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Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship: Forging a Strategic Partnership?

Maria Raquel Freire and Carmen Amado Mendes

Abstract: Russia and China are two big players in the international system, both of which share interests and concerns and compete for preponderance and affirmation at the regional level. As a framework for political-military cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) frames this relationship in an institutional setting that might be understood as a tool for *rapprochement* between Moscow and Beijing or as a strategic manoeuvre for balancing an unbalanced international order. Thus the following question arises: is Russian-Chinese cooperation discourse mere political rhetoric or does it imply the intentional forging of a goal-orientated partnership? The relationship between Russia and China in political and security terms reveals identifiable common concerns, such as counter-terrorism or the fight against organised crime, while simultaneously masking the underpinning drivers, based on *realpolitik* dynamics and image construction on both sides (power projection, regional affirmation). This means that the strategic partnership dialogue between Moscow and Beijing is still far from being real. *Realpolitik* considerations rise above institutional goals, showing the lines of (dis)continuity in discourse and practice in this bilateral relationship.

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Keywords: China, Russia, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, strategic partnership

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Introduction

In an increasingly interdependent world, the relationship between the People's Republic of China (China) and the Russian Federation (Russia) might have a strong impact on the redefinition of the international system in a post-Cold War context. The increasingly strategic relevance of Asia in international relations allows this geopolitical redesign and raises several questions about the scope of the changes under way.

The Sino-Russian relationship is not only shaped by the international and regional framework, but also influenced by the internal developments taking place within each of these giants. The end of the Cold War and the new geopolitical position of states in Asia, alongside the promotion of a unipolar world order put forward by the United States of America (USA), has led to a reorganisation of the existing rules of the game. Indeed, the geopolitical game in Asia has been embedded in complexity, with rules not always clear, procedures often ambiguous, and sometimes dubious alignments.

In this context of complexity, this paper¹ discusses the relationship between China and Russia at the bilateral and multilateral levels, particularly within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) framework, questioning whether Sino-Russian cooperation in this institutional framing is based just on political rhetoric or if it implies deeper political and security commitments, resulting in a strong strategic partnership. Thus, based on the assumption that China and Russia share interests as major players in the international system, but also compete for dominance, this article's aim is threefold: first, to deconstruct the elements of cooperation versus competition behind this relationship, which is constrained in a dual power logic of convergence and divergence; second, to identify the underlying dynamics in Chinese and Russian policy-making that help explain their (in)ability to surpass power politics competition and build a solid strategic partnership; and third, to analyse this relationship within the framework of the SCO, highlighting how the cooperation/competition dichotomy is internalised in their dealings, thus questioning whether a political-institutional, security and economic framework such as the SCO could become more than just a framework for larger geopolitical manoeuvres.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2nd Global International Studies Conference, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 23-26 July 2008, with support from the Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon) and the International Studies Association.

Following this line of reasoning, the paper starts by identifying these aspects in the relationship between Russia and China, highlighting domestic versus foreign policy elements and how these are dealt with by both countries. In this definition of foreign policy goals, issues about national identity, economic goals and geostrategic and security aims become clear as primary concerns shape political options and their means of implementation. The paper then proceeds to analyse the Sino-Russian relationship in its bilateral and multilateral contexts, identifying how cooperation and competition dynamics intertwine. Is this bilateral relationship driven by *realpolitik* thinking? By regional solidarity? Or by both? This paves the way for a look at the relation within the SCO's institutional framework and the analysis of the so-called strategic partnership in terms of its possibilities and limits. The paper concludes that the building of a genuine strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing is still far from being real. *Realpolitik* considerations rise above institutional goals, networks of integration between Russia and China are still very weak, and identitarian approaches to national affirmation clash in their aims, showing the lines of (dis)continuity of this bilateral relationship in both discourse and practice.

Past and Present: Internal and External Constraints in the Redesigning of the Sino-Russian Relationship

Chinese foreign policy has been mainly defined by two domestic priorities: political stability and economic growth. The first priority has led the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to use nationalism as a factor of national unity and a source of legitimacy in order to avoid challenges to its permanence in power. The second one benefits from a stable regional environment, leading to a pragmatic foreign policy (Mendes 2008: 108). This pragmatism translates into the maintenance of the status quo regarding Taiwan and the territorial disputes in the China Seas and, in Central Asia, in the development of good relations with the countries bordering the province of Xinjiang: Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Through the building of economic links and investments in infrastructures, the Chinese policy of soft *rapprochement* based essentially on economic diplomacy has removed the previous mistrust and allowed a solution to the existing border disputes (Atal 2005: 101). This

pragmatism in China's relations with its neighbours is particularly noticeable with regard to Russia, as further analysed.

This pragmatic vision relates to a new alignment of Chinese foreign policy, according to a report published in January 2008: the "Peace Dove Strategy" (CASS 2008). This new concept uses a metaphor to explain the priorities of Chinese foreign policy, represented by the body of a dove: the United Nations emerges as the top priority, or the head of the bird; Asia is the chest, in the form of an "Asian Association", a future regional bloc led by China; Europe is one wing and the United States of America (which belongs to APEC – Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) is the other; and Latin America, Africa and Oceania form the tail (Xinhua 2008). This study by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, by stressing the importance for China of creating and leading that "Asian Association" representing the whole of Asia, is demonstrative of Chinese intentions to make sure that Russia will not take the regional lead to the disadvantage of Beijing.

China's commitment to the multilateral level has been part of its soft power diplomacy (Shambaugh 2005), or the ability to influence by persuasion and not through coercion, through activities that are beyond the field of security (Kurlantzick 2006: 1). In a clear logic of soft power, the Chinese leaders use trade, foreign investment, tourism, education and economic aid, mainly in developing countries; and Central Asia is no exception. For example, at the 2006 SCO Summit, China allocated to Central Asia a credit line of 900 million USD, namely for Chinese exports (Godement 2006: 58). The loans have also been used in joint projects within the framework of SCO, directed to extend the road and rail links between China and Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, although they are apparently considered in the interest of the whole organisation (Moiseyev 2007).

As far as Russian foreign policy is concerned, it has assumed an increasingly tough and independent tone, with a centralised and "vertical" model of governance, incarnated in former President Vladimir Putin. The main objectives of this policy are based on Russia's desire to take on an increasingly active role in the international arena, reversing the introspective policy-orientation and ideological vacuum that followed the disintegration of the Soviet Union (Freire 2007: 70-72).

The rise in energy resource prices has allowed sharp internal economic growth in Russia, giving it the means to implement a more independent foreign policy, and the fall in energy prices threatens that

growth. The growing assertiveness in Russian foreign policy is a reflection of both domestic and international trends. In addition, the issue of national pride and identity cannot be neglected. In fact, the vast majority of Russians do not regard themselves as Europeans or as Asians, but simply as Russians (71 per cent of the population), assuming their unique identity and the role of bridge-builders between Europe and Asia. This pragmatic and realist policy combines and adds the Western and Asian vectors to the more relevant circle of Russian foreign policy – the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), identified in the official documents as a preferential area of actuation (Russian Federation 2000a, 2000b, 2000c).

With the relevance of the Asian perspective increasing on the Russian agenda, the “looking East” policy is demonstrative of the changes under way. With a *realpolitik* approach and to counterbalance the rise of China and other regional players such as India, but also to contain the USA, this policy results from a combination of an increase in domestic power and from Russia’s will to raise its status in the international arena (Freire 2008a). Thus, it seems clear that “Russian policy with reference to Asia is not the result of doctrine, but based on pragmatism” (Slezneva 2003: 19), as well as being strongly driven by its desire to avoid engagement by external players in this area defined as being of vital interest to Russian national goals. Therefore, and following this reasoning, this regional involvement seems to reflect a sense of threat containment regarding Western involvement in areas defined by Russia as falling within its sphere of influence, such as Central Asia and the South Caucasus. However, it also carries the idea of developing a “Northeast Asian Co-prosperity Zone”, from which Russia might benefit, thus implying an inversion to the anti-USA rationale, a new type of alignment that is not established “as ‘against’, but rather ‘for’, a common cause ([such as] stable economic development)” (Voskressenski 2007: 9, 26).²

In this context of internal and external assertion, Russia’s participation in the SCO seeks to project its presence in the area while simultaneously containing the rise of China and India. Moreover, it also works as a containment instrument restricting the involvement of the USA and other players in the region. This complex game, central to the current

2 This understanding points to the concept of multi-factor equilibrium as the pragmatic tool of promoting Russian national interests in Greater Eastern Asia. See Voskressenski (2007: 14-15).

geo-strategic redefinition of the area, takes place at the intersection of political, economic, social and security vectors, with crossing logics and dynamics of (mis)alignment in international affairs, which are fundamental for dealing with the geopolitical map where Russia and China meet.

In short, Chinese and Russian foreign policies are shaped by domestic factors and priorities that result, in each case, in the need to display an assertive posture in the regional arena. The Russian armed intervention in Georgia in August 2008 and the subsequent recognition of the independence of the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is a good example of this.³ Nevertheless, assertiveness and a politics of affirmation need not be matched with the use of armed force. Softer means such as economic or cultural attraction are often used by these two players as instruments for their own affirmation (the Russian approach towards Central Asia is a good example). Simultaneously, this assertive tone has been combined with the pragmatism needed for the pursuit of Russian and Chinese national interests. This pragmatism, visible in the current Sino-Russian relationship, is nevertheless built on a differentiated understanding of identity and integration, which contributes to our argument that competition, despite shared interests and concerns, is the dominant feature in the redefinition of this relationship, both in bilateral and multilateral contexts.

Before the August 2008 Summit of the SCO that took place in Dushanbe, Russia sought support for its manoeuvres in the South Caucasus from Central Asian capitals as well as China. However, without prior consultation of its SCO partners, Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was not a safe diplomatic move. Moreover, the other member states criticised Russia for the violation of a fundamental principle of the Organisation, namely that of preventing separatism. Nevertheless, the final declaration of the 2008 SCO Summit stated the deep concern with the issue of South Ossetia and called on "the relevant parties to resolve existing problems in a peaceful way through dialogue, to make efforts for reconciliation and facilitation of negotiations". In addition, the document welcomed:

3 Put simply, the armed conflict between Russia and Georgia in the summer of 2008 was an opportunity for Russia to maximise its leverage in an area it describes as vital to its interests. Acting beyond rhetoric, Russia demonstrated its strength and made a clear case in this confrontation with regard to the position to which it aspires in the international system.

the approval on 12 August 2008 in Moscow of the six principles of settling the conflict in South Ossetia, and support[ing] the active role of Russia in promoting peace and cooperation in the region (SCO 2008).

Russian president Medvedev immediately declared that this demonstrated a “united position” of the state members and added that he expected it to “serve as a serious signal to those who try to turn black into white and justify this aggression [against Russia]” (Medvedev cited in Chan 2008; Agence France Presse 2008; RIA Novosti 2008). But Medvedev’s reading seems to be overoptimistic in the face of the SCO positioning. Caution regarding issues of separatism was voiced regarding the potentially destabilising effect that the recognition of these two Caucasian republics could have on the region. This is noticeable in the fact that formally the final declaration of the 2008 SCO Summit (Dushanbe Declaration) did not include any mention of the issue. All the SCO members reiterated their concerns, particularly China, for obvious reasons (Reuters 2008; RFE/RL 2008), as further analysed in the section on dynamics of cooperation and competition. In fact,

the SCO’s refusal to support dismemberment of a sovereign Georgia and the ensuing independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia contradicted Russian expectations. Perhaps more importantly, this refusal also showed the limits to Russo-Chinese partnership, which, though robust, is not by any means an alliance (Blank 2008: 8; Huang 2008: 8).

This suggests that the understanding of partnership for both Moscow and Beijing is not that of an alliance, but rather one that envisages the management of relations as fundamental not only for regional stability, but also – and more fundamentally – to the double goal they are both pursuing: self-reinforcement and containment of the other partner.

Realpolitik or Regional Solidarity? Cooperation versus Competing Dynamics

Relations between China and Russia have followed a course of greater or lesser proximity, fluctuating according to interests, objectives and actions. The rivalry that sits between the lines, interspersed with periods of cooperation, has been a constant in this relationship, which floats in a continuum of greater or lesser cooperation. It was already like that dur-

ing the Cold War. In February 1950, the Sino-Soviet alliance was signed in a Treaty of Friendship and Assistance, which was intended to be a key element in the geopolitical balance to the east, in a context of bipolar rivalry. However, the territorial reality of these two states, along with the ideological competition that continued to develop, led to the prevalence of rivalry. Chinese revisionism was badly received in the Soviet Union, which understood it as competition in the leadership of “international communism”. Basically, Mao Zedong advanced with a model of development distinct from the Soviet one, and Khrushchev reacted with the suspension of economic and technological aid to China – the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. This hostility resulted in various diplomatic incidents and lasted for nearly two decades. Only in the 1980s did relations start warming up, with the end of the Cold War enabling further *rapprochement*, but always following a logic of calculated partnership. In fact,

[t]here is no doubt that Russia and China lacked an underlying foundation of shared norms and values. The warming of ties between the two states was based not on trust but on convergent assessments of their mutual interests (Wilson 2004: 6).

As during the Cold War, the weight of ideology and the desire for regional superiority remained on the agenda.

The “Treaty on Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation” signed between presidents Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin in July 2001, which was very different from the agreement of 1950, reveals a more equitable alignment between the parties, aiming at consolidating the idea of a strategic partnership launched by both at the Shanghai Summit in April 1996. However, this treaty has been widely criticised, being compared to a regulatory mechanism for arms sales (Cohen 2001) and considered a stealthy move towards trading energy interests. The Summit was even described as the “summit of oil and gas”, particularly in the Russian press (see Herspring and Rutland 2005: 286).

This reveals, on the one hand, the difficulty of both parties to engage in a “normal” political relationship, showing mutual unwillingness to compromise on issues considered vital to their national interests and, on the other hand, the major geo-economic and strategic game in which both countries are engaged (although playing in opposite camps: Russia as the producer and China as the consumer). Nevertheless, the September 11 terrorist attacks of 2001 and the unilateral posture of the USA that followed added a new ingredient to this bilateral relationship. The new security context favoured *rapprochement*, as Washington is seen

by the Russian and Chinese elites as a destabilising element in the transition to a new international order (see, for example, Levin 2008). The “Russia-China Declaration on the International Order in the 21st Century” made in July 2005 renders this spirit explicitly in favour of a multipolar world, particularly drawn against USA hegemony. Following these positive developments, the two countries announced their commitment to deepening and broadening their political and strategic cooperation in a joint statement made in 2007, capitalising on the experience and results of the implementation of the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, adjusting agreed principles for the period ranging from 2009 to 2012 (China Elections and Governance 2007; Russian Presidency 2006).

Thus, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has assumed different contours, in a changing international framework. The main factors contributing to this deeper cooperation have been, as argued above, opposition to the USA and support for a multipolar international order. In other words, this is in essence a negative strategic partnership: cooperation is based on the containment of others – the West in general and the United States of America in particular (de Haas 2006). And the Sino-Russian partnership is no exception to this rule. It should also be noted that for China and Russia the concept of “strategic partnership” does not assume the specificities and substance that might be expected: looking at the levels of interaction and the remaining problems between those two countries and their various so-called “strategic partners”, it is possible to realise that this partnership is mainly an agreement on economic cooperation.

At a regional and inter-state level, the problems that both countries share regarding minorities (such as the cases of Chechnya in Russia and Xinjiang in China, for example), alongside the growing radicalisation of Islamic fundamentalist groups, have suggested convergent policies. This convergence has resulted in a diplomatic-political discourse of mutual support for the maintenance of territorial integrity, based on the principles defined in the UN Charter: “Both sides reaffirm that they will continue offering support to each other on significant issues involving national unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity” (Hu and Putin 2004: paragraph I).

In addition to this alignment, the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of states follows the same logic, particularly with regard to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Somehow,

there is a shared understanding that the commitment to the principle of territorial integrity legitimises this non-interference. This means, for example, Russian political support for China on the Taiwan issue and regarding the separatist problems in Tibet and Xinjiang. Thus, Beijing perceives Moscow as a loyal ally on the issue of Taiwan, under the strategy of adding a counterweight to the Washington-Taibei alignment, given the importance that Russia attaches to the principle of territorial integrity mainly owing to its own internal secessionist problems, with Chechnya probably being the most publicised case (Mendes 2004: 193). Chinese reciprocity in relation to the increasingly less mentioned, but still persistent Chechen question is evident:

China supports all Russia's efforts in safeguarding national unity and combating the terrorist and separatist forces in Chechnya. [...] China understands and firmly supports all measures taken by Russia to resume the constitutional order of the Republic of Chechnya and to fight against terrorism (Hu and Putin 2004: paragraphs I and III).

However, even if the Chechen question is somehow related to a shared problem, it differs substantially from the dispute between mainland China and Taiwan. The Chechen Republic has no international support in terms of its autonomy and all separatist attempts have been blocked by an authoritarian, pro-Kremlin local government led by Ramzan Kadyrov. Moreover, international consternation and Western pressure have mainly targeted the problem of violation of fundamental rights rather than the issue of secession. The referendum held in Chechnya in March 2003 for approval of a new constitution resulted in an overwhelming majority of votes in favour of the integration of the republic in the Russian Federation. Since then, Moscow has considered the issue of Chechnya as a non-issue, since the popular will has been clearly expressed, despite all the criticism levelled at the referendum, which did not respect international standards (Freire 2005: 167-168; RFE/RL 2003).

Still in a security context, other common problems relate to the role of mafias and the fight against terrorism, organised crime and illegal practices, which have also allowed for cooperative efforts, both at the bilateral level⁴ and in a broader framework. From a military and strategy point of view, the joint Chinese-Russian exercises are a good example of

4 The first formal contacts started in November 2001, soon after the terrorist attacks of September 11 in the USA. See, for example, *Peopledaily.com* 2001.

this approach. “Peace Mission 2005” was the first joint Russian-Chinese military exercise, combining air, land and sea forces. This exercise was aimed at assuring the training and readiness of these forces, according to General Baluyevskii, in order to “counter the challenges we face today in the Asia-Pacific region, and in the world as a whole” (General Baluyevskii cited in Bigg 2005). This bilateral-type of exercise has been held regularly. In addition, military exercises have also been conducted within the framework of the SCO, with the first such exercise taking place in 2003. Since then, there have been various military exercises, with the “Peace Mission 2007” being known for involving all six member states of the SCO for the very first time. Russian Major General Oleg Kolyada stated that this joint exercise would provide “the interchange of experience [as] very useful for further cooperation” (Russian Major General Oleg Kolyada cited in *Russia Today* 2007). In the process, it has always been underlined that these manoeuvres are not directed against any third country (see Chinese Assistant Foreign Minister, Li Hui 2007), reiterating that the scope of the organisation is cooperative and therefore not of containment (thus avoiding the usual criticism of being directed against American power).

In the economic field, the most significant Sino-Russian links have been related to the trading of military assets and energy resources. In fact, with regard to the latter, the Russian energy strategic document of 2003, presenting prospects until 2020, referred clearly to the importance of China as an energy consumer (MERF 2003). Nevertheless, and despite seeming contradictory, Russia and China are not well integrated in economic terms. Bilateral trade is failing to grow in a balanced manner, with much higher Russian export rates to China than the reverse (mainly due to the Chinese appetite for Russia’s mineral resources). China has increased the volume of its exports to Russia, but those values are still not yet comparable with its exports to the USA or the European Union, for example (Federal State Statistics Service, Russian Federation 2006, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c, and Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China 2007a, 2007b).

Paradoxically, Moscow has been following a calculated policy regarding sales of military equipment and technology to Beijing. After years of matching China’s weaponry needs (Blagov 2003) due to the Western arms embargo imposed in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre, Russian supplies to China dramatically went down in 2006. This is due, on the one hand, to the rising prices of energy resources,

rendering the Russian economy less dependent on military sales; however, the current international financial crisis may change this scenario. On the other hand, Russia fears renewed rivalry with rising China and a possible return of friction (Lague 2008). The hypothetical scenario of Chinese parity with neighbouring Russia, in terms of volume and military capabilities, is considered by Russia's establishment as a threat to its national interests and sovereignty. This also includes Russian anxiety about the future control of Siberia (Godement 2006: 53), with Chinese migrants "invading" the region, along with Russian fears of an excessive militarisation and modernisation of the military sector in China. Border issues and Chinese immigration to the eastern Russian regions have been gradually securitised (see comments made by the Russian Interior Minister, Rashid Nurgaliev, in December 2005, in de Haas 2006). Despite the border agreements signed between the two sides, explicitly about the areas east of the Sino-Russian border, pressure and mistrust from the past remain, cooling down the bilateral relationship (President of Russia 2004a, 2004b). This position clearly results from competition for regional dominance – geography and geopolitics – that has always been present in the Sino-Russian relationship.

Alongside the political, security and economic dimensions, ties between China and Russia have also developed in cultural terms: 2006 was the year of Russia in China and 2007 the year of China in Russia. At the opening ceremony of the year of China in Russia, President Putin quoted the teachings of Chinese wisdom:

'if the root is shallow then the branches cannot grow strong'. It must be said that the excellent tree, the metaphor of our joint efforts to develop our relations over the past few years, reflects the depth and strength of the friendship between our two peoples (Putin 2007).

Hu Jintao acknowledged Putin's words, reinforcing the idea that:

[b]eing good neighbours, best friends and responsible partners is not only a reflection of the good will between our peoples. It is also a necessary product of our desire to protect both of our countries' national interests (Hu 2007).

The Chinese Foreign Minister ensures that the cultural events mentioned above deepened the social dimension of the Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" (Yang 2007; see also Lo 2008). However, this proximate and cooperative relationship has been guided by *realpolitik* considerations which do not consubstantiate in an effective building of a sustainable

partnership. Despite these elements of approximation, the relationship is simultaneously imbued with rivalry, in what has been termed by Bobo Lo as an “axis of convenience”, following the rationale that it is “often tactical and instrumental, and expediency and opportunism are more relevant considerations than an often illusory likemindedness” (Lo 2008: 3).

The apparent Chinese policy of taking the lead in Asia means that China seeks to stand out from its neighbours in terms of power, mainly from Russia and Japan. In order to achieve a dominant status in maritime and continental Asia, and getting the other states to recognise its leadership, China has been pressuring for the withdrawal of the USA from the region and trying to prevent *rapprochement* between Japan, India and Russia (Friedberg 2007).

It is also worth remembering that, despite the common concern of counterbalancing American hegemony, the position of Moscow and Beijing is not necessarily one of hostility against the USA. There is a clear recognition of the geopolitical importance of maintaining an autonomous and independent but friendly relationship towards Washington. In this regard, Michael Levin’s strong case for “a major global confrontation”, leading the USA and China into violent conflict within the next five to 25 years (Levin 2008), seems too dramatic. In fact, and despite dissension, the Sino-Russian position that the partnership is not directed against any other state is constantly recalled (see Putin 2006), showing the will of both sides not to confront the USA openly, despite all the manoeuvring for its containment.

Indeed, Russia describes the relationship as a “non-alliance, non-confrontation, not targeted against third countries”, in which alignment it is followed by China (Gupta 2002). The Chinese Foreign Ministry assures that

efforts to promote the development of the world towards multipolarization are not targeted at any particular country, nor are they aimed at re-staging the old play of contention for hegemony in history. Rather, these efforts are made to boost the democratization of international relations, help the various forces in the world, on the basis of equality and mutual benefit, enhance coordination and dialogue, refrain from confrontation and jointly preserve world peace, stability and development (FMPRC 2003).

There is an alignment of strategic partnership between China and Russia, but with very limited achievements. The difficult balance between inter-

ests and rivalry undermines the foundations of such a partnership. In short, the strategic factor of the Sino-Russian relationship is limited to the search for power and influence, mainly driven by external factors, but strongly based on domestic national identity and power politics perceptions. Thus, it is mainly a defensive relationship, built to face the changing international security environment without setting an offensive agenda and limited by several internal and external factors (Li Chenghong 2007: 478-479). There is a Sino-Russian alignment that shares objectives, including the active participation of the two states in decisions of common interest. This means that the options adopted by Russia and China differ mainly regarding means of action, where Russian assertiveness contrasts with the more diplomatic Chinese posture. In this respect, Russia clearly has a tougher foreign policy than its neighbour China.

The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in the Framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The Shanghai Five group, formed in 1996 to resolve border disputes among its five members – China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – extended its purpose to the fight against terrorism and the prevention of territorial fragmentation in 1998. In June 2001, the group integrated Uzbekistan and was named the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (Atal 2005: 102). This international organisation, according to the “spirit of Shanghai”, is based on principles of mutual trust, joint benefits, equality between its members and respect for diversity through the promotion of cooperation on security and military affairs and aims at becoming a military bloc with regional impact (Kapila 2006). These objectives gain even larger relevance if we take into account the fact that the organisation covers three-fifths of Eurasia and involves a quarter of the world’s population (SCO 2004-2005).

With a secretariat based in Beijing and the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure based in Tashkent, the SCO includes the six countries mentioned above and also allows Iran, Mongolia, India and Pakistan to participate as observers (ibid.). Iran has a clear interest in participating in such initiatives in Central Asia, seeking militarily to deter the United States of America and Israel by its *rapprochement* to Russia, China and India. As for India, being a nuclear, military and economic power, it has

a strategic role in the regional balance: on the one hand, it counteracts the influence of the USA, and its participation in the SCO diminishes Chinese and Russian anxieties regarding a possible closer Indo-American relationship; on the other hand, it helps Russia to counterbalance the power of China. China sees Pakistan as a counterweight to the possible formation of an Indo-Russian bloc (Atal 2005: 103-104).

At the same time, and as part of its attempts to reduce China's prominence within the Organisation, Russia has worked to strengthen cooperation between the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)⁵ and the SCO. Essentially a political-military alliance, the CSTO has a rapid reaction force of 4,000 troops and plans the development of a military body to perform peacekeeping tasks within the framework of the organisation. Greater integration of the two forums would serve Russian interests of creating an enlarged system of collective security, not only in Central Asia but with a wider geographical design in Asia, under Russia's direction. China has delayed signature of a legally binding agreement between the organisations, although considering that greater collaboration between them would allow closer scrutiny of Russian military movements. Thus, cooperation has been strengthened, as exemplified in the CSTO's participation as an observer in the recent military exercises under the auspices of the SCO in 2007, but without translating this into a legally binding agreement, which could have reverse effects to those envisaged by Beijing (Litovkin 2007; Socor 2006; RIA Novosti 2007).

As for energy, Chinese policy has followed a principle of diversification of routes, including pipelines from Iran and Kazakhstan (Atal 2005: 101), keeping negotiations on a bilateral level, not only with these countries but also with Russia, which has contributed to some ambiguity in the objectives and actions of the SCO (Godement 2006: 67). To compensate for this, following a proposal by Vladimir Putin in July 2007, which gave voice to the initiative of Nursultan Nazarbayev, President of Kazakhstan, on the formulation of an energy policy for Asia, the SCO founded the "Energy Club". Bringing the energy dimension to the agenda of the Organisation, the Club aims at working as a platform for the involvement not only of members and observers but also other states, which is considered an innovative step (Moiseyev 2007). In order

5 The CSTO members include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

to coordinate policies, the Club includes major producers such as Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as well as major consumers such as China and India, following a policy of unification of positions of producers, consumers and transit countries for energy to ensure greater energy security (Freire 2008b: 239-245; de Haas 2007).

In August 2007, the summit of Bishkek, internally perceived as more pragmatic than the previous summits, marked the beginning of a second five-year plan of activities of the SCO and revealed many of the projects and interests of its members, who tried to influence the future agenda of the Organisation. SCO member states signed a long-term agreement on relations of good neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation that is the second most important policy paper after the Charter of the SCO (adopted in 2002 at the summit of St. Petersburg), providing the basis for the work of the Organisation in the long term (Moiseyev 2007). This agreement, applauded by both China and Russia (Moiseyev 2007; Yang 2007), focuses on issues of energy, security and cooperation, providing for an extension of the regional integration process. Furthermore, the SCO has organised large-scale military operations, such as the 2007 Peace Mission (RFE/RL 2007), pushing the six member states to adopt a coherent and united stance in the fight against separatism and terrorism (Moiseyev 2007), a trend confirmed at the 2008 Summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, as analysed (SCO 2008). These actions suggest that the SCO is becoming a leading regional organisation, with a strong military component based on the potential of its member states and projection of power in the regional context.

Although, in theory, the SCO member states enjoy the same status and decisions are made by consensus (*ibid.*), a considerable level of mistrust remains among its members: smaller states are suspicious of Russian and Chinese intentions (Innes-Ker in: Pannier 2007). However, the trade-off resulting from the convergence as a way of containing the USA has acted as an incentive for greater cooperation, increasing the role of this organisation in Asia, following a course of gradual assertion. Thus, anti-Washington feeling has been strong enough in the current regional context to lead to the strengthening of the cooperation format, acting as a game of double containment, both in terms of relations among its members and regarding the USA (Freire 2008b: 245).

The SCO does not formally present itself as an alliance directed against American primacy, but rather as an attempt to promote regional interconnections, officially described as resulting from a collective effort

for greater regional integration. However, this has mainly been pursued through a negative strategic objective (de Haas 2007) of double containment within the SCO and towards rival parties acting in the area. US policies have therefore tied Russia and China, and India has joined them, due to its old commitments to the defence of a multipolar world order.

Thus, inside and outside the SCO, the Sino-Russian relationship is under close scrutiny from the USA. While Washington clearly understands the difficulties in establishing a strategic partnership between Russia and China (two competing powers in the region), it is nevertheless concerned with the policies of *rapprochement* between the two giants (Freire 2008b: 240), especially when combined with a policy of attracting India. Nevertheless, the idea of a solid “strategic triangle”, already promoted in 1998 by Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in a different geopolitical context, is still far from completion. The combined forces of these three countries are still not sufficient to address the USA’s power (Pant 2004: 313).

Moreover, as mentioned above, neither China nor Russia seek to harass the USA, recognising its importance in the regional balance. The fact that the area of action of the SCO is the stage for regional competition between the two countries leads both of them to align with Washington on certain issues. An example of this is the active Chinese participation in negotiations with North Korea, much appreciated by the White House (Pant 2004: 324). The same logic applies to the possibilities and limits of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Russia and China emphatically argue that competition within the SCO is either “healthy” and that its main purpose is to “enrich the economic agenda of the Organisation” or that there is no competition at all, but rather a “combination and convergence of ideas” or even “a synergy of various proposals” (Moiseyev 2007). They reiterate that “[t]he activities of the organization help consolidate regional security and stability and promote the common development of countries in the region” and that

[i]t is a priority for Chinese and Russian foreign policies to push forward the development of the SCO which both sides regard as an important means to build up peace, security and cooperation on the Eurasian Continent, especially in Central Asia (Hu and Putin 2004: paragraph 4).

However, the truth is that the absence of common objectives and of a positive strategy of the Organisation limits the SCO to serving the interests of its members:

For example, China is seeking markets and energy resources; Russia is eager to regain its leadership status within the C.I.S. as well as that of a superpower in the international arena; and the Central Asian regimes consider the S.C.O. as their guarantee for political survival (de Haas 2006).

In short, the objectives of the SCO are to maintain influence over Central Asia while limiting the influence of the USA in the area, to allow an institutional context of containment of terrorism and promote security cooperation in the region and to provide a framework for an institutional balance of Russian and Chinese power. Furthermore, both China and Russia see the SCO “as a basic factor to establish a multilateral world pattern based on international law in the future” (Hu and Putin 2004: paragraph 4), a particularly relevant issue in their strategy for changing the current unipolar order. As they had already stated in the joint communiqué of 1999, the Chinese and Russian leaders agreed:

all members of the international community should be treated equally, enjoy the same security, respect each other in their choice of development paths, respect each other’s sovereignty, not interfere in each other’s internal affairs, and establish a fair, equal, and mutually beneficial international political and economic order. The two sides call for the concerted effort of all the nations to set up a democratic, balanced, and multi-polar world pattern to facilitate harmonious co-existence, constructive mutual influence, and mutual exchanges among the various cultures. The two sides also stress that the equal status of all sovereign states should be guaranteed (Jiang and Yeltsin 1999: paragraph 1).

More than an end in itself, for the Chinese and Russian leaders the SCO is probably just a means of achieving this common purpose and many divergent interests.

Conclusion

Due to domestic changes and developments at the regional and international level, Sino-Russian bilateral relations are currently experiencing one of their best moments. However, China remains concerned about and uncomfortable with the power of Russia (Ross 2005: 86), whereas Russia fears the return of Chinese preponderance on Asia’s geopolitical chessboard, mainly through the use of its economic power, following the good tradition of the Middle Kingdom (Terril 2005: 61). Chinese

superiority in economic and demographic terms makes Russian leaders fear a negative scenario (Godement 2006: 53), with an expansion of Chinese power in the area raising deep concerns within the political establishment in Russia. The limitations regarding the sale of arms and military technology to China are a reflection of this. Thus, “for the most part the image of ‘strategic partnership’ enables Moscow and Beijing to gloss over its limitations” (Lo 2008: 10).

Built on the identified factors underlying this analysis, the Sino-Russian relationship is also based more on the presence of a foreign element than on genuine empathy. Explicitly, the USA’s presence in Asia has fuelled the Sino-Russian strategic partnership and justified, in part, the existence of the SCO. The aligned posture of Beijing and Moscow on these issues, namely regarding fundamental freedoms and the perceived threat of separatism, strengthens the joint position of counterbalancing the USA.

This shows some of the ambiguities underlying this relationship to a certain degree. In the case of China, its strategic partnership with Russia does not replace its relationship with the USA in any way. Exclusively investing in the relationship with Russia and the SCO countries would clearly result in disengagement with the USA, favouring a continental geopolitical option at the expense of a maritime strategy. Although the golden era of the Middle Kingdom reflected a closed posture favouring the continental dimension, the emergence of the People’s Republic of China resulted from a policy of modernisation and opening up to the outside world deeply related to a maritime approach. Thus, it is unlikely that the Chinese leaders will invest in Russia as the most significant partner and consider Central Asia as the privileged stage for China’s foreign policy, tying involvement in the SCO to its participation in other organisations and neglecting the relationship with the USA and East Asia.

As for the Russian options, although always very focused on the CIS, Moscow balances between West and East. In a very pragmatic and realistic alignment, Russia seeks to maximise opportunities and minimise imbalances seen as unfavourable. However, this maximisation of profits ultimately constrains choices. The involvement of Russia in the SCO has clear advantages in a context of international and domestic change. By reducing the uncertainty of its relationships on the Asian chessboard, it allows greater room for manoeuvre in terms of action (reaction or pro-action) in the continent. The greater or lesser convergence with China, at the bilateral level and within the context of the SCO, is a clear example.

This is part of the broader context of Russian alignment, which has been based on assertive principles underlying its foreign policy options – the multilateral route to a multipolar order – as well as on the domestic developments that remain solidly based on authoritarian principles despite the context of change with the presidential elections of 2 March 2008 bringing Dmitry Medvedev to power. These internalised differences in means and procedures, reflecting identitarian issues, along with the low level of economic integration between the two countries, are a demonstration of the political and security relevance of underlying concerns.

The SCO, emerging as a mechanism to balance these differences while promoting cooperation in the face of a hostile external environment, has so far been unable to surpass suspicion and embed the parties in deeper cooperation commitments, eventually allowing for further integration not just in economic terms, but also regarding military-security cooperation. Thus, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership as affirmed and promoted in official documents is yet to become reality.

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