Michał Lubina
Jagiellonian University

Back to the Past: The Present Model of Sino-Russian Relations as a Return to their Initial Asymmetry

Introduction

Russian-Sino relations are one of the most important political issues of the modern world, due to the size of the mentioned countries, geographical location, economic and military potential. Russia, 22 years ago one of the global superpowers, has lost its importance; nevertheless it is still the biggest country in the world and a member of the UN Security Council. China the most populated country in the world, and after having successfully gone through market reforms, is on the best way now to become the second superpower. Therefore, Russia and China are both the main actors on the international stage and understanding their relationships is crucial for the whole world.

By basing on the neorealist's perspective in international relations and believing that interests, not values, constitute the core of politics, this paper claims that Russian-Sino relations are based on the traditional imperatives of Realpolitik: national security, power projection and management of strategic balance. Ideas serve here only as an instrumental basis – to rationalize and legitimize the pursuit of concrete national interests. Sino-Russian relations thus are a model equivalent of Palmerston's famous maxim "nations have no permanent friends or allies, they have only permanent interests".

This paper aims to give an insight into Chinese-Burmese relations, focusing on two main theses. One is that Sino-Russian relations are experiencing a "growing asymmetry". It is Beijing that is starting to become

a more powerful partner, affecting a whole range of Russian policies, both foreign and domestic. On the other hand, Russia is not central to Chinese foreign policy, and relations with Moscow, although important, are only one supporting element in China's overall strategy. This work agrees with Bobo Lo's thesis regarding an "Axis of Convenience" (Lo, 2008) between China and Russia. That is, that both countries need each other and benefit from stable and pragmatic relationship. However, it goes further by saying that since 2008 the situation has changed rapidly and the processes described in Lo's book went further – into Beijing's favor. Although both countries benefit from this pragmatic relation, it is China that wins more and this situation begins to multiply, thus a "growing asymmetry".

The other thesis is that this kind of situation is nothing new in Sino-Russian relations, for it is simply a "back to the past" predicament. The present model is a modern day equivalent to a 17th century configuration. Then it was China that was stronger with Russia, although weaker, not being treated in a traditional vassal network: it existed apart from the Sinocentric world. It was weaker and less significant than China, however, the position of Moscow was nevertheless better than that of the Western powers. This made it possible for Russia to use a series of opportunities and gain profits, mainly commercial. Moscow was able to make good use of this situation. In a way, this situation is being repeated now, if we look closer at Sino-Russian relations now, we can trace some patterns that resemble the initial *modus vivendi* of Russia and China.

Sino-Russia Relations through an Academic perspective

In modern times, that is since the mid 19th century, it was Russia which always had an upper hand in Sino-Russian relations. The period between1860 until 1991 can be called the "Russian advantage", since it was constantly Russia (first as the Russian Empire and then as the Soviet Union) that was the stronger partner in relations. This ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 1991 both countries were in a more or less equal position. In the coming two decades, however, it was China who would become stronger.

The 1990s in Sino-Russian relations were characterized mostly by two very important aspects: the normalization of relations (the partnership became "normal", it's a mix of good and bad, the successful goes along with

the less successful) and the ideological-axiological rapprochement against the West (both needed a stronger position in dealing with their most important partner – the West (USA) (Wilson 2004, 61–143; Wishnick 2001, 118–134; Garnett 2000, 47–141). It was however, not an alliance, just a building-up of their position. In the 1990s Sino-Russian relations served as an appendage for the relations of these countries with the West (particularly in economical sphere). This decade was also marked by Russia's phobias about the Far Eastern Region (Lukin 2007, 438–450), and – on the contrary – with the biggest success of this decade: the demarcation of borders (although not fully finished until 2008) (Iwasita 2006, 15–34; Woskriesienskij 2004,494; Titarenko 1994, 130).

The 2000s were characterized in the beginning by the continuation of the 1990s model. Sino-Russian relations were hostage to the relations of these countries with the west, the best example being the actions of Putin after 9/11. (Huei-Ming Mao2003, 10; Trenin 2007, 3). In the mid 2000s, however, Russia, backed by the rising oil prices that allowed Moscow to play a more important role in the international sphere, set up for a new "Bismarcan policy" (Yu Bin 2002, 1). This was supposed to be a "new concert of powers" (Acharya 1999, 89) and the best symbol of this attempt was the ESPO pipeline (Petersen, Barysch 2011,16). However, in the late 2000sit turned out that this policy was too ambitious for the capabilities of Russia. Moscow then turned to China as a leading partner in Asia. That meant growing economical cooperation (China became Russia's second trade partner), which turned from insignificant status in the 1990s into one of the most important factors in their overall relations (Lotspeich 2010, 94–99). Finally, both sides were able to finish the demarcation of the border; some analysts say that it was the biggest achievement of Putin's foreign policy. (Trenin 2012, 9)

The Sino-Russian relations are based on what Bobo Lo described as an "axis of convenience". Russia and China inject a considerable amount of realism into their interactions. They recognize that some problems and tensions remain, although this does not stop them from doing business. In general, their summits are full of extravagant commitments, however, this is an unsentimental affair as it is driven less by ideational convergence than cold-eyed perception of national interest. In this view, Sino-Russian relations are a model equivalent of Palmerston's famous maxim "nations have no permanent friends or allies, they have only permanent interests". The Sino-Russian convergence is not a result of a mutual

epiphany, like-mindedness or empathy. It reflects the importance of traditional Realpolitik imperatives: national security, power projection and management of strategic balance. Ideas serve here only as an instrumental basis, to rationalize and legitimize the pursuit of concrete national interests. Geopolitics matter: the ruling elites still consider the realistic strategic culture as the basis – in their world power relations dominate at the expense of allegedly universal values. Only the language has changed. Instead of zero-sum calculus or balance of power, they speak of interdependency and universal threats and challenges. However, the priorities remain the same as the preservation of geopolitical space and the projection of power still remain central priorities (e.g. Central Asia). Finally, it is pragmatism that rule in their relations. Neither side counts on the other for support when it comes to the hard issues of power projection. They do not trust each other and do not count on each other, and consequently are not disappointed. They have ambivalent views of each other, though they manage to rise above such misgivings to their mutual profit, out of political convenience. They don't have excessive expectations of the other, there is no over taxation of optimism. The find each other useful; much of their mutual progress has been unspectacular although it has always been useful and politically palatable. It serves both as a means of self-affirmation and to maximize their clout in a Western-dominated world. They both use themselves as cards in a game with the West. To conclude Lo's observations, it is a limited partnership and not strategic. It is limited in scope, depth and mutual trust (Russian Far East, economical dependence, Central Asia, East Asia). (Lo 2008, 3–173);

Since the late 2000s, and particularly after the 2008 crisis, new characteristics in Sino-Russian relations have come to light. It is what I call in my PhD thesis "the growing asymmetry" in favor of Beijing. The asymmetry in favor of China comes to light when referring to perspectives, interests and capabilities. China is becoming a major partner in almost every mentioned aspect (with the exception of military cooperation, though the gap is much smaller than it used to be). Russia is of secondary importance for China (strategic rear, raw material appendage, source of military technology, useful partner worldwide and a good market); China is of primary importance for Russia (is critical in restoring the global status of Russia, to maximize its foreign policy options and in support of its aspirations to play an increasingly influential role in the world; and it is critical for the fate of Far East). For Russia China's

overall importance is higher than that of any other country, with the exception of the United States.

The "growing asymmetry" is not considered in Moscow as a threat, at least for now. Moscow consequently strengthens its cooperation with Beijing, seeing China's rise more as a chance than as a threat (Trenin 2012, 3). This is due to several reasons. Although Russia is still unable to set normal relations with the West (it cannot vet it nor cannot it join in), China's rise is nevertheless not bothering Moscow. Russia is still concentrated more on the West, in particular the United States. China is more tactful. It is not teaching Moscow how to behave or conduct internal issues and it did not celebrate the fall of the USSR. Moreover, Russia believes that China's strategic geopolitical ambitions are focused on the southeastern direction, and Russia is right, at least for now. That makes Russia apparently the only country in Asia that is not afraid of a growing China (Trenin 2012, 19). Russia knows perfectly well that Moscow's alleged alliance with the West is Chinese elites' nightmare and Beijing will do a lot in order for it to not happen. Furthermore, the Russians, although impressive about Chinese successes, are still skeptical about the ultimate success of Chinese reforms; they know that a lot of trouble lies ahead. Finally, China's rise makes U.S. dominance grow weak and thus creating a more balanced international system. This can give Moscow more space to maneuver. Russia, although afraid of being "vassalised", knows that China's national resentments are focused more on the West than on Russia (Trenin 2012, 42–44)

Although Russia is not perfectly satisfied with the "growing asymmetry", it knows that this poses no fundamental fear for the stability of a state or a regime. This factor contributes to the fact that even though there is a "growing asymmetry", the relations are strong and stable and they will be stay in this state for the near future. For Russia, it simply pays off to cooperate with China and on Chinese conditions. In the Asia-Pacific the ideal partner for Russia would be Japan, however, that will not occur until the Kuryle dispute is done. Given this situation, Russia chooses to hitch its bandwagon to China. Even thoughit looses political space to maneuver, it gains participation (although on a second-level status) in the most important issues of the region, like that of Korea (Lo 2008, 128–124).

A similar mechanism works in the Russian Far East. Moscow would like to balance China's influence by taking investments from various

countries; however, only China invests there on a major scale. Given no option, Moscow has had to choose China's engagement, for if you do not have what you like, you must like what you have, and its better to have this than none. Without external funds, the region would not be developed. Thus, China is important for Russia and sometimes essential. Moscow is aware that in the long-term perspective it is China that poses the biggest threat to the Far Eastern region (Trenin 2012, 44). Nevertheless, knowing is one thing and willing to change is another. Moscow seems to have no idea how to handle this issue. The result is the even larger asymmetry with Russia fainting and China growing.

This is combined with the Russian internal situation. The Russian elites are more interested in power projection and making their own business than to responding to real political challenges. They seem not to realize that balancing the Western vector using China is unrealistic, and understanding China as a counterpart to the West is pure "wishful thinking". This leads to an almost colonial dependence on China. Finally, Beijing has learnt how to deal with Russia. It gives her all the honors, speaks of her as a great superpower, while at the same time ruthlessly uses its own advantage to maximize its own options. This deepens the "growing asymmetry".

Therefore the present Sino-Russian relations are being characterized by growing asymmetry in favor of Beijing. It is China that is becoming the stronger partner now, which is implied by its will for many areas of cooperation. At the same time, however, Russia is not losing much on it, as Moscow's prime political goals are set on the West rather than Asia, which enables the Kremlin to use the relationship with China as a card in political games with the West. Both countries, therefore, gain from these relations, but it is China that gains more. Thus, Sino-Russian relations can be described, by paraphrasing the popular Chinese statement, as an "asymmetrical win-win situation".

This is nothing new in Sino-Russian relations, for it is simply going "back to the past". The present model is the modern equivalent to a17th century configuration. In this model it was China that was stronger, while Russia, although weaker, was not being treated asa traditional vassal network; it existed apart from the Sinocentric world. It was weaker and less significant than China, however, Moscow's position was nevertheless better than that of Western powers. This enabled Russia to use a series of opportunities and gain profits, mainly commercial. Moscow was able to

make good use of this situation. In a way, this situation is being repeated now, if we look closer at current Sino-Russian relations, we can trace some patterns that resemble the initial modus vivendi between Russia and China.

Sino-Russian relations in the 17th century

In Russia, as well as in Poland, it is widely believed that in Russian-Sino relations it was Russia that has always had the stronger position. Such opinions as this one are quite typical: "the relations were taking place in the conditions of growing military, economical and psycho political advantage of Russia" (Chiny-Rosja 2001, 16). These kinds of descriptions do not take into consideration the very fact that the Russian-Sino relations had not begun in the 19th century. Since then it was indeed Russia who had the upper hand, however, the real "first contact" between China and Russia had already occurred in the 17th century. At that time it was China who was stronger and could implement the Sinocentric model of mutual relations. The importance of this model lies not only in historical research as it still has far fletching consequences for today. When it comes to modern Sino-Russian relations, their very nature start to resemble this initial model. Of course, the external conditions and political decorum changed since the 17th century, though the very essence of their relations comeback to this starting point. It is thus essential to introduce this model.

The first contact between Russia and China was a side effect of Russian expansion towards East Asia. Since the late 16th century Moscow was pushing eastwards to Siberia and Okhotsk Seat. As a leading Russian historian put it, "the East meant great opportunities" (Heller 2000, 245). This can be comparable to the American conquest of the Wild West (Voskresensky 2004, 405), with one important difference; the Americans, contrary to the Russians, did not face any strong state that could block their expansions. Russia on the other hand did: China.

The very reason for the clash between Russia and China was the Russian colonization of the Amur lands. The Russians came in search for fur, led by famous explorer (or conquistador) Yerofey Khabarov, though they soon started to colonize the little inhabited lands around the Amur River. The Russian knowledge of political conditions in the region was very limited.

One of the field commanders, Francbekov, sent a letter to the Chinese court demanding subjugation and threatening that if he was refused, he would be forced to send a six thousand punitive army (a perspective of a six thousand invading army must have been a real horror for the Chinese court who at that time had an army more populous than the whole population of Siberia) (Dmochowski 2001,136). The Manchu court in Beijing, however, was no better in understanding the external world. Until 1670 the Manchu believed that the Russians and Cossacks were two different nations, with the former being continental and the latter maritime (Mencall 1972,34). Most importantly, the Qing court failed to recognize that the Russian incursions into Amur were not just bandit raids into their territory, and not an attempt to colonize these lands. When it finally did recognize, however, it reacted with force. In 1658 the Chinese punitive army destroyed the weak Russian forces and cleared the Russian settlements.

When the Russians returnedin the 1670s after taking over Albazin[1], Manch, the most important fort in the region, was really annoyed. The Russian presence became "a thornintheir side" (Rodzinski 1992, 330). It meant a potentially strong enemy in their Manchu underbelly, something that could not be tolerated. The Manchu court, who finally realized that Cossacks are Russian lieges, presented an ultimatum to the Russians: they pull back, they will be rewarded with trade opportunities. They refused and thus the Kangxi Emperor dispatched an army to Albazin in 1685, which forced Moscow to send an embassy of Fyodor Golovin. This embassy reached a compromise with the Chinese, known

[1] In the meantime there was a fascinating interlude with a Polish adventurer, Nicefor Jaksa Czernichowski in the main role. His story resembles a Hollywood film. He was a Polish commander who was taken into Russian custody and sent to Siberia. There he lived peacefully but allegedly the Russian voivode raped his sister. Czernichowski in retaliation rebelled and with a team of other Polish fugitives went into unknown. He crossed the Lena and reached the Amur River, where he came across the remnants of Albazin. There he founded a new town, Jaksa (Jaxa), which soon became an important trading post, with its own administration and Polish as an official language. Chernichowski ruled for around 10 years in which he was able to remain independent from both Russia and China. It seems that the Manchu court found him much more bearable than the Russians (contrary to them he did not conduct raids into Manchuria) and allowed him to stay. Finally, however, he surrounded by the Russian tsar. The Tsar first sentenced him to death, however, on the next day he cancelled the edict and nominated Chernichowski a voivode of Albazin in 1672. After his death the Russians took over Albazin (Kajdański 2005: 213–225).

as the Treaty of Nerchinsk (1689).[2] This Treaty, upgraded in Kyakhta in 1727, set a model for Sino-Russian relations that survived until the mid 19th century.

It was a compromise on Chinese terms though China was stronger. Politically and militarily China has the a better negotiation position, as during the negotiations in Nerchinsk, the Chinese delegates were backed by an army 12 thousand strong, whereas the Russians had only 1400 soldiers (Voskresenskyi 2004, 406). Russia on the other hand was preoccupied mostly with the European issues. Beijing understood, however, that sole military power would not help in the longer perspective as the Chinese knew very well that victories over Russian settlers are of no importance as long as these settlers come back again and again. It was therefore better to strike a permanent deal with the Russians in order to make them stay away from Amur (Mencall 1972, 171). So it was a combination of stick and carrot tactics: the former was a military advantage and the latter, trade opportunities.

This helped China to implement its own conditions. According to the treaty, all of the Amur basin was to remain in Chinese hands, and Albazin itself must be destroyed and abandoned. Russians were to keep the Baikal region and lands near the Okhotsk Sea (Dmochowski 2001, 197). Thanks to their willingness to make concessions, they were granted with trade opportunities, which they soon fulfilled. Until the mid 19th century economical issues dominated Sino-Russian relations. The Russians were selling fur and leather and buying tea, various kinds of cloth, china, enamel and porcelain (Mencall 1972, 170). Both sides benefited from trade, first made by caravans, and later concentrated on the border town, Kyakhta, known at that time for its wealth and called "the Venice of Sands" (Kajdański 2005,218).

What is more important, however, is the fact that the Treaty of Nerchinsk (and its later upgrade in Kyakhta) helped to develop a specific Russian position in China. This treaty was signed between equal sovereign states, which was a major departure from traditional Chinese practices (the Portuguese in Macao, by comparison, were allowed their semi-independence status by an act of generosity unsubstantiated by a treaty) (Spence 1990, 66). Russia was therefore the first foreign country to sign an

[2] The translator of this treaty from the Russian mission was a Polish convert to Orthodox Christianity, Andrzej Biełobocki. He translated the Treaty from Latin to Russian (the Chinese translators where French and Portuguese Jesuits).

equal treaty with China (Voskresenskyi 2004, 407). Moscow's specific position was strengthened by the fact that dealings with Russians had been conducted not through the Ministry of Rituals, which handled the so-called tributary relations with such countries as Holland, Spain and Portugal. Instead, they were conducted though a special bureau, the Lifan Yuan (known for dealing with Mongol issues before). As Jonathan Spence writes, "by putting Russian affairs under this bureau, the Manchu tacitly admitted that their northern neighbors were a special case" (Spence 1990, 67). Russia was too strong to be put along other "vassal" states. Although it was weaker and less significant than China, and in the eyes of Beijing certainly not equal (it was impossible by the very definition of their Sino-centric world outlook), Moscow's position was nevertheless better than that of the Western powers. This enabled Russia to use a series of opportunities to gain profits, mainly commercial. To conclude this with one sentence: both countries gained from these relations, though it was China that gained more.

As Mark Mencall writes in his in-depth analysis of 17th century Sino-Russian relations, the Nerchinsk-Kyakhta treaty system created "neutral" institutions, which could be incorporated into the structure of assumptions of each society without infringing upon the prerogatives or sensibilities of the other. The system established very narrow paths of access from each society into the other and permitted each to control those paths on its own side (free access might upset either side's internal socio-cultural equilibrium). At the same time, access was sufficient enough so that neither party felt the need to go to war to obtain greater access to the other empire. The same model, although on a much lesser scale, functioned in Canton (and in Deshima, Japan) (Mencall 1972, 274–275).

The main reason why this system was so stable and lasted for so long is that it was based on what Mencall called "cultural neutrality". According to this researcher, until the late 18th century the European powers entering Asia behaved on a basis of Grotius' 'natural law' (jus gentium). The Russians, like the Dutch or Portuguese, could begin to accept Chinese ceremonial practices such as kowtow, as a custom that did not imply anything more than recognition under the natural law of the emperor's dignity in his own land. The Nerchinsk and Kyakhta treaties were based on this 'natural law of nations' and that is why the order lasted so long. It collapsed in the mid 19th century due to changes that were initiated by the intellectual revolution of the European Enlightenment in the late

18th century. The positivistic attitude put the concept of natural law outside the law entirely and instead introduced the construct of "family of nations" in the center of political philosophy. Whereas under natural law the family of nations was presumed to be a universal continuum, under the developing positive law it was redefined as those states that adhered to accepted international legal practices as proclaimed by the European states acting in concert – entry into the family of nations was formalized and symbolized by 'recognition', a concept that is purely European and positivist. To 'modernization' in the sense of 'Europeanization' started to be required for participation in the international community. This intellectual change was accompanied by a growth in Europe's technological ability to insist on, even by force (e.g. gunboat) to others' adherence to these new rules (Mencall 1972, 278–273). In other words, for a European Ambassador to China, a kowtow before the 18th century was not a problem; it was a recognition of the emperor's right (although, of course, in an extremely unpleasant way). Later, after this positivistic change, it was the volition of his human rights.[3] Furthermore, the European powers in the 19th century were strong enough to implement their own ways of international relations on China, the Westernocentric one that they considered universal. This, as a side effect, contributed to the collapse of theNerchinks-Kyakhta model of Sino-Russian relations, as Russia had hitched to the bandwagon of the Western powers and had begun exploiting China with them.

Conclusions

In 21st century, Sino-Russian relations came back to the past. Although the conditions and political decorum changed, some of the most important aspects remain. If we compare their 17th century relations with current ones, we can trace some striking similarities. The most important one is that China is much stronger now in this relationship (as it used to be in 17th century) and Russia accepts this fact (albeit quietly) and adheres to this situation by taking as many opportunities as possible. This leads

[3] Even the Russians changed their attitude in this Positivistic way. The result was the spectacular failure of theRussian Embassy to China headed by YuriyGolovkin in 1806. Golovkindid not want to hear the adviceof one of his best civil servants, a Pole Jan Potocki (a leading orientalists) and rejected the kowtow. He was expelled. (Kajdański2005: p. 111–153)

to the predominance of trade in the economic sphere their relations. Secondly, although Russia is weaker, it is still strong enough not to fit into the category of Chinese "modern vassals", such as Burma, Laos, Cambodia, thus it is again outside the China-centered world. China knows that Russia is still too strong, not to mention too proud, to be provoked or humiliated and chooses to appease Moscow in order to keep her on Beijing's side. Russia plays a delicate role in China's relationships. If Russia tilted too much to the United States, becoming a junior partner of Washington, China's overall strategic position would dramatically worsen. Russia would stop being the 'safe rear' of China, leading to fears in Beijing of a 'strategic encirclement' by the United States. This is a pragmatic equivalent of 17th century Manchu politics, which wanted to have a long-lasting deal with Moscow not to make them endanger the Amur basin. This deal was made on Chinese terms, though with benefits for Russia as well. So, the modern "asymmetrical win-win situation" is just an adaptation of the 17th century model of relations: both countries benefits from their relations, however, it is China that benefits more. Finally, with reference to Mencall's "cultural neutralism" in their 17th century relations, this can be matched with their axiological opposition against Western values, such as democracy and human rights, and their normative convergence. The limited communication between both societies is now being repeated and reflected in the famous sentence that "China-Russia relations are hot on the top, but cold on the bottom" (Tikhvinskyi 2008: 219), which doesn't bother the Chinese and Russian leaders who have more important issues on their agenda than taking care of the bilateral friendship between their societies. The most important common factor, however, is their pragmatism. In the 21st century, much like in the 17th century, China and Russia do not have much in common. They are two different worlds, maybe even two different civilizations. They do not like each other and do not trust one another; however, they want to make a business and do it successfully.

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