

# "Whose Pacific Century? China's Geo-Political Entrepreneurship in the Asia-Pacific and the Prospect of Sino-Russian Cooperation in the South China Sea"

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Vitaly Kozyrev, Endicott College (Panel 'China and Its Neighbors')

China's recent innovative strategy to claim sovereignty in the South China Sea by building and occupying artificial islands is just one example of its creative approach to geo-political norm entrepreneurship in the 21st century. A variety of hard and soft power applications indicate a full spectrum approach to reclaim the "Pacific century" as its own. Among the implications of the looming geopolitical contestation between Chinese regional hegemony and America's vaunted "pivot to Asia" a strategic rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow could tip the balance. While the United States flexes its stiff diplomatic, military, and economic muscles in the region, an upgraded strategic cooperation between China and Russia, including Moscow's support of Beijing's political position on the questions of international law and arbitration, freedom of navigation, and internationalization of dispute settlement, promise an ironic twist on triangular diplomacy. By examining the geopolitical, security, and legal implications of the emerging consensus between Beijing and Moscow on this key regional issue, the paper contributes to the ongoing debate about the changing regional order and a "new bipolarity" in Asia.

## *Introduction*

Amidst the growing concerns over the security situation in the Western Pacific complicated by the North Korea nuclear crisis and US-China tensions in the South China Sea,<sup>1</sup> voices from the recent 'One Belt, One Road' Forum held in Beijing in May and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Astana in June have delivered a message to the regional community that China's strategic position in continental Eurasia has never been stronger: the accession of India and Pakistan to the SCO marks an important turn in the formation of an enlarged Eurasian association united by common goals. In addition, Moscow and Beijing reiterated their intention to foster a joint Greater Eurasia initiative and also pledged to jointly maintain global stability by developing defense cooperation between Russia and China in 2017-2020 that many in Russia consider as a precursor for a new military alliance between the two Eurasian great powers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the recent accusations of China as a violator of the international law in the South China Sea by US Secretary of Defense Gen James Mattis at the 2017 Shangri-La Dialogue. However, Mattis stated that US-China conflict in the region was "not inevitable." See: "The United States and Asia-Pacific Security: General James Mattis's Address to the IISS Shangri-La Dialogue 2017 First Plenary Session," June 3, 2017 <https://www.iiss.org/en/events/shangri-la-dialogue/archive/shangri-la-dialogue-2017-4f77/plenary-1-6b79/mattis-8315>

<sup>2</sup> "An Alliance Between the Russian and Chinese Armed Forces Will Chill Down Heated Heads in the West," (Союз армий России и Китая остудят горячие головы на Западе), Russia Noah Ark Information Portal, June 9, 2017, <http://rnk-concept.ru/32006> "It is important that Russia and China are ready to defend the world with mutual efforts and strengthen international security," Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu told the Interfax news agency at a meeting with his Chinese counterpart Chinese General Chang Wanquan in Kazakhstan. "Russia and China Prepared a Military Cooperation Roadmap for the Period of 2017-2020," (Россия и Китай подготовили дорожную карту военного сотрудничества на 2017-2020 годы), Interfax News Agency, June 7, 2017 <http://www.interfax.ru/world/565589> ; "Shoigu Proposed China to Fight Together," (Шойгу предложил китайцам бороться вместе), Gazeta.ru online, June 7, 2017 <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/06/07/10711685.shtml>

This paper examines China's effort to utilize its powerful strategic resource in continental Eurasia to offset US pressure in the maritime area and even induce a significant geopolitical shift in the greater East Asian region by fostering a bipolar challenge to U.S. supremacy and the existing U.S.-led security architecture in Asia. We will first focus on China's changing geopolitical perceptions and security strategies in the region. Secondly, the new parameters of Chinese-Russian strategic partnership will be scrutinized. The major outcome of the recent development of a Russo-Chinese partnership is an unprecedented strategic cohesiveness in regional security affairs. The third section will analyze the implication of the newly acquired Sino-Russian strategic cohesiveness in the region on the inherent evolution of Moscow's stance toward the territorial disputes in the South China Sea.

The paper demonstrates that since the outset of Xi Jinping's presidency China has successfully capitalized on the return of Russia to the Asia-Pacific region as a factor of regional power realignment. By making significant concessions in the spheres of Sino-Russian overlapping strategic interests in Eurasia and in the broader Asia-Pacific region, Beijing has managed to engage the Kremlin and receive its support of China's regional leadership ambitions. Strategic security issues have moved to the center of this regional quasi-alliance, and one's adequate understanding of Russia's role in the rise of China as Asia's dominant power helps to set the parameters of the Chinese version of a "Pacific Century."

*China's new geostrategic vision of East Asia: dislodging U.S. influence, going West and East, and shaping a new "world center."*

In the new post-globalization era three major paradigms continue to drive Chinese international policies: Beijing's holistic approach<sup>3</sup> to the international system justifying China's new role as a provider of global public goods; China's specific (post-Marxist) radical view on global conflicts (North-South divide); and the realist assessment of great power realignment and

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<sup>3</sup> See more on the "Concept of Holism" in Chinese foreign policy strategy in: Wang Fan, "Traditional Chinese Culture and East Asian Security Cooperation," in Shao Binhong (ed.) *The World in 2002 According to China* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 39.

global risks that endanger China's core national interests, mixed with Beijing's perception of its global power status legitimizing the Chinese regime at home.<sup>4</sup>

As an emerging great power China considers itself an essential part of the globalized world, thus not only accommodating to globalization but also boosting China's status in the new world order by 'enhancing its international responsibility'. China's perspective of a new international order has been informed by Beijing's overall assessment of the ongoing global great power realignment, which limits the capacity of a declining West to continue acting as the sole constructive force in world governance. Chinese leaders believe that in the new century, such factors as economic recession, structural disparities, and crises of legitimacy in the West have fueled its assertive efforts to preserve the Western-dominated international order. These developments have driven China to revise its own functional role in the global capitalist system as a generator of stability and economic growth and also as a force capable of balancing the system 'from within'.

It is noteworthy that among the key pillars of China's new global goals are justice, social harmony, mutual prosperity, equal treatment of all other nations, and reason. Michael Swaine notes that over time China's "positive features of periphery diplomacy in advancing stability, harmony, and development have been augmented by a clearer and greater stress on the need to safeguard China's national interests and defend its rights in periphery regions."<sup>5</sup> According to some strategists within the Xi administration, protecting China's national interests requires thorough implementation of Deng Xiaoping's idea of the unity of righteousness and interest. The optimal combination of value-based and international norms-backed justice and national interests in China's foreign policy is seen as an important attribute of China as a rising responsible global power.<sup>6</sup>

However, the Chinese leadership admits that the world has entered the period of turbulence and instability due to unprecedented structural political and economic changes. To protect national interests in a changing world order Beijing has no choice but to move on from its "constructive

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<sup>4</sup> Vitaly Kozyrev, "Harmonizing 'Responsibility to Protect': China's Vision of a Post-Sovereign World," *International Relations* (Sage, U.K.), Vol. 30(3), September 2016, pp. 328–345.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Swaine. *Op. Cit.*, p. 3

<sup>6</sup> On the role of justice versus interests in Chinese foreign policy practices see Qin Yaqing, "Correct View on the Concept of Righteousness and Interests: Innovative Ideas and Practical Principles of Chinese Foreign Policy in the New Era (秦亚青, 正确义利观: 新时期中国外交的理念创新和实践原则), 《求是》 2014/12, June 16, 2014, available at [http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2014-06/16/c\\_1111103905.htm](http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2014-06/16/c_1111103905.htm)

participation” policy to “creative involvement” into the international system-building effort including power balancing, security provision, and norm-making. China’s current geostrategy comprises three important components – 1) *securitization* of sovereignty, national interest, and international norm-making; 2) effective management of global distribution of power, and 3) “winning over followers.”

In terms of **great power management**, in addition to its traditional “great power diplomacy” China has to initiated a new proactive policy of regional leadership which involves geopolitical balancing, regional security institutionalization, strategic resource accumulation and an effective coordination of Beijing’s core interests in both the maritime zone in the Pacific (March to the East, 东进) and continental Eurasia (March to the West, 西进).

**Securitization** requires serious consideration of geostrategic parameters of a nation’s survival and rise, its ability to secure its ‘*lebensraum*’ (living space) and exercise adequate control of its littoral zone and continental heartland, protecting its key security-related zones (access denial), organizing anti-missile defense, paving its own freeways to blue water ocean, and the like.

“**Winning over followers**” implies a nuanced foreign policy effort, particularly in China’s neighborhood, to move beyond just securing “stable and peaceful environment” toward developing multi-layered networked partnerships and bilateral or multilateral coalitions. Zhou Fangyin contends that, “both China and the U.S. need to win over followers as they compete to gain more regional influence... and hold one the more strategic positions in the East Asian structure.”<sup>7</sup>

Several years ago prominent Chinese strategist Yan Xuetong developed the idea of shifting international geopolitical centers and argued that it was the new role of China that would make East Asia a real world center, in terms of the changing international power configuration and new international norms creation.<sup>8</sup> To meet its evolving interests as an emerging great power, in Yan’s view, China needs to be proactive in the uses of its enormous power potential and contribute to global norm-making. The concept of China as a global responsible power, actively promoted by the CPC leadership, acknowledges China’s international commitments but requires a revision of

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<sup>7</sup> Zhou Fangyin, “China’s Rise, the Transformation of East Asian Regional Structure, and Development Direction of the East Asian Order,” in Shao Binhong (ed.) *The World in 2002 According to China* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 176.

<sup>8</sup> Yan Xuetong, “Power Shift and Change in the International System,” in Shao Binhong (ed.) *The World in 2002 According to China* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), pp. 142-143; 151.

Western international norms in compliance with China's (and its new key strategic partners') security goals and national interests. A series of new foreign policy concepts, such as the 'new type of great power relationship', international 'connectivity', and the 'corridor diplomacy', all aim to align other countries' interests with China's rise.

China's ascendance as a regional leader seeks to limit the role of extra-regional powers by initiating of Beijing-sponsored regional security institutionalization. While acknowledging that "power politics remains a main dimension of world politics... and territorial-military security remains essentially meaningful,"<sup>9</sup> China had to alternate the existing U.S.-led system of alliances and security guarantees which, in China's view, by no means contribute to long-term regional stability. In May 2014, at the 4<sup>th</sup> Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) held in Shanghai, the Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed a regional security architecture based on the common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security in Asia. In his attempt to make the CICA a security dialogue and cooperation platform that would cover the whole of Asia, President Xi pointed to inclusiveness and openness of the CICA ready to step up cooperation with other organizations in the region and expand dialogue and communication with other regions. Xi urged the regional actors to "advance the process of common development and regional integration, foster sound interactions and synchronized progress of regional economic cooperation and security cooperation, and promote sustainable security through sustainable development."<sup>10</sup>

By claiming the leadership role in the area of regional security by means of enhancing the organization with a limited role of the U.S. and its allies as observers, the Chinese leader specifically emphasized his confidence in the people of Asia to resolve its regional security issues, clearly referring to needlessness of US meddling in Asian affairs. He said that "...it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the

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<sup>9</sup> Shi Yinhong, "China's Contemporary Foreign Strategy: Ideology, Basic Platform, Current Challenges, and Chinese Characteristics," in Shao Binhong (ed.) *The World in 2002 According to China* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2014), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> See: "China proposes to set up regional security cooperation architecture," Xinhua, May 21, 2014, [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/21/content\\_32449336.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/21/content_32449336.htm) The Shanghai summit drew dignitaries from 47 countries or international organizations. China took over the CICA presidency from Turkey for 2014 to 2016 at the summit.

region through enhanced cooperation.”<sup>11</sup> It is also symbolic that for the first time the 2010 Chinese-Russian security initiative was mentioned at the highest level in a multilateral format. Xi stressed that “China and Russia jointly proposed an Asia-Pacific peace and security initiative, which has played an important role in strengthening and maintaining peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>12</sup>

This concept received further development in President Xi’s address to the 5<sup>th</sup> CICA foreign ministers’ meeting in Beijing held in April 2016.<sup>13</sup> These statements were to be addressed to the U.S. and its allies with regard to the maritime territorial disputes in the East China Sea and the South China Sea, and eventually stirred major concerns in the U.S. about the exclusive character of Chinese initiatives aimed at ousting the U.S. from the Western Pacific.<sup>14</sup> While criticizing the U.S. for its “bloc mentality” China does not deny in practice the status of the U.S. as an Asia-Pacific power,<sup>15</sup> continuing to implement some key elements of its great power diplomacy seeking cooperative relations with the U.S., proposing a “new type of great power relationship” with America, and promoting “active cooperation when interests converge” and “preventive cooperation where interests conflict.”<sup>16</sup>

To avoid a direct confrontation with the U.S., Beijing has applied the tactics of geopolitical rebalancing in Eurasia.<sup>17</sup> China’s continental orientation has long been on the Chinese foreign

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<sup>11</sup> “New Asian security concept for new progress in security cooperation,” Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Shanghai Expo Center, 21 May 2014, China.org, May 28, 2014 [http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/28/content\\_32511846.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/world/2014-05/28/content_32511846.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> “Xi Addresses CICA Foreign Ministers’ Meeting,” Xinhua News Online, April 28, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/28/c\\_135319774.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-04/28/c_135319774.htm)

<sup>14</sup> See U.S. reaction to China’s new initiatives in: Richard L. Armitage and Kurt M. Campbell, “Strengthening Deterrence in Asia: Chairmen’s Statement For the Atlantic Council Task Force On Extended deterrence in Asia,” The Atlantic Council’s Brent Scowcroft Center On International Security, October 2014

[http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Ext\\_Det\\_Ch\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/images/publications/Ext_Det_Ch_Statement.pdf) The authors of the report criticized China’s new posture, stating that in response to the distinct US advantage, “China has resolutely developed... “antiaccess area-denial” (A2/AD) capabilities, specifically designed to blunt the US ability to effectively project power into the region,” “the PLA has amassed a large ballistic and cruise missile arsenal, a growing and increasingly sophisticated air force and navy, and capable command and control systems to employ these forces,” concluding that the “cumulative effect is that, under existing US capabilities and concepts of operations, US forces would face substantially greater risk in the Western Pacific.” (p. 2)

<sup>15</sup> “Роль Китая и России в структуре по обеспечению безопасности АТР (The Role of China and Russia in the Security Structures in the Asia-Pacific),” People’s Daily Online, December 19, 2011 (Russian edition) <http://russian.people.com.cn/95181/7680660.html> accessed 10.22.2014

<sup>16</sup> Yan Xuetong. Op Cit.

<sup>17</sup> Wang Jisi, “March to the West – Rebalancing of China’s Geopolitical Strategy” (王缉思：“西进”，中国地缘战略的再平衡), Global Times Online (环球时报), October 17, 2012 [http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion\\_world/2012-10/3193760.html](http://opinion.huanqiu.com/opinion_world/2012-10/3193760.html)

policy agenda, and the importance of the stable neighborhood in China's northwestern areas has grown over the recent decades. For many years China's policies toward Central Asia and, broader, Central Eurasia (including Central Asia plus Afghanistan, the Caspian Sea region, and the adjacent parts of Russia) have been determined by China's regional security concerns (traditional – the great power rivalries – and nontraditional – the “three evils”), growing demands for fossil fuels and mineral resources, and the stability of Xinjiang. To address these issues, Beijing since the late 1990s has successfully strengthened the web of bilateral and multilateral (through the SCO) ties with the countries in this region. The waves of “color revolutions” and the “Arab spring” movements have added an important dimension to China's Eurasia political course – stabilization of the regimes in regional countries by means of economic assistance, trade, investment cooperation, aid and “co-development”.

On the one hand, China's new “March to the West” may be regarded as China's response to U.S. “Pivot to Asia” or a “New Silk Road” initiative put forward by former U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton during her visit to India in July 2011. Chinese plans for the region have been geared to the restructuring of the broader Central Eurasian space to eventually secure Beijing's upper hand in regional affairs and restore its traditional cultural role as a unifying force in Eurasia.<sup>18</sup> On the other – Beijing's turn to Eurasia opened opportunities for cooperation with the U.S. easing tensions in the coastal area. Unlike East Asia, the region of Central and West Asia has not been integrated, nor has it generated conditions for forming Western-dominated military alliances. Central Eurasia indeed provided an excellent opportunity for China to boost regional economic development and raise its international status by converting its economic might into political leverage and soft power projection.<sup>19</sup> At the same time, given the resource potential and tremendous risks and factors of instability in the Greater Middle East and Central Asia,<sup>20</sup> the region could become an area for cooperation, rather than zero-sum confrontation, between the great powers, especially between China and the U.S. which would not have to tackle the risks of military

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<sup>18</sup> Chinese researcher Zhao Baomin stresses that Chinese civilization has long been in existence as a unitary force in the region. China's peaceful rise revived the strength of the Chinese civilization and enhanced its cultural influence. Zhao Baomin, “Return to Eurasia—Shift of China's Grand Strategy” (赵葆珉, 回归欧亚大陆—中国大战略转型), February 26, 2012, [http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2\\_5724157\\_1.html](http://bbs.tiexue.net/post2_5724157_1.html)

<sup>19</sup> Wang Jisi, “March to the West – Rebalancing of China's Geopolitical Strategy.”

<sup>20</sup> Chinese experts point to the fragmented character of the Eurasian space – inhabited by various ethnic groups divided by certain political and economic boundaries, and characterized by unequal patterns of development and specific socio-political traditions.

encounters similar to those of the maritime Asia-Pacific zone. The ‘One Belt One Road’ summit recently held in Beijing has become an example of Beijing’s leadership in economic liberalization and its cooperative approach to all actors involved in the region.<sup>21</sup>

But China’s Eurasian project also involves geopolitical balancing. Beijing’s continental strategies by no means may be considered as a deviation from its major geostrategic objectives in the Western Pacific region. China’s effort as a land power may enhance its potential in the maritime zones by pursuing a nuanced strategic game of balancing Beijing’s continental and maritime interests. Chinese scholar Wang Xufang reminds that, in its foreign policy choices Beijing needs to consider geopolitical implications of China’s rise for the East Asian region in general.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, China needs to react to U.S. “excessive expansion in the Asia-Pacific” which hurts China’s interests.<sup>23</sup> Unlike Wang Jisi who did not see much room for China in maritime areas, Zhao Baoming believes that, given US’s relative decline, the door seems to be open for China on the sea front, and China as a growing maritime power needs to be more assertive. Beijing’s ultimate goal is to pursue the strategy of paralleled engagement of maritime East and continental West, enhancing its strategic options.<sup>24</sup>

So, China’s behavior vis-à-vis the U.S. in Central Asia is contingent upon intensity of conflicts between China, the U.S. and its East Asia allies over maritime disputes in the East China and the South China Sea which have aggravated in the recent years. This contingency factor may affect China’s regional policy in the sphere of security. Beijing is considering its more aggressive military policy toward Central Asia, considering China’s future military presence in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, which might be a bilateral decision or a product of some multilateral efforts within the SCO.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> “Xi Jinping Says the Rejection of Protectionism Is Part of What ‘One Belt, One Road’ Is About,” The Fortune Online, May 14, 2017 <http://fortune.com/2017/05/15/china-xi-jinping-belt-road-summit-protectionism/>

<sup>22</sup> Wang Jifang, “Specific Character of China’s Geopolitics and Its Foreign Policy Choice in the New Era,” (王继芳, 新时期中国地缘政治的特点及外交选择), The Fortune Times Magazine (智富时代), December 2015, p. 137.

<sup>23</sup> Wang Hao, “Excessive Expansion of America’s Strategic Re-balancing to Asia and the Pacific and its Implications,” (王浩, 过度扩张的美国亚太再平衡战略及其前景论析), Journal of Contemporary Asia-Pacific Studies (当代亚太), 2015, Issue 2, pp. 4-37.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Zhao Baoming suggests that China should continue to pursue the policy of strategic self-restraint in the South-East, to come to terms with the United States, and shift its strategic attention to Eurasia.

<sup>25</sup> Zhao Huasheng, “Tsentralnaya Azia v kitaiskoi diplomatii (Central Asia in China’s Diplomacy)”, in: Tsentralnaya Azia, vzglyad iz Vashingtona, Moskvyy i Pekina (Central Asia: A View from Washington, Moscow and Beijing) (Moscow: New Publisher, 2008), p. 231-232.

In its important regional security document in the beginning of the year 2017 Beijing inadvertently outlined its new strategy to dislodge the U.S. as a primary regional security provider by building an alternative architecture, normalizing U.S. acceptance, and enforcing regional compliance with Chinese leadership preferences through rewards and punishments. Timothy Heath considers this publication as a signal to the outside world of establishing China as the dominant power in Asia.<sup>26</sup> China's geopolitical maneuvering on land has only become more imperative for Beijing as the Trump administration apparently flirting with a form of isolationism and international uncertainty reaching new heights. U.S. President Trump's secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, has threatened to blockade Chinese trade routes if its activities in the sea go too far. As Tom Harper puts it, "extensive rail routes to the west are an excellent way to render any such tactics moot." He adds that, "in keeping with Mackinder's theories, the Chinese are now developing rail routes to take strategic pressure off maritime routes, a crucial step in the face of the South China Sea crisis."<sup>27</sup>

To secure a shift in international configuration, China needs to "adjust its non-alignment policy," "step up the number of its strategic cooperators," to help drive the international configuration.<sup>28</sup> In his publications Yan Xuetong notes that the country has been shifting from its 'neither friends nor enemies' posture toward the appreciation of 'friendship and loyalty' between China and its neighbors. By providing some incentives to the other neighboring nations for their constructive role in China's own development, Beijing is seeking to form 'communities of common destinies' – the new types of international cooperation which go beyond just pure economic interests and contain, as Yan Xuetong puts it, 'a strong political dimension ...' which might extend to providing security guarantees to select countries.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, connectivity promoted by Beijing may not be unconditional. As Yan Xuetong maintains, other nations in the Eurasian regions may be rewarded by China "in exchange for political support for China's regional objectives." Therefore, the Belt and the Road cooperation with other countries in trade, industry, investment, energy and resources, finance and ecological

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<sup>26</sup> Timothy Heath, "China Intensifies Effort to Establish Leading Role in Asia, Dislodge U.S.," China Brief, The Jamestown Foundation, Volume 17, Issue 2, February 6, 2017, <https://jamestown.org/program/china-intensifies-effort-establish-leading-role-asia-dislodge-u-s/>

<sup>27</sup> Tom Harper, "China's Play for Supremacy in Eurasia Revives an Old Geopolitical Vision," March 19, 2017 <https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/03/19/chinas-play-supremacy-eurasia-revives-old-geopolitical-vision/>

<sup>28</sup> Yan Xuetong, "Power Shift and Change in the International System," p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> Yan Xuetong, "China's Foreign Policy: Not Conflict But Convergence of Interests," , NPQ, 31(2), 2014, [http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2014\\_spring/11\\_xuetong.html](http://www.digitalnpq.org/archive/2014_spring/11_xuetong.html)

protection, urban development, ports, land ports and industrial parks, etc. – may only be a part of common development of China and these countries, to secure “an expanded set of strategic options for China to avoid military conquest to achieve regional dominance.”<sup>30</sup> In the current security environment, Russia seems to be the best candidate for the role of China’s key strategic cooperator. Zhou Fangyin suggests that China needs to utilize its economic statecraft to gain friends and “win over followers.”<sup>31</sup> Paradoxically, the engagement of Russia is largely driven by strategic congruency and security incentives rather than purely economic factors.

*China envisions Russia’s new role: shaping a ‘new type’ of strategic partnership*

Much has been written about the character of the new Sino-Russian partnership. Observers range from the staunch pessimists pointing to distrust and historical animosity between the two Eurasian giants, to realists referring to the ambivalent and pragmatic nature of this partnership, and to some whistle-blowers announcing the coming era of a real alliance between Russia and China.

Since the late 1990s Moscow has been elaborating its relevant strategic posture toward China, first slowly revising the one-sided Eurocentric foreign policy orientation and then introducing a balanced Euro-Pacific approach, which, despite some skepticism among Russia-watchers, has helped Russia to improve its standing in Asia in 2009-2014. These relationships have got an extra impetus in the midst of the 2008 global economic recession, when Russia and China admitted that some concerted efforts should be made to hedge the risks of monetary and financial overdependence on the West. The “Arab spring” revolts and the Russo-Chinese cooperation on the Syrian issue in 2011-2013 further improved understanding between the two countries’ leadership, which started to form a new ideological and political foundation for their emerging “tandem” in international affairs.

China’s impressive rise as a great economic superpower also informed some positive voices in Russia (as well as in Central Asia), especially in 2006-2007, appraising China’s modernization potential and the effective developmental model of China. China is portrayed as being a responsible international actor-contributor to global economic governance. China’s ability

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<sup>30</sup> Yan Xuetong. Op. Cit.

<sup>31</sup> Zhou Fangyin. Op. Cit., p. 176

to manage complex economic and security problems and demonstrate effective governance also draw attention of elites in Russia and other post-Soviet states, which on the contrary have poor records in terms of investment climate, corruption, lack of coordination and strategic planning.

So by the mid-2000s the key parameters of the Sino-Russian partnership could be defined in terms of common strategic interest (perceived primarily as state interest), common political vision (of sovereignty, non-interference, multipolarity, justice and democracy in international relations), economic complementarity, and mutual reliance in the security sphere. Political analyst Zhang Shimin regarded Sino-Russian cooperation in the security sphere as one of the key driving forces of their strategic partnership. He posited that Russia needed China to gain more weight in the former's relationship with the U.S., whereas China needed Russia as an important destination of its "go out" strategy, let alone the significance of Moscow's support in Beijing's opposition to the American hegemony.<sup>32</sup>

Strategic competition between China and the U.S. in East Asia and the clash between Russia and the West over Ukraine have produced a situation of an unprecedented western pressure on Russia by means of sanctions, and on China by further pursuing the policy of rebalancing in the Asia-Pacific. This American policy of estrangement of Russia and "smart pushback" against China have predictably resulted in the speedy development of a "new type of strategic partnership" between the two major Eurasian powers determined to expand cooperation, in Xi Jinping's words, "no matter what changes occur in the world." Moscow and Beijing have become more articulate about their intent to challenge the existing US-dominated world order in a coordinated practical way. In the 2013 East Asia Summit, China and Russia formally proposed the initiative of establishing security and cooperation architecture in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>33</sup> Recent commitments of Russia and China on financial and investment cooperation within the BRICS format have been aimed to challenge the West. Since the Asia-Pacific summits in Beijing and Naypyitaw in November 2014 the Russian leadership voiced its support of the major Chinese initiatives in the sphere of trade liberalization in the Asia Pacific and also on the creation of a regional comprehensive security architecture. Russia has made a series of unprecedented measures

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<sup>32</sup> "Realism and Practical Sino-Russian Relations," (张世明, 现实主义与现实中的中俄关系), *Journal of Fuyang Teachers College*, Vol. 103, No. 1 (2005), pp. 112-113.

<sup>33</sup> Liu Qing-cai; Zhao Xuan, "Strategic Thought about Sino-Russian Promotion of the Establishment of Asia-Pacific Regional Security and Cooperation Architecture" (刘清才; 赵轩, 中俄推动建立亚太地区安全与合作架构的战略思考), *Northeast Asia Forum* (东北亚论坛), No.3 (113) (2014), pp. 32-41.

– in natural gas deals between Gazprom and CNPC in particular – to strengthen its role as an indispensable energy partner and one of the largest fossil fuels suppliers to China.

So at the moment Sino-Russian strategic closeness based on their willingness to consider one another's national interests helps to create the mechanism of conflict aversion and build "great power relations of a new type," which would determine the parameters of a new security and economic order. The case of Ukraine is seen in Beijing and Moscow as a qualitatively new stage in the evolution of the western expansionist great powers, which are turning to a new strategy of destructive hybrid wars against the potential adversaries of the consolidated West. Over the last decade, America's "visionary leadership" which sought to utilize the factors of global economic interdependence, financial globalization, the formation of a global normative consensus, the emergence of "networked communities" and nonstate actors, reflected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft diplomacy – these developments have become a matter of a great concern in both China and Russia. It is the defensive imperative against the unified West that drives the "new stage" of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership. And what makes the two nations closer is the shared perspective of the two countries security threats and their core national interests in the changing global and regional international order.

It is important to acknowledge that, contrary to the multiple speculations regarding the temporary or 'unhealthy' character of ties between Beijing and Moscow,<sup>34</sup> the two parties since 2012 have upgraded their relationship to meet their strategic interests and secure their equal voice with the West in international affairs. External factors are not likely to make this process reversible, the relationship is self-sustainable and based on the proximity of the two political regimes concerned about their domestic performance and political legitimacy.

Beijing and Moscow both seek to reshuffle the international order and set new rules of global governance and secure international stability.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese-Russian joint mission of maintaining the international order and promoting global peace and development, was placed at the center of Xi Jinping's seminal article "Remember History, Open Up the Future" published in

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<sup>34</sup> See, for example, the event at the Brookings Institution: "Is the United States Losing China to Russia?" July 26, 2016 <https://www.brookings.edu/events/is-the-united-states-losing-china-to-russia/>

<sup>35</sup> This may be considered as a tectonic shift in bilateral relations since 2010-12 when President Putin refused to participate in the China-US 'battle for leadership' and expressed no enthusiasm about the uplifting CICA as a key regional security mechanism without the U.S. In numerous multilateral security gatherings China ignored Russia's initiatives in the sphere of regional security, even originally coordinated with China (such as Russia-sponsored Action plan for Asia or broader integration initiatives at the APEC summit in Vladivostok in 2012).

a Russian government-affiliated newspaper Rossiyskaya Gazeta in May 2015, prior to celebration of the victory of China and Russia in World War II.<sup>36</sup> In summer 2016 Beijing and Moscow set forth a number of bilateral and global order-forming initiatives that attained new meaning to Russo-Chinese strategic coordination: in addition to some traditional statements about respect of state sovereignty, international law, and the UN-based system of global governance, there was. Firstly, the declarations stated that both China and Russia would regard their policy of balancing against the U.S. as a positive measure to maintain global balance of power and deter expansionism and aggression. Secondly, these documents offered a new reading of ‘strategic stability’, which went beyond the notion of nuclear stability and now involved the use of conventional forces, the principles of uses of force, and also required an adequate ‘political behavior’ in the global arena.<sup>37</sup>

In Sino-Russian partnership a special emphasis is placed on the issues of strategic security and deterrence. Since the outbreak of the Ukraine crisis Moscow has persistently criticized the outdated system of traditional ‘hub-and-spoke’ alliances in Asia. In many international venues the two countries appeared to be adamant about ‘bloc mentality’ as a rudiment of the Cold War era irrelevant in the age of globalization and interdependence.<sup>38</sup> Speaking of specific Russo-Chinese efforts, Vladimir Putin stated in 2015 that Russia and China “would never build relations that may antagonize others,” “alliances ‘against’ somebody.” The Russian president clarified that Russia and China were “in the process of building an alliance "for" safeguarding our national interests.”<sup>39</sup> Both countries speak a lot about the role of collective effort—including the U.S.—to address global challenges, while considering ‘hard power’ balancing as an element of stability. In one of his interviews to the European media in 2015 President Putin drew attention to the realist principle

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<sup>36</sup> Rossiyskaya Gazeta, May 6, 2015 <https://rg.ru/2015/05/06/knr-site.html> See also: “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs Holds Briefing for Chinese and Foreign Media on President Xi Jinping's Attendance of Celebrations Marking 70th Anniversary of Russia's Victory in Great Patriotic War and His Visit to Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus,” May 4, 2015, Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website, [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1261234.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1261234.shtml)

<sup>37</sup> During Russian President Putin’s visit to Beijing on June 25, 2016 the packet of joint declarations on the international order and global strategic stability was signed by the leaders of the two countries. These documents included: Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Joint declaration on the strengthening of global strategic stability, and a joint declaration on cooperation in the development of the information space. See: “Press statements following Russian-Chinese talks,” The Official Web Site of the President of the Russian Federation, June 25, 2016, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/52273> ; See also: “China, Russia sign joint statement on strengthening global strategic stability,” Xinhua News Online, June 26, 2016

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Vladimir Putin’s Address at the plenary meeting of the 70th session of the UN General Assembly in New York, September 28, 2015 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>

<sup>39</sup> “Russia, China do not create military blocs — Putin,” TASS News Agency, June 19, 2015, <http://tass.com/russia/802428>

of strategic stability and the role of Russia's military buildup. Putin categorically stated that Russia was doing it for itself to ensure his country's security, and it also doing it "for the rest of the world, because this strategic stability ensures the balance of power."<sup>40</sup>

In this context Russo-Chinese defense coordination and military cooperation has gained new momentum. Russia has upgraded its previous model of defense industry cooperation with China. This cooperation has ceased to be a 'one way street' when Russia provided China with defense equipment and technology in exchange of Chinese cash.

Three major developments could be observed in the recent years. The first one is the growing role of the Russian companies as subcontractors in the Chinese defense industry R&D and production projects. A good example of such cooperation is the agreement on cooperation on advanced heavy helicopter project signed during the Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to China in June 2016. According to this agreement Russia will help to design and supply a number of subsystems (including the engines) for the Chinese heavy helicopter which will be assembled to China and for the Chinese market. The second one is the start of major joint projects including joint large body civilian aircraft which is supposed to be produced jointly for the markets of the two countries. The third one is the start of significant imports of the major Chinese components for the Russian platforms and systems. During President Putin's visit to China in June 2016 an agreement on large scale procurement of the Chinese electronic components for the Russian space satellites was signed. This practice can be expanded to the new areas, including UAV technology, marine gas turbines etc.

There is a more nuanced and coordinated policy aimed at blocking US anti-missile efforts regionally and globally. This includes potential alliance in space reconnaissance technologies and weapons, and probably joint effort to offset these new US developments. In a special document issued by the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in January 2017 special focus was cast on significant progress in China-Russia military relations in the sphere of joint maritime drills, international military skill competitions, including the First Joint Computer-Enabled Anti-Missile Defense Exercise in 2016, and close coordination within the defense and security cooperation framework of the SCO.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> "Vladimir Putin's Interview to Swiss media," St Petersburg, July 27, 2015. Official Website of the President of the Russian Federation, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50066>

<sup>41</sup> "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, January 11, 2017 [http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1429771.shtml](http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1429771.shtml)

Both China and Russia share a critical view on U.S. global anti-missile system deployment plans, accusing Washington of damaging global and regional stability. The statements from Moscow and Beijing refer to U.S. deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) elements in South Korea, which, in the words of China's Maj. Gen. Cai Jun, is "not conducive to settling the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula and will seriously damage the national security interests of countries including China and Russia." His Russian counterpart Lt. Gen. Viktor Poznikhir, from Russian military's General Staff, reiterated a Sino-Russian proposal that related parties should conclude a treaty through negotiation on preventing the deployment of weapons in outer-space and preventing the use of or threatening to use weapons against outer-space objects.<sup>42</sup>

Meanwhile, in 2012-14 Moscow decided to upgrade significantly the level of sophistication of its arms sales to China. In 2016 China obtained the first elements of the advanced S-400 surface-to-air missile systems in 2016. Russian military expert Vassily Kashin believes that with its firing range of up to 400 km, Beijing's possession of these systems signifies a fundamental change in the rules of the game in Taiwan and the Senkaku Islands, two potential hot spots where China is involved.<sup>43</sup> Another Chinese acquisition – two dozen SU-35s fighter jets from Russia for \$2 billion also may have a considerable impact on regional security: experts estimate that even a single regiment of Su-35s may be enough to affect the balance of power in Taiwan. Being deployed in the reclaimed artificial islands in the South China Sea, those jets could employ their Irbis radar systems that can detect airborne targets at a range of up to 400 kilometers, which will improve Beijing's access denial capabilities.<sup>44</sup>

Russia's growing strategic importance vis-à-vis the U.S. is being appraised in China. In his recent book *China's Diplomacy* prominent Chinese foreign policy expert Wang Fan points to the importance of Russian-Chinese mutual strategic support.<sup>45</sup> Others refer to the role of the traditional Soviet "strategic triad" – inherited by Russia – which remains a significant component of Russian deterrence potential. In the 3rd International Army Games scheduled for on July 30 - August 9,

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<sup>42</sup> "China, Russia Criticize U.S. Missile Defense Plan," Xinhua News, October 11, 2016 [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-10/11/c\\_135746441.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-10/11/c_135746441.htm)

<sup>43</sup> Vasily Kashin, "Selling S-400s to China: A New Front in the Cold War?" The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Moscow Office, April 27, 2017 <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=59908>

<sup>44</sup> Vassily Kashin, "Why Is China Buying Russian Fighter Jets?" Carnegie Moscow center, September 2, 2016 <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=62701>

<sup>45</sup> Wang Fan. *Great Power Diplomacy* (王帆, 大国外交) (Beijing: Lianhe Publishers, 2016), pp. 264-268.

2017 and conducted in China's northeast, almost 40 Russian aircraft and helicopters will participate in Aviadarts competition as part of Aerospace Force Tactical Aviation Combat Training.<sup>46</sup> Among the Russian jets participating in the games a TU22M3 strategic bomber armed with X-34 1000-km-range anti-ship cruise missile draws special attention<sup>47</sup> in the context of China's new effort to develop its own strategic air force.<sup>48</sup>

Thus, Moscow and Beijing have set the foundation for the prospective military and defense cooperation – which might include joint operations, if political decision is being made. The two sides plan “enormous important events” said Chinese defense Minister Chang Wanquan introducing in Astana a roadmap for development in the military sphere between Russia and China in the years 2017-2020. “It is important that Russia and China are ready to defend the world with mutual efforts and strengthen international security,” Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu told the Interfax news agency at a meeting with his Chinese counterpart in Kazakhstan in June this year.<sup>49</sup> Some Russian experts believe that this would chill the heated heads of someone in the West who stand for the preservation of an unipolar world.<sup>50</sup>

Overall, in recent years, Russia has abandoned its previous role as a neutral onlooker of China's rise and accommodated the Chinese leadership. Commenting on the prospect of Moscow's alliance with China, Russian former foreign minister Igor Ivanov explains that China and Russia “enjoy flexibility in their decision making, avoid balancing against one another, promote their interaction in the form of new international regimes, favorable for both parties, develop multi-

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<sup>46</sup> “Over 30 aircraft to represent Russian aviation at Aviadarts competition in China,” TASS News Agency, May 17, 2017 <http://tass.com/defense/946377>

<sup>47</sup> Li Jie, “Russian Air Jets Stepping Afore,” (李杰：俄空军精锐尽出背后的玄机), Global Times Online (环球时报), May 23, 2017 <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2017-05/10715456.html>

<sup>48</sup> Michael S. Chase and Cristina Garafola, “China's Search for a “Strategic Air Force” The Jamestown Foundation China Brief, Volume: 15 Issue: 19, October 2, 2015, pp. 5-10. [http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/China\\_Brief\\_Vol\\_15\\_Issue\\_19\\_-\\_2.pdf](http://www.jamestown.org/uploads/media/China_Brief_Vol_15_Issue_19_-_2.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> “Russia and China Prepared a Military Cooperation Roadmap for the Period of 2017-2020,” (Россия и Китай подготовили дорожную карту военного сотрудничества на 2017-2020 годы), Interfax News Agency, June 7, 2017 <http://www.interfax.ru/world/565589>; see also: “Shoigu Proposed China to Fight Together,” (Шойгу предложил китайцам бороться вместе), Gazeta.ru online, June 7, 2017 <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/2017/06/07/10711685.shtml>

<sup>50</sup> “An Alliance Between the Russian and Chinese Armed Forces Will Chill Heated Heads in the West,” (Союз армий России и Китая остудят горячие головы на Западе), Russia Noah Ark Information Portal, June 9, 2017, <http://rnk-concept.ru/32006>

layered partnership, addressing simultaneously security and development issues.”<sup>51</sup> But clearly the two countries’ bilateral relationship has grown from the energy-based to a geopolitical one— driving China and Russia toward economic complementarity and potentially mutual security commitments. As one leading Russian expert noted, “the U.S. and the West underestimate rapprochement between Russia and China, hoping that China will be driven by its economic pragmatism.”<sup>52</sup> Yang Cheng, a professor at East China University has argued that the “possible decrease in Chinese-Russian economic cooperation in scale does not present a challenge to the countries’ coordination and cooperation at the strategic level”<sup>53</sup> This coordination has recently had significant implication on Russia’s stance toward the South China Sea disputes.

*The Black Sea! The South China Sea! The Prospect of Sino-Russian Cooperation in the South China Sea*

In his Russian media news conference on September 5 at the G20 summit in Hangzhou, Russian President Vladimir Putin openly supported the Chinese decision to ignore the Hague Arbitration Court ruling in the dispute between China and the Philippines, and stated that “interference by any power outside the region” would “hurt the resolution of these issues” and be “detrimental and counterproductive.”<sup>54</sup> Moscow’s growing arms supplies to China in 2016-18 – which include the above-mentioned 24 Su-35 Flanker-E fighters and four battalions of S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems, among the others, will have far-reaching implications for the security balance in the disputed maritime areas. Much was written about the unprecedented Russo-Chinese naval drills “Joint Sea 2016” held on September 11-19, 2016 in the SCS area<sup>55</sup> which assured observers of Moscow’s new position toward the conflict.<sup>56</sup> In the Chinese media many saw

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<sup>51</sup> Conference “Russia and China: new partnership in a Changing World,” (Конференция «Россия и Китай: новое партнерство в меняющемся мире»), Lenta.ru May 29, 2015 <https://lenta.ru/video/2015/05/29/russiachina/>

<sup>52</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “West’s Antics Pushing Russia Closer to China,” China Daily Online, September 12, 2014 [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-09/12/content\\_18586033.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-09/12/content_18586033.htm)

<sup>53</sup> Yang Cheng, “China and Russia: An Economic Component,” The Valdai Club, September 21, 2015 <http://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/ChinaandRussiaAnEconomicComponent/>

<sup>54</sup> “Vladimir Putin Answered Russian Journalists’ Questions Following His Working Visit to China to Take Part in the G20,” September 5, 2016 <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52834>

<sup>55</sup> Damien Sharkov, “Russia and China Launch Navy Drill in South China Sea,” Newsweek, September 13, 2016 <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-and-china-launch-navy-drill-south-china-sea-497804>

<sup>56</sup> Chris Buckley, “Russia to Join China in Naval Exercise in Disputed South China Sea,” The New York Times, July 29, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/world/asia/russia-china-south-china-sea-naval-exercise.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/29/world/asia/russia-china-south-china-sea-naval-exercise.html?_r=1)

parallelism in China's support of Russia in the Black Sea and Russia's support of China in the strategic conundrum in the South China Sea.<sup>57</sup> The Russian and Chinese leaders believe that strengthening the two countries' naval capability and interoperability would contribute to peace and stability. The new Russo-Chinese cohesiveness forms a new strategic reality in the region and reflects Russia's changing attitudes toward the matter.

Both the Soviet government and the post-Soviet leadership of Russia have been pursuing the policy of non-interference in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. Driven by predominantly pragmatic interests in the region, Moscow has been generally satisfied with the regional status quo admitting the role of the 2002 Declaration on the Conduct of the Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), standing against any meddling by nations other than the claimant countries in the South China Sea territorial dispute, and advocating for the freedom of navigation principle as a prerequisite for the solution of the disputes.<sup>58</sup>

Prior to the breakup of Russia's relations with the West over Ukraine in early 2014 Moscow's interest in Asia lied predominantly in fostering economic cooperation with all actors which could reciprocate. Russia's successful integration with the broader Pacific region required stability between the two major great powers, namely the U.S. and China, which would enable Moscow to balance and avert conflicts. To prevent the formation of a new bipolarity Moscow tried to stay away from the contest for regional leadership, and instead promoted the concept of the major powers' "collective leadership," multilateral conflict management, and inclusive integration.

In its attempt to assume a role of a third party balancer, Moscow significantly improved in 2008-2014 its relationship with the Southeast Asian nations and actively supported the formation of an institutionalized security mechanism in the Asia-Pacific with the East Asia Summit (EAS) at the center, considered by the Kremlin as instrumental for maintaining stability, managing conflicts and promoting stronger "connectivity" in the Asia-Pacific. In that period Russia's stance on the issue of "internationalization" of the SCS disputes did imply some tacit support of collective arrangements or even outside facilitators within the existing multilateral institutions that would

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<sup>57</sup> "The Black Sea! The South China Sea! Hidden Meaning of Sino-Russian Continuous Naval Drills Over the Recent Two Years," (黑海! 南海! 中俄连续两年海上联演地点藏深意), September 14, 2016 <http://www.rsdmc.com/zgjs/20160914/364786.html>

<sup>58</sup> Roy C. Mabasa, "Russia Against Meddling," The Manila Bulletin, May 20, 2012, <http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/360014/russia-against-meddling#.UIRTUcXR6fg> .

strengthen ASEAN's consolidated position in its negotiations with Beijing with some elements of impartial international mediation and arbitration.<sup>59</sup>

One leading Russian expert on Asia at that time unambiguously pointed to the fact that, since China's sovereignty claims expanded over the 80 percent of the SCS, Beijing's declarations of its support of freedom of navigation in the area would mean that "from now on freedom of navigation would be secured by China, rather than formal legal norms shared by all." This expert also warned the Kremlin that Russia should never recognize China's nine-dashed line, remain consistent in its partnership with Vietnam, and even stimulate the formation of a political alliance between Vietnam and China.<sup>60</sup> In the beginning of 2013 Russia's ambassador to China Sergey Razov tried to dissolve the Kremlin's ambiguity stating that "the lifting of bilateral disputes to collective, international, or regional level would not bring about appropriate solutions."<sup>61</sup> Moscow's pragmatism and "balancing" behavior raised suspicions in the Chinese expert community: some observers accused the Russians of getting benefits from US-China rivalry and maximizing its gains in the era of geopolitical uncertainty.<sup>62</sup>

Since the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and Moscow's split with the West, Moscow's position toward the SCS disputes have increasingly become more articulated and sympathetic of China.

Firstly, Russia's top governmental officials, while avoiding their open recognition of China's historical rights in the South China Sea, formally supported China's right to ignore the

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<sup>59</sup> For example, in May 2012 Russian ambassador in the Philippines Nikolay Kudashev publicly acknowledged that Russia was "not indifferent" to the situation which could have been addressed without any "meddling by nations other than the claimant countries in the South China Sea territorial dispute," specifically referring to the United States. As a matter of balancing however, Kudashev proposed that it was okay for "outsiders" like the United States, Russia and other European nations to provide assistance to claimant countries when asked. He went further saying that both Russia and the U.S. were "concerned about freedom of navigation in the sea," which, as he believed, would be one of the aspects of a solution to the larger problem of the South China Sea." Nikolay Kudashev's remarks may be found here: "Russia Denounces Meddling from 'Outsiders' in South China Sea," May 22, 2012 <http://bbs.english.sina.com/viewthread.php?tid=82826>

<sup>60</sup> Dmitry Mosyakov, "Falling Short from Foul Play: China's Policy in the South China Sea," (Дмитрий Мосяков, На грани фола: политика Китая в Южно-Китайском Море), Security Index (Индекс Безопасности), Moscow, Vol. 19, No. 4(107), (Winter 2013), pp. 58; 67 <http://www.pircenter.org/articles/1593-na-grani-fola-politika-kitaya-v-yuzhnokitajskom-more>

<sup>61</sup> Russian Ambassador to China Sergey Razov's Interview to the "Russian Newspaper" (Interview Интервью Чрезвычайного и Полномочного Посла России в КНР С.С.Разова, опубликованное в «Российской газете»), February 1, 2013 [http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/124698](http://www.mid.ru/web/guest/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/124698)

<sup>62</sup> Kang Lin, "Russia Benefits from the South China Sea Disputes," (康霖: 俄罗斯是南海争端的获益者), Global Times ( 环球时报), August 6, 2012, <http://opinion.huanqiu.com/1152/2012-08/2990668.html>

Hague arbitration July 12 verdict as illegitimate due to the one-sided claim by the Philippines and the court's insufficient jurisdiction to judge on territorial disputes of sovereign states.

Secondly, on the disputes "internationalization" issue, the Kremlin no longer attempts to stimulate a multilateral dialogue among the claimant states, trying to dissuade the U.S. from interfering and utilizing anti-China sentiments for militarization of the dispute. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov stated in April 2016 that in the situation over the disputed isles in the South China Sea "all parties involved into the disputes should follow the principles of non-use of force and find political-diplomatic solutions acceptable for all the claimants of disputed territories." While formally supporting neither side in the disputes Russia obviously backs Beijing which opposes internationalization of the issue.<sup>63</sup> The current Russian ambassador to China Andrey Denisov also echoed Lavrov's words explaining that a new standoff in the SCS was incited artificially due to the interference of non-regional actors in conflict settlement.<sup>64</sup>

Thirdly, Moscow no longer believes that freedom of navigation may only be secured by neutrality of all the claimants and simply abiding of all parties to the international law. It is now China that is seen by the Russian government as a real guarantor of freedom of navigation. As ambassador Denisov stated, China "is more than anyone else interested in freedom of navigation in the area without any complicating circumstances."<sup>65</sup> It is noteworthy that this position corresponds to China's self-declared role of a responsible great power which intends to apply legal procedures and negotiations in conflict settlement, avoiding forceful measures.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Interview of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to the Mongolian, Japanese and Chinese Media Prior to His Visit to These Countries" (Интервью Министра иностранных дел России С.В.Лаврова СМИ Монголии, Японии и КНР в преддверии визитов в эти страны), Moscow, April 12, 2016

[http://www.mid.ru/press\\_service/minister\\_speeches/-/asset\\_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2227965](http://www.mid.ru/press_service/minister_speeches/-/asset_publisher/7OvQR5KJWVmR/content/id/2227965)

<sup>64</sup> An Interview of the Russian Ambassador to China A.I. Denisov to Russian News Agencies 'Russia Today' and TASS (Интервью Посла России в КНР А.И.Денисова информагентствам «Россия сегодня» и ТАСС), June 21, 2016 [http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2327002](http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2327002)

<sup>65</sup> An Interview of the Russian Ambassador to China A.I. Denisov to Russian News Agencies 'Russia Today' and TASS (Интервью Посла России в КНР А.И.Денисова информагентствам «Россия сегодня» и ТАСС), June 21, 2016 [http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn/-/asset\\_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2327002](http://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/2327002)

<sup>66</sup> Chinese Defense Ministry: The Day the US Fleet Stops Provoking would Be the Moment of Stability and Peace in the South China Sea, (中国国防部：美军舰机停止挑衅之日就是南海稳定和平之时), July 8, 2016, China Radio International (CRI) Online, <http://mil.cri.cn/20160708/be80fa29-e806-9b66-e9a9-c75e9eac6cc1.html>

These statements have been widely publicized by the official media in China showing Russia's enhanced support of China's position in the territorial disputes with its neighbors.<sup>67</sup> Speculations about Moscow as a new ally of China in its multiple maritime disputes have gone so far that the Russian side had to officially dismiss all allegations of Moscow's changing position toward this sensitive issue. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova had to remind the international community in July that Russia "had never been a participant of the South China Sea disputes" and "would not be involved into them." Zakharova reiterated Moscow's position of non-taking sides and non-interference in the negotiations between the parties involved into the conflict, calling for a non-violent diplomatic solution of the issue.<sup>68</sup>

Zakharova's comments came out in the midst of the heated debates in the West about the character and purpose of the China-Russia naval exercise in the South China Sea in September. Lack of information about the concrete area for joint maneuvers and Russia's assurances fueled observers interest toward the "Joint Sea 2016" but did not cause much concern about China's and Russia's behavior. One key U.S. China analyst Bonnie Glaser was confident that the maneuvers would not necessarily become "a departure from what has so far been a pattern of relative restraint."<sup>69</sup> While being novel operationally, the proceeding of the drills demonstrated accuracy of this assessment. However, the drills opened a new chapter in Russian-Chinese naval interoperability, demonstrating the character of Moscow-Beijing's defense cooperation.

Most of the Russian naval commanders considered the Joint Sea-2016 as simply positive cooperation experience,<sup>70</sup> some experts in Moscow believed that Moscow's consent to hold the drills in the sensitive maritime zone of the South China Sea would be the "entrapment" of Russia. Military analyst Alexander Khranchihin warned the Russian government against the

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<sup>67</sup> "From Beijing with Love: Sergey Lavrov is assured that the relations with China has never been so good" (Из Пекина с любовью. Сергей Лавров убедился, что отношения с КНР хороши, как никогда). Lenta.ru April 30, 2016, <https://lenta.ru/articles/2016/04/30/beijjingcalling/>

<sup>68</sup> Russia Refuses to Be Involved into the South China Sea Disputes (Россия отказалась втягиваться в спор за Южно-Китайское море), Lenta.ru July 14, 2016 [https://lenta.ru/news/2016/07/14/without\\_us\\_please/](https://lenta.ru/news/2016/07/14/without_us_please/)

<sup>69</sup> Chris Buckley. Op. Cit.

<sup>70</sup> The Russian Navy's deputy commander Vice-Admiral Alexander Fedotenkov appraised annual change of combat conditions as being positive for "gaining experience." "Joint Sea-2016: the Chronology and Major Stages of the Joint Russian-Chinese Exercises," Russian Defense Ministry, September 20, 2016 <https://defence.ru/military-exercise/morskoe-vzaimodeistvie-2016-khronika-sobitii-i-epizodov-rossiisko-kitaiskikh-uchenii/>

establishment of a permanent naval operational group with China, which, in his view, would substantially enhance China's naval capability and further sharpen Moscow's relations with Washington.<sup>71</sup> Alexey Maslov from the Russian Higher School of Economics pointed to the intensity and scope of Sino-US military cooperation which reduces risks of open confrontation, so, he believed that Russia's goal in this exercise was to demonstrate that Moscow has some military allies in the era of Western pressure. Franz-Stefan Gady considered the "Joint Sea-2016" a kind of symbolic gesture, he believed that the major rationale behind the joint drills was "political rather than practical and is meant to emphasize the burgeoning security partnership between the two countries."<sup>72</sup> Japanese observer Yu Koizumi believed that, while stressing its close ties with China, Russia tried to keep distance from territorial problems, and the Kremlin's rhetoric by no means expresses Russia's full support of China in the South China Sea issue.<sup>73</sup>

What was the real *significance of the maneuvers* for both Russo-Chinese strategic cooperation and the changing security environment in the Asia-Pacific region? Western experts today contend that these maneuvers indeed have far-reaching implications for Russo-Chinese military alliance.<sup>74</sup>

First of all, the 2016 naval drills in the South China Sea appeared to be the most sophisticated and multi-dimensional since the partners started joint naval exercises in 2012. The "Joint Sea-2016" may be considered as a sign of the growing intimacy of the two countries' military forces. At first glance, both Russia and China conducted their drills in a less contentious site, refraining from holding their exercise in the southern part of the South China Sea, close to the Spratly islands, which would raise unprecedented controversy and increase tensions in the area. Territorially the "Joint Sea-2016" was unfolded near the city of Zhanjiang, located in southern Guangzhou province and north of the South China Sea's Hainan Island, where China's main

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<sup>71</sup> Anton Mardasov, "In the Wake of a Crafty Dragon," (В кильватере коварного дракона), Svobodnaya Pressa Online, July 29, 2016, <http://svpressa.ru/war21/article/153424/>

<sup>72</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "Are China and Russia Holding Joint Military Drills in the South China Sea?" The Diplomat Online, July 7, 2016 <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/are-china-and-russia-holding-joint-military-drills-in-the-south-china-sea/>

<sup>73</sup> Yu Koizumi, "Why were the Sino-Russian Maneuvers held in the South China Sea Area?" (小泉悠, 中露合同演習はなぜ南シナ海で行われたのか) Wedge Report, September 27, 2016 <http://wedge.ismedia.jp/articles/-/7837>

<sup>74</sup> Damien Sharkov, "Russia and China Plan 'Enormous' Military Events and Cooperation After Successful South China Sea Drill," Newsweek, June 7, 2017 <http://www.newsweek.com/russia-china-military-cooperation-enormous-drills-south-china-sea-622267>

regional military base is located.<sup>75</sup> However, even with a limited size of the joint fleet, the Chinese and Russian navies have gone beyond the standard feature of the two countries' maneuvers which combined search and rescue operations, amphibious missions and airborne landings, undertaking an 'island-seizing' exercise, with an upgraded level of interoperability and the improved the quality of exercises. Abhijit Singh believes that the trajectory of recent maritime interactions suggests that the partnership is beginning to outgrow the original template of military cooperation.<sup>76</sup> Chinese Navy spokesperson Liang Yang explained that this time the drills were realistic, with the unprecedented involvement of information technologies, standardization, and the unified and more practical command and control procedures.<sup>77</sup> Much attention was devoted to landing operations (on Dashu island) and the more sophisticated anti-submarine operations, engaging early warning helicopters (Ka-27PL and Z-9C), JH-7A aircraft, Chinese destroyer Guangzhou, guided-missile frigates Huangshan, Sanya and Daqing, and the Russian technologically advanced anti-submarine destroyer Admiral Tributs.<sup>78</sup> More importantly, the two navies successfully conducted joint combat and maneuvering operations within the joint tactical naval and anti-missile group, as well as joint targeting and joint target coordination.<sup>79</sup>

Another significant aspect of the "Joint Sea-2016" maneuvers was related with the above-mentioned Russo-Chinese changing strategic worldview, which was utterly confrontational to the current U.S. global behavior. The Kremlin increasingly looked into its activities in the South China Sea as part of a worldwide "struggle for peace" by means of power balancing with the hegemonic U.S. Russia's and China's strategic capacity to deter the U.S. by military means became the major guarantee of global peace and stability. Hence, both Russia and China were determined to protect

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<sup>75</sup> Bill Gertz, "Counter-Pivot: China, Russia Hold Massive South China Sea War Games," Asia Times Online, September 20, 2016 <http://atimes.com/2016/09/counter-pivot-china-russia-hold-large-scale-s-china-sea-war-games/>

<sup>76</sup> Abhijit Singh, "Why Russia and China's Combat Drills in the South China Sea Matter," The National Interest, September 16, 2016 <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/why-russia-chinas-combat-drills-the-south-china-sea-matter-17729?page=show>

<sup>77</sup> "China and Russia Have Started Largest in Scope Joint Naval Drills," (Китай и Россия начали самые масштабные в истории совместные военно-морские учения), Geopolitika.info September 13, 2016 <http://geo-politica.info/kitay-i-rossiya-nachali-samyie-masshtabnye-v-istorii-sovmestnye-voenno-morskie-ucheniya.html>

<sup>78</sup> Bill Gertz. Op. Cit

<sup>79</sup> "Joint Sea-2016: the Chronology and Major Stages of the Joint Russian-Chinese Exercises." Op. Cit.

their respective zones of strategic interests. As Aaron Austin contends, China is clearly intent on developing the largest military and maritime law enforcement force in the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>80</sup>

So, it is not primarily access to natural resources or commercial transportation routes in the disputed waters of the South China Sea that determine China's strategy. Looking at the vulnerable condition of the southern elements of its nuclear defense system, Beijing increasingly enhances its own military control capability in the area. China is actively considering a South China Sea Air Defense Interception Zone (ADIZ) and, until the past year's improvement of the relationship with the Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was blocking the Philippine's access to the waters near Scarborough Shoals. There were also reports that China is considering the deployment of floating nuclear power plants to the South China Sea to provide power to offshore platforms.<sup>81</sup> Beijing regards these waters as a corridor for its growing nuclear submarine fleet harbored in the Yulin naval base on the Hainan island. The development of the military infrastructure on the disputed rocks in the Paracels and Spratly area is considered in China as part of its ambitious plan to set up a series of protected outposts along the ways of China's nuclear submarines patrolling in the Western Pacific.<sup>82</sup>

In this context, China's claims in the South China Sea may be compared to the strategic role of the Crimea for securing Russia's military control over the Black Sea and the protection of Russia's vital strategic nuclear defense infrastructure. Chinese analysts speculate a lot about the lessons learned by China from Russia's successful strategy in the Black Sea – given the security significance of the Crimea peninsula and the Black sea littoral area for Russia's nuclear deterrence.<sup>83</sup> As Abhijit Singh suggests, the nautical synergy also reveals an enduring correlation between geopolitics and maritime strategy. The Sino–Russian maritime relationship seems driven by political motivations and a desire to jointly counter US military pressure.<sup>84</sup> Some leading military experts in Russia also regard China's military assertiveness in the Pacific as beneficial for

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<sup>80</sup> Aaron Austin, "China's Subtle Strategy in the South China Sea," The United States Institute of Peace Peace Brief, No. 154, July 24, 2013 <http://www.usip.org/publications/china-s-subtle-strategy-in-the-south-china-sea>

<sup>81</sup> Mark E. Rosen, "China Has Much to Gain from the South China Sea Ruling," The Diplomat, July 18, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/07/china-has-much-to-gain-from-the-south-china-sea-ruling/>

<sup>82</sup> "Hot Summer of 2016: Is the War in the South China Sea Possible and What the PLA is Getting Ready For," (Жаркое лето 2016-го: возможна ли война в Южно-Китайском море и к чему готовится китайская армия), South China Insight, Hong Kong, July 25, 2016 <https://www.south-insight.com/node/218369>

<sup>83</sup> Russia's Black Sea Strategy's Lessons for China's SCS Strategy," (俄国黑海战略对中国南海战略的启示), March 18, 2016 <http://blog.ifeng.com/article/44247910.html>

<sup>84</sup> Abhijit Singh. Op. Cit.

Russia's own national security.<sup>85</sup> America's attempts to develop "new approaches to counter coercion in the East and South China Seas"<sup>86</sup> presented in the recently published CSIS's report titled 'Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia: The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence'<sup>87</sup>, has been criticized by Russia's top military experts who assert that "as far as the recommendations on 'countering the Chinese strategy of coercion' go, the report seems to be quite severely detached from reality."<sup>88</sup>

There are also proposals in the Russian expert community to form a permanent Russo-Chinese joint naval operational group enhanced by Russia's Tu22M3 strategic bombers to deter the U.S.-Japanese naval coalition forces in the region.<sup>89</sup> Dmitry Novikov from Russia's Higher School of Economics, believes that by supporting China Russia will contribute to the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific to eventually stabilize the region.<sup>90</sup>

### **Concluding remarks:**

In the complex regional security environment China over the last years have successfully developed its comprehensive Eurasian strategy aimed at the formation of a Sino-Russian quasi-alliance which is grounded on a solid political foundation and cemented by a newly formed

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<sup>85</sup> Viktor Litovkin holds that "the construction of Chinese military infrastructure will provide Russia with protection in the area against U.S. Navy ships and the Aegis system and SM-3 and Tomahawk missiles." Victor Litovkin, "Russia Could Gain from Backing China in South China Sea Disputes," Russia Beyond the Headlines, September 8, 2016 [http://rbth.com/international/2016/09/08/russia-could-gain-from-backing-china-in-south-china-sea-disputes-experts\\_628057](http://rbth.com/international/2016/09/08/russia-could-gain-from-backing-china-in-south-china-sea-disputes-experts_628057)

<sup>86</sup> Michael J. Green, Kathleen Hicks, Zack Cooper, John Schaus, Jake Douglas, "Countering Coercion in Maritime Asia The Theory and Practice of Gray Zone Deterrence," CSIS Report: CSIS/Rowman & Littlefield, Washington, DC, May 9, 2017 <https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia> The report refers to Chinese 'gray zone' coercion which threatens to destabilize the region by undermining the rules-based order and increases the risk of conflict. The authors of the report are critical of US policymakers who seem to be "unable to deter coercive actions or to articulate a coherent gray zone strategy" and "to protect U.S. interests, to integrate China into the international order, and to maintain existing alliance commitments."

<sup>87</sup> See Michael Green et al. –authored report available here: <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/countering-coercion-maritime-asia>> The report describes the most notable crises and incidents in Asia involving China in recent years, including China's attempt to stop operations of a US intelligence ship in the South China Sea in 2009, and also the crises around the Senkaku/Diaoyudao Islands and the South China Sea isles and reefs in 2010 and 2012, and the Chinese islands reclamation policies in the South China Sea beginning in 2013.

<sup>88</sup> "China Has Achieved Irreversible Shift in Balance of Power in South China Sea," Sputnik News Online, May 12, 2017 <https://sputniknews.com/politics/201705121053562544-china-us-asia-strategy/>

<sup>89</sup> Russian military analyst Konstantin Sivkov represents this position. See: Anton Mardasov. Op. Cit.

<sup>90</sup> Неравнобедренный треугольник. Цели и возможности России в отношении китайско-американского дуэта. Russia in Global Affairs, Russian edition. June 7, 2015, <http://www.globalaffairs.ru/number/Neravnobedrennyi-treugolnik-17499>

ideological and security-based alliance between the two countries. Both issues of domestic legitimacy of the two authoritarian regimes and also global order-forming perceptions justify such an alliance. The shared Sino-Russian views on the globalization of sovereignty, the role and the notion of the “international community,” the principles of the international law and global normative consensus lie at the center of this political and ideological congruency of the two countries.

China’s geopolitical game in Eurasia and its ability to utilize global tensions to obtain important strategic resources enabled Beijing to ease US pressure in the maritime area and even induce a significant geopolitical shift in the greater East Asian region by creating the danger of a bipolar challenge to U.S. supremacy and the existing U.S.-led security architecture in Asia. The result of an ongoing strategic rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow has been apparently seen in Russia’s changing position toward China’s key security and core interest issues including conflicts in the South China Sea. In the context of an upgraded strategic cooperation between China and Russia louder voices are heard in Moscow showing Russia’s support of Beijing’s political position on the questions of international law and arbitration, freedom of navigation, and internationalization of dispute settlement.

Beyond the multiple statements on the official level reiterating Russia’s “neutrality” and non-involvement in the territorial disputes, Moscow’s more articulated and nuanced position toward internationalization of dispute settlement and the freedom of navigation problem demonstrate that Russia’s participation in China’s activities in the disputed areas add more than just a symbolic support to Beijing’s policies. Russia’s changed rhetoric and practical actions, along with the increased sales of advanced weapons to China, should be regarded as a manifestation of the strategic congruency of Chinese and Russian visions of the evolving global order which increasingly depends on the reanimated geopolitical factors. The relationship with the U.S. is regarded by the Chinese and Russian leaders as systemic confrontation, which pushes the two Eurasian giants into the policy of hard and soft balancing. Beijing has learned the Crimea lesson: the real battle for sovereignty requires direct military control and constant upgrade of China’s defense capability. Being alienated by the West, Russia rises as an ideal ally in the uphill battle for regional and global leadership. Strategic security issues have moved to the center of this regional quasi-alliance, and one’s adequate understanding of Russia’s role in the rise of China as Asia’s dominant power helps to set the parameters of the Chinese version of a “Pacific Century.”