

Distrust in the heartland: explaining the Eurasian “Organization Gap” through the Russo-Chinese relations

Desconfiança no Heartland: explicando o “Vazio Organizacional” eurasiático por meio das relações Russo-Chinesas

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Abstract

The concept of Eurasia is one of the most important elements of geopolitics, dating back to the beginning of the last century, and whose development owes much to the works of geographers and political thinkers alike. Nevertheless, although comprising a big portion of the planet’s political space, this region suffers from a relative ‘organizational gap’, especially if compared with neighboring regions such as Western Europe and Southeast Asia for instance. This paper contends that the lack of an overarching political arrangement in Eurasia owes much to particular aspects of the Russia-China relationship, which encompasses Great Power aspirations and competing organizational schemes in the region. Different views about Eurasia itself, associated with a quest for leadership in regional institution-building, put both Russia and China on competitive tracks, essentially obstructing the formation of a broad political design in the broader continent. To substantiate our point, the present work applies certain concepts from historical institutionalism, whose mechanisms enabled a thorough evaluation of patterns of inception, continuation, and change of political institutions, alliances and principles affecting the Sino-Russian relationship over time, as well as its effects on Eurasia’s ‘organizational gap’ *per se*.

Keywords: Historical Institutionalism; Russian Foreign Policy; Chinese Foreign Policy; Eurasia; International Institutions;

Resumo

O conceito de Eurásia é um dos elementos mais importantes da geopolítica, o qual remonta ao início do século passado, e cujo desenvolvimento deve muito às obras de geógrafos e de pensadores políticos. No entanto, embora englobe uma grande parte do espaço político do planeta, esta região sofre de uma relativa ‘lacuna organizacional’, especialmente se comparada com regiões vizinhas, como a Europa Ocidental e o Sudeste Asiático, por exemplo. Este artigo propõe que a falta de um arranjo político abrangente na Eurásia se deve muito a aspectos particulares da relação Rússia-China, que engloba aspirações por parte de duas Grandes Potências e esquemas organizacionais concorrentes na região. Diferentes visões sobre a própria Eurásia, associadas à busca pela liderança na construção de instituições regionais, colocaram a Rússia e a China em caminhos competitivos, essencialmente obstruindo a formação de um amplo desenho político no continente. Para substanciar nosso argumento, o presente trabalho aplica certos conceitos do institucionalismo histórico, cujos mecanismos permitiram-nos uma avaliação mais ampla dos padrões de surgimento, continuação e mudança das instituições políticas, alianças e princípios que afetaram a relação sino-russa ao longo do tempo, bem como sua efeitos na ‘lacuna organizacional’ da Eurásia em si.

Palavras-chave: Institucionalismo Histórico; Política Externa Russa; Política Externa Chinesa; Eurásia; Instituições Internacionais;

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Introduction and Methodology

Eurasia suffers from a distinctive organization-gap, characterized by an absence of multilateral coordination structures necessary to address emerging financial and cooperative security challenges. In contrast to Western Europe, the South Pacific, and even the Middle East, Eurasia has never had a formal region-wide multilateral security structure. This situation lies at the heart of the region's issues and has impeded their resolution, while there is a growing inadequacy of long-standing informal alternatives (BUZAN, 2020; CALDER; YE, 2010; TØNNESSON, 2017).

The Eurasian organization-gap issue has been analyzed by various scholars, who have identified several causes of such absence. Looking to explain the difficult emergence of a collective regional identity in Asia, many analysts have pointed to obstacles that are keen to the region, including cultural diversity, disparate economies, asymmetries in power, and historical animosities (DUFFIELD 2001; NOLT 1999; SIMON 1993). Meanwhile, Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002) emphasized the lack of interest from the United States (US) to foster multilateralism in Asia during the Cold War due to the American perception of the region as alien territory, preferring to promote bilateral alliances in the continent, which prevented the formation of a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-like there. On the contrary, Cha (2016) purports the US opted for bilateralism in Asia in the 1950s because it aimed to control autocratic anti-communist allies at the time, such as South Korea and Taiwan, to avoid the possible American entanglement in a large-scale conflict between them and communist rivals, like the Soviet Union (USSR) and China. Then, this preference for bilateral alliances would have become ingrained in the thinking of the local political elites, making them avoid the formation of an encompassing multilateral institution.

Other analysts, instead, blame China for the gap since its significantly large territory and centralized location would render the region "hegemony-prone". Given China's long shadow and America's countervailing power, this hegemony bias would persistently inhibit the emergence of serious regional cooperation in Asia (CALDER; YE 2004, 2010; FRIEDBERG 2000). On the other hand, Katzenstein and Shiraishi (1997) embrace an institutionalist approach for the gap, stating that two institutional features of Asian countries contribute to the lack of formal regional institutions: 1) hierarchic state-society relationships; and 2) distinctive state structures. They argue "the Western concept of community is often associated with organized and institutional structures, but there is no equivalent Chinese translation for this notion" (KATZENSTEIN; SHIRAIISHI 1997, p. 21).

We contend these explanations have missed the importance of the relations between the two great continental powers in the Mackinderian heartland - Russia, and China - as a major explanatory variable for the absence of a comprehensive international organization in the region. At the outset, China and Russia seem to hold similar geopolitical interests, ranging from the defense of multipolarity in world affairs to antagonistic attitudes to the West and its promotion of liberal values (BOLT; CROSS, 2018; DIAMOND, 2019; GAT, 2007; KENDALL-TAYLOR; SHULLMAN, 2018; LI; POH 2019). Today, Moscow and Beijing's arguably 'common political adversary' is represented by the United States (ALVARES; PADULA, 2020). For Beijing, the pivot to Asia announced during Obama's presidency represented an attempt to contain Chinese growth and influence in Eurasia, with the US administration's strategic documents demonstrating concern over the rise of China and the resumption of an assertive Russian foreign policy (ALVARES; PADULA, 2020). For Moscow, American and European sanctions after the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 had hurt its economy significantly, while Russia is seen as a 'rival' to the US's interests and values around the world (NSS, 2017).

However, despite having grievances against the US and the West, the question arises as to why the current partnership between Russia and China was not sufficient to foster a broader institution-building in Eurasia? This paper puts forth two possible hypotheses to this question, which are summarized as follows:

H1) Realist concerns (involving disputes for territory, status, and/or influence over the region) have impeded the consolidation of stable relations between Russia and China, therefore jeopardizing Eurasia's organization building.

H2) Great Power aspirations associated with a quest for leadership in regional institutions put both Russia and China on competitive tracks in their shared geographical space, complicating the prospects for forming an overarching Sino-Russian political design in Eurasia.

To help us attain the goal of demonstrating the validity of the proposed hypotheses, we intend to use some of the Historical Institutionalism's analysis tools, as discussed in our next section.

Historical Institutionalism

Historical Institutionalism (HI) is neither a particular theory nor a specific method. It is best understood as an *approach* to studying politics (STEINMO, 2008). HI is concerned, among other things, with understanding institutions' resilience over time (FIORETOS, 2017), while working with a definition of institutions that includes both formal organizations and informal rules and procedures that structure conduct (THELEN; STEINMO, 1992). As Taylor (2020, p. 13) points out, "institutions are the rules of the game, and as such, they are reflected in recurring patterns of behavior". Institutional resilience is often explained by HI's concept of 'lock-in', whereas due to previously taken political decisions, a particular institutional design or set of privileges is preserved. Therefore, within that context, "nothing short of a shock to the system would push institutions onto a different path" (FIORETOS, 2017, p. 13).

For our inquiry, we found it best suited to utilize HI's concept of *critical junctures*, which represent "constitutive and potentially constitutive moments that cause particular pathways to be followed" (FIORETOS, 2017, p. 16). The duration of a critical juncture is brief, concerning the duration of the long-lasting process it instigates (which leads to the outcome of interest) (CAPOCCIA, 2015; CAPOCCIA; KELEMEN, 2007). It is important to note the *permissive* and the *productive* conditions of critical junctures within this context. *Permissive conditions* are necessary conditions that loosen institutional or structural constraints on agency or contingency and thus provide the temporal bounds of critical junctures. On the other hand, *productive conditions* act within the permissive conditions to bring about change. They are aspects of the critical juncture that shape initial outcomes and are subsequently reproduced when the critical juncture comes to a close (FIORETOS; FALLETI; SHEINGATE, 2016).

The explanatory approach of the *critical junctures* goes as follows: an event or a series of events, typically exogenous¹ to the institution of interest, lead to a phase of political uncertainty in which different options for radical institutional change are viable; antecedent conditions define the range of institutional alternatives available to decision-makers but do not determine the alternative chosen; one of these options is selected, and its selection generates a long-lasting institutional legacy, what is known as *path dependence*. The past determines the present but not necessarily in a continuous way (CAPOCCIA, 2015; CAPOCCIA; KELEMEN, 2007).

Critical junctures often occur in the form of *crises*. In the international realm, a crisis denotes disruptive interaction between states, be it accompanied by violence or not. A crisis unfolds in four phases and four periods: 1) *onset phase/pre-crisis period*, which may be triggered by a hostile act, a disruptive event; 2) *escalation phase/crisis period*, in which there is an increase in the intensity and/or a change in the type of disruptive interaction between/among adversaries, an

¹ Nevertheless, it is possible that a critical juncture in the development of a given institution is generated endogenously by power holders that may disrupt existing institutional equilibria to achieve political objectives (CAPOCCIA, 2015; KOHLI, 1997).

awareness by the decision-makers of time pressure on choices and there is a substantial increase in the perceived probability of war; 3) *de-escalation phase/end-crisis period*, which is a process of accommodation by the adversaries and it is characterized by a decline in the perceptions of threat, time, and war likelihood; and 4) *impact phase/post-crisis period* enhances how decision-makers, sensitized to multiple potential consequences, will respond to future incipient crises (BRECHER, 2008, 2018).² As Calder and Ye (2004, p. 196) indicate, “the on-the-spot interplay between events, on the one hand, and the parameters that determine the incentives of decision-makers at a critical juncture, on the other, has important causal impacts on the institutional outcome of a crisis”.

In the interstate crisis framework, the elements of *time pressure* and *stimulus for change* are particularly important. *Time pressure*, located in Brecher’s (2018) *escalation phase/crisis period*, enhances the role of key individual decision-makers, makes interactions hard to routinize, limits time available to search out options, and reduces the ability of interest groups to dominate outcomes. As the concept of the fog of war suggests, decision-makers are forced into sudden, high-stakes decisions under extreme circumstances. On the other hand, *stimulus for change*, present in the *impact phase/post-crisis period*, in which new systemic characteristics can emerge from the need for collective action. These factors can, in turn, affect national leaders’ perception of interest, as well as their capability to coordinate and communicate with one another, leading to accelerating institutional changes that affect policy-making long after a critical juncture is passed and that constitute important legacies for the future (CALDER; YE, 2004).

Path dependence refers to “a period of time where the choices available to decision-makers are constrained by the choices made in the past” (LAMONT; BODUSZYŃSKI, 2020). Therefore, path dependence requires a build-up of behavioral routines, social connections, or cognitive structures around an institution. Path dependence may present four types of causes: 1) *increasing returns*, which means that the more a choice is made or an action is taken, the greater its benefits; 2) *self-reinforcement*, which means that making a choice or taking an action puts in place a set of forces or complementary institutions that encourage that choice to be sustained; 3) *positive feedbacks*, which are little bonuses given to people who already made that choice or who will make that choice in the future; and 4) *lock-in*, that means that one choice or action becomes better than any other one because a sufficient number of people have already made that choice (PAGE, 2006). Attention to the timing and sequence of developments becomes crucial in path dependence since the causal impact of early events is considerably stronger than subsequent events (FIORETOS; FALLETI; SHEINGATE, 2016).

Finally, the method applied in this paper to analyze the critical junctures will utilize elements delineated by Capoccia & Kelemen’s (2007, p. 357), including: “the main actors, their goals, preferences, decisions, and the events that directly influenced them” while specifying “not only the decisions and actions that were taken but also those that were considered and ultimately rejected”, building on the consequences of the courses of action implemented and, whenever possible, conjecturing on those that were not, to present why, in our understanding, a broader Eurasian institutional design under Russo-Chinese leadership has not taken place, despite their current political partnership.

Realist concerns in Russo-Chinese relations: a brief historical review

With the end of World War II (1939-1945) and after Mao Zedong’s (r. 1949-1976) Communists seized power in China in 1949, Russo-Chinese relations acquired aspects of a promising political partnership. By then, both Communist China and the USSR posed a significant threat to America and its allies during the first decades of the Cold War (1947-1991), with Beijing being assisted by Moscow in state-building, weapons sales, and technical/military support to the Chinese army. Nevertheless, in the 1960s, the once “friendly” political relations between the two biggest Communist countries were undermined by domestic changes within the Soviet Union. Nikita Khrushchev’s (r. 1953-1964) initial proposal of a

² For a full presentation of the Unified Model of Crisis (UMC), see Brecher (2018).

“peaceful coexistence” with the capitalist West generated distrust in most socialist countries (China in particular), with Beijing accusing the USSR of abandoning the ‘revolutionary path’ (SEGRILLO, 2015).

The Soviets, by its turn, justified the concept of “Peaceful Coexistence” as a means to avoid a new all-out war, thus providing the necessary international and domestic tranquility for socialist countries to develop and strengthen (CPSS, 1964). Henceforth, the Soviet dispute with China became not only a genuine conflict for the soul of the “world revolution” (JUDT, 2005), but partly a struggle for geopolitical primacy in Eurasia. In a historical document composed by the Soviet Communist Party in 1964 entitled *Struggle for the Solidity of the World Communist Movement* Moscow was on the impression that China now posed “a direct threat [...] [to] the world communist movement” (CPSS, 1964, p. 4, translated by the authors), conditioning its own population “in the spirit of hostility to the USSR”.

For Moscow, the real goal of the Chinese leaders was to split the united front of the Communists and to impose on other countries a “sinicized version of socialism”, embedded with elements of an “adventurous foreign and domestic policy course, ideology and cult of personality” (CPSS, 1964, p.12). On the Chinese side, there was distrust in relation to the Soviet Union due to its hegemonic ambitions and its nuclear arsenal³. In a meeting between Mao and Kikunami Katsumi, member of the Japanese Communist Party, on January 5, 1964, the Chinese leader comments:

We have diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union; we are two countries in the socialist camp. But the relations between our two countries are not as good as those between China and the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party or China and the Ikeda faction. This is something we should think about. What's the reason? Because the U.S. and the Soviet Union both have nuclear weapons and want to dominate the world (MAO, 1998, p. 388).

The explicit Soviet opposition to the Chinese communism also enlarged the rift between the two Eurasian powers, as Mao mentioned during a talk with American socialists on January 17, 1964: “They [the Soviets] malign us as dogmatists, Trotskyites, empty talkers, sham revolutionaries and nationalists” (1998, p. 394).

Besides, during the early to mid-1960s, Mao thought that foreign military threats no longer demanded top priority, pursuing instead a foreign policy that promoted his socialist vision (GOLDSTEIN, 2020). An example of this policy is present in a May 15, 1964 conversation between Mao and Vito Kapo, Chair of the Albanian Women’s Union, in which the Chinese Chairman praises Albania for sharing China’s struggle against the Soviet de-Stalinization, to which he refers to as “revisionism”. Mao delineates that China perceived the ideological changes promoted by the USSR as deviations of Marxism-Leninism, being products of bourgeois capitalism. In his view, this produced a fascist dictatorship, which was characterized as the rule of a minority over the working class, preventing the consolidation of the dictatorship of the proletariat:

The Soviet Union has been controlled by revisionism. What is revisionism? It is the thought, politics, economics, and culture of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeoisie have already seized power in the Soviet Union. [...] Since revisionism is a product of capitalism, it cannot represent the truth of Marxism-Leninism, it can only represent the minority. There is still class struggle in the Soviet Union, but it is in a critical state. If one opposes Khrushchev they will be locked up in an asylum. It is a fascist dictatorship, and worth paying attention to (GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION ARCHIVES, 1964).

Mao also pointed out that Khrushchev “is in the process of restoring the bourgeoisie, he’s deceiving the people” (GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION ARCHIVES, 1964). The Chinese leader lectured the Albanian representative on how to counter the Soviet revisionism, through refusing “to import revisionist or capitalist works of art and literature” (GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION ARCHIVES, 1964) and “using class struggle to conduct their [the youth’s] education (GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION ARCHIVES, 1964).

³ Actually, China had been developing its nuclear weapons program with Soviet aid since 1954, however, Beijing continued the program independently after 1958 due to the Sino-Soviet Split. China would successfully detonate a nuclear device on October 16, 1964 (HORSBURGH, 2015).

Realist concerns came to the forefront when China refused to sign the Moscow Treaty on the Ban of Nuclear Weapon Tests in the Three Environments (on land, air, and sea). After this refusal, the Soviet government stopped providing technical assistance to China to develop nuclear weapons. The USSR was concerned with “a response in the form of an atomic armament of the powers of the imperialist camp, in particular, West Germany and Japan” (CPSS, 1964, p. 20; our translation). Be it as it may, even without the help of the USSR, China finally developed its own atomic bomb in 1964, achieving its nuclear status. Apart from that important event, in addition to tensions stemming from differences in political views and on the acquisition of atomic weapons by China, in the mid-1960s, border disputes ultimately led to several military conflicts between the USSR and the Chinese army, solidifying the split between the two states.

It is true that during the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, relations between Russia and China gradually improved (ADAM, 2012; BEZERRA, 2018).⁴ Nevertheless, one special concern for both countries - still to the present day - continues to be their territorial integrity. Russia’s Far East is historically underpopulated if compared with the more populous Chinese border areas, and the demarcation of frontiers between them has remained until recently a matter of concern for Moscow. In October 2004, Russia and China signed an agreement solving their border disputes, according to which Moscow returned some islands off the Amur River (claimed by Beijing since 1929) to Chinese rule (MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, 2004). Since then, Russia has become the only country in the Chinese neighborhood with which Beijing has no territorial claims. However, it is important to note that both Russians and Chinese have, at different times in the past, invoked historical narratives to justify geopolitical ambitions in relation to their borders, as exemplified by the Russian incorporation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, and the Chinese takeover of Xinjiang in 1949, and of Tibet in 1950 (HAYTON, 2020).

In effect, some Chinese authorities still recall that current-day Russia’s Far East, including Vladivostok, was once a Chinese territory seized by the Russian Empire in the 19th century, when China was economically and militarily incapable of opposing its adversaries; this historical record brings considerable apprehension to political pundits in Russia, who are concerned about the eventuality of a future Chinese claim over territories that Moscow conquered in the 19th century (KALACHINSKI, 2019).

Table 1 below presents the major events in the Sino-Russian relations since the mid-20th century, while the critical junctures are marked in bold. We identify the state of the relations between the two countries at the time (allies or not); whether the event was a crisis; whether time pressure was constraining the choices of the decision-makers; which country was responsible for triggering the event or whether it took part in it; and the outcome of the event for the bilateral relations at the time. The critical junctures, in bold, were identified as phases of institutional fluidity that steered outcomes towards a new equilibrium in the bilateral relations. They altered these relations for a period longer than their own duration (path-dependency), transforming amity into enmity and vice versa.

⁴ As a sign of this improvement, bilateral arms trade, which had significantly decreased during the “Sino-Soviet split”, was once again resumed, fostering the strengthening of their political ties (ADAM, 2012), with Russia becoming the main arms supplier to the Chinese market (SIPRI, 2019).

Table 1- Major Events and Critical Junctures in the Russian-Chinese Relations regarding Eurasia (1950-Present)

EVENT	Allies	Crisis	Time Pressure	Initiative	Outcome
<i>Alliance and Friendship Treaty (1950)</i>	Yes	No	No	China	Soviet advantage
Sino-Soviet Split (1956-1966)	No	Yes	Yes	China	Chinese advantage
Sino-Soviet Border Conflict (1969)	No	Yes	Yes	China	Chinese advantage
Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989)	No	Yes	Yes	Soviet Union	Chinese advantage
Sino-Soviet Rapprochement (1982-1988)	Yes	No	No	China	Chinese advantage
Summit Meeting (1989)	Yes	No	No	China	Chinese advantage
Soviet Dissolution (1991)	Yes	No	No	Soviet Union	Chinese advantage
Shanghai Five (1996)	Yes	No	No	Mutual	Mutual advantage
<i>Moscow Summit (1997)</i>	Yes	No	No	Russia	Mutual advantage
<i>Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (2001)</i>	Yes	No	No	Mutual	Mutual advantage
<i>Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation (2001)</i>	Yes	No	No	China	Mutual advantage
<i>Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) (2001)</i>	No	No	No	Russia	Russian advantage
<i>Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) (2011)</i>	No	No	No	Russia	Russian advantage
Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership (2013)	Yes	No	No	China	Mutual advantage
<i>Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (2013-)</i>	No	No	No	China	Chinese advantage
<i>Silk Road Fund (SRF) (2013)</i>	No	No	No	China	Chinese advantage
<i>Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) (2015)</i>	Yes	No	No	China	Chinese advantage
Integration EEU-BRI (2015)	Yes	No	No	Mutual	Mutual advantage
<i>Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) (2020)</i>	No	No	No	China	Chinese advantage

SOURCE: Adapted from Calder and Ye (2004). Based on Lüthi (2010), Radchenko (2015), Vámos (2010), Muzaffar and Khan (2016), Shtraks (2015), Bolt and Cross (2018), Korolev (2019), Li and Poh (2019), and Cooley (2019).

Two of the critical junctures presented in the table above, specifically the Sino-Soviet Split (1956-1966) and Sino-Soviet Border Conflict (1969) cemented the split of the world communist movement and, as a consequence, hampered the possibility of a broader unifying institutional arrangement in Eurasia. Countries in the continent were divided by their allegiances with either Moscow or Beijing, with states on the former’s side being composed of: East Germany, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Albania (the Soviet satellites), and Mongolia serving as a buffer State between Russia and China. More closely aligned with Beijing (although not completely severing ties with the USSR) were Vietnam⁵ (assisted by China in its war against the United States), Laos, Cambodia, and North Korea. Stretching from Eastern Europe to East Asia, it can be argued that had both the Soviets and the Chinese leadership made peace during the first phases of their mutual strangeness, as proposed by the Russians in its *Struggle for the Solidity of the World Communist Movement* document, the path would therefore be open for a new confluence of political ideas within Eurasia, leading

⁵ Despite being allies since the 1950s, there is a Sino-Vietnamese split in 1975, due to Beijing’s rapprochement to the United States, culminating in the Sino-Vietnamese War in 1979. The two countries only warm up their relations as of 1985 (AMER, 1993).

towards not only an economic but also to a more efficient political integration within a then “unified” Communist camp (CPSS, 1964).

Figure 1 – Eurasia's political adherence map after the Sino-Soviet Split



Source: Created by the authors, through link: <https://mapchart.net/world.html>

On a different note, in more recent times, questions related to territorial claims also represented an obstacle in terms of enabling an overall agreement within Eurasia that could at the same time accommodate the geopolitical interests of both Russia and China. Although Beijing and Moscow do not hold specific border contentions against each other nowadays, the possibilities for a future revisionist claim (taken into consideration their history) cannot be altogether excluded, as represented by the events taking place in Ukraine in 2014. Meanwhile, the only countries in Eurasia that took a pro-Russian instance in relation to the annexation of Crimea were Afghanistan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan, which demonstrates the fragile support Moscow received for its actions. On the other hand, China has territorial disputes with over 18 states, many of them in Eurasia such as: Bhutan, Mongolia, India, Nepal, and Tajikistan. In this context, the realization of organizational structures of political character under the simultaneous leadership of Moscow and Beijing is compromised by how their neighbors perceive with apprehension their geopolitical interests.

Competing Institutionalisms between Eurasian powers

Both in their own right, Russia and China present themselves as the potential leaders of broader institutionalization schemes in Eurasia. Russia's aim through its institutionalization projects, according to Averre (2009, p. 1696), is “to shape its external environment by establishing stable and friendly States on its periphery as a prerequisite for security”. In that regard, we must first mention the Commonwealth of Independent States, or CIS⁶, a multilateral forum that was established in the 1990s for political concertation among the former Soviet republics under the tutelage of Moscow. According to analysts, since its inception, the CIS did not exert any significant impact on the most important

⁶ Composed by the following signatories: Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Moldova, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

political decisions taken by its members (WEITZ, 2014, TRENIN; LO, 2005), and Russia exercised no general leadership in terms of implementing a serious integrative project for the region (DUGIN, 2016).

Be it as it may, at the beginning of the 2000s, in order to develop more effective cooperation in the military-political sphere within the CIS area, Russia launched the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), considered by Moscow as an important factor “to maintain stability and ensure security in the CIS area” (FPC, 2008) and consequently to exert an impact on the political configuration of Eurasia. The organization focuses on the fight against international terrorism, extremism, and separatism, whose members are composed by: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan (the latter three located in Central Asia). With CSTO, Moscow aims to project itself as the main guarantor of regional stability, providing security to local governments in Eurasia (ADAM, 2012), while strengthening the national security of its participants (CSTO Charter, Prologue)

In 1996, the cooperation between China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan was formalized by what was called the Shanghai Five group, which in 2001 became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) (YAHUDA, 2020). The organization was created under the leadership of Beijing and counting with the participation of Russia and the Central Asian countries, the SCO aims to combat as well regional instability in Central Asia while limiting the influence of external actors in the region, such as the European Union and the United States (HORÁK, 2014), goals that are practically identical to those present in the Russian-led CSTO. The SCO also declares its intention to facilitate joint action in “strengthening peace and promoting regional security and stability”, focusing on the fight against “terrorism, separatism and [religious] extremism” (SCO Charter, Art.1), much akin to the phraseology contained within the CSTO’s Charter (CSTO Charter, Article 8) under Russian leadership. Despite being a Chinese initiative, Russia decided to join the SCO, because it allowed Moscow to monitor Beijing’s decisions concerning Eurasia, and also as a form of balancing the Chinese influence over the region (JESUS, 2014).

The creation of the SCO was also motivated by the Chinese and Russian critiques to the global “War on Terror” waged by the US and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), after the 9/11 attacks. Moscow and Beijing considered, at the time, the Western targeting on transnational Islamic terrorist organizations as a sort of “civilizational war” that would marginalize even moderate Islamic groups, which could be problematic to them, since Muslim communities are an important part of their societies. China and Russia preferred to interpret terrorism as a radical opposition to their governments, in a broader context of political extremism, driven by the Islamic separatist movements in Xinjiang and Chechnya, respectively (LAZZARI, 2011).

As yet another Russian-led initiative in Eurasia, it should be mentioned as well the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), formed in 2011 between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan⁷ and intended “to make the best use of mutually beneficial economic ties” (FPC, 2013) among former Soviet republics, while aiming to stimulate: 1) free flow of goods, capitals, services and labor 2) equal access to transport and energy infrastructure and 3) standard rules of customs and tariff regulation among its participants. The EEU, under the leadership of Moscow, actively sought to attract new members since its inception, and for some analysts, it represented Russia’s attempt to establish its control over the Post-Soviet space, creating a transnational entity having Moscow at its core (COHEN, 2013). Some observers assert that behind the regional economic integration lies a greater geopolitical goal: to create a supranational Eurasian space based on civilizational ties, similar to the European Union (DUGIN, 2016).

For Cohen (2013), the establishment of the EEU can be seen as an attempt to pave the way for Russian control over the post-Soviet space (and by extension, the Eurasian space), by creating a transnational entity that can potentially become a stronger Eurasian actor globally. Vladimir Putin himself, regarding the integration promoted by the EEU, expressed the following opinion in an article to the Russian periodic *Izvestia* “We suggest a powerful *supranational*

⁷ Kyrgyzstan and Armenia were added to the EEU in 2015.

association capable of becoming one of the poles in the modern world and serving as an efficient bridge between Europe and the dynamic Asia-Pacific region. [...] the Eurasian Union is an open project. We welcome other partners to it" (PUTIN, 2011; our emphasis).

Some contend that any integration process, however, and the EEU is no exception is, in fact, the result of the expansionist impulse inherent to the leading Great Powers in it (OCAMPO, 2009). With that in mind, Putin's strategy resides in the creation of an independent pole of power in an international multipolar system, through the use of the natural and industrial resources of the EEU members, in what can be considered as the most serious attempt by post-communist Russia to recreate a zone of influence deeply integrated with Moscow' (COHEN, 2013). Such an economic union, therefore, serves Moscow as a way to consolidate its position of great Eurasian power (BLANK, 2014), and as an "instrument to institutionalize its privileged status" (COOLEY, 2019, p. 114) and underscore Russia's Great Power position in the world.

Due to those above, a hidden geopolitical antagonism can be felt between Moscow and Beijing, often demonstrated by the latter's involvement in the former's "sphere of influence". Russia withholds a shared Soviet legacy (in political as well as in cultural terms) with Central Asia, for instance. Meanwhile, China has a long history of political, cultural and commercial relations with the region. For many centuries, the Chinese have referred to the vast area west of the historical Silk Road (2nd century BC-18th century AD) as *Xiyu* (西域) ("Western Regions") and it is based on this historical precedent that Beijing rekindled its ties with Central Asia after the Soviet dissolution in 1991 (ZHAO, 2016). Chinese economic influence there has grown significantly in the last years due to Beijing's investments in regional infrastructures within the frameworks of its trillionaire Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as well as by Chinese imports of Central Asia's natural resources (COOLEY, 2019). Beijing regards Central Asia as a source of oil and natural gas reserves, which can play an important role in China's strategy to reduce its dependence on energy supplies from war-prone regions, such as the Middle East, and also reducing its reliance on sea transports that leave it vulnerable to piracy or a possible naval blockade in the event of major crisis (ALBERT, 2019). China has been the most important exporting country for Central Asia, accounting for 40.9% of annual oil and gas exports (2015) (ZHOU; HE; YANG, 2020).

The BRI, more specifically, involves the construction of highways, ports, gas pipelines, and transcontinental railroads crossing (from the Chinese western-most territories) several countries, including some of the Central Asian States and Russia itself, intended to transport Chinese goods to the European market, with around 55% of GDP, 70% of the population and 75% of known world energy reserves involved in their scope. Such investments, due to their scale and volume, are gradually displacing Russia from its position of 'main regional geopolitical actor' (BEZERRA, 2018), while at the same time intensifying Chinese economic and political leadership in Eurasia, to the detriment of Moscow.

Be it as it may, to prevent Beijing from articulating with other Asian countries seems to be out of Moscow's possibilities, which brings difficulties to a regional "consortium leadership" between Russia and China, taking into account diverging geopolitical pretensions in terms of how Eurasia should be managed. As posited by some analysts, "China, which has increased its economic and financial strength, [...] widened its leadership potential and is gradually building a Chinese-centered system of international rules, norms, and institutions" (LEKSYUTINA, 2019, our translation).

Meanwhile, for authorities in Moscow, if Russia does not exercise a leadership role in Eurasia's institution-building, there cannot be any hope of a Russian 'pole' in a "multipolar" international system (TRENIN, 2001). Russia's very actions abroad reflect Moscow's commitment to rebuilding a zone of influence consistent with its aspirations as a Great Power. Thus, regional integration plans conducted by Moscow, both in the economic and military spheres, are of fundamental importance for the achievement of its leadership goals. Given these considerations, the objectives of Moscow in Eurasia in general and in its vicinity in particular, consist in 1) to position Russia as a pole of regional power and influence, 2) to sustain pro-Moscow-oriented political regimes in its neighborhood, and 3) to exclude or, at least, minimize the Chinese influence regionally (FROST, 2009). However, if during the 19th and 20th centuries Russia was considered the

leading power in Eurasian geopolitics, in the 21st century, China is the one-state ‘wrestling large areas in Asia away from Russia’ using its ever-growing economic leverage.⁸ This Chinese presence in many parts of Asia is thus encroaching on Russian-led EEU as well as on the CSTO, undermining Moscow’s efficiency as a Eurasian leader.

Figure 2 – Countries that participate at the same time in the Russian-led CSTO and the EEU



Source: Created by the authors, through link: <https://mapchart.net/world.html>

Moreover, arguably much of this geopolitical antagonism stems from Russia’s and China’s understanding of themselves as Civilization-States, therefore framing their domestic and foreign policy under such identities. Russia represents a civilization in itself (neither European nor Asian), which some consider being Eurasian (DUGIN, 2016; PUTIN, 2011) or properly Christian Orthodox (HUNTINGTON, 2011). China equally holds the interpretation of itself as a unique civilization in the world, or the “Middle Kingdom” (中國). The ancient Chinese cultural concept of *Tianxia* (天下) is related to this interpretation. It translates as “all-under-heaven” and dates back to the Zhou Dynasty (1046 BC - 256 BC), denoting the lands, space and area divinely appointed to the Emperor by universal and well-defined principles of order (YANG, 2015; ZHAO, 2005). In the context of a rising China, this concept has been influencing the Chinese political and intellectual elites, who defend ideas that derive from *Tianxia*, such as the international recognition of the country as a Great Power, the Chinese preponderance in Asia and the Western Pacific, and the building of a Sinocentric world order that would improve the current anarchic Westphalian system (JIANG, 2018, 2019; LAU, 2006; LIU, 2015; XI, 2014; YANG, 2015; ZHAO 2005, 2009).

The divergence between Russia’s and China’s visions of a future world order are even greater because, while Moscow envisages a tripolar order based on the interaction between the United States, China, and Russia, Beijing sees the US as its only true global competitor (LUKIN, 2018). From a security perspective, the Chinese government perceives the engagement with Eurasia and the promotion of regional integration as foreign policy priorities and an extension of its domestic policy towards its restive western province of Xinjiang, due to its heightened concerns that regional Uighur groups might mobilize externally to destabilize the political situation in China (COOLEY, 2019).

In Table 2 below, we present the main critical junctures in terms of regional organizations’ building in Eurasia, while underlying the events that worked as *permissive conditions* for their establishment, their character (be it political, economic, cultural, etc.), the country-initiator, as well as their outcome.

⁸ The Russian GDP stands for US\$ 1.7 trillion as of 2019, while that of China stood above US\$ 14.3 trillion in the same year, according to data from the World Ban.

Table 2 - Critical Junctures and Regional Organizations' Building in Eurasia (Institutions whose Initiative were taken either by Russia or China)

PERMISSIVE CONDITION	ORGANIZATION	REGIONS INVOLVED	CHARACTER	INITIATIVE	OUTCOME
The End of the Cold War (1991)	CIS - 1991	Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Caucasus	Political, Economic, Cultural	Russia	Ineffective
The 9/11 Terrorist Attack (2001)	SCO - 2002	East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe	Political, Economic, Security	China	Limited Efficacy
	CSTO - 2002	Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Caucasus	Political, Security	Russia	Limited Efficacy
2008 Financial Crisis - Rise of Economic Regionalism	EEU - 2011	Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Caucasus	Economic	Russia	Limited Efficacy
	BRI - 2013	South Asia, Central Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle-East, North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa	Economic	China	Partially Effective (Evolving)

SOURCE: Adapted from Calder and Ye (2004). Based on Lüthi (2010), Vámos (2010), Radchenko (2015), Shtraks (2015), Muzaffar and Khan (2016), Bolt and Cross (2018), Cooley (2019), Korolev (2019) and Li and Poh (2019).

Global critical junctures at different points in time after the 1990s and into the 2000s prompted both Russia and China to implement schemes of regional integration in Eurasia with similar character and sometimes with identical goals. The economic character of organizations such as the CIS and the EEU (Russian-led) contrasts with the Chinese BRI. States involved in these projects often find themselves balancing between Russian and Chinese uncoordinated interests. For instance, after the SCO's foundation, authorities in Beijing intended to strengthen the economic aspect of that organization (by establishing a free trade zone and a development bank). However, Moscow did not back this proposal due to "Russian fears of institutionalizing Chinese economic dominance" (COOLEY, 2019, p. 126) in Central Asia and beyond.

As multiple states are either uncomfortable with Moscow's geopolitical enveloping intentions (as demonstrated by the modest adhesion to institutions such as the EEU and CSTO) to as well as with Beijing's growing economic say in the region (by fears of becoming too embroiled and dependent on Chinese financial grasp), most of the elements that pervade the very nature of Russia-China relations, as well as their interactions with their neighbors, present a conundrum for the establishment of a consortium leadership in Eurasia, thus explaining this 'organizational gap' in the region.

Conclusion

The Russian view of world order contains the conviction that it must hold a sphere of influence in Eurasia, particularly among the former Soviet republics, due to the history of the Soviet Union and the Russian Empire and its contemporary security requirements. Russia does not treat post-Soviet states as truly sovereign in that the Kremlin leadership believes it has the right to set conditions on their policy choices. In other words, the Russian government assumes it is entitled to ensure these states do not take actions that undermine Russian interests. Russia's intervention in Georgia in 2008, when it positioned troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and more prominently the annexation of Crimea, in eastern Ukraine in 2014, are examples of this long-held belief.

The Chinese self-perception and worldview clash with those of Russia's, once it understands itself as the "Middle Kingdom" since antiquity, and believes it has the historical right to be the preponderant power in Asia and the Western Pacific, as well as the center of a Sinocentric world order. For China, the engagement with Eurasia and the promotion of regional integration are foreign policy priorities with concern about the region as the source of terrorist threats that need to be countered before they endanger Chinese domestic security. Also, the region is seen by Beijing as a pivotal supplier of

energy resources in order to guarantee China's energy security and reduce its dependence on unstable regions, such as the Middle East.

The problem when it comes to the prospects of a 'condominium leadership' between Russia and China in the Eurasian landscape resides in the fact that Beijing and Moscow are both willing to play the role of leader in Eurasia through organizations such as the SCO and the Belt and Road Initiative (on the side of China), and the EEU and CSTO (those being led by Russia). Those fundamental inclinations held by authorities in Beijing and Moscow coupled with realist concerns (in terms of mutual distrust and territorial issues) presented in the first section of our paper are elements that help us comprehend the absence of an overarching organization in Eurasia under the shared leadership of its two most prominent Great Powers.

Finally, applying the historical institutionalist approach to the research allowed us to observe the dynamics of the Sino-Russian relations since 1950, demonstrating that their main hurdles have been asymmetry of power, lack of transparency due to the autocratic character of both regimes, and great power competition. We have been able to identify that when they cooperated or entered into conflict, as literature informs, China tended to have an advantage over the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and this trend has continued after its dissolution and the emergence of an independent Russia, despite a few instances of mutual benefits in bilateral cooperative arrangements. Also, the use of original archival material showed that their opaque nature and great power rivalry generated high levels of distrust about each other's intentions, rendering frailty to their alliance in the long run.

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