
What Is China to Us? Westernizers and Sinophiles in Russian Foreign Policy



Andrei Tsygankov

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Summary

As China's role in shaping the world grows, Russia is increasingly unable to resist its neighbor's economic and political influence. As a result, Russia's China discourse has evolved from the one dominated by Westernizers to one largely controlled by Sinophiles. The latter favor development of relations with China based on Russia's economic and security priorities. Although the official discourse remains focused on strengthening ties with Europe, the state is increasingly subject to pressures by various groups, both inside and outside state structures, with preferences for China. For the Western world, the prospect of the growing "Sinophilization" of Russia's foreign policy implies the need to strengthen ties with Russia, while preserving the existing level of strong relations with China.

Introduction

The events of the second half of 2008 have indicated that the post-cold war world is being replaced by a post-Western world, in which Russia and China are playing an increasingly important role. Among other developments, the Russia-Georgia war and the global financial crisis have undermined the West's ability to project its political and economic power across the globe. The October 2009 trip to Beijing by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin—even as United States (US) Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, was visiting Moscow—has again highlighted the increasingly close relations between the two nations, particularly in the area of energy cooperation. Having concluded an oil contract worth 100 billion US dollars in 2009, Moscow and Beijing are now negotiating an agreement that would make China the biggest consumer of Russian natural gas.¹ Although these developments may be viewed as vindicating their shared vision of an emerging multipolar world, China is in a stronger position than Russia to challenge the West's global preeminence. China has played an important role in establishing international coalitions outside the West—especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China)—and is emerging from the global financial crisis more strongly than other states.

This paper reviews the evolution of Russia's relations with its largest Asian neighbor since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Drawing on work by other scholars,² it summarizes important developments in Russia's perception of China and highlights its progressive growth in importance for Russia. Russia's political class no longer views the excessively pro-Western diplomacy of Andrey Kozyrev's tenure as Foreign Minister as a viable foreign policy course. On the policy level, the Russia-China bilateral relationship has obtained strategic dimensions in the areas of commerce and regional security, and the two have demonstrated an increased convergence in perceiving global priorities and proposing solutions to global problems. On the level of discourse, Westernizers, or supporters of Russia's increased engagement with the West have been replaced by Sinophiles, or advocates of increased ties with Russia's eastern neighbor even if this means the decline of relations with the West. At the same time, a considerable number of Russians are also wary of

¹ L. Kim, "Putin Travels to China to Expand \$100-Billion Energy Relations," Bloomberg, 12 October 2009, <www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=avtvp2DPg6ao>.

² G. Flikke and J. Wilhelmsen, *Central Asia: A Testing Ground for New Great Power Relations*, Oslo, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2008; B. Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, Washington DC, Brookings Institution, 2008; P. Rangsimaporn, *Russia as an Aspiring Great Power in East Asia: Perceptions and Policies from Yeltsin to Putin*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

China's growing power and influence and the potential implications for Russia's sovereignty and independence. At present, the observed Sinophilization of Russia's foreign policy is neither absolute nor irreversible, and pragmatic considerations of economic and political interests continue to prevail in Moscow's relations with Beijing over ideological considerations or common values.

China and the West in Russian Foreign Policy

Key Issues

Located between China and the West, Russia is faced with issues of regional and global significance. Those specific to Russia's relations with China include cross-border immigration and territorial disputes. Other issues—their view of the international system; security in Central Asia and on the Korean peninsula; and energy sources and their transit—are of a more global nature and allow for the greater involvement of Western actors. Over time Moscow has moved toward a more active Chinese agenda and sought to address the latter issues in the context of its relations with Beijing.

Russia and China have successfully resolved issues of cross-border immigration and territorial disputes within the framework of their bilateral relations. The two nations also have a largely compatible perspective on territorial integrity and have consistently denounced separatism within each other's territories, whether in Chechnya or Taiwan. Moscow and Beijing formally disagreed on the issue Russia's recognition of Georgia's breakaway territories, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Beijing refused to endorse Moscow's action out of concerns for its territorial integrity, particularly in the light of the Uighur activities in the largely Muslim province of Xinjiang. Informally, however, the Chinese supported Russia during the crisis in the Caucasus, and the issue has not complicated the two nations' relations. The Chinese media were on the whole sympathetic to Russia's position during the conflict. In addition, even after recognition, Chinese experts tended to support Russia's suspicion of NATO enlargement.³

Russia and China have also largely converged in their visions of an international system; they both see a multipolar world emerging. In April 1996, they first affirmed that they were entering into a new stage of partnership, and a year later the countries' leaders signed the "Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International

³ E. Wishnick, *Russia, China, and the United States in Central Asia*, Carlisle (PA), Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, February 2009, p. 41.

Order,” which reflected their vision of multipolarity as a work in progress. Subsequent Western military interventions—by NATO in Yugoslavia in 1999 and by the United States in Iraq in 2003—further consolidated convergence in Russia and China’s preferences for the international system. In addition, both have refused to support Western sanctions against Iran in response to its alleged nuclear weapons ambitions.

The two nations’ views of regional security issues are compatible as well, at least within the medium-term. In Central Asia, the Kremlin favors resolution of security problems through systematic coordination of state efforts, and not through use of force by ad hoc coalitions. It has developed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with China and four Central Asian states, to address threats from terrorism and the regional security vacuum. In East Asia, Moscow advocated a multilateral solution to the nuclear crisis with North Korea, and contributed considerably to creating the 6-party format in 2003 for dealing with it. In addition, Russian officials extended their support for unification of the two Koreas if it takes place in an orderly fashion and on the basis of inter-Korean dialogue.

Russia’s ties in Asia have been also growing in areas of arms and energy sales. With the West dismissing Russian armaments as inferior, China and India have emerged as Russia’s largest markets. Since 2001, Russia has also been interested in cooperation with China and other non-Western nations on energy and transportation projects. In May 2003, Chinese president Hu Jintao signed a twenty-five year oil supply agreement. However, it did not go forward until recently. The delay partly reflected Russian fears of China gaining control over parts of Siberia, but a recently signed oil deal with China worth 90 billion US dollars has demonstrated Moscow and Beijing’s ability to overcome their disagreements over prices, social conditions and transportation routes. In exchange for lending Russian oil companies 25 billion US dollars, Russia’s state oil company, Rosneft, has agreed to supply 15 million tons of oil to China over a period of twenty years.

More complicated is the issue of access to Central Asian energy reserves. Although Russia is the shortest transit route for exporting energy sources to Europe—the most profitably market—China is increasingly successful in projecting its economic influence and winning new contracts with the wealthiest states in the region: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Table 1 summarizes key issues in Russia-China relations and process of their resolution.

Table 1. Russia-China Relations: Issues and Solutions

Issue	Resolution Process
1. Border immigration	Treaty for Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation, 16 July 2001 and Protocols on border demarcation: 14 October 2004 and 21 July 2008.
2. Territorial disputes	Protocols on border demarcation: 14 October 2004 and 21 July 2008.
3. Separatism	Bilateral declarations of mutual support: 2001, 2004.
4. View of the international system	Bilateral declarations favoring multipolar world: 1997, 1999, 2005.
5. Security in Central Asia	SCO (China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan), established on 15 June 2001.
6. North Korea	Six-party talks (China, Japan, Russia, the US, North Korea, South Korea), since August 2003.
7. Russia's energy	Bilateral negotiations and long-terms contracts, the largest oil agreement 17 February 2009.
8. Central Asian energy	Unresolved (in competition).

The Evolution of Russia-China Relations

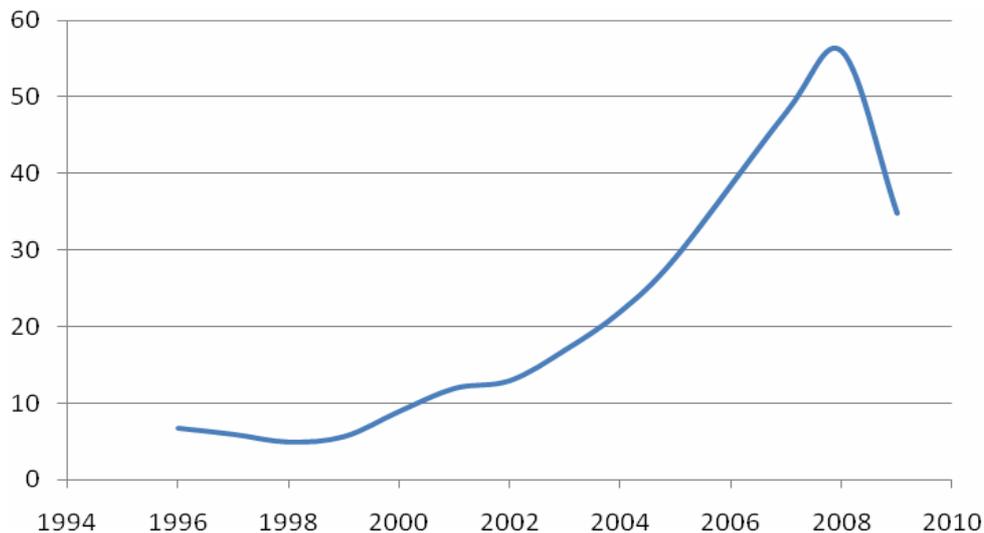
The gradual evolution of Russia-China relations is the result of cumulative progress in growing trade and policy convergence. The early post-Soviet period showed the Russian leadership's passivity in its Eastern policy. In February 1992 the border treaty with China was ratified by Russia's Supreme Soviet, but President Boris Yeltsin and Kozyrev remained wary of the nation, aware that it was anti-Western and critical of Russia's democratic development. Until late 1992, Russia's leaders and politicians avoided even meeting with Chinese officials. In March of the same year, Kozyrev traveled to China in an attempt to stimulate economic cooperation between the two states. However, the trip lasted only thirty hours, and the two sides disagreed over human rights issues, officially concluding that in Russia-China ties "elements of considerable agreement coexist with different approaches to some quite significant questions."⁴ Yeltsin's visit to

⁴ Ye. Bazhanov, "Russian Policy Toward China," in P. Sherman (ed.), *Russian Foreign Policy*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1995, p. 170.

China in December 1992 recovered some of the lost trade between the two countries, but did not principally change the situation.

In the mid-1990s Russia's geostrategic and economic ties outside the West increased, partly in response to pressures from the domestic opposition. The policy of Russia's second foreign minister, Yevgeni Primakov, aimed to improve Russia's relative power position in the world at the expense of Western nations—particularly the US—and reflected Primakov's vision of multipolarity as a desirable aim. In December 1998, Primakov even spoke of desirability of a Russia-China-India alliance as a "new pole in world politics." Developments in the last two years of the decade—US military strikes against Iraq, plans for the creation of US-Japan theater missile defense, NATO enlargement, and the bombing of Yugoslavia—again brought the two together to actively coordinate their responses to what they saw as threatening developments in world affairs.

Figure 1. Russia-China Trade Relations, 1996-2009 (bn. US dollars)



Sources: B. Lo and A. Rothman, "China and Russia: Common Interests, Contrasting Perceptions," *Asian Geopolitics*, CLCA Special Report, May 2006, p. 14; "FACTBOX—China-Russia Trade Relations," Reuters, 19 May 2008; "China Becomes Russia's Leading Trade Partner," Interfax, 17 June 2009.

*Data for 2009 are for the first quarter only.

Economic relations lagged behind, however. Although ties between the two countries improved in areas of cross-border trade and arms sales, overall commercial relations did not progress in any meaningful way. As Figure 1 indicates, real commercial improvements did not come until Russia's economic recovery around 2002. Russia's weakness and China's gravitation toward global economic markets complicated the realization of Moscow's geostrategic ambitions. The full-fledged strategic partnership of Russia and China therefore remained only a possibility, and Primakov's efforts to engage non-Western countries into strategic partnership with Russia for the purpose of balancing against the West could not work.

With the election of Vladimir Putin as Russia's president, the Russian economy began to recover, and relations with China initially reflected new priorities of normalization and modernization, rather than

developing strategic diplomatic alliances. While promoting weapons sales in Asia, Putin did not raise the issue of balancing the US or creating some new strategic “axis” to serve this purpose. Russia viewed itself as connected with Asia in an economically open region, in which it, due to its natural resource wealth, occupies an appropriately important role and reaps considerable economic and political benefits. Although its energy markets remained primarily in Europe and accounted for about 50 percent of foreign trade, Russia continued to aggressively promote itself as an energy pipeline hub connecting Asia, Europe and North America.

Under the presidencies of Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev, Russia continued to normalize political relations with China. In July 2001, Russia and China signed Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, a far-reaching strategic and economic cooperation agreement for twenty years. The two states have made use of the earlier established SCO to hold joint military and anti-terrorist exercises since 2002. During 2004-2005, they signed and ratified an agreement on the final demarcation of the eastern border settling the issue of disputed islands in the Amur River. At a later stage, in response to Russia’s growing rift with the West and geopolitical rivalries in the former Soviet region, great power balancing resurfaced as a priority in the Kremlin. Presenting itself as an energy superpower, Russia mobilized its ties outside the West. Since then, Russia and China have increasingly coordinated their political statements and military activities. In 2005, they signed a joint declaration on the 21st century world order and have since conducted a number of complex and large-scale military exercises. There are also signs of them working on developing a similar position on Afghanistan.

China and the West in Russia's International Discourse

Russia's International Spectrum

An examination of what officials, scholars, foreign policy analysts, and the media are writing about relations with the West and China in contemporary Russia points to the existence of two groups: Westernizers and Sinophiles.⁵ Westernizers represent Russia's historic aspirations to belong to the Western world, whereas Sinophiles—while remaining distinct—often tap into old Slavophile beliefs in Russia's cultural uniqueness and need for a separate path of development. Each of them may be divided into two additional categories depending on whether its members advocate stronger relations with the West and China on the basis of pragmatism/interests or ideology/values (please see Figure 2 for a summary of Russian discourse). These schools of thought sometimes clash, but also interweave, and neither position is entirely homogeneous in Russia's highly fluid political environment.

Figure 2. Westernizers and Sinophiles in Russia's Discourse



Ideological Westernizers

Ideological Westernizers have positioned Russia as a country with a Western identity and system of values. They have been critical of the country's domestic conditions and sceptical of its ability to become a great power. According to this group, Russia's principal problem has been the

⁵ For more detailed examinations of Russian attitudes toward China, see A. Lukin, *The Bear Watches the Dragon: Russia's Perceptions of China and the Evolution of Russian-Chinese Relations Since the Eighteenth Century*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 2003; V. Shlapentokh, "China in the Russian Mind Today: Ambivalence and Defeatism," *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2007; B. Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, *op. cit.* [2]; A. Leonova, "Electoral Choice, Cultural Capital, and Xenophobic Attitudes in Russia 1994-2006," in: *Russian Nationalism*, edited by M. Laruelle, London, Routledge, 2009; P. Rangsimaporn, *Russia as an Aspiring Great Power in East Asia Perceptions and Policies from Yeltsin to Putin*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

model of economic and political development chosen under Vladimir Putin's leadership. Excessively centralized and energy-oriented, it is argued that the model is blocking the country's modernization and integration with Western institutions. Politicians and experts affiliated with liberal parties and think tanks, such as Boris Nemtsov, Vladimir Milov, Yevgeni Gontmakher and Igor Yurgens, have challenged the government's "Concept of Long-term Socio-Economic Development of the Russian Federation for the Period up to the year 2020" as misguided and unrealistic.⁶ Some of them have criticized Russia's war with Georgia and offered a bleak assessment of the country's prospects of recovering from the current global economic crisis without dismantling the existing development model.

In addition, ideological Westernizers have blamed the government for being in denial about the nation's internal weakness and the rising threat posed by China. The group has recognized the West's relative decline, but argued that both culturally and politically Russia's choice in addressing its principal economic and security problems should be with Europe and the United States. According to Director of Moscow Carnegie Center Dmitry Trenin, "Russia is not a distinct civilization or a world unto itself" and therefore "cannot seriously expect to be a power center on par with China or the United States. Thus, Russia's non-inclusion into the European security architecture is a problem, while China's absence from the U.S.-led system of security arrangements in Asia is not."⁷ This position remains largely marginalized in the Russian foreign community.

Pragmatic Westernizers

More influential are the Pragmatic Westernizers closely associated with the views of Putin and Medvedev. Pragmatic Westernizers revealed their desire to prioritize relations with the West, but on the basis of economic and political interests, rather than values. Outlined in Putin's early programmatic speech "Russia at the Turn of Millenniums" these interests included economic modernization, political stability and enhanced security.⁸ Advocates of this approach insisted that while cooperating with the West and even moving in the direction of freedom and democracy, Russia should do so at its own pace, on its own conditions. In particular, such conditions require that the country remain a great power and an equal member in alliances with Western nations. Putin's 2007 speech in Munich, with its strong criticism of US "unilateralism" in world politics, was especially noteworthy, serving as another reminder that Russia was not about to tolerate policies that it viewed as interfering with its sovereignty and security. However, the speech was delivered to a European audience, indicating that Russia's priorities remain with the West, albeit not on the

⁶ B. Nemtsov and V. Milov, "Putin i krizis," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20 March 2009; Ye. Gontmakher, "Who Will Take Power?" *New Times*, 2 March 2009; A.E. Kramer, "Political Aide Says Kremlin May Need to Ease Control," *New York Times*, 10 February 2009.

⁷ D. Trenin, "Blowing Both Hot and Cold," *Moscow Times*, 24 March 2009, <www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=22888>.

⁸ V. Putin, "Rossiya na rubezhe tysyacheletiy," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 30 December 1999.

latter's terms.⁹ Many within the Presidential Administration and state corporations with export ties to Europe, such as Gazprom, hold this point of view.

Pragmatic Westernizers side with the West not so much because they believe in Western-style democracy, but because they understand the power of the West-centered global economy and importance of Western technology. Prioritizing state sovereignty and independence, Pragmatists are equally aware of the danger of becoming dependent on the more powerful East. In some ways, their thinking about Russia's Asian neighbors is similar to that of Westernizers and is marked by fear and defensiveness. For example, Putin shared the Westernizers' concern that if Moscow failed to improve the economic situation, neighboring nations could exploit Russia. In one of his speeches, the then president issued the explicit warning, "I do not want to dramatize the situation, but if we do not make every real effort, even the indigenous Russian population will soon speak mostly Japanese, Chinese, and Korean."¹⁰

Pragmatic Sinophiles

This group favors development of relations with China based on Russia's economic and security priorities. Like pro-Western pragmatists, pragmatic Sinophiles are believers in preservation of Russia's sovereignty and independence but they insist that those would be better protected by closer economic and political ties with China, rather than the West.

In security relations, the position that Russia is better off in a military alliance with China has been advocated since Primakov by those within the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and military-industrial complex who perceive the US-centered unipolar international system as dangerous. To Primakov and his supporters, the development of a multipolar world is a necessary condition for reviving Russia's great power status and therefore the main national priority. For example, in 2001 Vadim Tsymburski, a leading intellectual, argued that Russia must preserve control over the area of its geopolitical responsibility, specifically in Central Asia and Caucasus, by developing cultural and political alliances with China, India, and Iran. He complained, however, that Putin's policy had left little hope for accomplishing this task by deciding to "fight the alien war" and "surrendering" Central Asia and Georgia to the Americans.¹¹ In 2003, Mikhail Margelov, chair of the International Affairs committee in the Federation Council, emphasized the Sino-Russian nexus in the Russia-

⁹ For a more detailed analysis, see A. Tsygankov, *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*, Boulder, Rowman & Littlefield, 2nd edition, forthcoming 2010).

¹⁰ V. Putin, "Vystupleniye na soveschaniyi 'O perspektivakh razvitiya Dal'nego Vostoka i Zabaikalya'," Blagoveschensk, 21 July 2000 <www.kremlin.ru>. The current president, D. Medvedev made similar remarks, openly stating in 2008 that Russia could lose the Far East if it failed to develop the region: "Medvedev: Far East Ignored Too Long," *RIA RosBusinessConsulting*, 26 September 2008, <www.rbcnews.com/komment/komment.shtml?2008/09/26/32133807>.

¹¹ V. Tsymburski, "Eto toi posledni geokul'turnyi vybor, Rossiya" [It's your Last Geopolitical Choice, Russia], *Polis*, No. 1, 2001.

China-US triangle.¹² *Russkaya doktrina* (the Russian doctrine), an influential work prepared in 2007 by experts with ties to the military and Russian religious circles,¹³ defends the notion of long-term alliances with non-European states in order to resist the West and become self-sufficient. Predicting a US retreat from Eurasia between 2010 and 2015, nationalists call for “a full-fledged political, economic and—ideally—military union in the manner of a Warsaw Pact” with China, India, Iran and other non-Western nations.¹⁴

In the area of economic relations this position is often favored by energy producers and military industrialists in search of contracts in Asia, or by those who stand to benefit from imports of cheap Chinese consumer goods. Energy analysts and geopolitical thinkers insist that Russia would be better off sharply re-directing its oil and gas supplies to Eurasian countries, such as China and India, because it would assist the country in developing “energy-intensive goods” and in shedding its current role as a raw materials appendage of Europe.¹⁵ In addition, some state corporations have benefited from Chinese loans. For example, a 6 billion US dollar Chinese loan enabled Rosneft, Russia’s largest oil company, to purchase Yuganskneftegaz after the sale of Yukos.¹⁶

In media and expert circles, the pragmatic Sinocentric approach is defended by those who are involved in joint projects with China or receive various forms of support from the nation’s organizations. For instance, the influential Russian Institute of the Far East advances scholarship that is largely sympathetic to the idea of strategic economic and military partnership with China.¹⁷

Ideological Sinophiles

Finally, in Russia’s international discourse there are those who admire China for the values expressed in its model of development and nationalist resistance to the West. The Communist Party of the Russian Federation and some Eurasianists have advocated a close alliance with China or Iran in order for Russia to return to its “cultural roots” and defend itself against influences from the West that are seen as most dangerous.¹⁸ According to

¹² B. Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, *op. cit.* [2], p. 163.

¹³ The large group of authors and consultants contributing to the volume includes Orthodox priests and members of the Center of Dynamic Conservatism. The *Doktrina* also earned endorsement by Patriarch Kirill. A detailed list of authors is available at the following site: <www.rusdoctrina.ru/page95506.html>.

¹⁴ *Russkaya doktrina*, Moscow, Yauza, 2007, p. 313.

¹⁵ M. Dmitriyev, “Russia’s ‘Energy Key’ Strategy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, No. 4, October – December 2006, <<http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/numbers/17/1070.html>>.

¹⁶ Rosneft’s chairman is Igor Sechin, currently Vice-premier and one of the most influential members of the *siloviki*. B. Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, *op. cit.* [2], p. 145, 249.

¹⁷ See, for example, books by the Institute’s Director M. Titarenko, *Rossiia: Bezopasnost’ cherez sotrudnichestvo*, Moscow, Institut Dal’nego Vostoka, 2003; and *Geopoliticheskoye znachenie Dal’nego Vostoka*, Moscow, Pamyatniki istoricheskoi mysli, 2008, in which he defends the notion of Russia as a Eurasianist power.

¹⁸ A. Dugin, “Vneshnepoliticheskaya eklektika ili strategiya rossiiskoi vneshnei politiki,” *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 21 January 2005; M. Leontyev, “Strana, kotoraya khochet possorit’

this group, Russia must create a Eurasian coalition as a meaningful counter-balance to the West, push America out of Eurasia and replicate the Chinese model of state- and culture-centered development. Supporters of such a view are often critical of pragmatic Westernizers and Sinophiles for thinking exclusively in terms of interests and practical benefits. Their criticism of the emphasis on sovereignty and independence is not a criticism of sovereignty as an outdated concept—something that a number of Westernizers would likely agree with—but an argument that sovereignty itself must rest on the idea of a nation and civilization. Relative to the previous group, the ideological Sinophiles are not as close to the Kremlin and are in an incomparably less prominent position to influence the state.

The Evolution of Russia's International Discourse

Since the end of the Soviet Union, Russia's China discourse has evolved from one dominated by ideological Westernizers to one largely controlled by pragmatic Sinophiles. The latter now have supporters in the government, energy corporations with ties to Asia, military-industrial complex, governing structures of large cities with sizable presence of Chinese migrants, and some influential media. Although the international discourse has largely reflected preferences of the state, the current state weakness allows various interest groups to play a greater role in influencing policy.

In the early 1990s, ideological Westernizers set the political and policy agenda in Russia. Although Gorbachev laid the foundations for improving relations with China by signing two important joint communiqués and the border treaty, progress in the relationship was stalled by their growing ideological differences. Westernizers insisted that relationships with the “barbaric” East were to be limited to issues of national security. In the ideological mindset of Russia's early reformers, the East was associated with “backwardness” and “authoritarianism,” rather than the “prosperity” and “democracy” of Western “civilized” nations. Many in the Westernist camp believed that non-Western systems, such as those of China and the Middle Eastern countries, would soon follow the Soviet and Eastern European example and collapse, precisely because these systems were “non-democratic.” China was especially despised because of the Tiananmen massacre of Chinese democrats in 1989 and Beijing's support of the August 1991 anti-Gorbachev coup in Moscow.

The arrival of Yevgeni Primakov as Foreign Minister heralded a change in Russia's attitude toward China. The strategically driven official discourse stressed the geopolitical importance of the nation in the construction of a multipolar world. Regarding the West and NATO, the new wisdom was to pursue a combination of both cooperation and balancing

Rossiye s Kitayem,” *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 22 July 2008; M. Yuriev, “Kitayskaya ugroza: fakty i fiktsiya,” *Profil*, 14-20 January 2008.

policies while strengthening ties with non-Western nations. A large part of the country's political class seemed comfortable with the new, pragmatically Sinophile perspective—some were concerned about US political and military dominance in world affairs, others feared painful economic reforms and advocated state paternalism. Westernizers took issue with this view and warned that multipolarism was nothing but another example of unwarranted power ambitions, yet for some time their critique had little effect. Ideological Sinophiles attacked the new official vision for not going “far enough” with restoring traditional Soviet foreign policy ties and Russia’s “Eurasianist values” but also had little success.

Under Vladimir Putin’s presidency, Russia’s China discourse took a turn toward pragmatic Westernism and away from Primakov’s pragmatic China and India-centered approach. At this point, the state was willing to listen to those who criticized as fundamentally misplaced the priorities of reviving the CIS as a vehicle of the post-Soviet integration, resisting the eastern expansion of NATO, and trying to build a Russia-China-India security axis. Even some of Primakov’s former supporters became disappointed with the old course and began to withdraw their support.

More recently, in response to the Kremlin’s disappointment with the results of Putin’s initially pro-Western course, Russia’s international discourse has been experiencing a return to the attitude of pragmatic Sinophilia—this time without the conscious encouragement of the state. Although the official discourse stays focused on strengthening economic relations with the world, especially Europe, the state is increasingly subject to pressure from various interest groups with preferences for doing business with China. In response to Russia’s new tensions with the West, the rhetoric of strategic partnership with China filled the media space obtaining an exceedingly zero-sum character relative to relations with the US and other Western nations. The Russian public has also grown increasingly Sinophilic over time. For example, one poll revealed that the share of Russians viewing China as a strategic and economic partner had grown from 34 percent to 41 percent over the past several years. In addition, 47 percent voiced optimism regarding the future of relations with China.¹⁹

¹⁹ “Most Russians See China as Strategic Partner—Poll,” Itar-Tass, 16 June 2009.

Explaining Russia's Turn to China

Three factors—China's economic rise, the U.S. unilateralism and Russia's state weakness—help to explain Russia's growing preoccupation with its Asian neighbor since the end of the Cold War.

China's Economic Rise

The simplest reality of the post-Soviet era is that until 2000, Russia's economy was shrinking at a staggering rate while China's was experiencing rapid but steady growth. By the late-1990s, China was leading Russia in GDP terms by a factor of five which greatly concerned Westernizers who sensed the danger of Chinese encroachment in the Far East. During the 2000s, the Russian economy recovered from the longest economic depression in its history. Russia's share of global GDP is a mere 2.3 percent and may only rise to 3.5 percent by 2020.²⁰ During the next ten to fifteen years the gap between Russia's global GDP share and that of China and India will continue to widen; furthermore, the US's share is not likely to decline significantly relative to that of Russia. The rise of China therefore presents Russia with a challenge of increasing differences in power and influence. As Russia continues to supply China with energy and weapons, and as China grows at a considerably faster rate than its northern neighbor, the risk of Moscow becoming a junior partner in a Beijing-led coalition increases.

China's increasing assertiveness has manifested itself in Beijing's attempts to acquire Russian energy assets, obtain favorable deals, and make Russia more dependent on its growing sales market. For example, in 2002, China's National Petroleum Company tried to purchase Slavneft.²¹ Beijing is also known for its aggressive efforts to negotiate energy supplies at prices below market rate.²² Thus, some Russian media criticized the recent twenty year oil contract and other agreements with China as disproportionate concessions on Russia's part.²³ Recognizing its growing

²⁰ A. Kuchins and R. Weitz, *Russia's Place in an Unsettled Order—Calculations in the Kremlin*, Washington DC, The Stanley Foundation, 2008, p. 6.

²¹ N. Norling, "China and Russia: Partners with Tensions," *Policy Perspectives*, 2007, p. 44.

²² *Kommersant*, 22 July 2008. For divergence of Russia and China's energy policies in Central Asia, see Flikke and Wilhelmsen, *Central Asia*, *op. cit.* [2].

²³ I. Naumov, "Rossiya glubzhe podsela na kitayskuyu iglu," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 29 October 2008, <www.ng.ru/economics/2008-10-29/4_china.html>; Yu. Latynina,

need for Chinese investment, credit and sales market,²⁴ Russia was unwilling to press environmental claims against its neighbor when it polluted the Amur River and the Kremlin also ceded several territories going to China in border treaties.²⁵

To Sinophiles, however, China's rise presents new economic opportunities that Russia must seize. Such opportunities include expanding bilateral trade, the volume of which continues to be incomparably smaller than that of China with the US or other Western nations. As of now, Russia's largest exports to China are energy and weapons, whereas the most commonly imported products include everything from electronics to clothes. The Kremlin may now apply the model established by the recently signed deal with China on oil to other energy areas including electricity, natural gas and atomic energy.²⁶ As Russia's relatively low productivity and expensive labor translate into declining competitiveness, China's ways of influencing the north continue to expand. With growth of influence, the China lobby in Russia is getting stronger too. As a result, even routine domestic economic decisions in Russia are increasingly made with a consideration for China. For instance, in July 2009, Beijing sent a delegation to Moscow to negotiate on behalf of a large group of ethnic Chinese affected by the Moscow government's decision to close the large Cherkizovski market due to multiple violations of labor and immigration law. Headed by China's Deputy Trade Minister, the delegation negotiated the restoration of the trading area on condition of a 1 billion US dollar investment by China.

US Unilateralism

If China's rise provided an important basis for the development of economic relations with Russia, then US unilateralism served to reinforce Russia-China security ties and their shared perceptions of a desirable new international order. For example, during the US-led NATO intervention in Yugoslavia, Beijing became extremely upset with NATO's allegedly "accidental" bombing of a Chinese embassy and sided with Russia in its criticism of the West's actions. Sinophiles obtained powerful ammunition to argue for establishing strategic ties with China and countries outside the West. Subsequent actions by the United States under George W. Bush's administration—NATO expansion, unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and military intervention in Iraq—further strengthened Russia's Sinophiles, particularly those with ties to the security establishment.

"Ukhodya gasite svet," *Novaya gazeta*, 6 July 2009, <www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/071/11.html>.

²⁴ F. Lukyanov, "Russia, China Have Few Political Differences But Economic Interests Diverge," *Gazeta*, 28 July 2009.

²⁵ Some Russian economists estimated the damage of transferring territories for Russia at \$3 billion (*Kommersant*, 22 July 2008).

²⁶ Vice-premier I. Sechin made such a suggestion after signing the oil deal (Ye. Grigoryeva, "Nefi' razvernuli na Vostok," *Izvestiya*, 22 April 2009).

China's position on these issues was becoming similar to that of Russia albeit not voiced as loudly. Beijing also supported the Kremlin's military response to Georgia's attack on South Ossetia—partly because of Georgia's status of a US client state—while refraining from backing Russia's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Although concerted positions by Russia and China do not amount to emergence of a West-balancing coalition—at least not yet—some scholars have described their behavior as employment of soft balancing tactics against the United States.²⁷

Russia's State Weakness

Russia's state weakness manifests itself in an inability to solve vital problems and isolate the influence of powerful lobbies. First, the weak state creates a negative image of itself for many Russians, being unable to solve demographic, economic and ideological problems. In contrast to China, Russia has an aging and declining population. Russia's indicators of life expectancy and infant mortality have been deteriorating since the late 1980s. These indicators have begun to improve relative to the late 1980s since 2005, but only marginally so. In addition, after the disintegration of the communist system, Russians live in an ideological vacuum and are yet to formulate their historical values. In addition, the state is yet to formulate attractive soft power projects for its neighbors. The second aspect of state weakness concerns administrative incapacity which complicates formulation and conduct of a long-term policy. The Russian state is currently not sufficiently consolidated, lacking both legitimacy and the capacity to isolate pressures of the increasingly powerful China lobby. Although Putin and Medvedev are popular with the general public, they have yet to translate their political capital into effective administrative reform.

²⁷ R.A. Pipe, "Soft Balancing against the United States," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2005.

Conclusions and Implications

Overall, Russia is increasingly unable to resist China's economic and political influence. Both in state action and on the level of national discourse, China's importance has considerably expanded, which has translated into the growing prominence of Russian Sinophiles in national debate. Russia's relative economic and administrative weakness will continue to challenge its ability to fully preserve political independence and other attributes of a great power. Although the nation has largely recovered from the chronic malaise of the 1990s, gaining greater confidence and preserving important attributes of a great power, in a foreseeable future it cannot act on par with the West and China. Despite the rhetoric of Russia's resurgence, Russia has not become and is not in a position to become a rising great power in the face of growing international challenges, such as the continued expansion of the Western and Chinese influences in Eurasia. The fact that Russia continues to muddle through is not a guarantee that it will be able to do so in the future; the economic crisis narrows the Kremlin's options further.

Russia is unlikely to emerge as an independent center of power and cultural influence within the next twenty years and therefore should set realistic objectives. Siding with Western states, as recommended by ideological Westernizers, has proven too costly after the end of the cold war. The option of becoming a junior partner in a China-led coalition of states is no more attractive and is likely to come at the expense of Russia's interests and global influence too. Yet another strategy might be to respond to potentially unfavorable external conditions by concentrating on domestic issues and avoiding making explicit international choices (back-passing). In the late-20th and the early 21st century, this strategy has generally been followed by China, yet it may not be available to Russia. The latter is too large and too central in its geographic location between Europe and Asia to delegate the resolution of critical issues of world politics to other powers.

This leaves Russia with some version of the 19th century *recueillement* or "concentration" following defeat in the Crimean War. The two key principles of the *recueillement*, introduced by Imperial Russia's new Chancellor Prince Alexander Gorchakov, were relative isolation from European affairs and flexible alliances with other states. While the former was deemed necessary for conducting internal reforms after defeat in the war, the latter was designed to provide the required international calm for domestic recovery. Unlike back-passing, concentration still favors international engagement and may be all the more appropriate now that the world is entering a transition from the US dominance to a fully-fledged

multipolarity. During the era of transition, Russia will be in a group of tipping-point states that will determine the balance of power among the world's largest actors—the US, the European Union and China.²⁸ While remaining assertive in defending its core interests, Russia could design a long-term strategy of flexible cross-cultural alliances and domestic concentration. If China does not show strong expansionist tendencies, Russia may yet win the international calm necessary for an extended period of stable, broad-based internal growth.

For the Western world, the prospect of the growing Sinophilization of Russia's foreign policy implies the need to change course. Rather than trying to secure the 21st century as another American or Western century, Washington and Brussels will do well to prepare for an honorable retreat from the position of global hegemony. Although tensions between Russia and China exist and may even increase in future, the West may contribute to their management by promoting a genuinely multilateral dialogue in Eurasia and beyond. If, however, Western nations continue to act upon unilateral and imperial temptations, the non-Western nations beginning with Russia and China will act in defiance by asserting what they see as their strategic and economic interests. In the absence of sufficiently strong international institutions, such interaction is likely to foster new conflicts, not peace and stability in the world. Preventing further Sinophilization of the Kremlin will also mean strengthening ties with Russia, while preserving the existing level of strong relations with China. The West should work not so much to encourage Russia to become pro-Western, but discourage it from being pro-Chinese at the expense of its ties with the Western nations. The objective should be not to marginalize or isolate China, but rather to strengthen Russia's ability to choose its future partners in the post-Western world.

²⁸ P. Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York, Random House, 2008.