West, represented by Kozyrev, Yeltsin’s foreign policy pursued a more multi-vectored approach, as expressed by Primakov. Sino-Russian relations entered a positive momentum, leading in 1994 to the discourses about a “constructive partnership”, upgraded two years later to a “strategic partnership of equality, mutual confidence and mutual coordination for the 21st Century”. Borders’ issues were solved, indeed in 1996 an agreement on confidence building measures along the whole length of the Sino-Soviet frontier was reached. Finally, the agreement on Strengthening Mutual Military Confidence in the Border Region, signed in Shanghai by Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the so-called “Shanghai Five”, established the “withdrawal of all armoured troops and heavy weaponry from a 100-km-wide frontier zone”, evolving over time into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization[56]. The 90s marked a period of significant convergence between Russia and China. Economic ties were deeply developed, with China becoming a major trading partner. Moreover, Moscow pursued a “One China policy” while Beijing supported Yeltsin during the war in Chechnya. As argued by Bobo Lo, both sides promoted a narrative and understanding of global order based on “multipolarity”, opposing American hegemonism and foreign interference in domestic affairs, while sharing, at the same time, similar views on issues such as the Balkan wars, Iraq, the Middle East, and relations with Iran[57]. Yet, frictions persisted over matters linked to the common border, not respected by the provincial administrations. Moreover, tensions arose over Chinese “illegal migration”, in line with the never-ending psychosis of a Yellow threat from the East. Fears related to an eventual process of Sinification and to the potential danger represented by the concentration of Chinese workers in certain urban centres. Finally, even those who promoted the concept of Eurasianism, framed the discourse from a Russian, not Asian, perspective.

[55] Ivi p. 366
[56] Bobo, Lo. (2008), Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics. London and Washington DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press, p. 30
[57] Ibid.

CHAPTER II: SINO-RUSSIAN CONTEMPORARY RELATIONS

The Return of History and the Unipole's Crisis of Success

There was a time where the world was believed to be entering a post-historical phase, championed by the US-led world order, signalling "the End of History"[58], transforming the relentless dynamic and dialectic nature of history into stasis. Yet, such a teleological and progressivist reasoning was bound to fail. Indeed, the current international environment is characterised by fragmentation, the lack of international leadership, a dynamic and chaotic international arena, marking the end of what Charles Krauthammer defined the "unipolar moment[59]". Accordingly, Covid-19 has represented a precious, although dramatic, opportunity to have a clearer sense of such trends. The pandemic has been an accelerator of such patterns: the erosion of Universalism, the growing assertiveness of individual state actors, the weakness of multilateral institutions and the US incapability in punishing free riders and ensure compliance with the liberal international order.
An international order, by its very definition, is essential to efficiently regulate the interactions occurring in the international arena through codified rules, institutions or accepted norms and patterns of behaviour. In the unipolar world emerged after 1991, those have been inevitably set by the hegemonic country and are inherently dependent on its political willingness and structural constraints, be these geopolitical in nature and/or the reflection of a shift in the global distribution of power. Moreover, as argued by Mearsheimer, such a unipolar order "was destined to fail from the start, as it contained the seeds of its own destruction[60]". Being an ideological kind of order, based on the promotion of democracy, the post-Cold War international order was doomed to collapse, finding in its path an even stronger, ancient and unbreakable intersubjective reality, nationalism, tied to the still most efficient political organization: the State. Indeed, non-statal actors, be they informal or institutionalised, are not yet the main driving forces of the unfolding of history. As argued by Hegel, the state is an historical construction destined to be overcome throughout the time, as it happened to the Greek Polis, yet it seems that the time is still not ripe for such an epochal transformation. Accordingly, Sovereignty and Nationalism trump over Liberalism, "undermining the order in its core[61]".

Moreover, I would agree with Ikenberry in defining such a peculiar historical phase as a "crisis of success[62]", as well as arguing for a proportional diffusion of power from its centre rather than a sudden and radical shift in the distribution of global power leading to a new bi-polar or multi-polar world order. Indeed, The US still retains its undisputed hegemonic role, yet "Global order is giving way to various mixtures of

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[58] Fukuyama, F. (1989), *The End of History?* The National Interest No. 16 (Summer 1989), pp 3-18
[59] Krauthammer, C. (1990), *The Unipolar Moment.* Foreign Affairs, Vol. 70, No. 1 Winter 1990/1991, pp. 23-33
[60] Mearsheimer J.J. (2019), *Bound to Fail: The Rise and Fall of the Liberal International Order.* International Security, Vol 43, No. 4 (Spring 2019), pp 7-50
[61] Ivi p. 8
[62] Ikenberry G.J. (2018), *The end of liberal international order?* International Affairs, 94, 2018, pp 7-23

nationalism, protectionism, spheres of influence and regional Great Powers projects[63]", or what Sergej Karaganov has simply defined as "the return of Geopolitics[64]". The collapse of the USSR resulted in the establishment of the liberal international order as the sole framework for order. As states began to be integrated into it, with their extremely diverse priorities and values, problems of collective action and governance inevitably revealed themselves. New global challenges requiring a global response emerged: issues such as international terrorism, climate change and cyber governance, just to name a few. "Mutual vulnerability[65]" during the bi-polar era was the foundation for the functioning of what John Ruggie defined as "embedded liberalism". What liberal IR scholars define as a "security Community" was based on the concept of "risk society", put forward by sociologists Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck, defined as "a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself[66]". This sense of sharing a common identity based on a feeling of mutual exposure to threats and dangers disappeared in 1991. "The result was an increasing divergence of views across the orders' members about their place in the world and their historical legacies and grievances[67]".

Furthermore, hyper-globalization has resulted in rising income inequalities and job losses while trying to eradicate any national barrier so to expand global trade and investment. Consequently, a mounting feeling of distress and fatigue has been exacerbated by recurring economic and financial crises, allowing for the rise of populist parties, signalling the outbreak of a new domestic delegitimating phase affecting western liberal democracies. The US led liberal order further lost its social purpose with the rise of insecurity and inequality, as famously described by Branco Milanovic's "elephant curve[68]". Analysing global income levels, Milanovic has observed that the majority of gains in real per capita income has predominantly benefited two distinguished groups: those concerning countries such as China and India, who have taken jobs in low-end manufacturing and service jobs, and the highest earnings made by the top 1%. Moreover, the global flows of capital and the crucial impact of global finance are eroding the ultimate welfare states' capabilities to face such a hyper-globalization development.

The erosion of the undisputed Hegemony and the China-Russia resurgence

Despite mounting concerns about the beginning of the "Rise of the East and the Decline of the West", the United States still retain their undisputed hegemonic role and capabilities Yet, the "ambitious plans of

[63] Ivi. p. 8
[64] Karaganov A.S. (2013), *The map of the world: Geopolitics stages a comeback.* Russia in Global Affairs, 19.05.2013
[65] Ikenberry G.J. (2018), *The end of liberal international order?* International Affairs, 94, 2018, p. 20
[66] Ibidem
[67] Ibidem
[68] Milanovic B. (2016), *Global Inequality: A New Approach for the Age of Globalization.* The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016, p. 31

social engineering with the aim of promoting democracy worldwide have backfired[69]", undermining the moral legitimacy of the US-led global enterprise. The complex interdependence defining today's world has led to a more even distribution of power and wealth across a wider array of actors. China's rise and Russia's resurgence are perfect examples of this phenomenon; indeed, their strategic partnership is unprecedented in terms of their power capabilities and their transformative potential to shape the world order, giving rise to alternative forms of regional governance, represented for example by institutions such as the SCO, BRICS, EEU or the BRI, which appear as different ways to counterbalance the US-led order.

The Pax Americana, instructed by a progressivist liberal direction aimed at overcoming national boundaries, in economic terms, through the development of an increasingly more interconnected global market, in military terms, with the conceptualisation of the R2P, and ideologically, with the spread of democratic liberal values worldwide, has inevitably provoked the creation of balancing coalitions sharing a common feeling of fear towards regime change, for example as a consequence of colour revolutions, or as a way to reject what they perceive, in a self/other axis, as foreign values menacing their sovereign rights and cultural claims. Thus, much of the increasingly more relevant Sino-Russian convergence can be explained in this sense, at least in its global and normative dimension.

Alliance Formation in a Self-Help International System and the Balance of Threat

However, in line with a neorealist understanding of international relations, we should bear in mind that "states place an overriding emphasis on the need for self-help[70]". Indeed, marked by the absence of an overarching authority, a global Leviathan, the international arena is an anarchical battlefield for the most important actors, States, which thus represent the unit of analysis for our understanding of Sino-Russian relations. Accordingly, Great Powers must provide for their own security, mainly balancing "through internal means and seldom through external means[71]". As argued by Stephen Walt, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most threatening power, "rather than allying in response to power alone[72]". Such an argument allows us to highlight the importance of perceptions in explaining Russia and China rapprochement. Thus, Great Powers, shaped by their imperial past, the way they perceive and present themselves to the global audience, the crucial importance they attach to their status and security, prefer internal balancing, as it is more in line with the idea of self-help, and would avoid the risk of relying on another country when their safety is at stake. Indeed, an empirical analysis based on the historical record of world conflicts since 1816, developed by Parent and Rosato, shows that even as great powers emerge, "the major players will not rely on external

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70 Parent J.M. and Rosato S. (2015), *Balancing in Neorealism.* International Security, Vol. 40, No. 2, Fall 2015, p. 52

71 Ibidem

72 Walt S. (1985), Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power. International Security, Vol. 9, No. 4, Spring 1985, p. 8

balancing for their security. In timeless cycles of power politics, salvation lies within[73]". As Waltz points out, true external balancing will occur "only under the pressure of great power war[74]". Finally, "for great powers, band-wagoning and buck-passing are not viable alternatives to external balancing. In a neorealist world, any move that creates a more capable rival reduces a state's security[75]".

The concept of threat is not uniquely related to perceptions, identity, military as well as economic capabilities, demographic trends, and great powers' defensive or offensive intentions, but it is inherently bound to geographic implications, namely proximity and the presence/absence of natural barriers. Balancing of power theories have proved to be extremely useful and enlightening, yet they remain puzzled over the absence of a balancing coalition after the US emerged as the hegemonic power in the post-Cold war era. On the one hand, Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth rightly emphasize that the United States are too strong and that a balancing strategy would involve too many costs and risks[76]. On the other hand, in order to refine the concept of balancing behaviour, it is crucial to take into consideration whether the states are land powers or sea powers, whether they balance on land or at sea. Indeed, Levy and Thompson perfectly highlight this crucial aspect, disputing the balance of power concept as a universally valid dictum that structurally informs great powers' behaviour in forming alliances and countering threats. Thus, it is of the utmost importance to overcome the "implicit Eurocentric bias" of this theory, focused "on land-based military power as the primary basis of power in the system"[77]. Regarding the Chinese and Russian "strategic partnership", even defined by some scholars as a "quasi-alliance", "an attempt by a Eurasian power to significantly increase its power and balance against the United States would threaten its neighbours and provide the latters with incentives to seek U.S. assistance, further reducing motivations for balancing against the United States"[78].

Taking into account the main trends of the global distribution of power, the main tenets of the US led order, the geopolitical constraints, the mutually exclusive strategic cultures and perceptions of major statal powers, as structural driving forces informing great powers' behaviour in the international anarchical arena, and thus their alliance politics, we will now focus our analysis on the main domains of interaction between China and Russia, starting from the most successful aspect of the Sino-Russian convergence, namely the military dimension.

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[73] Parent J.M. and Rosato S. (2015), *Balancing in Neorealism.* International Security, Vol. 40, No. 2, Fall 2015, p. 86
[74] Waltz, K.N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics,* Reading, Mass, Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
[75] Parent J.M. and Rosato S. (2015), *Balancing in Neorealism.* International Security, Vol. 40, No. 2, Fall 2015, p. 57
[76] Brooks S.G. and Wohlforth W.C. (2015), *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the Twenty-first Century.* International Security, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Winter 2015/2016), pp. 7-53
[77] Levy J.S. and Thompson W.R. (2010), *Balancing on Land and at Sea. Do states ally against the leading Global Power?* International Security, Vol. 35, No. 1, Summer 2010, p. 14
[78] Ivi p. 12

The Sino-Russian military-to-military engagement: limits and opportunities

Russia is by far China's largest arms supplier, accounting for nearly 80% of its total imports since 1991[79]. Yet, from 2006, such a military-to-military engagement was halted as Moscow was finally able to achieve domestic stability, embarking on a path of economic growth, and was thus able to make use of a more diversified customer base. The Kremlin was even alarmed by China's reverse engineering practices. Conversely, arms sales were renewed as both countries shared common grievances vis a vis the US, namely those related to the 2011 intervention in Libya, US support for anti-Putin demonstrations and Obama's announcement of the American pivot to Asia. In 2013, "Beijing had agreed in principle to purchase Su-35 combat aircraft, Lada class submarines, and possibly S-400 air defence systems from Moscow[80]". However, Sino-Russian arms' sales are set to worsen as the PLA will overcome Russian army's level of sophistication and it will subsequently reach military self-sufficiency.

China and Russia have been holding military drills in the context of the SCO, the so-called Peace Mission on counterterrorism, conducted in Central Asia. Such military exercises have not been limited to operations aimed at combating terrorism, as signalled by their scope and by the number of units involved. Moreover, much of their military relationship has a clear anti-US character since these missions have been used as provocative signals to echo their critiques toward the US led international order or their calls to close US bases in Central Asia, still in use until 2014. However, much of their military partnership is strained by a low level of interoperability[81] and a latent feeling of mistrust, the by-product of their strategic cultures. Accordingly, this sense of suspicion manifests itself in their disputes concerning the location of their jointly held military drills. Indeed, Beijing wanted the 2005 Peace Mission to be held near the Taiwan Straits but this "was deemed too provocative for Moscow[82]". Then, in 2007, Russia "pushed for the 2007 Peace Mission to be held within a joint SCO-CSTO framework[83]", however, Beijing refused since it wanted the SCO to maintain its leading role. On the one hand, Moscow wants to preserve its role in Central Asia, being the security guarantor in the region in the framework of the CSTO. On the other hand, the PRC has made use of the SCO as an instrument to further promote its economic influence in the region. Such divergent priorities inform their military relationship and can explain much of their military drills' low operational benefits as well as the SCO's lack of a unified command structure. Indeed, As argued by Fëdor Luk'janov, Russia and China, for

79 Schwartz, P.N. (2019), The Military Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
80 Schwartz, P.N. (2019), The Military Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. p. 92
81 Ivi. p. 96
82 Ibidem
83 Ibidem

geopolitical and historical ontological reasons, are not powers fit to full-fledged alliances on equal terms[84]. The delimitation of the 4200-km border was completed in 2007 and set the stage for today's rapprochement. Indeed, despite contrasting interests at regional level, Sino-Russian spectacular military cooperation represents a complete reversal of their past dramatic confrontation along their borders. As argued by Schwartz, "despite the growing imbalance, neither country felt compelled to make fundamental changes in their defence posture"[85]. Both countries have decided to follow a sound policy aimed at avoiding a counterproductive confrontation. Indeed, since 2009, Russia has limited itself to modernize its troops without adding new contingents in the RFE region, while China's military "build-up is still focused primarily on the Western Pacific[86]". It is ironic to note that the 2018 Vostok war games, the largest military exercise ever held in Russia since 1981, included 3200 Chinese soldiers despite being initially created in the 80s to address the threat of an invasion from China.

In conclusion, both countries, expanding the size and complexity of existing joint exercises, have reinforced their strategic partnership to increase their bargaining power and leverage against the US. Their growing military alignment is signalled also by the provocative and sensitive locations of their joint naval exercises, ranging from the Mediterranean (2015), the Baltic Sea (2017), the South-China Sea (2016) to the planned joint naval drills in the Indian Ocean, together with Iran (2021). China can make use of Russia's huge atomic strike capabilities to foster a situation of deterrence, so to complement its atomic arsenal. Furthermore, such a situation obliges the US to focus on two fronts. Yet, the low level of interoperability, essential requirement for a true military alliance, the linguistic factor affecting their military drills, the rise in the number of jointly held military exercises in the aftermath of the Ukrainian Crisis, the much more complex and larger military drills that Russia conducts with its historical allies, are all elements illustrative of a persistent strategic diffidence between both countries, as well as of the importance of the US factor in informing their non-permanent and tactical military rapprochement.

The Economic Dimension of the Sino-Russian Entente

Until the 2000s, Russia and China's bilateral trade suffered from certain constraints inherited from the Soviet era: namely, divergent policy priorities, lack of adequate infrastructure, a certain feeling of hostility and the lack of structural complementarities. Maintaining a trade surplus until 2004, Russia exported mainly fertiliser, telecommunication equipment and polyethylene[87]. However, as China became an increasingly more

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[84] Luk'janov, F. (2019). "Non siamo alleati ma rifiutiamo l'egemonia Americana", Limes, Cina e Russia: La strana Coppia. n.11/2019 pp 43-52

[85] Schwartz, P.N. (2019), The Military Dimension in Sino-Russian Relations in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. p. 101

[86] Ibidem

[87] Amighini, A. (2019). *Russia and China: The progressive Building of a Major Trading Bloc* in Ferrari, A. and Ambrosetti, E.T. (eds.), *Russia and China: Anatomy of a Partnership.* ISPI, First Edition: May 2019, Ledizioni LediPublishing, Milano, Italy.

important commercial power and Russia was not able to sufficiently diversify its economy, their terms of trade were completely reversed. Indeed, the Russian Federation became even more dependent on its exports of raw materials, natural resources and agricultural goods. A drastic shift which laid the basis of their strategic partnership in view of their economic compatibility. On the one hand, Russia, extremely rich in terms of energy and natural resources, although in strong need of foreign investment to smoothen out the effects of the so-called Dutch Disease. On the other hand, China, extremely rich in capital, to be invested also in oversea infrastructural projects, but vulnerable in terms of its energy hunger. This perfect economic complementarity became even more evident when Russia needed to find a reliable market for its exports in the aftermath of the post-Ukraine western sanctions[88]. Moreover, as Sino-American relations worsen nowadays, Russia has a great incentive to replace US agriculture exports to China, even though "rising land costs, poor infrastructure and bureaucratic red tape slow down progress in this direction[89]", therefore, Moscow alone cannot supplant the US role in providing Beijing with agricultural goods in the medium term.

Overall, the growth in Sino-Russian bilateral trade has remained relatively slow despite their improvement in bilateral ties. The Covid-19 Pandemic has negatively affected their commercial intercourse, with Russian exports to China down by 6,6%[90]. Despite a significant growth in energy and agricultural trade, there is a lacking increase in bilateral investment and a more urgent need to achieve deeper industrial regulation. Despite a slight decline in 2020, bilateral trade exceeded the $100-billion mark for the third year in a row while China remained Russia's top trading partner for the 11th straight year[91]. Yet, the trade intercourse had failed to meet the already postponed objective to increase bilateral trade to $200 bln by 2021. Their economic relationship pales in comparison to Sino-American trade intercourse as well as to the EU-Russian commercial exchange. China and Russia's economic relationship is becoming increasingly more asymmetric, with Russian manufacturing goods corresponding only to 22% of its exports to China[92]. Indeed, many observers point out that their commercial relationship inevitably favours China, with Russia being dependent on Beijing's imports. At the same time, even Beijing is exposed to certain vulnerabilities, fostering in this way their incentive to cooperate. The PRC needs to diversify its reliance on oil and gas, especially in terms of energy imports passing through fragile routes such as the Malacca strait, and it is also in need of water resources, timber and agricultural products to sustain its economic development[93].

After 2014, the Kremlin expected Chinese banks to replace their western counterparts in lending operations, however, this has not happened. Fearing western sanctions, Chinese banks lent only 2 Billion

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[88] Ivi. p. 93
[89] Hillman, J.E. (2020). *China and Russia: Economic Unequals*, CSIS, July 2020, p. 3
[90] Cong, W. (2021). *With China-Russia ties at "best in history", trade still needs a boost to ensure security.* Global Times
[91] Ibidem
[92] Amighini, A. (2019). *Russia and China: The progressive Building of a Major Trading Bloc* in Ferrari, A. and Ambrosetti, E.T. (eds.), *Russia and China: Anatomy of a Partnership.* ISPI, First Edition: May 2019, Ledizioni LediPublishing, Milano, Italy, p. 93
[93] Ibidem

dollars in 2017. Furthermore, Moscow has not been able to attract Chinese FDI. As Kremlin officials admit, 'it cannot be said that China invests a lot in the Russian economy'[94]. This is evidence of Chinese firms' pragmatism and economic realism. As of 2019, Russia ranked No.13 among foreign destinations for Chinese investment at $12.8 billion, according to the latest Chinese official data. As Alexander Gubaev notes: "the choice between jeopardising relations with the regulators of large, profitable prospective markets in the West and entering the tiny, risky and over-regulated Russian market was an easy one for major Chinese financial players[95]". Russia does not have a great technology sector, exception made for the advanced military one in which it is not possible to invest. Accordingly, Alexander Lukin considered that "Russia and China have yet to show they can effectively collaborate on major hi-tech projects and achieve the levels of technological integration and division of labour found in the West[96]". The widening asymmetries, the structural constraints represented by the impossibility to have a relevant say in Russian state-owned enterprises in the hydrocarbon sector and in the military-related domains, the Kremlin's fear to become too dependent on China, the lack of a developed and modern infrastructural basis connecting both countries, the slow pace in the development of Sino-Russian railway connection and trains, as well as bureaucratic and financial constraints, are all elements hinging on Moscow and Beijing's ability to fulfill their economic potential.

The Energy Domain

Russia and China's convergence is perfectly visible in what in terms of energy issues appears as an inevitable perfect match. Indeed, China is the biggest energy consumer and, by 2013, the largest oil importer, while the Russian Federation is the world's largest exporter of oil and gas combined. Their rapprochement in the energy sector has occurred even before the Ukrainian Crisis, which of course, together with the imposition of Western sanctions, has played the crucial role of an accelerator of Moscow's turn to the East.

In the first place, the Chinese market came to be viewed as "the primary source of Russia's future growth[97]". Secondly, the European paramount role of market for Russian gas exports crumbled as a growing emphasis was put on renewables and energy efficiency[98]. Finally, along the prolonged Eurozone crisis which inevitably depressed the European demand for Russian hydrocarbons, the Old Continent started focusing on reducing energy dependence on the Russian "energy superpower", fostering a diversification of energy imports. Moreover, the shale revolution and the crucial role assumed by the US in this dimension, "made the global gas market more interconnected, and the Europeans potentially less dependent on Russian gas

94 Lukin, A. (2020). The Russia-China entente and its future. International Politics, Springer Link
95 Gabuev, A. (2016). Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis. Carnegie Moscow Center, 29 June.
96 Lukin, A. (2020). The Russia-China entente and its future. International Politics, Springer Link p. 4
97 Skalamera, M. (2019) *Explaining the Emerging Sino-Russian energy partnership* in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. p. 69
98 Ibidem

supplies"[99]. On the other hand, since the pro-market approach has not gained momentum, Beijing has opted since the early 2000s to follow a state-centred approach in the energy sector since it had been considered "too important to be left to market forces alone[100]", crucial to sustain the process of Chinese economic development as well as inevitably tied to paramount strategic security concerns. Already Zheng Bijan, a senior advisor to Chinese President Hu Jintao, "listed the shortages of resources as the first of the three fundamental challenges to China's peaceful rise[101]", a dependence which is inevitably set to increase as Chinese industries and the middle-class consumerist habits increase in size and intensity. The PRC's "vulnerability to energy shortage[102]" as well as to the so-called "Malacca Dilemma", its exposure to a potential US naval blockade in this critical maritime chokepoint, have led the CCP to reduce Chinese dependence on energy imports shipped through sea lanes while fostering diversification through an increase in oil and gas imports from Central Asia, namely from Kazakhstan and Turkemistan, Russia and Myanmar[103], territories not exposed to possible foreign embargoes, even though they are vulnerable in terms of political upheavals and terrorism. Indeed, as demonstrated by Chia-Yi Lee, "Beijing has implemented more favourable foreign policies toward energy-producing countries for its energy security concerns[104]".

However, an asymmetric relationship characterizes also what is perceived to be their obvious point of convergence. Indeed, even though Russia has displaced Saudi Arabia as China's biggest supplier on an annual basis in 2016, Beijing is able to diversify its energy portfolio. The PRC can take advantage of its buyers' market to bargain for maximum price concessions. Conversely, Russia has not been able to significantly diversify its economy thus being "highly vulnerable to strategic shocks in a global context in which supply of energy resources is likely to remain greater than its global demand"[105]. Bearing this in mind, we can understand why oil price disputes emerged in 2011 when the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline started operating. The ESPO set the basis for the subsequent construction of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline, which signalled once again Russia's need to overcome the isolation from Western sanctions, the main priority being the construction of new infrastructure in the Russian Far East to develop those distant, yet so important, territories, as well as the complex risks associated with such expensive infrastructures which do not guarantee a commercial success and are instructed mainly by political considerations. Furthermore, as argued by Edward Chow, such energy related infrastructural projects, whose first proposals date back already to the 90s, went

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[99]Ivi p. 76
[100] Zhao, S. (2008) *China's Global Search for Energy Security: cooperation and competition in Asia-Pacific*, Journal of Contemporary China, 17:55, pp. 207-227
[101] Ibidem
[102] Ivi p. 209
[103] Røseth, T.(2017) Russia's energy relations with China: passing the strategic threshold? Eurasian Geography and Economics, 58:1, pp. 23-55
[104] Lee, Chia-yi (2019) China's Energy Diplomacy: Does Chinese Foreign Policy Favor Oil-Producing Countries?. Foreign Policy Analysis 2019, 15, pp. 570-588
[105] Skalamera, M. (2019) *Explaining the Emerging Sino-Russian energy partnership* in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. p. 76

forward only once China first built pipelines from Central Asia, where it could be part of that lucrative business directly, in contrast with the Russian energy market where it was relegated to be a merely purchaser of oil and gas[106]. Thus, profiting from Central Asian energy resources and those countries' pursuit of a multi-vectoral foreign policy, China has been able to have the upper hand in its commercial deals with Russia. Even in the case of the Yamal LNG project, in which China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) has bought 20% of the projects' shares, we should not downplay the presence of major European oil companies, such as Total, as well as the fact that Novatek operates mainly on a market non-state led basis[107]. Russian oil and gas infrastructure is mainly directed to the Western European markets for historical, geographical, and geological reasons, indeed, in 2018, 70 percent of Russian natural gas exports went to the EU, while only 15 percent of Russian oil exports went to China. At the same time, bearing in mind that oil and gas exports still in 2018 accounted for 59 percent the value of Russian exports and 46 percent of Russia's total federal revenues, Russian oil represented only 15,4 percent of China's total oil imports while Russia's share of gas imports stood only at 1%[108]. Therefore, "taking into account the globalising energy market and the trend away from fossil fuels[109]" Russia's windows of opportunity for what concerns its pivot to Asia is increasingly closing in terms of energy exports. In the long term, the Zhongnanhai and the Kremlin's energy interests might diverge, and both will have much less to offer to each other, especially since Beijing is making use of its vastly diversified energy portfolio, it is mainly directing its FDI to Europe, the US and Asia and it is thus not proving to be a real substitute for Western technology or financing in Russia[110]. Accordingly, Moscow has been pursuing a much more multi-vectorial and hedging strategy, "starting to look beyond China to deepen energy ties with other Asian powers such as Vietnam, Japan, South Korea and India[111]".

The Yellow Peril

Fears of a yellow peril, defined as the invasion of Chinese immigrants in the scarcely populated Far East territories of the Russian Federation, have much dissipated. Russian cities in the region are increasingly more familiar with Chinese migration, being mostly shuttle traders benefitting from cross-border trade local. The argument of a Chinese invasion and the subsequent Sinicization of Far Eastern territories has been often employed to justify an impossible marriage of interests between China and Russia, yet the argument has no empirical grounding. The average density of Russia's oblast bordering China is 17,83 times lower than that of

[106] Chow, E. (2021) *Sino-Russian Relations: a match made in heaven?* Carnagie Moscow Center
[107] Weitz, R. (2014) *The Russia-China Gas Deal: Implications and Ramifications.* World Affairs, September/October 2014, Vol. 177, No. 3 pp. 80-86
[108] Herrero, A.G. and Xu, J.(2016) *The China-Russia trade relationship and its impact on Europe.* Bruegel Working Paper, Issue 4
[109] Weitz, R. (2014) *The Russia-China Gas Deal: Implications and Ramifications.* World Affairs, September/October 2014, Vol. 177, No. 3 pp. 80-86
[110] Skalamera, M. (2019) *Explaining the Emerging Sino-Russian energy partnership* in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. p. 78
[111] Ibidem

Chinese provinces, yet the situation is even worse for Mongolian territories[112]. As argued by Alexander Korolev, the issue of Chinese migration to Russia has been overblown by irresponsible media and Russian local politicians[113]. Portyakov demonstrates that Russia is not a priority destination for the Chinese emigrants[114]. Russia does face demographic decline, according to UN measures for there will be a population decline of approximately 7% to 135 Million people by 2050. Notwithstanding such trends, also affecting China as well as many developed countries, we should not look at mere quantitative demographic data without inspecting the related qualitative aspects. Accordingly, disputing any simplistic view of demographic patterns, we should bear in mind that a "larger population is only beneficial to a country that is able to educate, employ and leverage that potential[115]". Indeed, a too large and fast-growing population could turn out to be a negative aspect, generating "immense social pressures and challenges faster than it does power[116]". Finally, the art of war has been completely transformed, wars are no longer fought by mass mobilization armies as technology has multiplied its destructive power. Quantity and mass remain important in modern warfare, but few countries are able of politically willing to support sizable forces. Also, nuclear weapons represent a "demographic equalizer" since unsustainable losses can be inflicted despite stark asymmetries in demographic size. However, taking a long-term perspective, as argued by Aleksandr Khramoikhin, one way that China has to solve its structural problems, related to overpopulation, environmental degradation but most importantly to the limits of its socio-economic model, is its expansion abroad[117]. Accordingly, Russia represents the most obvious and favourable vector. According to Chinese scientists, from the point of view of eco-sustainability, the optimal population for China is set among 700 and 800 Million people. Moreover, water resources are adequate for no more than 250 million people, the alimentary ones for 330 million[118]. Accordingly, China has well exceeded its ecological limits. The One Child Policy indeed was an attempt, although not so effective, to solve such structural limits. The Russian Far East could become China's safety valve, much like Mexico lets off population pressures with migration into the United States, especially in cases of social disorder or increased Chinese unemployment, not a remote outcome due to the relation between the country's export-led economy, the rising salaries, and the rise of protectionist policies, which would make its products less competitive, slowing down its economic growth.

It's impossible to know the exact number of Chinese people into the Russian Far East; Russia has not run a census in over a decade. According to the Federal Migration Service Chinese labour migrants accounted

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112 Korolev, A. and Yew, L.K. (2015) *The Strategic Alignment between Russia and China: Myths and Reality*. The Asan Forum
113 Ibidem
114 Ibidem
115 Kofman, M. (2020) *Russian Demographics and Power: Does the Kremlin have a long game?* Commentary February 4, 2020, War on the Rocks
116 Ibidem
117 Khramcikhin, A. (2019) *"Siberia lo Spazio Vitale di Pechino"*, Limes, Cina e Russia: La strana Coppia. n.11/2019 pp 77-83
118 Ibidem

only for 3 percent of the 11 million foreigners in Russia in 2015[119]. China and Russia significantly benefit from the negotiated and stable status quo reached along their borders, even the weapons systems deployed by the Russian Defence Ministry to the Far East are systems “meant to repel a threat from the sea and air”, to contain the US-Japan military efforts, “not a land-based threat from China[120]”. However, we cannot completely dismiss the possibility of long-term disputes over the area. The stark division in population density between Russian and bordering Chinese territories in the East is real, although not at all a sufficient condition for a potentially inevitable fight as it happened in the 60s. Indeed, migration can be easily manipulated by local media and politicians especially in this globalization era, different from the first globalization era, lasting from 1870 to 1913, in which the free movement of labour was globally permitted and not exclusively intra-regionally allowed. Also, history matters, especially in this context, as signalled by the nationalist backlash prompted in China by some diplomats and social media users after the Russian embassy in China posted a video on Chinese social media for the celebration of the founding of Vladivostok, a city which was formerly part of the Qing’s homeland but “was annexed by the Tsarist empire in 1860 following China’s defeat at the hands of Britain and France in the second opium war”.[121]

A Two-Level Pattern of Interaction: Regional Hedging and the Sino-Russian Strategic Global Consensus

The literature on Sino-Russian contemporary relations is characterized by an array of different views, ranging from the concept of “axis of Convenience[122]”, limited defensive strategic partnership[123], a soft alliance[124], an outright entente[125], a quasi-alliance[126] or even the Genesis of an anti-Western Eastern Rapallo Treaty[127]. Such diversity of voices is the inevitable outcome of such a complex multi-dimensional subject and is premised on some faulty analytical approaches and premises which tend to overemphasize certain levels of analysis at the expense of some inconsistencies. Thus, emphasizing a common anti-western feeling informing China-Russia relations, would erroneously lead us to interpret their strategic partnership as a de-facto anti-Western alliance. At the same time, downplaying certain mutually advantageous benefits arising from their convergence, as well as their shared view over some global governance issues, would lead us to view their relationship as inherently ambiguous and destined to fail as a result of certain trends towards asymmetry and

[119] Lukin, A. (2018) *China and Russia: the New Rapprochement*, Polity Press, 2018, Cambridge, UK
[120] Simes Jr, D. (2020) *Russian military Buildup in Northeast Asia rattles Japan and US*, International Relations, Nikkei Asia
[121] Baptista, E. (2020), *Why Russia’s Vladivostok celebration prompted a nationalist backlash in China*, China-Russia relations, South China Morning Post
[122] Bobo, Lo. (2008) Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics. London and Washington DC: Chatham House and Brookings Institution Press, 21
[123] Chenghong, Li (2007) *Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino–Russian rapprochement and the driving forces*, Journal of Contemporary China
[124] Gabuev, A. (2016) *Friends with Benefits? Russian–Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis.* Carnegie Moscow Center, June.
[125] Trenin, D. (2015) *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente.* Carnegie Moscow Center, April.
[126] Lukin, A. (2020) *The Russia–China entente and its future.* International Politics, Springer Link
[127] Nguyen, H.P. (1993) *Russia and China: the Genesis of an Eastern Rapallo*, Asian Survey, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 285-301, University of California Press

as a consequence of certain geopolitical irreconcilable strategies, which will likely hinder the future of Sino-Russian relations but which do not significantly affect the short and medium term implications of their rapprochement.

In conclusion, I would dispute a twofold exclusively based on concepts such as band-wagoning, not a viable option for great power as we have previously noted, or balancing, as the main explanatory variables for China-Russia strategic partnership. Indeed, we should view the daily evolution of foreign policy as affected by multiple non-systemic causes, as well as bearing in mind that the concept of balance of power needs to be refined so to consider other aspects such as proximity, threats' perception, strategic culture as well as specific geopolitical constraints. The analysis that we have conducted, retracing the most relevant domains in which the Sino-Russian cotemporary interaction has taken place, has revealed us that their convergence is unprecedented in many respects as well as inconsistent and asymmetric in other crucial aspects. Such complexity and inconsistency, represented, not by chance, by the stark diversity of voices which have been expressed on this topic, urge us to make sense of the nature of China and Russia strategic partnership pursuing our research on a two-level pattern. Indeed, as argued by Alexander Korolev, "a strategic consensus on the global scene coexists with a more complex pattern of interaction involving both common interests and clashes of interests at regional level[128]". Accordingly, I would argue that we should follow the same analytical path, based on the interplay of different causal forces at different levels of analysis. The same methodological and analytical approach will characterise the following case studies as well as the final typology to summarise Sino-Russian relations.

The Systemic Dimension: Systemic Balancing and the Sino-Russian Global Consensus

At a global and systemic level, Moscow and Beijing form a balancing coalition in opposition to the US led order. In front of NATO and EU expansion eastward, Russia reacted forcefully, first in the 2008 Georgian War and then in the 2014 Ukrainian war. On the other hand, China too faces the US containment strategy, what Obama defined the US "pivot to Asia". Such an anti-unipolar feeling inherently drives much of their convergence. Both countries criticise the American National Missile Defence since the US withdrawal from the ABM treaty. Indeed, the Joint Russia-China declaration stated that the creation of such global missile defence systems "does not help to maintain strategic balance and stability and hampers international efforts in arms control and nuclear proliferation". In addition to this, even though their economic and technological interaction is instructed mostly by state-led economic pragmatism, thus far from fulfilling its economic market potential as political and security concerns are prioritized, we can observe a general trend in greater financial coordination aimed at criticizing the dominance of the dollar and encouraging the use of national currencies

[128] Korolev, A (2016) Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2016, pp. 375-397

in the bilateral and multilateral trade[129]. The China's UnionPay international payment system entrance in the Russian market in 2013 can be read in this sense, an effort to avoid the impact of US-imposed sanctions and to weaken the dollar[130]. Yet, despite overtly exaggerated concerns about a de-dollarized alternative financial system, the US dollar still represents 62 percent of Central Banks' currencies in 2020.

Furthermore, in contrast to Western norms of free flow of information, Sino-Russian convergence is evident also in their common information policy view. Indeed, both countries argue for the state's ability to prevent the dissemination of information that "may constitute a threat to governments[131]". Influenced by the colour revolutions of the 2000s and the Arab spring events, the SCO adopted "initiatives to protect information security", even proposing a code of conduct on information security to the UN General Assembly, emphasizing the need for information sovereignty, in favour of the "democratization" and the desirability of multilateral governance by state actors, what the Euro-Atlantic consensus views instead as an effort to promote censorship.

Finally, China-Russia anti-unipolar and balancing effort at a systemic level can be observed as well in their enhanced cooperation within alternative multilateral institutional formats, such as the SCO or the BRICS[132]. Thus, their partnership is a major driver in devising new international non-western structures as well as in promoting a different identity-related narrative, a new discourse centred on the concept of "sovereign democracy" in opposition to "Western interference", signalled by their joint actions in the UN Security Council for example on the Syria votes, despite some differences in approach and interests. An argument that rejects the liberal interpretation of the universal R2P individuals in order to reaffirm the importance of "state sovereignty and non-interference".

However, I would argue that their balancing common stance cannot be so easily defined at first-hand. Firstly, both countries pursue different grand strategies. China has significantly benefitted from the US led order. Beijing's export-led economic growth, its resource hunger, its geographical conformation, are all elements pointing to their current priority, namely the maintenance of the international status quo at least as far as the international economy's openness and the globalization process is at stake, as signalled by Xi Jinping's speech at Davos in 2017[133]. Conversely, Russia has proved to be much more "revisionist" and prone to change an international order which crucially affects what Moscow perceives to be its paramount interests and its own security. In line with Andrej Krickovic's argument, in this sense the PRC and the Russian Federation appear to form a "symbiotic partnership" between a "cautious riser and a desperate challenger[134]".

[129] Wishnick, E. (2016): *In search of the 'Other' in Asia: Russia–China relations revisited*, The Pacific Review
[130] Ibidem
[131] Ibidem
[132] Korolev, A (2016) Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2016, pp. 375-397
[133] Xinning, L. (2017) *Xi Jinping delivers robust defense of globalisation at Davos*, Financial Times, January 17, 2017
[134] Krickovic, A. (2017) *The Symbiotic China-Russia partnership: Cautious Riser and Desperate Challenger*, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2017, pp. 1-31

Also, both countries would unlikely get caught in their own affairs when security issues are at stake or when they risk being entangled in a fight against the US. Finally, The Kremlin discourse is mainly centred on a return to multipolarity, to a Congress of Vienna kind of global order. Accordingly, Russia would have an incentive to play the role of the swing power, "the balancer between two potential hegemons and a guarantor of a new non-alignment, or as one of the active creators of a new partnership[135]". Instead, "ideas grounded in a specific interpretation of Chinese history have begun to be articulated in Chinese foreign policy circles[136]". Therefore, it would be interesting to trace the development of the Chinese conceptualization of the international order, linked for example to the resurrection of the term "Tianxia", which questions the idea itself of nationalism and of territorial borders.

The Regional Sphere: competition and cooperation, a mix of contradictory actions

At regional level, the China-Russian relationship can be defined as an example of "hedging", a "mix of balancing/containment and engagement", "of cooperation and competition", implying "inherently contradictory or opposing actions[137]". As the strategic grammar concerning the interaction of two proximate great powers would imply, there have been elements of geopolitical competition which, however, have not yet prevented both countries from sustaining a global common stance, balancing against the US hegemony. The first striking example in this regard concerns the Central Asian countries, which have made use of the Sino-Russian rapprochement in the area to foster their multi-vectorial foreign policies and their commercial diversification. Beijing has been able to widen its influence due to its uncontested economic power, becoming the most important creditor and investor in the region, creating a situation of economic dependence on Chinese goods and capital. Moreover, the PRC has capitalized on the rich oil and gas reserves with some huge infrastructural investments in the energy sector, such as the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. On the other hand, Russia mainly relies on its role of regional guarantor of security in what it considers its "near abroad". At the same time, the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union, unifying the economic policies of the member states, preserving through economic interdependence the still strong cultural, political, and social links between Moscow and the Central Asian countries[138], is a perfect instrument to monitor and constrain Chinese economic influence. The EEU is a perfect devise to constrain the BRI and the uncontested Chinese economic power, yet China-Russia relations in the area, although probably confrontational in the long-term, have been marked also by cooperation, for example with the Joint Statement on Cooperation and Connection between the Silk Road and the Eurasian Economic Union.

[135] Karaganov, S. (2020), *The Future of the Big Triangle*, Russia in Global Affairs
[136] Carlson, A. (2011), *Moving Beyond Sovereignty? A Brief consideration of recent changes in China's approach to international order and the emergence of the tianxia concept*. Journal of Contemporary China, 2011, 20(68), January, 89-102
[137] Korolev, A (2016) *Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations*, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2016, pp. 375-397
[138] Ibidem

Another regional issue, marked by a hedging pattern of interaction, is the Artic and, more specifically, the Northern Sea Route. The Kremlin views the Artic zone of the Russian federation, an area making up 40 percent of the Artic space, "a strategic asset which provides 12-15 percent of the country's GDP", thanks to its rich raw material and resources[139]. In security terms, the area is crucial since the Northern fleet is "one of the main instruments in the country's nuclear deterrence strategy[140]". Moscow views the Artic as an issue of maritime sovereignty, promoting the Artic Council as the sole body which should deal with this area, a sort of Artic P5. Also, the NSR has the potential to change the configuration of trade routes, giving Russia the possibility to rise huge profits from the foreign vessels' passage. As declared by the Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, "There is trust in China but you and we, that is the Artic States, lay down the rules here[141]". Conversely, the NSR passage is associated also with the Chinese Ice Silk Road to Europe. Chinese membership as an observer member of the Artic Council has been contested and opposed by Russia in the first place. Russia fosters the territorial integrity, and the national control over navigation, arguing for the "precedence of international law over any other universal rules-based order[142]". China, instead, promotes the idea of an inclusive system in the Artic, so to have a say over the region's issues. Accordingly, in the 2018 "China artic policy" white paper, the Chinese leadership defined its country a "near-Arctic state[143]". Beijing argues for a globalist view, in which the freedom of navigation is granted, whereby the area should be considered a global common, an internationalized region. Nevertheless, both countries are aware of their diverging priorities yet are prone not to "accentuate their conflicts and to avoid conflicts on practical policy issues[144]".

Finally, their relationship is rendered even more complex by the bilateral ties that both countries develop with other regional states, as a way to erode its partner's influence or as an instrument to balance against its regional grand strategies. Accordingly, despite China's self-proclaimed "nine-dash line" and the territorial disputes in the South-China Sea, the Kremlin has "stepped up military cooperation with Vietnam, considerably increasing its arms sales to the country[145]". Gazprom has even signed a deal with Vietnam to develop gas projects in the Vietnamese Continental shelf in the contested South China Sea. Moreover, Moscow has been selling Russian advanced weapons to weapons, such as submarines and planes as well as asking Hanoi to regain a naval base in Cam Rahn Bay, "a typical policy of hedging aimed at offsetting potential

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[139] Trenin, D. (2020) Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences, Carnegie Moscow Center
[140] Ibidem
[141] Korolev, A (2016) Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2016, pp. 375-397
[142] Trenin, D. (2020) Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences, Carnegie Moscow Center
[143] Hsiung, C.W. and Roseth, T. (2019) *The Arctic dimension in Sino-Russian relations* in Bekkevold, J. I. and Lo, B. (eds.), Sino-Russian relations in the 21st Century. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. p. 170
[144] Trenin, D. (2020) Russia and China in the Arctic: Cooperation, Competition, and Consequences, Carnegie Moscow Center
[145] Korolev, A (2016) Systemic Balancing and Regional Hedging: China-Russia Relations, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 2016, pp. 375-397

economic, security or political risks by pursuing multiple policy options[146]". The same is true for Indo-Russian ties, marked by a strong military dimension, whose latest sign of convergence has been the shipment of 24 tonnes of aid materials from Moscow to help India with the striking deterioration of the Covid 19 domestic situation[147].

	HEDGING	BALANCING against the US
GLOBAL / Systemic Level		Normative anti-Western narrative. "Sovereign Democracy". Financial Coordination Cyber Governance and Information Policy International Institutions – alternative to the US led order Power Distribution
REGIONAL / Inter-State level	Artic & NSR Central Asia Bilateral ties with regional partners: Vietnam, India, South Korea, Japan, North Korea, … EAEU/CSTO vs BRI Geopolitical constraints/ Proximity	

*The table portrays a proposed understanding of Sino-Russian relations in their contemporary outlook. It is based on empirically grounded variables. Therefore, long-term patterns, seemingly and arguably leading towards asymmetry and regional confrontation, have not been taken into account. (Marcello Rocchi)

[146] Ibidem
[147] Russia sends Medical Aid to Virus-Ravaged India, The Moscow Times, April 28, 2021

CHAPTER III: CASE STUDY - EAEU vs BRI – The Sino-Russian encounter in Central Asia

The Age of Non-Polarity and the Regionalization of World Affairs

Charles Krauthammer, nearly two decades ago, coined the term "the Unipolar moment[148]" to describe the US global dominance. Yet, he had already anticipated that such an historical phase was temporary, bound to end, since "multipolarity will come in time[149]". Conversely, no balancing coalition emerged to erode the US hegemony. As we have already noted, this view has been based on a non-qualified balance of power theory, premised on its Eurocentric bias, since it has been considered at face value without any further analytical insights. Without entering a fascinating debate centred on the likely or unlikely emergence of a new multipolar world, and thus the continuation of the Pax Americana or its demise, we should confine ourselves to highlight the current state of affairs in the international arena, in line with what Richard Haass has defined: "The Age of Non-Polarity[150]". Accordingly, the diffusion of power from the centre, the erosion of the unipole's normative authority, the expensive war choices affecting the US fiscal position, the hegemon's partial "imperial overstretch" and, most importantly, the consequences of globalization, have all reinforced non-Polarity[151]. Thus, as argued by Haass, "globalization dilutes the influence of the major powers" while the cross-border flows taking place outside the sovereign control of governments have strengthened "the capacities of non-state actors[152]".

The multilateral global governance framework is failing to address overarching transnational challenges which would require a collective effort and a binding global arrangement. The pandemic has been a case in point, whereby the WTO has been unable to mask the geopolitical fragmented reality characterising world politics. The race for vaccines has affected even the Western world, despite being often portrayed as a single cohesive bloc. In addition to this, the Cyber domain is a perfect example of how Globalization has affected states' sovereign power capabilities and strategic autonomy, fostering a path towards non-polarity. The shortcomings of Cyber Governance have crucially affected some of our most precious fundamental rights. Canalys, a tech market analysis firm, has just reported that 30bn data records have been stolen in 2020, an amount equal to the previous 15 years put together[153]. Security is lacking since we are increasingly more exposed to cyber threats affecting crucial infrastructure, as the recent cyber-attacks aimed at EU institutions' IT infrastructure and at the US oil pipeline's system have shown us[154]. As the economic History teaches us,

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[148] Krauthammer, C. (1990/91). *The Unipolar Moment*, Foreign Affairs, Vol. 70, No. 1, America and the World 1990/91, pp. 23-33, published by Council of Foreign Relations
[149] Ibidem
[150] Haass, R. N. (2008). *The Age of Nonpolarity*, Foreign Affairs, May/June 2008, published by the Council of Foreign Relations
[151] Ibidem
[152] Ibidem
[153] Glenny, M (2021). *Pandemic accelerates growth in cybercrime*, Financial Times, Cyber Security, April 28, 2021
[154] Nardelli, A. and Drozdiak, N.(2021). *European Institutions were targeted in a Cyber-Attack Last Week*, Cybersecurity, Bloomberg

globalization is not an unprecedented event confined in its uniqueness to our contemporary age. Indeed, it is a flux of waves which inform the enlargement or the subsequent retrenchment of the global market, the integration/disintegration of national markets to/from the global one. Hence, as argued by Robin Niblett, "the coronavirus pandemic could be the straw that breaks the camel's back of economic globalization[155]" as signalled by the US bipartisan determination to "decouple China from US-sourced high technology and Intellectual property and to force allies to follow suit[156]". The global economic architecture may atrophy, and thus international cooperation may retreat to competition. Indeed, despite an increase in the WTO membership, we have not observed any new liberalization of trade in goods from multilateral negotiations since 1995. Also, the 2008 financial crisis has not led to any substantial reform of the world financial system to overcome its asymmetries and imbalances, defining, instead of a G-20 concert of nations, a "cacophony of competing voices" among the leading economies, with different political and economic values, defining the so-called "G-zero world", "one in which no single country or bloc of countries has the political and economic leverage – or will – to drive a truly international agenda[157]".

Finally, also non-conventional threats are on the rise. Even the post-Cold war security order has been undermined, in Europe with the 2014 Ukrainian crisis, and in the South-China Sea with the Chinese proclamation of the "Nine dash line", just to name the two most prominent examples. Andrej Krickovic perfectly highlights that "as global governance begins to falter, issues that in the past have been addressed at the multilateral (global) level are increasingly being addressed at the regional level with emerging regional powers taking the lead[158]". Accordingly, we should view Central Asia as the most important geopolitical environment of the Sino-Russian interaction, which will define the nature of their strategic partnership and the possible future scenarios that we might observe in the long-term.

The Sino-Russian encounter in Central Asia and the importance of Regional Politics

Interdependence and interconnectedness have added a layer of complexity to Global Governance as a by-product of increasing collective action problems. Therefore, to better grasp the state of art of contemporary international affairs, it is useful to complement the concept of "non-polarity" and "world disorder" with another consideration by Erik Jones. US hegemony is still uncontested; thus, the Pax Americana will likely endure for a long time. State actors are still the most prominent actors in the international arena; however, their power capabilities have been significantly curtailed by the sophistication introduced by globalization and

[155] Niblett, R. (2020) *The End of Globalization as We Know It*, in "How the World will look after the Coronavirus Pandemic", Foreign Policy, March 20, 2020
[156] Ibidem
[157] Bremmer, I. and Roubini, N. (2011) *A G-Zero World: the New Economic Club will produce Conflict, not Cooperation*, Foreign Affairs, March/April 2011, Vol. 90, No. 2
[158] Krickovic, A. (2015) "*All Politics is Regional": Emerging Powers and the Regionalization of Global Governance*, Global Governance 21, 2015, 557-577

they have been affected by the subsequent emergence of non-statal actors. Hence, "it is more accurate to say that the world is not witnessing the end of leadership so much as the end of followership". Accordingly, regionalization of world politics, even though suboptimal for instance in the economic sphere, has become a valid alternative, either as a tool of economic modernization, diminishing economic dependence on Western markets and restructuring supply chains away from low value-added goods, or as an "embodiment of cultural distinctiveness" and a container "for cultural and value diversity[159]". Hence, China and Russia's regional politics represents at the same time an inevitable adaptation to a process of world politics' regionalization, as well as a conscious effort undertaken to curtail US influence, as well as a tool to foster regional power through regional integration. However, China-Russia regional grand strategies, institutionalized in the Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt One Road, are informed by different insights and interests. Regional initiatives tend to be mainly understood in terms of regional domination and hegemony, or as efforts to obtain higher economic benefits. Such oversimplification is often based on classic western conceptions of International Relations. Nonetheless, the constructivist turn is analytically useful to better define Russia and China's regional politics so to consider even norms and collective identities. Indeed, Moscow and Beijing have a different understanding of regionalism.

China and Russia's regional politics: two different conceptions of regionalism

Imperial and Soviet nostalgia, historical legacies, cultural, social and economic interdependence, obviously play a significant role in shaping the Kremlin's view of the EAEU and defining the incentives of post-Soviet states to adhere to such a regional integration process. Moreover, Moscow's strategic culture and its foreign policy aimed at preserving its great power status through regional hegemony, cannot be downplayed. However, Andrej Krickovic rightly highlights these explanatory variables' inconsistency in explaining the timing of Russia's push towards the creation of the EAEU[160]. Therefore, we need to take into account the larger geopolitical framework. "Distribution of power is rapidly changing" and the "Western powers ability to provide the collective goods", to guarantee economic stability and peace, is called into question[161]. Thus, Russia's strategy is defensive in nature, "oriented towards arresting its decline[162]" as well as preparing itself to face an unpredictable and chaotic future. A prudent choice informed by strategic calculus, in light of EU Neighbourhood Policy and the emerging role that China is assuming in Central Asian countries. Consequently, Russian interpretation of regionalism is inherently tied to the notion of space and how this concept informs its geopolitical thinking and its interaction with the Other in the Self/Other Dialectic.

[159] Krickovic, A. (2015) "*All Politics is Regional": Emerging Powers and the Regionalization of Global Governance*, Global Governance 21, 2015, 557-577
[160] Krickovic, A. (2014) *Imperial Nostalgia or prudent geopolitics? Russia's efforts to reintegrate the post-Soviet space in geopolitical perspective*, Post-Soviet Affairs, 30:6, 503-528
[161] Ibidem
[162] Ibidem

Moreover, Moscow fosters "universal and legally binding norms, creating a barrier to the outside world[163]". A defensive posture, a vision strongly connected to its past, its great power status, and to the overarching idea of the still most powerful intersubjective reality, the nation, and, consequently, the border. Defensive due to global structural conditions but projected beyond post-Soviet borders at the same time, through the conceptualization of the "Greater Eurasia" identity-related narrative. Finally, Russia's President Vladimir Putin has clearly defined the ultimate goal of the Russia-led regional institution: to establish an EAEU "capable of becoming one of the poles in a future multi-polar world[164]". Therefore, as it might be suggested by the Russian Federation's double-headed eagle, the Kremlin's grand strategy is aimed at positioning Russia between the East and the West, to act as a swing power in the Sino-American confrontation.

On the other hand, the CCP, through the Belt and Road Initiative, "defines regionalism in functional rather than territorial terms and sees its project as an inclusive one[165]". The OBOR acts in conjunction with the outside world, increasing the benefits it has gained through globalization, setting new alternative rules without revisioning, or discarding, the global economic framework in its entirety. The CCP has not set neither any full-fledged legal framework to guide their initiative, nor any attempt to institutionalize it, emphasizing instead "flexibility and openness to its project[166]". The PRC mainly undertakes bilateral relations to expand an unprecedented infrastructural project, involving around 1,4 trillion dollars, aimed at reviving the historically paramount Silk Road, connecting China and the Eastern part of the Eurasian landmass to Europe, bearing some crucial geo-economic and geopolitical implications, both at regional and global level.

China and Russia's regional order initiatives, as argued by Marcin Kaczmarski, suggest different interpretations and grand strategies[167]. Both view their regional projects as a means to foster their status in world affairs as well as a way to limit foreign presence or interreference in Central Asia. Yet, beyond this shared view, they pursue different approaches to regionalism. For Moscow, regional politics is related more to a defence posture against the outside world in what it considers its "near abroad", in the context of a highly unpredictable and hostile international arena. Conversely, Beijing views the BRI as a way to directly shape, influence, and sustain globalization, so to have an even greater say in international affairs.

The Eurasian Economic Union

The EAEU was formally established in 2015, formalising a long integration process between the post-Soviet states. Its founding members are Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, while Armenia and Kyrgyzstan have

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[163] Kaczmarski, M. (2017) *Non-Western visions of regionalism: China's New Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union*, International Affairs, 93:6, pp. 1357-1376
[164] Putin, Vladimir. 2011. "Novyy integratsionyy proyekt dlya Yevrazii [New Integration Project for Eurasia]." Izvestiya, October 3. http://ivestia.ru/news/502761
[165] Kaczmarski, M. (2017) Non-Western visions of regionalism: China's New Silk Road and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, International Affairs, 93:6, pp. 1357-1376
[166] Ibidem
[167] Ibidem

joined the union in Spring 2015. Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev was the first to suggest the idea in 1994. Then, Vladimir Putin famously outlined the regional initiative in a 2011 article in Izvestia, speaking of a "common strategic national interest between Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, as well as the role of an economic union serving as a pole and bridge between Europe and Asia[168]". Rejecting any imperial implications aimed at achieving the revival of the Soviet Union, the project was modelled on the EU, a closed economic integration, going beyond the previously established Customs Union and thus fostering the four freedoms of movement of capital, goods, services, and persons. The Eurasian Economic Union is inherently tied to the idea of Russia as a "prominent member of a greater European space[169]", in line with what Gorbachev had defined a "Common European home", a concept further developed by President Dmitry Medvedev, suggesting the creation of a Euro-Atlantic security community extending from "Vancouver to Vladivostok". Yet, as US-Russian relations worsened and other post-Soviet States became members or targets of the European Neighbourhood Policy, the Eurasianist understanding of the EAEU became the predominant paradigm for the conduct of Russian foreign policy and regional politics. Thus, cultural and civilization claims, which emphasized the need to celebrate and defend the primacy of Russian culture and values in opposition to the Western ones, became the paramount lenses through which reality was given meaning. "The West's lack of recognition for Russia's values and interests in Eurasia", as well as the EU presentation of Ukrainian membership in the organization as a "civilizational" choice, further prompted Putin and his associates to view the Eurasian Union as a "value-based community[170]".

The EAEU suffers from the same problem that led to the failure of the EurAsEC Customs Union, which failed because it imposed severe costs on the Central Asian countries, which "had to buy lower-quality and higher/priced Russian manufactured goods" as a result of the "common external tariff umbrella", based on Russian tariffs, thus favouring trade diversion towards Moscow[171]. Indeed, the current customs union has started as well with Russian tariffs. In this sense, it represents an expansion of the Russian market at the expense of higher costs imposed on the other member states, that used to buy more sophisticated goods at lower prices from Western or Chinese markets. However, due to Russia's accession to the WTO, the tariffs of the customs union have fallen by about 40 to 50 percent, thus trade diversion and transfers from Kazakhstan, Armenia, Belarus, and Kirghizstan have diminished[172]. Moreover, real economic benefits arise from "deep integration", namely from the four freedoms implied and guaranteed by the EAEU, as well as from further efforts to reduce non-tariff barriers, even though progress in this area has been slow. Finally, Russia can sustain

[168] Wilson, J. L. (2016) The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: implications for the Russian-Chinese relationship, European Politics and Society, Vol. 17, No. S1, pp. 113-132
[169] Wilson, J. L. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: implications for the Russian-Chinese relationship*, European Politics and Society, Vol. 17, No. S1, pp. 113-132
[170] Tsygankov, A. (2015) Vladimir Putin's last stand: The sources of Russia's Ukraine policy. Post-Soviet Affairs, 31(4), 279–303.
[171] Tarr, D.G. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union of Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and the Kyrgyz Republic: Can it succeed where its predecessor failed?,* Eastern European Economics, 54: 1-22
[172] Ibidem

the Eurasian Economic Union through its monetary subsidies, politically motivated foreign direct investment, oil and gas subsidies to Belarus as well as security guarantees to Armenia[173].

"Perceptions of national interest have often trumped on consensual behaviour[174]". Indeed, the EAEU is far from being a political union and thus a geopolitically relevant unitary actor. For instance, the Kremlin did not even consult the other member states when countersanctions against the West were invoked, thus Astana and Minsk did not follow suit, rejecting a trade war with the West. Moreover, Nazarbayev has reiterated that "Kazakhstan will not hesitate to withdraw from the EAEU if it feels that its interests are threatened[175]". On the other hand, Russia has many instruments at his disposal to preserve its leading role and further develop the EAEU. Even Kazakhstan has decided to profit from the customs union's economic benefits, while being aware of all the possible political implications. Accordingly, Belarus' economic dependence on Russia has been a main driver of its decision to join the EAEU, especially in light of Moscow's promise to provide loans and to reduce oil and gas prices. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, deeply relying on labour remittances from Russia, joined the EAEU considering the positive effects implied by the free movement of labour and persons. Also, besides subsidies and loans, guarantees of security have played a crucial role, especially for Armenia in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

The EAEU is characterised by divergent political and identity-related considerations. Russia of course has a primary role in the institution. Nonetheless, the Kremlin, in exchange for political, economic and security guarantees, can enhance the regional initiative's development, fostering the Eurasian Economic Union as a tool to monitor EU and China encroachment in its "near abroad"[176], sometimes acting even in a completely unilateral manner as in the case of the EAEU-Silk Road cooperation agreement signed with China in 2015, where it did not even consult the presidents of Kazakhstan and Belarus, which were also in Moscow at that time.

The Belt and Road Initiative

In 2013, Xi Jinping announced at Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan the initiatives that together go under the name of One Belt One Road. Xi proposed the creation of new economic and infrastructural linkages cooperating with Central Asian States, devising a modern version of the Silk Road. Then, Beijing set forth the establishment of the Maritime Silk Road and the Polar Silk Road. The initiative bears some crucial geopolitical and geo-economic consequences. Involving 65 countries, the project, similar in its basic tenets to the Marshall Plan, is aimed at tying other countries, especially the developed and prosperous European ones, to Beijing,

[173] Ibidem
[174] Wilson, J. L. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: implications for the Russian-Chinese relationship*, European Politics and Society, Vol. 17, No. S1, pp. 113-132
[175] Wilson, J. L. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: implications for the Russian-Chinese relationship*, European Politics and Society, Vol. 17, No. S1, pp. 113-132
[176] Gast, A.S. (2020) *The Eurasian Economic Union – keeping up with the EU and China*, Post-Communist Economies

accentuating a situation of interconnectedness and interdependence. Moreover, the BRI tries to rebalance the gap of income disparities in China, between the coastal cities and the rural hinterland regions. Being the most important global exporter, China runs a huge trade surplus vis a vis the US, investing until this moment much of this money in US treasury bonds, representing a safe investment. However, the 2008 Financial Crisis has exposed the weakness and fragility of US bonds, persuading the CCP to diversify its investments, namely in infrastructure projects in the framework of the OBOR. Then, being the US "head servant[177]", China tries to face its difficult transition to high value-added chains through this project, which significantly hinges on geo-economic interests, trying to reorient global value chains to re-orient them towards China. Finally, the BRI represents an alternative way to solve the so-called Malacca dilemma, where 40% of world trade passes, together with 80% of Chinese imported oil. Such a geopolitical vulnerability requires, as a strategic necessity, a diversification of world trade routes and thus a reorientation of the global economic geography.

"The Westward orientation of the Silk Road is considered to aid in the regional development of China's less prosperous Western regions[178]". Beyond serving Chinese domestic goals, the initiative is presented as a win-win solution, an effort to sustain and shape globalization, to bring about economic development in the participating states in line with Chinese view of regionalism which is open and flexible. Furthermore, as argued by Hung-Ho Fung, "the PRC's long-term export competitiveness is rooted in a developmental approach that bankrupts the countryside and prolongs the unlimited supply of low-cost migrant labour to coastal export industries[179]". Thus, China's global financial power "may inflate", yet its "long term suppression of wage restrains the growth of China's consumption power[180]". Accordingly, the BRI can be interpreted as an attempt to reduce and prevent the further accumulation of foreign reserves, a risk asset in Beijing's hand, as well as to "diminish its export dependence and stimulate the growth of domestic demand, by increasing the working classes' disposable income, fostering the development of the rural backward hinterland[181]". Yet, the BRI still comprehends much of economic irrationality in its projects, as well as other obstacles such as a growing resistance, mounting fears related to a Chinese "debt trap" or Chinese products' invasion, or even Sinophobic feelings, which may endanger the long-term feasibility and effectiveness of the BRI. Finally, Yan Xuetong rightly emphasizes that "during the forming process of bipolarity, it is impossible for a rising power to hide its capability[182]". Accordingly, a striving for achievement strategy, embodied for example in the OBOR, is well suited and inevitable since it "encourages China to take up international responsibilities consistent with

[177] Ho-Fung, H (2009) *America's Head Servant? The PRC's Dilemma in the Global Crisis*, New Left Review, 60, December 2009
[178] Wilson, J. L. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: implications for the Russian-Chinese relationship*, European Politics and Society, Vol. 17, No. S1, pp. 113-132
[179] Ho-Fung, H (2009) *America's Head Servant? The PRC's Dilemma in the Global Crisis*, New Left Review, 60, December 2009
[180] Ibidem
[181] Ibidem
[182] Xuetong, Y. (2014) *From Keeping a low profile to Striving for Achievement*, The Chinese Journal of International Politics, 153-184

China's interests, capability, and its status as the second largest power in the world[183]".

In conclusion, if successfully developed, the BRI will inevitably enhance China's influence, both in the Eurasian and in the Southeast Asian regions, enticing the future of the neighbouring countries to an increasingly more assertive and powerful China. In addition to this, we should highlight the civilization themes used by the CCP to describe the OBOR, with references to the Chinese historical status, the core and predominant power in the region "to which its neighbours pay tribute in a hierarchical relationship", towards the creation of a "community of common destiny", a Sino-centric image which posits Beijing "as the core cultural reference point in the region[184]".

Cooperation and Mutual Benefits of the EAEU-BRI interaction

In Central Asia we can observe an astonishing reversal of power distribution, with a declining Russia and an ever-increasing Chinese presence. Yet, as argued by Alexander Gabuev, despite "jostling for power and influence, the two players have developed intellectual and bureaucratic frameworks to accommodate mutual interests[185]". Accordingly, ideas of linking up the Eurasian Economic Union and the BRI is a perfect example of a hedging pattern defining China-Russia relations at regional level. Indeed, Beijing has accommodated Moscow's interests in the region without renouncing to its interests. Central Asia is an important source of commercial and economic opportunities, especially considering the Central Asian countries' richness in terms of strongly needed natural resources, as well as representing a new "potential market for Chinese goods[186]". Furthermore, Chinese authorities have a paramount interest in promoting stability in the region fearing a "cross-border export of instability[187]" especially in the vulnerable region of Xinjiang. On the other hand, while first observing Chinese presence in the region as a serious concern, with the deterioration of Russian-Western relations in the aftermath of the Ukraine war and the imposition of Western sanctions, the Kremlin arrived at the conclusion that a more comprehensive approach towards Beijing was needed and a new pattern of interaction had to be devised in view of the different geopolitical circumstances[188]. Indeed, one of the key elements of the new Russian foreign policy was the necessity and desire to expand its ties with the Asian continent, both in commercial and in infrastructural terms.

Some of the most important projects developed in Russia under the BRI framework concern the transport sector, the renewal of Russia's transport infrastructure benefiting from the provision of Chinese capital. For instance, the Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway system has been on the agenda since 2013,

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183 Ibidem
184 Wilson, J. L. (2016) *The Eurasian Economic Union and China's Silk Road: implications for the Russian-Chinese relationship*, European Politics and Society, Vol. 17, No. S1, pp. 113-132
185 Gabuev, A. (2016) *Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, 5:2, 61-78
186 Ibidem
187 Ibidem
188 Ibidem

announcing a reduction of the train journey from 11,5 hours to 3,5 hours[189]. The China Railway Construction Corporation Limited is building the fifth out of eight sections and the 790-km railway running is expected to be completed, after long delays, in 2024 thank to the provision of a 20-year Chinese loan worth 400 billion roubles for the project[190]. Among the other most important projects we could name for example the construction of the first 2,200-meter rail bridge connecting Russia and China across the Amur River, which began 2014 and was finally completed in 2020. Expected to be operation from 2022, the bridge will likely serve as a fundamental international goods transportation channel "with an annual shipment volume of 21 million tonnes[191]", providing a new route for Chinese goods into the fast-developing cities of the "Siberian commercial development and consumer landscape[192]". Furthermore, the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor, announced by the leaders of the respective countries in 2014, could transform Siberia into a new important hub of strategic economic and commercial interests[193], diminishing Russian fears that the BRI might bypass Russian Eastern Territories and deprive them of important train freights. Finally, besides energy related projects such as Yamal LNG or the mineral extraction plant Bystrinsky GOK, which respond to China's quest for energy and raw materials to sustain its economic development, there are important development initiatives enacted under the BRI in the tourist and agricultural sector as well as other infrastructural projects such as the international transport corridors Primorye-1 and Primorye-2. The former will handle cargo via Vladivostok bound for the West coast of the United States and Europe, while the latter will handle regional traffic between China and Russia and through to Korea and Japan[194]

In conclusion, Moscow "has transitioned from seeing China as a threat to Russian Far East to viewing it as a crucial partner in the region's development[195]". Indeed, the latter's future economic growth and development has been defined by Putin as a "national priority for the 21st Century[196]". Furthermore, the 2015 process leading to the EAEU-OBOR agreement has allowed Beijing to increase its economic influence, signalled for example by an unprecedented rise of its exports in Central Asia and Russia. The deal has reduced trade barriers and has simplified customs procedures, thus allowing deeper integration. Moreover, it has enabled "EEU members to transition to equitable business trade cooperation with China[197]", profiting from the opportunities embodied in the Chinese market, even more important after the enforcement of sanctions, offering its energy resources in exchange for Chinese capital, infrastructure projects, FDI and loans. Moscow and Beijing have been able to promote the development of a new economic geography in Eurasia and have

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[189] *3,5 hours by train from Moscow-Kazan*, Raillynews, 28/05/2013
[190] Marray, M. (2020) *CRCC signs Russian high-speed rail contrac*t, Asia Connect/Europe, The ASSET
[191] *First Russia-China Bridge Across the Amur River Boder is Completed*, Russia Briefing, August 13, 2020
[192] Ibidem
[193] Xuxin (2019) *Mongolia-China-Russia economic corridor benefits all sides: official*, Xinhua-net, Asia&Pacific
[194] Russia, *China Agree on Primorye-1 Corridor; Opens up Heilongjiang to Asia-Pacific Markets*, Russia Briefing, May 15, 2017
[195] Weitz, R. (2014) *The Russia-China Gas Deal: Implications and Ramifications*, World Affairs, September/October 2014, Vol. 177, No. 3, pp. 80-86
[196] Ibidem
[197] Remyga, O. (2018) *Linking the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road*, Reconnecting Asia,

kept on following this positive-sum pattern of interaction, as signalled for example by a new series of economic cooperation agreements, signed in 2017, which include the creation of a new US$10 Billion China-Russia RMB Investment Cooperation Fund to finance Russian projects under both the OBOR and the EAEU[198]. A certain degree of complementarity certainly "offers enormous potential for developing mutually beneficial cooperation[199]". Moreover, both countries' political leaderships have developed "an outstanding mechanism for meetings and consultation[200]". Finally, Beijing and Moscow have emphasized their division of labour in the region, with the latter being the security guarantor, while preserving its cultural ties, and with the former being the uncontested economic power. A mutually advantageous perfect match which can be observed, for example, also in Moscow's strategy for developing the Russian Far East and in Beijing's strategy for reviving the Chinese Northeast and rural hinterland[201].

Structural Constraints, Geopolitical Friction, and Competition in Central Asia

The Eurasian Economic Union and the Belt and Road Initiative, as the institutional pillars of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia, have been marked also by widening asymmetries, structural constraints, be these the by-products of economic, bureaucratic, infrastructural, and geopolitical implications, and/or divergent priorities.

In the first place, we should highlight certain practical aspects which hinder the development of the EAEU-OBOR integration. Accordingly, the top-down approach and the low-involvement of the business world[202] has prevented a natural economic integration revealing how geo-economic considerations have trumped over mere economic benefits. Furthermore, the EAEU creation itself might be interpreted as the most important barrier for Chinese imports[203] with the implementation of new tariffs, based on the Russian ones. Thus, the Russian-led regional integration is a political tool to curb Chinese economic influence in the area, increasing internal trade in the EAEU at the expense of Chinese products, whose competitiveness could have exerted "enormous pressure on the economy of the EAEU[204]", while preserving Moscow's share in regional trade and investment at the same time. Also, the Russian territory lacks a modern, efficient infrastructure and is characterized by a slow bureaucratic set-up, which significantly hinder the development of investment and

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[198] Engdahl, F.W. (2017*) Russia and China Build Up a new Economic Geography*, Global Research, Centre for Research on Globalization

[199] Li, Y. (2018) *The Greater Eurasian Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative: Can the two be linked?,* Journal of Eurasian Studies, 9, 2018, pp. 94-99

[200] Ibidem

[201] Li, Y. (2018) *The Greater Eurasian Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative: Can the two be linked?,* Journal of Eurasian Studies, 9, 2018, pp. 94-99

[202] Gabuev, A. (2016) *Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, 5:2, 61-78

[203] Ibidem

[204] Li, Y. (2018) *The Greater Eurasian Partnership and the Belt and Road Initiative: Can the two be linked?,* Journal of Eurasian Studies, 9, 2018, pp. 94-99

the completion of the construction projects. Finally, the Chinese presence suffers from a rise of local resentment and anti-Chinese sentiment, both in the Russian Far East and especially in Central Asia. Fears related to Chinese economic might, the lack of transparency in Chinese investments, unresolved border disputes with Beijing, Chinese rents of land or concerns about the Chinese abuse of the Uyghur minority, which have recently given rise to students' activist actions and social media outrage especially in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan[205].

Security dynamics in Central Asia "are often framed in the Great Game terms of great power competition[206]" often obscuring a more complex and nuanced reality. Indeed, rather than overtly compete, both powers have accommodated their increasingly divergent interests in the region. However, we should point out that "China's growing security sector presence could destabilize the equilibrium of the past decades, increasing the stakes of great power competition in the region[207]". Indeed, Beijing has provided "18 percent of Central Asia's region's arms imports over the past 5 years" and has constructed "its first military facilities in Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains" while beginning to project its operational capabilities of its paramilitary units[208]. As argued by Jardine and Lemon, "While Moscow retains a strategic edge over Beijing, the gap is closing, and, if trends continue, Moscow may find its influence undermined in the coming decade[209]", affecting that perfect complementarity which informed their division of labour in the region, perhaps giving more credits to those concerns related to a new different "Great Game" in Eurasia, where China "has broken Russia's monopoly over Central Asia's oil and gas exports[210]", while its clout, economic influence and security presence continues to grow along the BRI land routes. Furthermore, the CCP and the People's Liberation Army might have an incentive to change the vector of their military strategy in the long-term, in line with Mao Zedong famous exposition: "Where the enemy advances we retreat. Where the enemy retreats, we pursue". Thus, the strategy "March West[211]", articulated by the prominent and influential scholar Wang Jisi in 2012, "China might shift its attention from the heated competition in East Asia and rebalance its geographical focus westwards to the vast area from Central Asia to the Middle East[212]" in light of US disengagement from the area. Also, "China's influence is extending beyond economics" and beyond the security domain, "promoting its language and culture in the region through Confucius Institute and generous granting of scholarships[213]".

The Kremlin has acknowledged China's undisputable economic power, thus accommodating to

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205 Cage, M (2019) Why are there anti-China protests in Central Asia?, Washington Post, 16/10/2019
206 Lynch, I.J. (2020) *What are the implications of China's growing Security Role in Central Asia? China's Rise in Central Asia has been swift*, The Diplomat
207 Ibidem
208 Jardine, B. and Lemon, E. (2020) *In Russia's Shadow: China's Rising Security Presence in Central Asia*, Kennan Cable, No. 52, May 2020, Wilson Center
209 Ibidem
210 Stronski, P. (2018) *China and Russia's Uneasy Partnership in Central Asia*, East-Asia Forum
211 Sun, Y. (2013) *March West: China's Response to the US Rebalancing*, Brookings
212 Ibidem
213 Zogg, B. (2019) *Cooperation, Co-existence or Clash? China and Russia's Ambitions in Central Asia, The two great powers' approaches to Central Asia may be a good indicator of their current partnership and future relations*, The Diplomat

Chinese presence and influence in Central Asia, using the EAEU, as well as its economic, strategic, and cultural ties in the region, to monitor Chinese economic penetration and bourgeoning influence. Russia's stagnant economy especially in the aftermath of post-Ukraine sanctions, have restricted its room of manoeuvre in the international arena. The worsening of Russian-Western relations and its position increasingly tilted towards Beijing, have constrained Moscow's ability to compete with China in the region. Furthermore, promises of linking the EAEU and the BRI "are unlikely to be realised[214]" because both projects are incompatible. Indeed, both countries have a divergent understanding of regionalism. The Belt and Road Initiative "is a vision to connect multiple markets and reorient global trade with China as its engine[215]". Conversely, the EAEU is a more rigid integration process establishing a binding legal framework as well as a single closed market. The PRC, at the same time, has kept on developing and fostering its bilateral ties in the region, ignoring the EAEU in its negotiations for new projects, profiting from Central Asian countries' incentive to deal with Beijing bilaterally so to limit their dependence on Russia, as well as to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy. The perspectives of both powers' integration projects are inherently contradictory. The 2015 EAEU-OBOR deal is a perfect example in this sense. The Kremlin viewed it as an acknowledgment that all negotiations "should be conducted through the EAEU, involve the Russian government, and technical standards established on the Union's territory[216]". Nonetheless, "Beijing has viewed the 8 May document as a bilateral memorandum with the Russian side[217]" as a way to promote OBOR in Russia, without abandoning its practice of dealing with EAEU member-states directly. Moreover, EAEU members all have different priorities as to which OBOR land routes should be prioritised, as well as having conflicting economic interests. Finally, ideas to create a full-fledged Free Trade Agreement between China and EAEU have been expressed for over a decade without producing any tangible results. Indeed, protectionist interests, geo-economic and geopolitical considerations have always trumped over mere economic benefits. Moreover, a trade agreement between the EAEU and India has been proposed, and it would represent "an effective strategic step to contain the economic influence of China in Central Asia", since Russia "finds more appealing a multi-player competition[218]" in the area rather than a China-dominated landscape, recalling in this respect "the SCO expansion saga".

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214 Stronski, P. (2018) *China and Russia's Uneasy Partnership in Central Asia*, East-Asia Forum
215 Ibidem
216 Gabuev, A. (2016) *Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, 5:2, 61-78
217 Ibidem
218 Jiang, Y. (2020) *Russia's Strategy in Central Asia: Inviting India to Balance China. Russia's invitation for India to link up with Eurasian Economic Union recalls the SCO expansion saga*, The Diplomat

EAEU-BRI interaction: an example of Hedging

In conclusion, the EAEU-BRI interplay in Central Asia is an important case study of Sino-Russian hedging interaction at a regional level. As argued by Gavuev, "the findings are mixed[219]". A mixture of balancing/containment and rapprochement, of mutually beneficial cooperation and competition. Both great powers have been adamant to stress their complementarity and their mutually advantageous division of labour in Central Asia. The Kremlin has stressed a narrative based on the "Pivot to East", prioritising the development of the Russian Far East so to approach the Asia-Pacific flourishing markets and to have a greater say over the affairs of one of the most relevant geopolitical battlefields of the coming decades. Much of their convergence at regional level has been instructed once again by structural overarching conditions, thus pushing back US influence and presence in the region in the first place, while reinforcing their anti-western narrative and initiatives. Moreover, Beijing has accommodated to the Kremlin's interests and concerns in its "near abroad", thus promoting the development of the BRI as well as satisfying its energy hunger through an economically convenient and strategically secure diversification of energy-related imports from the region. Finally, both countries inevitably benefit from a secure, stable, and economically more dynamic Central Asia. Nevertheless, "low involvement of business, lack of understanding on key concepts[220]", an inefficient red-tape and the lack of a modern infrastructural basis, have inevitably slowed down the process of achieving the full-fledged economic potential of their regional initiatives' interaction. Likewise, the BRI bears some paramount geo-economic implications. Beyond breaking Russia's monopoly of gas and oil exports in the region, China's growing security sector presence could break the equilibrium of the past few decades. At the same time, the EAEU itself can be regarded as a comprehensive regional agreement whereby "Russia can prevent its neighbours from concluding agreements with external actors[221]", "counterbalancing EU and Chinese influence in Russia's neighbourhood", positioning Russia as the regional gravitational centre, a bridge between the West and the East as well as a swing power with its own sphere of influence. Moscow and Beijing have been able to deal with their divergent priorities, stark asymmetries, and inconsistencies, yet all these constraints will likely hinder the future development of their strategic partnership.

[219] Gabuev, A. (2016) *Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia*, Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies, 5:2, 61-78
[220] Ibidem
[221] Gast, A.S. (2020) *The Eurasian Economic Union – keeping up with the EU and China*, Post-Communist Economies

CHAPTER IV - CASE STUDY: The Syrian War, R2P and the Sino-Russian Global Consensus

The Sino-Russian Global Consensus

Already in 1993, Hung Nguyen referred to China-Russia rapprochement as the "Genesis of an Eastern Rapallo"[222]. Accordingly, motivated by a global balance of power approach, Beijing would have represented a strategic "counterweight to offset a weakening Soviet bargaining position vis-à-vis the West[223]". Thus, the rationale behind this linkage would have been the same which led Germany to conclude an agreement with Russia in 1920. "Suffering from previous geopolitical reversals", Moscow perceived the need to ally itself with its traditional power, with a continental power in the East. As Kenneth Waltz argued, "In international politics, overwhelming power repels and leads other states to balance against it[224]". Consequently, this structural imperative, which informs the emergence of balancing coalitions, would represent the explanatory variable to understand the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. I would argue that this argument rightly captures the basic point behind China and Russia's convergence on a systemic level, thus including its global implications.

Far from being a mere "Axis of Convenience", a pragmatic partnership mainly characterized by asymmetry, ambiguity, and strategic calculus, both countries "have come not to the illogical conclusion that there is nothing to lose, and probably much to be gained, from moving even closer together[225]". In what they perceive to be a hostile international environment, Moscow and Beijing can cooperate so to "achieve greater political security at home, […] a more equal world system[226]" as well as using their partnership as a political tool to enlarge their sphere of action. Nonetheless, refining the balance of power theory, also considering the notion of threat, as well as specific geographical constraints, strategic cultures, and divergent grand strategies, I would define their partnership as a kind of "entente cordiale" rather than a full-fledged alliance, informed at regional level by a hedging pattern, while constituting, on a systemic level, a "limited defensive strategic partnership". Indeed, as argued by Chenghong Li, "the Sino-Russian rapprochement is externally driven rather than internally driven[227]". Without inevitably defining the emergence of a multipolar world, China and Russia, employing "dissident rhetoric and cost-imposing strategies short of actual balancing behaviour[228]", undermine the legitimacy of the American order, while fostering their prestige, the everyday currency of international

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222 Nguyen, H.P. (1993). *The Genesis of an Eastern Rapallo*, Asian Survey Vol. 33, No.3, University of California Press, pp. 285-301

223 Ibidem

224 Waltz, K.N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics,* Reading, Mass, Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.

225 Cox, M. (2016). *Not just "convenient": China and Russia's new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics.* Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 1 (4). pp. 317-334

226 Ibidem

227 Li, C. (2007). *Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino-Russian rapprochement and the driving forces*, Journal of Contemporary China, 16:52, pp. 477-497

228 Schweller, R.L. and Pu, X. (2011). *After Unipolarity: China's vision of International Order in an era of U.S. Decline*, International Security, Vol. 36, No.1 Summer 2011, pp. 41-72

politics[229], defending their domestic political order from undue interference and developing their ambitions in their own neighbourhood. Therefore, their strategic global consensus "can be considered as the by-product of a bilateral soft balancing strategy in an age of American primacy[230]". In a world of disorder, where the US power and legitimacy, although slightly eroding, haven not been seriously undermined, "delegitimating US unipolarity and proposing a viable new order are prerequisite exercises for traditional balancing behaviour to commence[231]".

Finally, as argued by Dmitri Trenin, China and Russia "share a host of fundamental interests as well as elements of a common worldview[232]". Firstly, both the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai view the survival of their political regimes as a paramount priority, viewing Western campaigns for democratization and Human Rights in their countries as destabilizing forces, while subscribing to the "notion of multipolarity as the optimal structure for the global community of states[233]". The Western factor has been a crucial determinant of their rapprochement. On the one hand, Russia embarked on a pivot to Asia, deepening its political relations with the East as well as reorienting its economy eastward. On the other hand, Beijing has profited from this situation considering Moscow's refusal to follow a path of deep integration with the West. The Sino-Russian entente "will not form a bloc to oppose the West militarily", they won't set forth a new common ideology in contrast with Western liberal values. "Rather they will join forces to withstand Western pressure and to gain resources to better compete against the West"[234].

The Syrian War, R2P and the Sino-Russian Global Consensus

China and Russia's balancing efforts, aimed at undermining and challenging US global pre-eminence, also informs their common opposition towards the Western idea of humanitarian intervention, embodied in the principle of R2P. The doctrine sets forth the international community's right to protect individuals when sovereign states fail to respond to protect and guarantee their citizens' human rights.

The Syrian War, together with the related issues concerning the interpretation of the R2P doctrine, represents an important case study to make sense of the Sino-Russian global consensus. Indeed, both countries have been working together at the United Nations. Even though China has been less willing to make use of its veto power, it has consistently resisted the use of force by the West if the purpose appeared to be regime change. Thus, Beijing has prevented the UN from acting against Sudan over its genocidal behaviour in Darfur

[229] Gilpin, R. (1983). *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-209
[230] Li, C. (2007). *Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino-Russian rapprochement and the driving forces*, Journal of Contemporary China, 16:52, pp. 477-497
[231] Schweller, R.L. and Pu, X. (2011). *After Unipolarity: China's vision of International Order in an era of U.S. Decline*, International Security, Vol. 36, No.1 Summer 2011, pp. 41-72
[232] Trenin, D. (2015). *From Greater Europe to Greater Asia? The Sino-Russian Entente*, Carnegie Moscow Center, April 2015
[233] Ibidem
[234] Gabuev, A. (2016). *Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese relations after the Ukraine Crisis*, Carnegie Moscow Center, June 2016

in 2007, stymying the UN action over Myanmar and "protecting Mugabe's Zimbabwe from censure[235]". Then, after the Libyan war experience, it vetoed all UN motions against Syria together with Russia.

In 2001, the ICISS coined the Responsibility to Protect term in response to the atrocities perpetrated during the Balkan wars and especially in the African conflicts of the 1990s. The report asserted that "states have international responsibility towards their own peoples and external responsibility to react as members of the international community in cases of gross and systemic violations of human rights[236]". The document identified three main principles: the just cause threshold, the precautionary principle, and the principle of the right authority, which reaffirmed the primacy of the UNSC authority. Then, the 2005 World Summit Outcome document further elaborated on the R2P framework in the context of the UN. Adopting a narrower reading, the document was subsequently reaffirmed in two distinct UNSC Resolutions. Three main pillars emerged from its definition. First, the "enduring Responsibility of the State to protect its population" from the four crimes to which the R2P scope had been narrowed. Second, the commitment of the international community to support states in meeting the demands of the first pillar. Third, the responsibility of member states "to respond collectively in a timely and decisive manner when a State is manifestly failing to provide such protection[237]". Thus, the concept so defined did not add neither any new procedural laws, any new competences or powers to the UNSC, nor any legal obligations for states to act, enhancing mainly a normative pressure which would eventually lead the P5 to act[238].

Russia and China have pursued similar policies during the R2P process of development. Accordingly, they supported the narrower view adopted by the 2005 UN WSO document, favouring the first two pillars which seek to foster the sovereign capabilities of the state involved, through international assistance and capacity building, while voicing their disagreements on the third pillar, which involves a "timely and decisive response". Thus, Moscow and Beijing have signalled "their shared concerns about domestic political security and international image[239]", suspicious of Western powers' use of the R2P doctrine to promote regime change while refraining from challenging the concept in its entirety so to avoid incurring damages to their international status. Therefore, it is interesting to analyse China and Russia's understanding of the norm, as well as their behaviour during the Syrian war, which indeed signal a global consensus driven by a soft balancing pattern, typical of a soft entente, together with a notable divergence in the approaches undertaken. Indeed, as argued by Zheng Chen and Hang Yin, "although the two regimes do look to each other for mutual support so as to

235 Cox, M. (2016). *Not just "convenient": China and Russia's new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics*. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 1 (4). pp. 317-334
236 Averre, D. and Davies, L. (2015). *Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria.* International Affairs, 91:4, pp. 813-834
237 United Nations General Assembly (2005). Resolution 60/1 2005 World Summit Outcome adopted on 16 September 2005
238 Averre, D. and Davies, L. (2015). *Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria.* International Affairs, 91:4, pp. 813-834
239 Chen, Z. and Yin, H. (2020). *China and Russia in R2P debates at the UN Security Council*, International Affairs, 96:3, pp. 787-805

avoid isolation at the UNSC, Beijing and Moscow do not have an identical outlook on issues such as the application of R2P[240]".

Russia and the R2P

Moscow supports the framework established by the R2P doctrine as codified by the 2005 WSO document, thus calling for a strict interpretation of the concept. Indeed, the Kremlin "emphasizes that the principle of sovereignty as responsibility strengthens rather than weakens the state by ensuring the stability of the legitimate government[241]". Thus, Russia undertakes an understanding of the doctrine which seeks a comprehensive prevention strategy, ensuring socio-economic development and political stability rather than simply reacting through sanctions or military operations. A humanitarian view which goes hand in hand with a statist perspective, encouraging an inclusive political dialogue rather than the use of a "disproportionate unilateral force outside the auspices of the UNSC[242]", in support of one party and thus leading to regime change. NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 to protect Kosovars at the expense of Russia's old ally, Serbia, without a UNSC mandate, deeply influenced Russia's view of what they considered a US realpolitik initiative under "the pretext of humanitarian intervention[243]". Then, in 2011, Russia decided to abstain from the 1973 UNSC resolution establishing a no-fly zone and an arms embargo in Libya, leading shortly after to NATO's military intervention. Influenced by the Arab League's support for a military intervention, Moscow did not use its veto power, yet it strongly criticized the military operation leading to the demise of Gaddafi. Accordingly, Russia vetoed all UNSC resolutions aimed at sanctioning or launching a military attack against the Syrian Assad's regime. Supplying arms to Syria as well as providing it with a diplomatic shield, the Kremlin acted in a way to avert the possible repetition of the Libyan NATO-led military operation in the Syrian region.

The Russian leadership has been arguing for an international order and view of international justice based on the legal framework of sovereignty and non-interference, refuting any customary norm which, in its view, contains only "moral-political commitments" that are not justified from a legal point of view[244]. Moscow's stance towards the Syrian war was surely informed by geopolitical and strategic interests. Syria represents a crucial ally in the Middle East chessboard. Yet, as argued by Allisson, these "influences are not sufficient to explain Putin's unwillingness to renounce or condemn the Assad's regime"[245]. Therefore, we

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[240] Ibidem
[241] Averre, D. and Davies, L. (2015). *Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria.* International Affairs, 91:4, pp. 813-834
[242] Ibidem
[243] Ibidem
[244] Averre, D. and Davies, L. (2015). *Russia, humanitarian intervention and the Responsibility to Protect: the case of Syria.* International Affairs, 91:4, pp. 813-834
[245] Allison, R. (2013). *Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis*, International Affairs, Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944, Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 795-823

need to consider also the "Russian leadership's anxiety about Russian state order and Russia's domestic political structure[246]". On the one hand, a political breakdown in the Syrian context could imply the resurgence and intensification of Islamist groupings' extremism, thus affecting the North Caucasus. On the other hand, an anti-western feeling and narrative, whose origin dates back to the late 90s, has been influencing Putin's elite stance against any form of regime change. Finally, the Kremlin's foreign policy discourse emphasizes a sort of neo-Westphalianist view aimed at supporting the return of a "Concert of Nations" kind of world order, in which Russia could finally reassert its great power status. Also, the 2011 street protests in Moscow, but most importantly the colour revolutions in Georgia, Kirghizstan, and Ukraine, have exacerbated Russia's security and domestic stability concerns as well as its spiritual and moral values, perceived as threatened by the transformative liberal agenda and the promotion of democracy worldwide.

The Chinese view on R2P

The Chinese understanding of the R2P doctrine is shaped by an inherent tension between a narrative which sets forth the primacy of sovereignty and non-interference, and an active participation in the process of the concept's development, so to suit its interests, while preserving its status of a responsible stakeholder[247]. Indeed, such an ambivalence is reflected in Beijing's role in the international arena, that of an emergent superpower which is neither "a status quo power content to preserve and replace the US-led order", nor a "revolutionary power discontented with and ready to replace the order[248]". The PRC had embraced a rhetoric of preference for the Westphalian principle since the 1955 Bandung Conference. Accordingly, because of its historical memories related to the long "Century of Humiliation", China feared the possible erosion of its political system, thus signalling the pre-eminence of sovereignty by proposing the 5 Principles of coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence. Yet, as China embarked on a path of convergence towards globalization, in lockstep with its unprecedented economic development, it completed its transformation from an anti-imperialist revolutionary power to a paramount stakeholder of the post-Cold War international arena. As argued by Suisheng Zhao, "globalization represented a threat to state sovereignty when China was relatively weak". However, rising as a great power, Beijing was able to reap the benefits of Globalization "without undue concern over the loss of sovereignty[249]".

Furthermore, the PRC became an indispensable stakeholder with an ever-growing influential role and commitment to global governance, as evidenced by its increasing contribution to the UN budget and by the

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[246] Ibidem
[247] Chen, Z. (2016). *China and the Responsibility to Protect*, Journal of Contemporary China, 25:101, pp. 686-700
[248] Zhao, S. (2018). *A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27:113, pp. 643-658
[249] Zhao, S. (2018). *A Revisionist Stakeholder: China and the Post-World War II World Order*, Journal of Contemporary China, 27:113, pp. 643-658

number of troops sent for UN peace-keeping operations. China has not renounced to its discourse of non-interference in states' domestic affairs. Indeed, it has been trying to foster a "state-enhancing globalization[250]", critical of the US order while showing greater flexibility and active engagement on international issues. Consequently, Beijing came to play an important role in Darfur, being an active mediator. There, it laid down for the first time a three-party dual track approach[251], involving the target country, the related regional organizations, and the UN. Hence, it was able to equip itself with a shield against external pressure while setting limitations to foreign intervention.

Prospect theory and the Sino-Russian stance on the Syrian War: shared concerns but different approaches

The Syrian war represents an important case study to understand the Sino-Russian global emerging consensus, whereby both countries vetoed all the four UN proposals aimed at implementing economic sanctions or implying the removal of the Assad's regime. Indeed, the Syrian conflict, after the Libyan intervention and its regime change, signalled the emergence of a distinct division between the Western camp and a Sino-Russian balancing alliance. Beijing is wary of the R2P concept for two main reasons. On the one hand, the CCP has tried to curb the development of humanitarian intervention trying to avoid "the establishment of a legal or procedural precedent for using the UN regimes to undermine or overthrow sovereign governments[252]". On the other hand, the PRC has tried to "mitigate the negative reaction that China's international behaviour had been provoking[253]" by playing the constructivist role of a responsible stakeholder, in line with the foreign policy narrative of the "peaceful rise". Beijing has thus focused on cultivating its status as a great power embedded in a liberal world order to which it has been economically, although not politically, integrated. Finally, "Xi's strategy of rejuvenation is also distinguished by its determination to more resolutely resist challenges to what Beijing defines its core interests[254]". Accordingly, as argued by Zheng Chen, "when negative implications for regime security are clear, Beijing's support for R2P is unlikely, despite image gains[255]", avoiding at all costs its involvement in supporting a one-sided international pressure against a country's government leading to regime change.

The Syrian war is illustrative of the emergence of a Sino-Russian global consensus in opposition to the Western liberal world. Indeed, both countries support a narrower understanding of humanitarian intervention, as codified by the 2005 WSO document, embracing the general idea of the Responsibility to Protect, while voicing their dissent over the third pillar, which implies a "timely and decisive response". Both Beijing and

[250] Ibidem
[251] Ibidem
[252] Chen, Z. (2016). *China and the Responsibility to Protect*, Journal of Contemporary China, 25:101, pp. 686-700
[253] Goldstein, A. (2020). *China's Grand Strategy under Xi Jinping: Reassurance, Reform and Resistance*, International Security, Vol. 45, No. 1, Summer 2020, pp. 164-201
[254] Ibidem
[255] Chen, Z. (2016). *China and the Responsibility to Protect*, Journal of Contemporary China, 25:101, pp. 686-700

Moscow "are deeply suspicious of the Western powers' tendency to use R2P selectively to promote de facto regime change[256]". Conversely, both governments have been adamant to safeguard and foster their status and international image, refraining from directly challenging the R2P norm in its entirety. Moreover, Damascus has reinforced even more a widespread view that sees China and Russia as allies on Human Rights issues. The PRC and the Russian Federation have found it useful to cooperate, diplomatically shielding each other on every occasion while curbing the development of the R2P framework in line with their interests and values. Thus, the US factor has crucially propelled an even faster convergence of Sino-Russian interests on a systemic level. After the 2014 Ukraine war, the Kremlin has drastically enhanced and promoted its pivot to the East so to withstand Western Pressure. Indeed, China was the perfect candidate to escape Western sanctions as well as keeping "the Russian economy afloat and spur new sources of growth[257]". On the other hand, the CCP has refrained from directly criticizing Moscow's actions in Ukraine, despite its security concerns related to domestic separatism, foreign interference and its narrative centred on the inviolability of sovereign territories. Moreover, Russia's rupture with the West has helped China "to secure a Russia more accommodating to Beijing's commercial demands and more willing to give up on ambitions of deep integration with the West[258]". Nonetheless, the Syrian war unveils another aspect of their balancing global consensus. Accordingly, Zheng Chen and Hang Yin rightly emphasize that "although the two regimes do instinctively look to each other for mutual support so as to avoid isolation at the UNSC, Beijing and Moscow do not have an identical outlook on issues such as the application of R2P[259]", pursuing different objectives and agendas. Finally, China has developed a much more cautious and cooperative approach, at least as long as its core interests are not affected. Prospect theory suggests us that "actors evaluate outcomes relative to a reference point[260]". Russia, despite its staggering resurgence, finds itself in the domain of losses and it is consequently prone to take on greater risks. Conversely, Beijing, given its domestic challenges and priorities, "continues to focus primarily on its domestic development and stability, while pursuing selective adjustments of the existing international order[261]" from which it has been greatly benefitting, contrary to Moscow.

[256] Chen, Z. and Yin, H. (2020). *China and Russia in R2P debates at the UN Security Council*, International Affairs, 96:3, pp. 787-805
[257] Gabuev, A. (2016). *Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese relations after the Ukraine Crisis*, Carnegie Moscow Center, June 2016
[258] Ibidem
[259] Chen, Z. and Yin, H. (2020). *China and Russia in R2P debates at the UN Security Council*, International Affairs, 96:3, pp. 787-805
[260] Ibidem
[261] Ibidem

Status Seekers: The "Loud Dissenter" and the "Cautious Partner"

Hobbes defined three principal causes of quarrel. "First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory. The first maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for Safety; and the third, for Reputation"[262]. Yet, in the international anarchical arena, the third element is often disregarded. At the same time, our previous analysis on the Syrian War and the R2P doctrine, two useful analytical variables to understand the Sino-Russian global convergence, has precisely brought up the importance of status to make sense of great powers' foreign policies. Status can be defined as the "collective belief held by states about a country's ranking in the international hierarchy[263]" based on certain attributes and characteristics. On a psychological and social dimension, status is crucial to enhance groups' sense of identity and self-esteem. Also, reputation is instrumentally valuable since it allows states to persuade others to comply with its requests without having to incur in any material cost[264]. Finally, according to Social Identity Theory, "when a group's identity is no longer favourable, it may pursue one of several strategies: social mobility, social competition and social creativity[265]". The former implies an emulation of the higher-status group practices and values, so to be admitted into elite clubs. For instance, Japan and Germany, in the aftermath of the Second World conflict, had been integrated to the US-led liberal group while renouncing to their offensive military force and nationalist identity. Social competition instead refers to a state's effort to surpass the dominant group in the area on which it claims to have a superior status. Finally, social creativity "reframes a negative attribute as a positive or stresses the achievement in a different domain[266]".

Historically, in contrast with Liberal theory's precepts, thus despite economic and institutional linkages, Moscow was denied integration into elite Western clubs. Indeed, under Kozyrev, Russia's foreign policy assumed a pro-western stance, pursuing democratic and liberal reforms so to become a part of the liberal order and to obtain, within it, what it perceived to be its rightful place. However, western imposed barriers to social mobility, domestic paramount difficulties, and instability, together with a strong strategic culture, led Russia to adopt a social competition strategy. Accordingly, its confrontational and assertive policies, as signalled by the 2008 Georgian War or the 2014 annexation of Crimea, alongside other geopolitical and cultural explanatory variables, can be rightly explained in light of its declining status. Furthermore, even China, under Jiang Zemin, modified Deng Xiaoping's cautious foreign policy showing off its political clout in the Asia-Pacific[267], yet reinforcing the "China threat" perception. Therefore, both China and Russia changed

[262] Hobbes, T. (1969). *Leviathan, 1651,* Ch.13,88. Menston, Scolar P.
[263] Krickovic, A. (2018). *Russia's Challenge: A Declining Power's Quest for Status*, PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 543, October 2018
[264] Ibidem
[265] Larson, D.W. and Shevchenko, A. (2010). *Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy*, International Security, Spring 2010, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 63-95, MIT Press
[266] Ibidem
[267] Ibidem

the course of their foreign policies, engaging in social creativity. Moscow, offering its cooperation to the US during the war on terror. Beijing, becoming a responsible great power, participating in multilateral institutions such as the ASEAN regional forum, launching the SCO or acting as a responsible power during the Asian financial crisis, by avoiding devaluating its currency and offering financial assistance to neighbouring countries[268]. At the same time, History has inscribed in their genetic code the primacy of their great power status. The Celestial Empire and the Russian *Derzhavnost* inherently informs their grand strategies and their perceptions, their responses to threats to their identities and their concerns to be recognized as primary actors in the international arena. Far from signalling the emergence of a multi-polar world or a China-Russia alliance, both countries' global consensus, together with the inconsistencies and differences that we have previously noted in their approach, responds significantly to a quarrel for glory and reputation. Indeed, as argued by Larson and Shevchenko, the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai have contributed "to global governance when they believed that doing so would enhance their prestige", changing their grand strategies "in response to threats to their identities rather than changes in their relative power[269]". There is inevitably a balancing dynamic driving their rapprochement, however it often responds to a wider array of threats, for example to their sovereignty and status maintenance for example, than what instead would be predicted by a balance of power theory which emphasizes only systemic pressure.

To summarise, the PRC and the Russian Federation have both become partially socialized to certain norms and institutions of the US-led liberal order, as signalled by their commitment to support the R2P framework. Indeed, they have acted as responsible actors and fundamental stakeholders in the governance of world affairs, enhancing their international image and their status. However, both states have maintained their distinctive identities, "motivated by a strong sense of grievance at past humiliations inflicted by external powers[270]". Their common defence of traditional Westphalian norms of sovereignty, non-intervention, and territoriality, explains instead the adoption of their narrower view of R2P. Finally, status is relevant also if we consider their different approaches over R2P through prospect theory. Indeed, Moscow, anxious about its declining reputation, has acted both as a mediator, for instance bringing Syria's chemical weapons under international oversight, and as a "loud dissenter[271]", in order to defend normative pluralism and to signal the necessity to negotiate with Russia, due to its veto power in the UNSC, supporting the primacy of international law as a way to make up for its diminished great power reputation. Conversely, Beijing "prefers to follow a course of quiet diplomacy and is more sensitive to being labelled as a spoiler[272]", playing the role of the

[268] Larson, D.W. and Shevchenko, A. (2010). *Status Seekers: Chinese and Russian Responses to U.S. Primacy*, International Security, Spring 2010, Vol. 34, No. 4, pp. 63-95, MIT Press
[269] Ibidem
[270] Ibidem
[271] Snetkov, A. and Lanteigne, M (2014). *"The Loud Dissenter and its Cautious Partner" – Russia, China, global governance and humanitarian intervention*, International Relations of the Asia-Pacific, Vol. 15, Issue 1, January 2015, pp. 113-146
[272] Ibidem

"cautious partner". This division of roles inevitably points out divergent priorities and grand strategies, however, it also shows a degree of complementarity, whereby the Zhongnanhai confers an even higher degree of respectability and necessity to take into account Russian foreign policy, while the Kremlin harsh opposition gives "Beijing a cover for its own assertiveness in constraining the application of R2P, while enabling it to avoid being the only dissenter[273]".

Domestic Vulnerability, Neo-Westphalianism and the "Modified Security Dilemma"

The second dimension that drives the convergence of the Sino-Russian global consensus refers to a common sense of diffidence and insecurity. Allisson argues that the Syria is a case in point to understand how "Putin has been particularly loath to accept that any external standards of legitimacy may be applied to states, regardless of their regime type[274]". Accordingly, Moscow's assertiveness signals a nervousness and a security concern related to a growing sense of domestic vulnerability[275]. After the Arab Spring, 2011 also observed the most significant eruption of mass public protests in Russia, during its parliamentary elections. The 2013 Russian foreign policy concept stated that it was unacceptable that interference be carried out on the pretext of implementing the concept of R2P. Moreover, the "colour revolutions" in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan had already exacerbated a feeling of hostility towards the US since they were perceived as part of a US-backed plan to topple down Russian-backed governments. Vladislav Surkov, one of the most influential Kremlin aides, has introduced the concept of "Sovereign Democracy" which informs much of Russian contemporary political discourse. Accordingly, HR do exist in a wide-ranging sense but depend pretty much on historical contingencies and social developments, from which the impossibility to impose them right away is deduced. The concept refers to the unequivocable need to protect sovereignty as an inherent prerogative and prerequisite of democracy. In concomitance with the outbreak of colour revolutions, the term clearly represents Russian response to western pressures, whether intentional or not, so to push them back and to prevent the manipulation of Russia's domestic political system.

Likewise, China bears similar domestic vulnerabilities and security concerns. Indeed, Beijing is aware of the danger that, despite the Han's dominance in terms of numbers, assessed at 90 percent of the total population, its substantial ethnic and religious minorities, especially in Tibet and Xinjiang, may eventually question the legitimacy of the existing political regime. Also, ethnic unrest may subsequently spread to other minorities, such as the Manchus or the Mongols, who have not raised any concern until this moment[276]. Besides its fear of domestic separatist or secessionist movements, such concerns also have an external

[273] Chen, Z. (2016). *China and the Responsibility to Protect*, Journal of Contemporary China, 25:101, pp. 686-700
[274] Allison, R. (2013). *Russia and Syria: explaining alignment with a regime in crisis*, International Affairs, Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944, Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 795-823
[275] Krickovic, A. (2016). *Catalyzing Conflict: The Internal Dimension of the Security Dilemma*, Journal of Global Security Studies, pp. 1-16
[276] Ibidem

dimension since foreign powers could put pressure on China, especially on core interests such as Hong Kong, with the related Umbrella Movement, and Taiwan, potentially making use of fifth columns to destabilize the Chinese regime. The discourse on US involvement behind colour revolutions is now predominant even in the PRC, a narrative that they have accepted even to explain the Maidan Revolution and the overthrow of Yanukovych[277]. Then, following the policies adopted in Russia, the CCP clamped down on civil society, NGOs, and news media[278]. Finally, Chinese legitimacy problems are inherently tied to the sustainability of its socio-economic development. Indeed, a lack of welfare provisions, stark inequalities between the coastal cities and the rural hinterland, as well as the likely negative effects of an eventual rise in protectionist policies or decoupling initiatives, could drastically halt the staggering rate of Chinese economic development or lead the population to voice their actively voice their concerns. Moreover, expectations for the future, influenced by the exposure to Western standards of life, could lead to street protests, especially if they won't meet reality[279]. Similarly, the rise of an ever-growing middle class could theoretically lead to mass protests demanding a more democratic political system.

The Arab Spring has shown the unprecedented revolution brought about by the Cyber-domain and the Internet. Consequently, despite a staggering improvement in surveillance and censoring digital technologies, it is extremely difficult for governments to assert their sovereign control within their borders. Hence, relatively small groups, be those protesters or separatists, could make use of social media platforms to widen the scope and enhance the effectiveness of their actions. Accordingly, "there is a growing fear among leaders in China and Russia that the US and other developed states will take advantage of these vulnerabilities and act to destabilize their internal political situations[280]". Therefore, another major driver of the Sino-Russian global consensus is this shared internal vulnerability. Indeed, as argued by Andrej Krickovic, "by focusing exclusively on external threats dynamics, however, common thinking about the security dilemma misses how domestic vulnerabilities can also be a catalyst for security competition[281]". China and Russia narrower understanding of the R2P doctrine suggests us precisely this, that HR and democracy promotion is viewed as a destabilizing factor and a threat to domestic stability. The "Modified Security Dilemma" proposed by Krickovic precisely captures this. According to Jervis' Security Dilemma, "many of the means by which a state tries to increase its insecurity decrease the security of others[282]". Even defensive strategies may be viewed, in the self-help international system, as threatening by other state actors, thus prompting a reaction from which the situation could finally escalate into a vicious cycle of security competition and finally war.

[277] Krickovic, A. (2016). *Catalyzing Conflict: The Internal Dimension of the Security Dilemma*, Journal of Global Security Studies, pp. 1-16
[278] Ibidem
[279] Ibidem
[280] Ibidem
[281] Ibidem
[282] Jervis, R. (1978). *Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma*, World Politics, Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 167-214, Cambridge University Press

Accordingly, China and Russia, not having created "a coherent ideological alternative to liberal democracy that would command people's loyalty"[283], hence suffering from a weaker political legitimacy, fear that other states could take advantage of their internal vulnerabilities. States, or non-statal actors creating "advocacy networks", may promote democracy without intentionally destabilizing or weakening non-democratic states which may view such efforts as an attempt to "sow discord in societies that are still undergoing the process of political, social and economic development[284]". In the end, the domestic dimension of the modified security dilemma is paramount to understand "the externally oriented balancing behaviour to counter the perceived threat[285]" to sovereign borders' inviolability, which precisely informs the creation of the Sino-Russian global consensus, and thus characterizes the systemic dimension of their entente.

In conclusion, the R2P framework and the Syrian War provide us with a revealing prism through which we can analyse China and Russia's foreign strategies as well as their balancing partnership at a global level. Indeed, both countries view the Responsibility to Protect as undermining the concept itself of sovereignty, which informs the basic legal framework of the Charter of the United Nations and International Law. Both countries express their concerns in terms of domestic security and stability, referring to the "doctrine of humanitarianism as a Trojan Horse with the purpose of weakening their own control at home[286]", as well as providing an alternative understanding of R2P so to foster and legitimise their status in the international arena. The US factor is an essential driver of their rapprochement since both countries maintain an adversarial relationship towards the Hegemon. At the same time, their global consensus is characterized by a division of roles between a "loud dissenter" and a "cautious partner", which is mutually beneficial as a consequence of its degree of complementarity. However, this also reflects a different perception of their own status, preventing both countries from setting a new norm in the R2P debates, and, on the other hand, signalling how their strategic partnership is mainly externally driven, constructed in response to the international security environment rather than offering a new ideological framework or offensive agenda[287]. In the end, far from defining an alliance, China and Russia have been able, until this moment, to manage their asymmetries and their sometimes divergent interests, promoting an unprecedented strategic partnership aimed at protecting their spheres of influence from US interference as well as promoting their status, while undermining, at the same time, the legitimacy of the US order in what it seems the beginning of a delegitimation phase of the so-called *Pax Americana*, rather than the sudden proclaimed emergence of a multipolar world.

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[283] Krickovic, A. (2016). *Catalyzing Conflict: The Internal Dimension of the Security Dilemma*, Journal of Global Security Studies, pp. 1-16
[284] Ibidem
[285] Ibidem
[286] Cox, M. (2016). Not just "convenient": China and Russia's new strategic partnership in the age of geopolitics. Asian Journal of Comparative Politics, 1 (4). pp. 317-334
[287] Li, C. (2007). *Limited Defensive Strategic Partnership: Sino-Russian rapprochement and the driving forces*, Journal of Contemporary China, 16:52, pp. 477-497

CONCLUSION

This analytical research has attempted to investigate the nature of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Our research has revealed us that their interaction is unprecedented in many respects as well as inconsistent and asymmetric in other crucial aspects. Accordingly, the literature has provided us with a similarly polarized academic debate, reflecting the afore mentioned contrasting empirical findings. Thus, instead of arbitrarily emphasizing elements of convergence at the expense of divergent priorities and observable trends towards increasing asymmetry, I have decided to develop an analysis based on a two-level pattern of interaction.

The relationship between Russia and China has been conceived as an interplay of different causal forces occurring at different levels of analysis. A two-level pattern wherein systemic balancing coexists with a hedging kind of interaction at regional level. Accordingly, their constructive partnership may be defined as an "Entente" between two major powers, based on a commonality of some key interests at a global/systemic level, informing their balancing coalition and their global consensus, while at a regional level, elements of geopolitical competition have not prevented both countries from sustaining their global common stance until this moment.

Alliance formation is often viewed as a response to power distribution in the international arena. Accordingly, states, when entering an alliance, may decide either to band-wagon or to balance against the most powerful state. Firstly, band-wagoning is not a viable option for great powers. Indeed, in a self-help system, "any move that creates a more capable rival reduces a state's security[288]". Secondly, we should acknowledge that the US factor has been a crucial accelerator, if not the overriding determinant, of the emerging Sino-Russian strategic partnership. Thus, scholars argue that both countries have found it natural to join forces against the hegemon in order to restore multipolarity. However, it is more accurate to say that states will ally against the most threatening power rather than in response to power considerations alone. Furthermore, we should be wary of the implicit Eurocentric bias informing the balance of power theory, which considered only European land-based powers. Indeed, an attempt by either China or Russia to increase its power would threaten its neighbours and provide the latter with a higher incentive to act as a swing power. On the other hand, the US still retain an undisputed military might; therefore, a balancing coalition would involve too many costs and risks.

Both great powers are unlikely to set aside a latent feeling of mistrust, due to historical and ontological reasons. Besides certain historical grievances, in a self-help system, marked by the absence of a global Leviathan, these two major powers will not rely on external balancing for their own security. Likewise, "in timeless cycles of power politics, salvation lies within[289]". The case study, based on the Syrian war and the

[288] Waltz, K.N. (1979). *Theory of International Politics,* Reading, Mass, Addison-Wesley Pub. Co.
[289] Parent J.M. and Rosato S. (2015), *Balancing in Neorealism.* International Security, Vol. 40, No. 2, Fall 2015, p. 86

R2P doctrine, has provided us with valuable findings that exactly signal the emergence of a rather soft-balancing Sino-Russian coalition rather than an anti-Western bloc ready to overhaul the US-led world order. Far from signalling the sudden emergence of a multi-polar world, their entente, in its global dimension, is mainly defensive, marking the beginning of a delegitimating phase of the US-led liberal order. The widespread promotion of democracy, human rights and liberal values has inevitably provoked the creation of a balancing coalition sharing a common feeling of fear towards regime change, for example because of colour revolutions, or rejecting what they perceive, in a self/other axis, as foreign values menacing their sovereign rights and cultural claims. Moscow and Beijing have neither laid down a new ideological framework to supplant western liberal democracy nor formed a cohesive anti-western military bloc. Conversely, they rather share a common view which sets forth the primacy of sovereignty and non-interference, promoting a neo-Westphalianist view which is mainly externally driven rather than aimed at proposing an anti-liberal alternative.

The PRC and the Russian Federation have become partially socialized to certain norms and institutions of the current international order. Accordingly, status related considerations are paramount to understand their different approaches in the global arena. In this respect, Russia has played the role of a "loud dissenter" because of its declining status and as a response to what it perceives as an inherently hostile international order. Conversely, China has acted as a "cautious partner", trying to act as a responsible player in line with its "peaceful rise" political narrative. Such a division of roles highlights a stark difference in the approaches undertaken, as well as in the grand strategies pursued. On the one hand, China has vastly benefited from globalization and the US led world order. Aware of its internal challenges, Beijing is cautious about challenging the US led order, in contrast with what would be predicted by power distribution theories. At the same time, the PRC has benefitted from a much more revisionist and assertive Russia, ready to significantly affect the status quo as a consequence of its declining status. Hence, the Sino-Russian entente, at a global level, is mainly a coordinated effort to "join forces to withstand Western pressure and to gain better resources to compete with it"[290]. Indeed, as argued by Luk'janov, Russia and China, "for geopolitical and historical ontological reasons, are not powers fit to full-fledged alliances on equal terms[291]".

I have disputed a two-fold typology, exclusively based on band wagoning or balancing patterns of interaction, to describe China and Russia's alliance politics. Indeed, the Sino-Russian interaction, at a regional level, can be best described as an example of "hedging". Accordingly, we have observed a mix of balancing/containment and engagement, of cooperation and competition. The EAEU-BRI interplay in Central Asia has been a case in point to understand these rather mixed and contrasting attitudes characterising the

290 Gabuev, A. (2016). Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese relations after the Ukraine Crisis, *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 2016

291 Luk'janov, F. (2019). "Non siamo alleati ma rifiutiamo l'egemonia Americana", *Limes*, Cina e Russia: La strana Coppia. n.11/2019, pp 43-5

Sino-Russian relationship. For the time being, both great powers have been adamant to stress the degree of complementarity and the mutually advantageous division of labour which characterizes their interaction in the Central Asian region. On the one hand, the Kremlin has further accentuated its narrative based on the "Pivot to the East", reorienting its economy towards the flourishing Asian markets. While remaining the regional security guarantor, Moscow has converged towards Beijing, especially in the aftermath of the Ukraine war and the establishment of western sanctions, overcoming its reluctance to sell advanced weaponry to China, allowing Chinese investments in infrastructural and natural-resource projects, thus accommodating to the BRI's geo-economic implications in the region. On the other hand, the PRC has greatly benefitted from Central Asian countries and Russia's energy resources and raw materials to sustain its economic development and satisfy its energy hunger, through a more strategically secure energy diversification. Moreover, Beijing has been adamant to sustain a more stable and safer Central Asia, fearing that instability and terrorist threats may spill over Xinjiang or put in danger its economic investments in the area.

However, the Sino-Russia economic cooperation at regional level is mainly state-centred, lacking a truly natural economic integration and a significant involvement of the business world. The lack of a modern and efficient infrastructural basis, together with bureaucratic constrains, inevitably prevent both countries from achieving their full-fledged economic potential. Moreover, the BRI bears some paramount geo-economic implications. Indeed, Beijing has broken Moscow's monopoly of gas and oil exports from Central Asia, while the growing Chinese security sector presence may complement its already uncontested economic primacy in the area. At the same time, the EAEU itself could be understood as a political tool to monitor Chinese projects and pressure in the area, curbing its influence by preventing its member states from concluding agreements with external actors, placing Moscow as the regional gravitational centre, the inevitable bridge between the West and the East, preserving its own pole to eventually act as a swing power. Moscow's recent announcements of its willingness to create a free trade agreement between the EAEU and India can be viewed as an attempt to contain Chinese economic influence in the region, transforming a bilateral confrontation into a multi-player competition, recalling the Russia-sponsored invitation, and then admission, of New Delhi to the SCO. Finally, this balancing pattern is not solely confined to the Sino-Russian interaction in Central Asia. We have noted that in the Artic both countries pursue diverging strategies. Russia views the Artic as an issue of maritime sovereignty, promoting the Artic Council as the sole relevant decision-making body. Conversely, Beijing supports the idea for an inclusive system, defining itself a "near-Artic state" and considering the Artic a global common. Furthermore, Moscow's increasing economic and military ties with Vietnam and India are evidence of the Kremlin's willingness to diversify its regional alliances, to balance against China's ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. Accordingly, the time could be ripe to observe the improbable, yet useful, consolidation of Russo-Japanese relations, if both countries will find it expedient to supplant territorial and historical frictions with a balancing coordinate effort against China's rise.

The future of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership will depend on how both powers will be able to manage an increasingly more asymmetric and interconnected relationship. Beijing and Moscow function as autonomous sovereign states, yet they have been able to develop and sustain a mutually beneficial partnership. Their global consensus has been inherently defensive as well as limited in its scope. Far from elaborating a new ideological framework, both countries pursue different grand strategies. Furthermore, over time, the Kremlin will have an even greater incentive to play the role of the swing power, so to preserve its great power status, instead of accepting the role of Washington/Beijing's junior partner. Consequently, it will act either as the balancer between two potential hegemons or as the guarantor of a new non-aligned movement. Conversely, Beijing will not risk getting caught in Russia's assertive initiatives when its interests are not at stake and a confrontation against the US might break out. While focusing on its domestic development in the short term, the PRC will rather follow its own grand strategy, perhaps instructed by the now popular "Tianxia – All under Heaven" view, a notion that questions the concept itself of sovereignty, thus in contrast with Moscow's ethnocentric view of regionalism, inherently tied to the notion of space, as well as closed and defensive in nature, reflecting Russia's declining status and global structural conditions.

In its limitedness and defensiveness, in its contradictory understanding of regional politics and in its autonomously defined grand strategies of independent great powers, the Sino-Russian entente will be likely shaped by the future development of the international order rather than the other way around. Thus, unless they will be able to develop a pro-active stance aimed at reforming the international order, for example filling the gaps of global governance issues, in an era of global disorder wherein multilateralism is failing to lay down and enforce global binding arrangements, their partnership will be determined by future systemic changes. In conclusion, I propose, here below, six different future scenarios that could affect the long-term development of the Sino-Russian entente.

Scenario 1: US unilateralism and the continuation of the Sino-Russian entente

It is quite probable that in a decade we won't be observing significant changes in the international arena. Accordingly, Russia and China global consensus and balancing coalition will likely remain in place, if not even intensify, thus trumping over geopolitical confrontation at a regional level and overcoming an even more significant asymmetric relationship. The American factor will probably accentuate their convergence, yet it will unlikely lead to the emergence of a full-fledged China-Russia alliance, whereby Moscow would be playing the younger brother role, something in stark contradiction with its great power status' concerns.

Scenario 2: US-China confrontation scenario

The Thucydides trap may unfold, and the US-China confrontation may thus ensue. The politics of triangularism may reveal itself once again, whereby Washington and Beijing might court Moscow, which in turn will likely preserve its strategic flexibility, profiting from a precious opportunity to position itself as the global swing power. The dramatic consequences of a Sino-American conflict might put Moscow at a crossroads. A hands-off approach is not a viable option for a great power, risking deteriorating its relationship with China without being compensated by the West for its neutrality[292]. Probably, the Kremlin would support the PRC materially and morally, however it is not entirely clear how far Moscow will push itself.

Scenario 3: US-China relative stability / accommodation

Although this outcome appears to be improbable, the scope and complexity of global governance issues requiring a global answer and a common enforcement mechanism, ranging from climate change, global poverty, pandemic diseases, nuclear proliferation and terrorism, might bring Washington and Beijing closer. Consequently, Russia's interests and concerns might be side-lined, likely prompting an assertive response to signal its status and claim to be considered as an essential great power. Conversely, if stability will follow suit and no considerable US-China rapprochement will emerge, the Sino-Russian Entente might even expand despite an increasingly more asymmetric and widening gap in favour of Beijing.

Scenario 4: Russia-US rapprochement

Until this moment, the US have maintained a two-front confrontation. However, if China could eventually complete its transformation from a potential emerging superpower to a full-fledged super-power, a distant prospect at least in the time being, Washington may find it expedient, if not necessary, to drive a Kissingerian-kind of wedge between both Beijing and Moscow, seeking Russia's collaboration in exchange for significant concessions to the Kremlin.

Scenario 5: Russia or China's domestic crisis and change in the political system

The Sino-Russia global consensus is partly conceived as a response to their mutually shared concern over foreign interference, embodied in the widespread promotion of democracy and liberal values, something they perceive as an attempt to exploit their internal vulnerabilities. Thus, we cannot rule out a dramatic change in either Russia or China's political system, from an illiberal regime to a more liberal and democratic regime[293]. Moscow, especially, is more likely to observe such a transition in a post-Putin era. Indeed, its declining status,

[292] Lo, B. (2020) The Sino-Russian partnership and global order, *China International Strategy Review*, 2:306-324
[293] Lukin, A. (2020) The Russia-China entente and its future, *International Politics*, Springer Nature Limited 2020

its feeble economic growth and its dependence on oil and gas exports to sustain the government's expenditure, point out an internal weakness in terms of political legitimacy. Russia's most developed regions are significantly closer to the West than the East. Thus, the Westernizers, after their failure in the 1990s, could obtain the favour of the Russian population once again. Sino-Russian relations would not be inevitably disrupted; however, their strategic partnership would lose much of their commonality of views and their mutual concerns, which have precisely informed their global balancing consensus. On the other hand, Beijing as well could theoretically, even though more unlikely, undergo a transitional phase towards political liberalization, for example if the Chinese socio-economic development was to suffer from a dramatic halt or if the emerging Chinese middle class claimed a more democratic political representation.

Scenario 6: Chinese Hubris

Moscow and Beijing have adamant to stress the positive aspects of their relationship, restraining themselves from criticizing each other's contradictory initiatives, such as India's invitation to join the SCO, Moscow's growing military ties with Vietnam and New Delhi or China's growing economic and military presence in Central Asia. Both powers have emphasized the emergence of a new pattern of interaction between great powers, mutually recognising each themselves as co-equals. However, China has increasingly closed the military gap with Moscow. Beijing's economy is now eight times greater than the Russian one. Russia might risk becoming a junior partner or an energy appendix to the emerging Chinese superpower, while the PRC is increasingly becoming a technological leader in the international arena. Accordingly, in the long-term, both countries' leadership may be observing another Sino-Soviet split. Also, Beijing might be tempted to "March West", choosing, in its land-sea strategic dilemma, to become a land-based powers considering the difficulty of launching an offensive on the sea on account of the "first island chain" and the US thalassocratic hegemony.

The direction of the related future research could be that of keeping record of the strategic partnership's development while considering the evolution of current trends towards increasing asymmetry. Then, it will be useful to observe whether Russia will show signs towards the creation of a new non-aligned movement or whether it will enhance its bilateral ties with an even growing number of Asia-Pacific countries so to contain China's rise. Finally, it will be interesting to analyse how the IR debate in both countries will be developed, so to observe which characteristics the "Greater Eurasia" concept will assume, and how those features could find a point of convergence/divergence with the emerging Chinese conceptualizations, related to its foreign policy and to global governance. In the end, it will be crucial to trace the development of Russian concerns in Central Asia, as well as to see whether the Chinese PLA will undertake a "March West" strategy or whether it will keep on mainly looking out onto the sea, where the Sino-US confrontation will take place.

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ABSTRACT

Nel 1989 Francis Fukuyama scrisse un saggio intitolato “La Fine della Storia?” che introduceva una nuova prospettiva secondo cui il mondo stava entrando in una fase post-storica, per cui la dinamicità dialettica della storia si sarebbe trasformata in stasi e in linearità. Tuttavia, questa visione teleologica e progressista era destinata a fallire. Il sistema attuale ne è la prova. L’ordine internazionale è infatti caratterizzato da un’evidente frammentazione, dalla mancanza di una leadership internazionale universalmente riconosciuta; un’arena internazionale caotica e dinamica che segnala la fine del “momento Unipolare” evidenziato da Charles Krauthammer. La pandemia da Covid-19 ha rappresentato in questo senso un’unica, seppur drammatica, opportunità per ottenere una comprensione più lineare e coerente delle forze sistemiche che stanno cambiando l’arena internazionale. Pertanto, la pandemia può essere vista come un acceleratore di quelle pressioni sistemiche che spingono l’ordine internazionale verso una frammentazione significativa, un’erosione dell’universalismo americano come precedentemente inteso, un indebolimento delle istituzioni multilaterali, una cresciuta assertività di medie e grandi potenze, il ritorno della geopolitica, ammesso che sia mai scomparsa, e la crescente non-polarità del sistema della politica internazionale. Mearsheimer ritiene che l’ordine unipolare fosse destinato a fallire in quanto esso stesso conterrebbe al suo interno i semi della propria distruzione. Un ordine internazionale di natura ideologica, fondato sulla democrazia e sui valori liberali, che sembra aver trovato nel suo cammino una realtà intersoggettiva ancora più antica, solida e forte; l’idea di nazione, l’identità nazionale e di conseguenza il sistema politico ad essa collegato, lo stato nazionale. Hegel definì lo Stato come una costruzione storica destinata ad essere superata nel tempo, come era precedentemente accaduto alla Polis Greca. Tuttavia, il tempo non sembra essere ancora maturo per questa svolta epocale. Il concetto di sovranità e l’identità nazionale sembrano avere la meglio sulla visione liberale diffusa dalla potenza americana e dal mondo occidentale, compromettendo l’ordine internazionale nel suo nucleo fondante.

La crisi del sistema internazionale può essere definita come una crisi di successo, dalla quale ne è conseguita una diffusione del potere dal centro. Gli Stati Uniti d’America mantengono ancora il loro primato egemonico in modo incontrastato, tuttavia l’ordine globale sta dando luce a varie forme di nazionalismo, protezionismo, sfere di influenza e progetti geopolitici di più ampio respiro. In primo luogo, con la fine della Guerra Fredda, la prospettiva liberale rimase l’unica cornice nella quale un ordine mondiale potesse essere contestualizzato e concepito. Con la crescente espansione e integrazione al suo interno di diverse entità statali con priorità, interessi e valori spesso in contraddizione tra loro, l’ordine internazionale è stato inevitabilmente compromesso da problemi di “Governance Globale” e di azione collettiva, con nuove sfide globali che necessitano di processi decisionali di scala mondiale, di risposte di natura transnazionale e di attuazione globale. Inoltre, l’era bipolare era fondata sulla contrapposizione di due “comunità di sicurezza” basate sul concetto di “rischio sociale”. Un sentimento di vulnerabilità nei confronti di un pericolo comune che ha

rafforzato un senso di identità comunitaria, un collante tuttavia scomparso con il crollo dell'Unione Sovietica. Infine, la fase neoliberista inaugurata negli anni 80, si è protratta e intensificata nel tempo, generando un flusso di iper-globalizazzione incontrollata, sfociata in tassi di disoccupazione elevati e soprattutto in crescenti diseguaglianze socioeconomiche, generando un senso di fatica e disagio, acuito dal succedersi di crisi economiche e finanziarie. Di conseguenza, una fase di delegittimazione politica interna ha caratterizzato le democrazie occidentali, raggiungendo il suo apice nell'ascesa del populismo. L'ordine liberale è stato colpito nella sua dimensione domestica, osservando la parziale erosione del suo scopo sociale e dunque della sua legittimità politica, la conseguenza inevitabile di un'impressionante crescita dell'insicurezza lavorativa e della disuguaglianza sociale.

In un'era di disordine globale e crescente non-polarità, la complessa interdipendenza che contraddistingue il processo di globalizzazione, ha portato a una diffusione e distribuzione più equa del potere nel sistema internazionale. La rinascita della Russia e l'incredibile ascesa della potenza cinese sono esempi perfetti in questo senso. La loro partnership strategica non ha precedenti in termini di capacità di potenza e potenziale di trasformazione dell'ordine mondiale. Tuttavia, le relazioni Sino-Russe non segnalano l'emergere di un'alleanza o l'inevitabile ritorno di un mondo multipolare. Nonostante la popolarità di alcune considerazioni circa la "caduta dell'Occidente e l'ascesa dell'Oriente", o "l'inizio del secolo Asiatico", Washington rimane tuttora il centro nevralgico del sistema internazionale, un ruolo che le pertiene in maniera indiscussa alla luce delle sue capacità, sia in termini di "hard power" sia di "soft power".

La natura anarchica del sistema internazionale obbliga le grandi potenze a dover provvedere autonomamente alla propria sicurezza, controbilanciando internamente, per esempio tramite lo sviluppo del proprio apparato bellico, e raramente esternamente, la pressione esercitata dalla potenza egemone e dagli altri rivali strategici. Parent e Rosato, nella loro ricostruzione storica, evidenziano come "in eterni cicli di politica della potenza, la salvezza risieda all'interno di uno Stato". Questa prima considerazione ci spinge ad osservare con diffidenza ogni analisi che descrive la partnership strategica sino-russa come un'alleanza avente come suo scopo una politica di contro-bilanciamento della potenza egemone, la revisione dell'ordine internazionale e la restaurazione di un sistema multipolare. Inoltre, la teoria della politica dell'equilibrio di potere, spesso invocata, si concentra esclusivamente su considerazioni legate al concetto di potenza *tout court*. Tuttavia, come evidenziato da Stephen Walt, è più appropriato parlare di "politica dell'equilibrio del pericolo", aggiungendo quindi una sfera di significativa importanza nella comprensione della politica delle alleanze; quella relativa alla percezione di una determinata minaccia. Il concetto di pericolo, al contrario di considerazioni basate esclusivamente sulla capacità di potenza di un determinato attore, ci permette di analizzare altri aspetti fondamentali: l'identità di un popolo e la sua relazione con l'alterità, aspetti geografici, come la presenza di barriere naturali e la prossimità tra due stati, che qualificano lo spazio nel quale avviene la competizione geopolitica, le capacità militari, economiche e tecnologiche, la demografia, il prestigio di una potenza e le intenzioni offensive/difensive di un determinato stato. Tutti questi concetti sono fondamentali per riqualificare la teoria dell'equilibrio di potere che soffre di un *bias* Eurocentrico, l'area geografica sulla quale questo concetto è stato articolato. Infatti, potenze terresti e potenze marittime perseguono diverse modalità di bilanciamento politico, in virtù di condizioni geografiche diverse e, di conseguenza, di una modalità differente nel percepire cosa può costituire un pericolo per la sicurezza stato. Levy and Thompson illustrano perfettamente questa considerazione, rifiutando una presunta universale validità analitica della teoria dell'equilibrio di potere. Pertanto, in riferimento alle relazioni sino-russe, ogni tentativo di potenziamento dell'apparato bellico da parte di Mosca o di Pechino, anche se mirato a controbilanciare l'egemonia americana, rappresenterebbe una minaccia ancor maggiore per ogni altra potenza Euroasiatica, ivi comprese la Russia e la Cina, incentivando quest'ultime a cercare di ottenere l'assistenza americana. D'altro canto, un'alleanza Sino-Russa implicherebbe dei rischi e dei pericoli troppo elevati nel caso di un conflitto contro Washington e i suoi alleati, in vista di un risultato incerto e non necessariamente positivo in ogni suo possibile scenario.

La convergenza Sino-Russa si esplica in maniera eccezionale nella dimensione militare. Infatti, la Russia è il maggiore esportatore di armi destinate alla Cina, rappresentando fino all'80% dell'import cinese di materiale bellico dal 1991 ad oggi. Nonostante una reticenza iniziale da parte di Mosca, dovuta alle pratiche cinesi di *reverse-engineering*, nel 2013 Pechino concordò con Mosca l'acquisto di aerei di combattimento russi Su-35, sottomarini di classe Lada e di sistemi di difesa aerea S-400. Tuttavia, il loro interscambio commerciale di tipo militare è drasticamente decresciuto negli anni, in conseguenza di un gap tecnologico, ormai a favore di Pechino, che vedrà una Cina militarmente autosufficiente e sempre più avanzata da un punto di vista bellico. La convergenza Sino-Russa è evidente anche nel numero crescente di esercitazioni militari congiunte, sia nel contesto della SCO in Asia Centrale, sia in località più sensibili come il Mediterraneo (2015), il Mar Baltico (2017) e il Mar Cinese Meridionale (2016). Queste operazioni militari, svolte in chiave anti-americana, sono tuttavia compromesse da un basso livello di interoperabilità militare e da un sentimento latente di sfiducia tra gli apparati militari. Questa mancanza di fiducia si è palesata nelle dispute circa la locazione delle esercitazioni militari congiunte. Da una parte la Russia ha fatto pressione per svolgere le missioni sotto la guida della CSTO, in congiunzione con la SCO, così da rafforzare il suo ruolo di garante della sicurezza nell'Asia Centrale. D'altro canto, la Cina propose di svolgere la "Peace Mission" del 2005 nello stretto di Taiwan, una mossa giudicata come troppo provocatoria da parte di Mosca. Fëdor Luk'janov considera la Russia e la Cina come potenze "non adatte a un'alleanza vera e propria, per ragioni geopolitiche e storico-ontologiche". La delimitazione del confine Sino-Russo, completata nel 2007, ha sì posto le basi per un fondamentale riavvicinamento diplomatico, riducendo la possibilità di osservare un controproducente confronto lungo il confine, costringendo gli Stati Uniti d'America ad essere attivi su più fronti, tuttavia persiste un senso di diffidenza reciproca tra i due apparati militari. Questo sentimento latente è l'inevitabile conseguenza di un passato storico segnato da conflitti lungo confine e da acquisizioni territoriali di tipo coloniale. Nonostante ciò, la Russia si è limitata semplicemente a modernizzare il suo contingente militare presente nei territori del Lontano Est, senza però aumentare il numero delle truppe o cambiare la propria postura bellica. Allo stesso modo, la Cina persegue una strategia militare basata su un vettore orientale, orientata quindi verso il Pacifico. Inoltre, alla luce di un passato storico fatto di scontri lungo il confine e acquisizioni territoriali, è persino ironico notare come i giochi militari "Vostok 2018", ideati in funzione di una possibile invasione Cinese dall'Est, abbiano accolto più di 3200 soldati cinesi. In conclusione, entrambe le potenze hanno segnalato una forte convergenza specialmente nella loro interazione militare, rinforzando in questo modo la loro posizione di svantaggio nei confronti delle potenze rivali, tra tutte gli Stati Uniti, accrescendo il loro peso specifico e la loro capacità negoziale. La minaccia condivisa rappresentata da Washington, un certo grado di complementarità militare, per cui, per esempio, la Russia può rafforzare notevolmente la capacità di deterrenza nucleare cinese, sono tutti elementi che illustrano l'importanza di questa partnership strategica nella sua dimensione bellica. Tuttavia, fattori come il basso livello di interoperabilità delle esercitazioni militari congiunte, il fattore linguistico come ulteriore ostacolo per un efficace coordinamento bellico, la ben più complessa natura delle operazioni che la Russia svolge con i suoi alleati storici in seno alla CSTO e la decisione di proseguire verso una maggiore convergenza militare con la Cina avvenuta solo in seguito della crisi in Ucraina, sono aspetti che evidenziano l'importanza del fattore americano, come forza scatenante del loro riavvicinamento, e di una persistente diffidenza strategica tra due grandi potenze che, in quanto tali, non sono disposte a vedere il loro spazio di manovra limitato dagli obblighi che un' alleanza militare implicherebbe.

L'interscambio commerciale tra Mosca e Pechino è andato incontro a un totale rovesciamento. La Russia, infatti, deteneva un surplus commerciale fino al 2004, esportando prevalentemente fertilizzanti, equipaggiamenti per telecomunicazioni e polietilene. Tuttavia, in concomitanza con l'incredibile ascesa economica della Cina, Mosca non è stata in grado di diversificare sufficientemente la propria economia. Con il passare del tempo, la Federazione Russa è diventata sempre più dipendente dall'export di idrocarburi e risorse naturali, ponendo le basi per una maggiore compatibilità economica con la Cina ma allo stesso tempo stabilendo un rapporto di dipendenza asimmetrica tra le due potenze. La Russia, specialmente dopo lo scoppio della guerra in Ucraina, ha promosso in maniera sempre più decisa un riorientamento della sua economia verso la Repubblica Popolare Cinese, così da ridurre l'impatto delle sanzioni occidentali e così da trarre i benefici di un mercato più affidabile, in termini di relazioni bilaterali, e in costante crescita. Nel 2020, l'interscambio commerciale ha raggiunto i 100 miliardi di dollari per il terzo anno consecutivo, segnando anche l'undicesimo anno di fila nel quale la Cina rimane il partner commerciale più importante per la Russia. Alla luce di un'evidente distorsione commerciale, per cui i prodotti manifatturieri rappresentano solo il 22% dell'export russo verso la Cina, Mosca e Pechino sono stati comunque in grado di promuovere una cooperazione di tipo economico. Entrambi i paesi, infatti, soffrono di alcune vulnerabilità che trovano una loro attenuazione in un grado significativo di complementarità economica. La Cina necessita di una diversificazione strategicamente sicura in termini di approvvigionamento energetico, di prodotti agricoli e di risorse che richiedono grandi quantità di acqua. La Russia, invece, ha un forte bisogno di capitale estero per modernizzare le proprie infrastrutture e diversificare la propria economia. Tuttavia, nella sua dimensione economica, la partnership strategica è lontana dagli obiettivi prefissati, posticipando ulteriormente l'obiettivo di raggiungere i 200 miliardi di interscambio commerciale e impallidendo di fronte al ben più significativo commercio Sino-Americano o di fronte a quello tra Unione Europea e Russia. Il Cremlino si prefigurava una crescente presenza di investimenti e prestiti da parte delle banche cinesi per sostituire le attività finanziare occidentali, alla luce del deterioramento delle relazioni con l'Europa e gli Stati Uniti. Tuttavia, le banche cinesi hanno erogato prestiti solo fino a 2 miliardi di dollari nel 2017, dimostrando il pragmatismo e il realismo economico su cui si fondano gli investimenti esteri cinesi. Inoltre, i settori russi più sviluppati, quello militare e quello degli idrocarburi, sono caratterizzati da un'imponente presenza dello Stato, precludendo la partecipazione azionaria estera in molti progetti, facendo prevalere considerazioni geopolitiche e strategiche a discapito di quelle economiche, bloccando una più naturale integrazione economica che necessiterebbe di un coinvolgimento maggiore del mondo del business. Infine, su un piano tecnologico, Alexander Lukin ha evidenziato come la Russia e la Cina non abbiano ancora dimostrato un'effettiva collaborazione che possa equiparare, se non quanto meno avvicinare, il grado di divisione lavorativa e integrazione tecnologica dell'Occidente.

La storia, come sostenuto da Carr, non può essere semplicemente trascesa. L'uomo, infatti, è allo stesso tempo "il prodotto e l'agente del processo storico, creatore e rappresentante delle forze sociali che trasformano il mondo". Di conseguenza, l'eredità storica esercita un ruolo cruciale nel modo in cui diamo significato al reale. Attraverso la pedagogia, le percezioni e gli atteggiamenti delle élite e delle masse sono incanalate e indirizzate dalla storia. Storicamente, al di fuori di alcune eccezioni, un senso di reciproca alienazione ha caratterizzato le relazioni bilaterali tra Cina e Russia. La nozione di un'invasione barbarica dall'Est, il clima ostile e una distanza significativa hanno a lungo ostacolato un possibile incontro tra i due popoli, dando luce esclusivamente a delle interazioni sporadiche. Il primo incontro significativo fu stabilito nel diciannovesimo secolo e fu tuttavia caratterizzato da acquisizioni territoriali da parte della Russia, approfittando di una dinastia Qing in constante declino. Oggigiorno, i libri di scuola cinesi fanno ancora riferimento alla perdita di 1,5 milioni di chilometri quadrati in seguito ai trattati ineguali di Aigun, Peking e Targabatai. Successivamente, la convergenza ideologica, di matrice comunista, fu oscurata da contraddizioni di natura politica e divergenti interessi geopolitici. Le ricorrenti umiliazioni di Mao da parte di Stalin, l'enfasi posta sul ruolo subordinato e inferiore della Cina tipica del dibattito politico dell'Unione Sovietica, la dottrina Brezhnev, gli scontri del '69 lungo il confine sino-russo, dimostrarono come l'indistruttibile amicizia era lontano da esserlo, culminando infine nello "split" tra URSS e Repubblica Popolare Cinese. Queste considerazioni storiche esercitano tutt'oggi una forte influenza. Recentemente i social media cinesi sono insorti contro un tweet dell'Ambasciata

Russa in Cina nel quale si celebrava l'anniversario della fondazione della città di Vladivostok. La contestazione ovviamente riguardava la storia della città, sottratta ai cinesi dall'impero zarista nel suo processo di espansione territoriale verso l'Est.

Allo stesso modo, la paura del "pericolo giallo", definibile come la possibile invasione di migranti cinesi nelle regioni scarsamente popolate del Lontano Est russo, ha una forte componente storica e una certa risonanza domestica. Questo argomento ha perlopiù una valenza politica. Infatti, questo concetto non ha una vera e propria solidità scientifica alle sue spalle. Nonostante la densità di popolazione sia 17 volte più bassa di quella delle limitrofe regioni cinesi, la situazione è anche più significativa in Mongolia e non è necessariamente conducibile a un'invasione. La Russia non è una priorità per i migranti cinesi, tuttavia se il sistema di sviluppo socioeconomico cinese dovesse soccombere di fronte alle forti pressioni esercitate dal deterioramento delle condizioni ambientali, dall'invecchiamento repentino della società, da un modello di crescita basato principalmente sull'export e dall'assenza di un sistema di welfare, un'eventuale agitazione domestica potrebbe portare a delle conseguenze inaspettate. D'altro canto, la paura del pericolo giallo non tiene conto del cambiamento epocale introdotto dagli armamenti nucleari nel cambiare l'arte della guerra. L'arma nucleare rappresenta in primo luogo un equalizzatore demografico, in virtù del fatto che danni insostenibili possono essere perpetrati nonostante evidenti asimmetrie nella taglia demografica dei paesi. Tuttavia, nonostante questo sentimento di paura di una possibile invasione cinese sia stato spesso usato come uno strumento politico per ottenere consensi a livello locale, bisogna pur ammettere che il vettore occidentale sia quello più appetibile per risolvere eventuali dissesti del modello di sviluppo cinese, alla luce del fatto che Pechino ha superato da tempo i suoi limiti ecologici. Infatti, secondo alcuni scienziati cinesi, la popolazione ottimale si dovrebbe aggirare intorno ai 700-800 milioni di abitanti. Pertanto, i territori del lontano Est potrebbero funzionare come una sorta di "valvola di sfogo per la Cina", un po' come avviene nel Sud degli Stati Uniti dove il Messico, anche se per ragione di diversa natura, lascia la propria popolazione migrare verso nord per diminuire la pressione sociale. La storia conta, non possiamo scartare l'ipotesi dell'emergere di eventuali dispute tra i due paesi in quei territori, né tantomeno escludere un cambiamento nella direzione perseguita dalla strategia militare cinese, che ora guarda al Pacifico per difendersi dalla pressione americana e per portare a compimento il processo di riunificazione con Taiwan, ma potrebbe un giorno "marciare verso Ovest", perseguendo la strada per divenire una superpotenza terrestre.

L'analisi che abbiamo sviluppato è rivelatrice di una relazione, tra Cina e Russia, che è allo stesso tempo senza precedenti, nel suo grado di convergenza, quanto inconsistente e asimmetrica in altri aspetti cruciali. Inconsistenza e complessità osservabili anche nella polarizzazione del dibattito accademico sul tema. Pertanto, al fine di derivare una comprensione sistematica e coerente della natura della partnership strategica tra Russia e Cina, è necessario focalizzare la nostra analisi su uno schema di interazione delle variabili su due piani contraddistinti. Infatti, nell'osservare le relazioni Sino-Russe, emerge chiaro, come indicato da

Alexander Korolev, come un consenso strategico sul piano globale coesista con un'interazione più complessa a livello regionale, caratterizzata quest'ultimo sia da interessi comuni sia da competizione geopolitica.

Su un piano sistemico, Mosca e Pechino formano una coalizione di bilanciamento in opposizione all'ordine guidato dagli Stati Uniti. La Russia, sotto la pressione dell'espansione della NATO e dell'Unione Europea. La Cina di fronte all'attuazione di una strategia di contenimento della sua ascesa, definita in primo luogo da Obama come il "pivot to Asia". Pertanto, la loro convergenza è informata da una pressione sistemica comune. Entrambi i paesi, per esempio, criticano il ritiro di Washington dal trattato sui sistemi antibalistici, che percepiscono come una voluta rottura della parità strategica. Inoltre, Mosca e Pechino perseguono una politica di coordinazione finanziaria, così da ridurre il potere del dollaro e l'efficacia del sistema sanzionatorio occidentale, promuovendo l'utilizzo delle proprie monete nel loro interscambio commerciale bilaterale e con i loro partner. La convergenza sino-russa è poi evidente nella loro comune politica circa la sfera dell'informazione. Influenzate dalle rivoluzioni colorate e dalle primavere arabe, la SCO ha adottato delle iniziative per proteggere la sicurezza dell'informazione, promovendo, anche in seno alle Nazioni Unite, il bisogno di una sovranità dell'informazione e di una sovranità digitale. Infine, la SCO stessa, come il modello dei BRICS, rappresentano delle istituzioni alternative ai modelli occidentali.

Cina e Russia condividono una narrativa incentrata sull'inviolabilità della sovranità degli stati, sia essa concettualizzata come la "democrazia sovrana" di stampo russo o espressa secondo i 5 principi ci coesistenza promossi da Pechino, in contrapposizione a ciò che loro considerano essere un tentativo di interferenza occidentale. Il caso studio incentrato sulla guerra siriana e la dottrina della responsabilità di proteggere tuttavia ha rivelato l'emergere di un consenso globale sino-russo che definisce la costituzione di una partnership limitata e difensiva, almeno allo stato attuale, piuttosto che un'alleanza militare o una coalizione di bilanciamento pronta a rivoluzione l'ordine mondiale. In linea con questa riflessione, Chenghong Li considera il riavvicinamento tra Cina e Russia come un evento generato da pressioni esterne piuttosto che da una decisione politica interna. Senza segnalare la nascita di un mondo multipolare o senza necessariamente porre le basi di una coalizione di bilanciamento del potere sistemico, la Cina e la Russia cooperano al fine di delegittimare l'egemonia americana, per eroderne in parte il primato, proteggendo le rispettive sfere di influenza, promovendo i propri progetti geopolitici, respingendo l'interferenza e l'influenza americana nel loro estero vicino, all'interno dei propri confini, e rafforzando il loro status di grandi potenze. In questo senso, la guerra in Siria e la dottrina dell'R2P hanno agito, nella nostra analisi, come un importante prisma attraverso il quale osservare il consenso globale sino-russo. Innanzitutto, quest'ultimo si basa su una visione comune che privilegia il concetto di sovranità. Entrambi i paesi esprimono una forte preoccupazione nei confronti dell'interventismo umanitario a guida americana, che percepiscono come un cavallo di Troia che ha lo scopo di indebolire il loro controllo domestico e la stabilità dei loro regimi politici. Il "dilemma modificato della sicurezza", proposto da Krickovic, evidenzia proprio la dimensione domestica non considerata nel classico dilemma della sicurezza. Secondo questo concetto, consci di una debolezza interna, in termini di legittimità politica, Mosca e Pechino temono che attori esterni possano approfittarne per destabilizzare la situazione interna. Pertanto, la narrativa secondo cui gli Stati Uniti abbiano fomentato e cavalcato le rivoluzioni colorate si è intensificata non solo in Russia ma anche in Cina. Entrambi i paesi fanno un uso sistematico di tecnologie di censura o di limitazione dell'attività di NGOs, media stranieri, equipaggiandosi anche di strumenti tecnologici capaci di delimitare dei confini nel mondo cibernetico.

Hobbes definì tre principali cause della disputa tra uomini nello stato di natura: la competizione, la diffidenza e la gloria. Eppure, quest'ultima viene spesso messa da parte. Tuttavia, questioni di status e reputazione ricoprono un ruolo molto importante. Gilpin definì lo status come "la moneta quotidiana della politica internazionale". Cina e Russia sono state parzialmente socializzate all'interno dell'ordine liberale a guida americana. Le due potenze pertanto hanno cercato di trarre i benefici della globalizzazione e dello schema economico garantito e stabilito dall'egemone. Tuttavia, entrambi gli stati, in quanto grandi potenze, hanno sempre mantenuto le loro identità. Da una parte, hanno agito come attori responsabili, dall'altra, quando il loro status o i loro interessi non sono stati presi in considerazioni, sono ricorsi ad azioni di competitività sociale o di costruzione sociale. Considerare lo status come una variabile cruciale a livello analitico comporta una più chiara comprensione nell'approccio intrapreso da entrambe le potenze a livello globale. La Russia, in una fase storica declinante, si trova nel dominio delle perdite. La teoria prospettive ci suggerisce quindi che Mosca è maggiormente inclinata a prendere dei rischi spiegando pertanto, l'assertività Russa e il suo ruolo di "dissidente rumoroso". D'altro canto, la Cina ha mantenuto un approccio più cauto, consapevole di aver beneficiato enormemente dalla globalizzazione e conscia delle numerose sfide interne che la separano dal raggiungere il grado di superpotenza.

Questa differenza, nella postura internazionale prediletta e nel condurre la propria politica estera, evidenzia una percezione differente del proprio status, del proprio ruolo nell'arena internazionale e di come questa vada rivoluzionata o riformata gradualmente. La formazione di un consenso globale sino-russo rappresento un evento storico fondamentale, tuttavia le due potenze non propongono alcun schema ideologico alternativo, perseguono strategie geopolitiche di natura diversa e definite in maniera indipendente. La loro convergenza, nella sfera globale, è motivata principalmente da ragioni esterne. Lontano dal definire un'alleanza, entrambi le potenze sono tuttavia riuscite a mettere da parte le preoccupazioni che potrebbero essere generate da una crescente asimmetria, trovando utile, in maniera non del tutto illogica, cooperare a livello globale, accentuando una fase di delegittimazione dell'ordine americano piuttosto che costituendo un'alleanza con l'improbabile obiettivo di restaurare uno scenario multipolare.

Sul piano regionale, è necessario andare oltre la duplice tipologia usata per descrivere la formazione delle alleanze, costituta dal concetto di bilanciamento e di "band-wagoning" (salire sul carro del vincitore). Infatti, l'interazione regionale sino-russa è racchiudibile in un concetto terzo che va sotto il nome di "hedging".

Quest'ultimo definisce un rapporto di competizione mista a cooperazione, di contenimento e competizione, includendo quindi delle scelte di politica estera diametralmente opposte e contraddittorie tra loro.

Il primo esempio riguarda la regione dell'Artico. La zona è cruciale per la Russia, in quanto asset strategico fondamentale in termini di risorse, generando il 12-15% del PIL nazionale, ma soprattutto perché casa della flotta settentrionale che rappresenta uno degli strumenti cardini della politica di deterrenza nucleare perseguita da Mosca. Il Cremlino considera l'artico come una questione di sovranità marittima prefigurando il consiglio dell'artico come il solo apparato decisionale responsabile delle questioni legate all'area, creando una sorta di consiglio di sicurezza dell'Artico tra i 5 paesi membri. D'altro canto, la Cina si considera uno stato quasi artico e definisce questa regione come un bene comune dell'umanità, promovendo una visione globalista e un'internazionalizzazione della regione così da sfruttare la rotta marittima del nord. Tuttavia, nonostante la chiara frizione di natura geopolitica, entrambi i paesi sono stati capaci di non dare rilievo né di accentuare l'evidente conflittualità di interessi così da evitare un dannoso confronto.

In secondo luogo, la loro relazione è ulteriormente complicata dai rapporti bilaterali che i due paesi intrattengono con gli attori regionali. Infatti, il Cremlino ha intensificato la sua cooperazione militare con il Vietnam, aumentando significativamente l'export di armi russe verso Hanoi, nonostante quest'ultimo opponga risolutamente le pretese territoriali cinesi nel Mar Cinese Meridionale. La stessa considerazione è applicabile all'India, con cui Mosca sta sviluppando un rapporto bilaterale sempre più intenso e proficuo, come si evince dagli aiuti mandati dalla Russia per aiutare Nuova Deli a combattere la pandemia, o anche dalla suggestione lanciata dal Cremlino circa la creazione di un'aerea di libero scambio tra l'EAEU e l'India. Il Vietnam e l'India sono chiari esempi di come Mosca stia allo stesso tempo intensificando la propria cooperazione con Pechino e monitorando l'ascesa cinese con una serie di rapporti bilaterali e legami diplomatici per contenere e controbilanciare la potenza cinese.

Infine, l'esempio più lampante in questo senso è relativo all'incontro/scontro tra Cina e Russia in Asia Centrale. Nel contesto dell'interazione politica tra l'Unione Economica Eurasiatica e la Nuova Via della Seta, Cina e Russia hanno enfatizzato i benefici della loro "divisione del lavoro" in Asia Centrale. Da una parte la Federazione Russa agisce come il garante della sicurezza regionale, dall'altra parte la Repubblica Popolare Cinese è la potenza economica di riferimento. Il Cremlino ha promosso una narrativa basata sul concetto di "Grande Eurasia" e di "Pivot verso l'Est", perseguendo il suo obiettivo primario che mira allo sviluppo economico dei territori del lontano Est, così da trarre benefici economici dai fiorenti mercati dell'Asia-Pacifico e così da avere un maggiore peso politico negli affari internazionali che riguardano la regione. D'altro canto, la Cina si è adeguata agli interessi geopolitici della Russia, in un'aerea che quest'ultima considera essere il suo "estero vicino", promovendo allo stesso tempo l'avanzata dei progetti condotti sotto l'ombrello delle Vie della Seta, diversificando l'approvvigionamento delle risorse energetiche di cui necessita così da soddisfare la sua fame energetica e sostenere in questo modo il suo modello si sviluppo economico. Infine, entrambi i paesi hanno beneficiato della loro convergenza rendendo la regione più sicura, stabile ed economicamente dinamica.

Tuttavia, nonostante la firma di un trattato tra la BRI e la EAEU nel 2015, vi è un'evidente dissonanza nella comprensione dell'accordo e nel modo di intendere e perseguire la politica regionale. In primo luogo, la Russia ha visto nell'accordo il riconoscimento da parte cinese dell'importanza dell'Unione Economica Eurasiatica come l'interlocutore a cui far riferimento. Pechino però non ha rinunciato ai suoi contatti bilaterali con i paesi membri, che al contrario si sono intensificati. Inoltre, la mancanza di una base infrastrutturale efficiente e moderna, insieme a dei blocchi di natura burocratica, ha rallentato significativamente il raggiungimento di un auspicato elevato grado di integrazione economica. La EAEU segue un modello di politica regionale di natura chiusa e rigida, inerentemente legata al concetto di spazio. Essa potrebbe essere intesa come un tentativo da parte del Cremlino di monitorare e controbilanciare la pressione esercitata da UE e Cina. La BRI invece è un progetto geopolitico di ampio respiro, flessibile, aperto e con una visione globale, quasi escatologico e non legata ai confini ma più in linea con il concetto di Tianxia. Le nuove via della Seta portano con sé delle implicazioni di natura geo-economica cruciali. La Cina, infatti, ha rotto il monopolio russo sull'export di gas e petrolio proveniente dall'Asia Centrale, aumentando allo stesso tempo la sua presenza militare, aprendo una base in Tajikistan, e intensificando la sua vendita di materiale bellico nei paesi centro-asiatici. Mosca e Pechino hanno interessi divergenti e inconciliabile nell'aerea. Da una parte la Russia si pone come centro gravitazionale di una sfera d'influenza che considera propria, posizionandosi come il ponte inevitabile tra Est ed Ovest, il pendolo che potrebbe decidere le sorti di uno scontro tra Cina e Stati Uniti. La Cina invece persegue un progetto geopolitico di portata globale e potrebbe decidere in futuro di non concedere più alla Russia il ruolo di partner di eguale rango in Asia Centrale.

In conclusione, la Partnership strategica tra Cina e Russia può essere definita come un'interazione di forze causali che operano a diversi livelli di analisi. La relazione Sino-Russa si esplica infatti su due piani, per cui una politica di bilanciamento sistemico coesiste con un'interazione a livello regionale, caratterizzata allo stesso tempo da cooperazione e competizione. Di conseguenza, la relazione tra Cina e Russia può essere definita come un'"Entente" tra due grandi potenze, basata su una comunanza di alcuni interessi relativi alla dimensione globale, che ne informano il loro consenso strategico. Allo stesso tempo, a livello regionale, aspetti di competizione geopolitica non hanno ancora impedito a entrambi i paesi di sostenere una postura comune nell'arena internazionale, erodendo la legittimità dell'universalismo di stampo americano, respingendo ogni sua forma di interferenza e pressione politica, sia reale sia percepita, e aumentando il loro status di grandi potenze. Seppur ontologicamente e storicamente non propense a definire un'alleanza e perseguendo strategie indipendenti e diverse, Mosca e Pechino sono state in grado di accentuare i benefici della loro convergenza, convogliando le proprie energie e risorse così da sostenere in maniera più efficace la competizione con gli Stati Uniti d'America. Tuttavia, la crescente asimmetria e l'inconciliabilità geopolitica della loro interazione a livello regionale, potrebbero compromettere il futuro dell'Entente sino-russa.