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The New geostrategic game

WILL CHINA AND RUSSIA FORM AN ALLIANCE AGAINST THE UNITED STATES?

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ABSTRACT

China and Russia have both recently contributed to raising international tensions as Russia has adopted a much more hostile position towards the West and as China appears to be getting more assertive in its ongoing maritime disputes with its neighbours. At the same time Russia and China appear to be moving towards a full partnership with each other. The question that necessarily will have to be asked is, therefore, whether China and Russia will form an alliance against the United States? Through conceptualising "partnership" in world politics, this report suggests a "threat-interest model of partnership" to examine the evolution of Sino-Russian relations after the Cold War. It argues that despite the ideological, material and strategic differences between the two nations, the convergence of threat perceptions regarding the United States has pushed China and Russia to form a "soft alliance" against the United States. The future of Sino-Russian relations still largely depends on the policies of the United States and Europe towards China and Russia. It is time for the United States and Europe to consider resetting their relations with China and Russia before it is too late.

MAIN FINDINGS:

- The nature of Chinese-Russian relations is not inevitably and naturally positive. They will need to overcome huge differences in order to move to a military alliance, including historical issues, ideology, identity, leadership in Central Asia, power relations, military technology transfer, energy negotiations and economics and future trade, etc.
- The current close relationship between China and Russia is rooted in the common security threat from the United States in particular and the West in general. Although China and Russia are strengthening their comprehensive strategic partnership with gas and oil deals, arms transfer, military cooperation and mutual international support, economic cooperation between the two countries will face more challenges.
- The future Chinese-Russian relations depend largely on what the United States does. If the United States continuously pushes Russia through NATO and China through its "rebalancing" in the Asia Pacific, it will certainly drive Russia and China closer. The deepening economic and security cooperation between the two nations will not only beef up their military capabilities, but will also create a military platform for alliance formation.
- In the new geopolitical game the United States, as the still-standing hegemon in the unipolar world, holds the first-move advantage to determine how the game will be played out. If the United States tries to take down both Russia and China simultaneously in the game, it will fall into a self-fulfilling prophecy: successful soft balancing by the Sino-Russian partnership will accelerate US decline rather than conserve US hegemony.
- China and Russia will also need to be cautious in testing the red lines of the US and the West in general. Even though a Chinese-Russian alliance is formidable, the differences between the two major powers are obvious and the areas of possible friction are ever mounting. Neither has any intention to sever completely its relationship with the West, particularly with the US, nor to sacrifice their Western links for the sake of the alliance.
- US policymakers and European leaders should reflect on their policies towards China and Russia. Why can two former enemies move together so closely, despite their previous huge ideological, material and ideational differences? It is time for the United States and European countries to consider how to reset their relations with China and Russia before it is too late.

Introduction:
RUSSIAN-CHINESE RELATIONS IN A CHANGING WORLD

This report addresses the deepening relationship between Russia and China and its implications for the United States and Europe. The relationship has been growing steadily stronger, culminating in 2014 when Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin met no less than five times during the year. The closer relationship has given birth to several strategically important agreements. In May 2014 the two countries signed a $400 billion natural gas deal. The natural gas deal not only offered China 30 years' supply of natural gas from Russia, but it enabled Russia to stand strong against Western sanctions imposed as a result of the Ukraine crisis. Moreover, the two countries conducted a joint naval drill in the East China Sea, which is widely interpreted as a signal of "displeasure at US policies" as well as a warning to Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands (Chan, 2014). So far there are no signs that the trend is faltering. In 2015 China and Russia moved closer to each other with more summit meetings between Xi and Putin, notably one in May where Xi attended the 70th anniversary of the World War II allied victory when Western leaders stayed away. Soon afterwards the Chinese and Russian navies jointly conducted exercises in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

This report focuses on the trend in the relations between Russia and China since the end of the Cold War, focusing in particular at the upward trend experienced since the September 11 attacks in 2001 and in particular the more recent surge in the relationships evidenced by the growing military coordination and huge energy deal between the two powers. Some suggest that a Sino-Russian military alliance is in the making and will challenge the United States as well as the Western order sooner or later (Adomanis, 2014), while others argue that the so-called military alliance between China and Russia is no more than an illusion (Beauchamp, 2015). This

report contributes to the debate by developing a "threat-interest model of partnership", which can help in assessing the Russian-Chinese relationship, and which can indicate the factors contributing to its development. Moreover, the report shows that it is not the first time such a debate over Sino-Russian ties has taken place.

Since China and Russia announced the establishment of a "strategic partnership" in 1996, there have been at least two, possibly three, rounds of intense discussions and debates on the future of China-Russian relations (Anderson, 1997; Garnett, 2000; Lo, 2008; Bellacqua, 2010; Green, 2014; Panda, 2014; Chen, 2015). The debate is normally polarised into two extreme views. On the one hand, Gilbert Rozman in his recent Foreign Affairs article: "Asia for the Asians: Why Chinese-Russian Friendship is Here to Stay", lists six reasons why the Chinese-Russian partnership is durable (Rozman, 2014a; 2014b). On the other hand Joseph Nye, Jr. in his piece published in Project Syndicate titled: "A New Sino-Russian Alliance?" questions such a possibility by pointing out deep problems for a Sino-Russian alliance in economic, military and demographic areas (Nye, 2015).

The bilateral relationship between China and Russia is by no means new – nor is its development linear in trajectory. Therefore, the right question to ask is not whether a Sino-Russian alliance is feasible, but under what conditions can it materialise in the future.

It is demonstrated in this report that both the pessimistic (alarmist school) and optimistic (limitationist school) views on a future Sino-Russian alliance reveal some elements of truth about Sino-Russian relations (Yu, 2007), but that both have missed the more important general trend. The bilateral relationship between China and Russia is by no means new – nor is its development linear in trajectory. Therefore, the right question to ask is not whether a Sino-Russian alliance is feasible, but under what conditions can it materialise in the future. By unpacking the concept of "partnership diplomacy" between China and Russia in the post-Cold War era, the report makes three arguments:

- The fundamental purpose of partnership diplomacy between China and Russia right after the Cold War was to reduce uncertainties and build trust between these two nations, not to cope with challenges from a third party.

- The later evolution of a Chinese-Russian partnership in the post-Cold War era has been shaped by external threat perceptions and the economic interests of both countries.

- This risk-avoidance partnership could be transformed into a threat-based, military alliance if both China and Russia have a convergent perception of external threats to security which are imminent and mounting.

The development of the Russia-China relationship is of immense strategic importance for the United States and Europe, and should therefore be watched closely.

The report is organised into three parts. First, I conceptualise "partnership" diplomacy through clarifying the differences and connections between partnership and alliance, and I lay out the four ideal types of partnership in world politics. I suggest a "threat–interest perceptual model" of partnership to highlight how the convergence and divergence of leaders' perceptions of threats and economic interests can shape the nature of partnership between two nations. Second, I apply the threat-interest model of partnership to examine the evolution of Sino-Russian relations after the Cold War. Last, I discuss the implications of this research for the current debate over a future Sino-Russian alliance. I argue that close economic and military ties between China and Russia have formed a "soft alliance" against the United States (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Lieber and Alexander, 2005; Brooks and Wohlforth, 2005; Art et al., 2006; He and Feng, 2008). It should be noted up front that neither Chinese official discourse nor Russian official discourse use or would use the term "alliance" (in Chinese 结盟) or "soft alliance". Chinese foreign policy officially declares that China will not form any kind of alliance with any country. Internal discussions from the Russian side also indicated that there is no intention of Russia forming an alliance with China.

The development of the Russia-China relationship is of immense strategic importance for the United States and Europe, and should therefore be watched closely. So far it seems that although China and Russia have domestic problems that might drive their foreign policy agenda, Putin enjoys very strong domestic support in his second term of presidency, and Xi Jinping has successfully consolidated power in the third year of his first presidency. Both Xi and Putin are strong leaders that are likely to remain in office for a considerable time. Thus, the conditions for a further strengthening of the Russia-China relationship are certainly present. However, the report argues that whether China and Russia will consolidate their relationship in a hard or formal military alliance depends largely on US policies in both Europe and the Asia-Pacific. If the United States pushes too hard on oil prices, Ukraine and NATO expansion toward Russia, and if it rebalances too far against China in the Pacific, this may push China and Russia towards a formal alliance even if that may not have been what they wanted in the first place.

WHAT IS A PARTNERSHIP AND WHAT IS NOT?

CONCEPTUALISING "PARTNERSHIP"

Partnership is not a new term in world politics, but it has become popular since the end of the Cold War (Kay, 2000). For example, the United States is negotiating to set up two free trade partnership blocs in the world: the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). India, the European Union, Japan, the African Union, and other countries and institutions are all setting up partnerships with each other. However, when two states forge a "strategic partnership", others raise their eyebrows. It happened between China and Russia when the two nations claimed to establish a "strategic partnership" in 1996, because the interplay of "strategic" and "partnership" could mean nothing or a lot in world politics.

The real confusion over the post-Cold War Sino-Russian relationship is rooted in the abuse of the term "strategic partnership" by both policymakers and academics. Since the mid-1990s, the term "strategic partnership" has proliferated in world politics. It is not only China and Russia who established various "partnerships" or "strategic partnerships" with other countries, the United States and European Union countries, also used the term frequently in their official documents (Feng and Huang, 2014; Hamilton, 2014; Flockhart, 2015). Research is certainly developing on the issue of partnership diplomacy, not least with the setting up of the European Strategic Partnerships Observatory, which has formally institutionalised the study of strategic partnerships by building up databanks of European partners and contracting researchers as experts on different strategic partnerships. Even though

China has set up over 50 strategic partnerships, with different descriptive features defining them, so far, there are no official documents or think tank publications systematically analysing this new diplomatic practice.

Overall, despite its popularity in the official discourses of world politics, the conceptualisation of "partnership" is still sufficiently unclear so that people are confused not only about what "partnership" is but also what it is not (Wilkins, 2008; Wilkins, 2012). Trine Flockhart makes a useful distinction between interest-based partnership and value-based partnership and suggests, "partnerships based on limited shared interests and not backed up with shared values are not easy to sustain" (Flockhart, 2015: 13). Although I agree that the value-based partnership is different from the interest-based one, this report only focuses on the functionality of partnership in the anarchic international system. In other words, this report focuses on the preliminary phase, or the "thin" stage of partnership that is mainly based on common interests instead of shared values or identities between states.

The minimal requirement for two states to form a "partnership" is a security commitment that they will not threaten each other.

It by no means indicates that identity and value are not important. However, given the scope of this analysis, I will mainly explore partnership as a strategic choice or an interest-driven policy for states (Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1999; Risse, 2002). A value-based partnership, therefore, can be seen as the second phase or the "thick" stage of partnership, which is based on shared practices, rules, and identities. The transatlantic partnership falls into this category, which deserves more detailed scrutiny and investigations (Flockhart, 2015). In this report, "partnership" in world politics is defined as the arrangement of a relationship between two political entities, such as states or non-state actors, which aims to reduce uncertainties under the anarchic international system. Partnership diplomacy, therefore, is seen as statecraft, or a foreign policy tool, to achieve this relationship between states.

Under anarchy, states face constant security pressures to compete. Therefore, the primary function of partnership is to reduce uncertainties from unknown intentions between two states. Thus the minimal requirement for two states to form a "partnership" is a security commitment that they will not threaten each other. This

inward-oriented, security-commitment function differentiates "partnership" from "alliance" because alliance entails an outward-oriented security commitment of two allies towards a third party which is imposing a common threat on them (Walt, 1987).

Partnership also functions like other institutional frameworks that can enhance economic cooperation between states by reducing transaction costs, promoting information exchange, and locating focal points between states (Keohane and Martin, 1995). It is why many so-called partnerships or strategic partnerships between states or international organisations aim to enhance economic cooperation, as in the case of the TPP and TTIP led by the United States as well as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) between ASEAN states and six external regional powers.

One positive externality of the unipolar system is the relatively stable relations among states, which opens the opportunity for states to reduce uncertainty and suspicion between them. In other words, this unipolar moment provides public goods and circumstances that have enabled the flourishing of partnerships after the end of the Cold War.

Although the origins of the proliferation of partnership in world politics in the post-Cold War era are beyond the scope of this research, I suggest that partnership diplomacy among states is a product of unipolarity. With the end of the Cold War, America remained the only superpower or the hegemon in the international system. The huge power gap between the hegemon and other states discourages the establishment of military alliances against the hegemon and thereby creates systemic stability under unipolarity (Wohlforth, 1999; Ikenberry, Mustanduno and Wohlforth, 2011). One positive externality of the unipolar system is the relatively stable relations among states, which opens the opportunity for states to reduce uncertainty and suspicion between them. In other words, this unipolar moment provides public goods and circumstances that have enabled the flourishing of partnerships after the end of the Cold War.

In sum, the term "partnership" entails a special status of relationship between two states, through which the two states can reduce security threats and enhance economic cooperation between each other. In terms of a security commitment, "partnership" is located between normal interstate relations on the one hand and

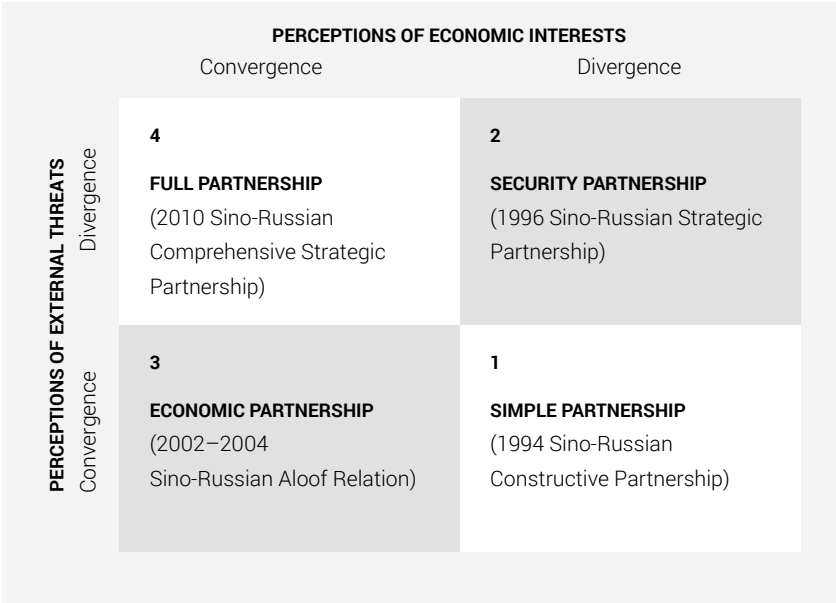
formal alliances on the other, because a security commitment between two partners targets threats from each other rather than external ones. For example, state A faces two security threats in the anarchic international system, one is from state B and the other is from state C. The partnership between A and B is only to reduce the threat from B, not from C. If A and B form a formal military alliance, i.e., to enhance/ensure their security commitments to the highest level, the alliance can then be used to deal with threats from C. It is worth noting that partnership is different from security community in two respects. On the one hand, partnership refers to a special relationship between two states, while security community includes more than two parties. On the other hand, partnership aims to reduce uncertainty and threat between two states, but security community is based on the commitment and even trust that the use of force is ruled out as a means of problem-solving inside the community (Adler and Barnett, 1998).

In terms of economic cooperation, a partnership between two states aims to promote economic cooperation. It is also located between normal interstate relations and full economic integration. While normal interstate relations represent the lowest level of cooperation due to uncertainty and relative gain concerns between states, full economic integration refers to the highest economic cooperation beyond the traditional boundaries of sovereign states (Baldwin, 1993). Still, the term partnership focuses on economic cooperation between the two states or political entities, and does not target a third party.

A THREAT-INTEREST MODEL OF PARTNERSHIP

While the minimalist definition of partnership is to reduce both security and economic uncertainty between two states, the two states can add different substance or emphases based on their partnership. If we relax the two original parameters of partnership, we can use external threat perceptions and economic interest perceptions to construct a 2 x 2 typology of partnerships. Figure 1 shows four ideal types of partnership between two states. While both external threat perceptions and economic interest perceptions have two variations as convergence and divergence, the interplay of the two variables constructs four types of partnerships for states.

Figure 1. A Threat-Interest Model of Partnership



Cell 1 is the lowest level of partnership between two states because the two states do not share either external threats or economic interests. It is named a "simple partnership," because the partnership between them is solely for reducing security threats between each other.

Cell 2 indicates that the two states share a common perception of external threats, but not economic interests. This type of partnership is called a "security partnership." It means that the partnership between two states not only aims to reduce threats between each other, but also to encourage them to cooperate in dealing with external threats together. In other words, the partnership forms a basis for security-oriented cooperation between the two states. Here, security partnership can be seen as a strategy of soft balancing through which the two states coordinate and cooperate on security issues when dealing with common external threats. Therefore, security partnership can be a preparation stage for a military alliance (Pape, 2005; Paul, 2005; Lieber and Alexander, 2005; Art et al. 2006; He and Feng, 2008).

A transformation from soft balancing to hard balancing, i.e. from a security partnership to a military alliance, depends on the level of external threat as well as the capabilities of the two states. If the external threats are imminent for the two states and both have the capabilities to cope with these external threats, then a military alliance is a most likely outcome from a security partnership.

Cell 3 indicates a situation of convergent economic interests and divergent external threats, which encourages an "economic partnership" between the two states. It means that the two states focus on enhancing economic cooperation on the basis of mutual trust, as a partnership has facilitated the reduction of security threats between them. However, because they do not share common external security threats, this "economic partnership" is limited to the domain of economic interactions between the two states.

Cell 4 suggests that the two states share both external threats and economic interests. It is called a "full partnership", which means that the two states have reached the highest level of partnership in both economic and security domains. The two states are expected to conduct both economic and security cooperation on the basis that they have reduced the threat level between each other to the lowest level. Economically, we should expect close cooperation in trade, investment, and financial sectors. In security, the two states will coordinate their diplomatic and security policies to deal with common external threats.

Still, this "full partnership" does not equal a formal alliance, but is rather a soft balancing strategy with the potential to become a military alliance in the future. Comparing the "full partnership" (cell 4) with the "security partnership" (cell 2), the former refers to more full-fledged cooperation than the latter. In other words, the "full partnership" is a more mature type of soft balancing than the security partnership, because economic cooperation can sometimes smooth or facilitate security cooperation between two states. Full partnership indicates more systemic and institutional coordination, and collaborations at higher levels.

In sum, by this reconceptualisation of "partnership", I highlight how the convergence or divergence of perceptions of external threats and economic interests shapes the variation of partnerships between two states. It is a deductive and conceptual model. The author acknowledges that identities and norms are also important. The proposed model performs a preliminary "first cut" theorisation for the study of partnership diplomacy in international relations. Analysing the importance of identity can certainly enrich our understanding of a specific partnership that one state might form at a particular time in world politics, but it would increase the complexity of the model and the scope of this paper. These are areas that will be best pursued in future research.

UNDERSTANDING THE SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP AFTER THE COLD WAR

To figure out under what conditions China and Russia will form a military alliance, we need to first consider Sino-Russian relations in the context of the partnership framework. Interestingly, both China and Russia have been vehement promoters of partnership or "strategic partnership" in world politics after the Cold War. China has reportedly established more than 50 partnerships or strategic partnerships with other countries. Despite efforts by scholars and reporters trying to decode the real meanings behind China's various types of partnership (e.g., the all-weather strategic partnership with Pakistan, the cooperative strategic partnership with Nepal as well as the strategic partnership with ASEAN), no official or authoritative clarification has been released to explain differences among these terms (Feng and Huang, 2014). This report will not try to navigate through the inflated terms of "strategic partnership" in Chinese diplomacy in particular and world politics in general. Rather, I employ the "threat-interest" model of partnership to analyse the evolution of Sino-Russian relations to shed light on the future direction of the bilateral relations.

Since the establishment of Sino-Russian diplomatic relations after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992, the two countries have officially established three types of partnerships: the "constructive partnership" in 1994, the "strategic partnership" in 1996, and the "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2010. The elevation of the partnership between China and Russia indicates ever-closer cooperation in bilateral relations in the post-Cold War era. However, one question has remained. During the Cold War they treated each other as security threats and even enemies, so why did the two countries constantly improve their bilateral relations after the Cold War? A related question is: why did the two countries spend about 15 years on elevating

their "strategic partnership" to a "comprehensive strategic partnership"? In other words, what factors have encouraged or hindered their bilateral relations in the post-Cold War era?

To answer these questions, I employ the "threat-interest" model to examine how the divergence and convergence of perceptions of external threats and economic interests shape the ups and downs in China–Russia relations. Integrating the official discourses on partnership into the model to help streamline the conditions of partnership evolution, we can divide Sino-Russian relations into four phases: the 1994 simple partnership in cell 1 when "constructive partnership" was set up, the 1996 the security partnership in cell 2 when China and Russia established a strategic partnership, the 2001–2004 economic partnership in cell 3, and the 2010 full partnership in cell 4 when China and Russia upgraded their partnership to a comprehensive strategic partnership.

Interestingly, both China and Russia have been vehement promoters of partnership or "strategic partnership" in world politics after the Cold War. China has reportedly established more than 50 partnerships or strategic partnerships with other countries.

The "threat-interest" model of partnership is an analytical tool to simplify the complicated bilateral relationship between China and Russia. It can serve this purpose by catching the dynamics of change in the bilateral relationship, as it originates from threat and changing interests, thus providing more power for scholars to understand the outcomes of foreign policy directions. The measurement of convergence vs. divergence of perceptions is continuous in nature, and in reality the real bilateral relations between China and Russia are not clearly categorised into each cell using the dichotomies that the model suggests. Instead, Sino-Russian relations might be located in between two or among three cells. However, the utility of the model that it can single out the most important factors that shape and influence the relationship between the two nations.

THE 1994 SIMPLE PARTNERSHIP

After the collapse of the Soviet Union bilateral relations between China and Russia were still dominated by suspicion and fear. As a consequence of the Cold War period's bitter ideological antagonism, the two nations treated each other as their respective enemy number one for more than two decades. Although Gorbachev started the normalisation process of Sino-Soviet relations during his visit to Beijing in the middle of student demonstrations and before the Tiananmen Square incident in 1989, the later demise of the Soviet Union as well as the rise of the anti-communist Yeltsin overshadowed their bilateral relations with both ideological antagonism and strategic distrust. Beijing's conservative groups were even prepared to publicly criticise Gorbachev and condemn the pro-West Yeltsin in the aftermath of the regime change in Moscow. Fortunately, Deng Xiaoping as China's paramount leader vetoed the conservative groups' proposal and insisted on normalising bilateral relations with Russia (Dittmer, 2001). Russian foreign policy at the start was nothing but pro-Western, because Yeltsin saw himself as a "democratic hero" against the old communist regime. Given the huge ideological gap and historical antagonism between the two nations, as Jeanne Wilson notes, in 1992 "few observers anticipated the emergence of close ties between China and Russia in the 1990s" (Wilson, 2004: 4).

First, the major purpose of the "constructive partnership" is to reduce mutual fears originating from uncertainty and threats from each other.

However, the reality is that the leaders of both countries adopted a pragmatic foreign policy toward each other. In December 1991 China recognised the government of the Russian Federation after the break-up of the Soviet Union; both agreed to fulfil obligations previously concluded between the two nations, including the joint communiqués signed by Gorbachev in 1989 and 1991. In December 1992 Yeltsin paid a state visit to Beijing, and the two countries signed a joint statement declaring that China and Russia regarded each other as "friendly states" that would not allow differences in social systems and ideology to obstruct the normal relations between the two nations (Dittmer, 1992). The mere fact that the two countries emphasised "friendly states" in the joint statement reflects the deep suspicion and distrust harboured in the minds of the leadership of both sides at that time.

In September 1994 Jiang Zemin visited Moscow and signed a joint statement to establish a "constructive partnership" with Yeltsin. It was the first "partnership" between the two states. Although the joint statement covered four areas of bilateral cooperation: political, economic, military and international, this constructive partnership is only the lowest level of partnership, i.e., the "simple partnership" (cell 1) in the "threat-interest" model. First, the major purpose of the "constructive partnership" is to reduce mutual fears originating from uncertainty and threats from each other. One major document during Jiang's visit declared that the two countries would not target their strategic nuclear weapons at each other. In addition, the two sides reached an agreement to continue mutual reduction of arms forces in their border area. Along with the continuous border demarcation between the two states originating in the 1991 agreement, the two countries gradually reduced direct military threats to each other along their 7000 km border.

Second, the establishment of this "simple partnership" does not require common external threats and economic interests between the two countries. Actually, the major reason behind the "constructive partnership" document is rooted in the domestic needs of both countries. China was recovering from the Western economic sanctions in the aftermath of the Tiananmen incident. Deng's famous "Southern Tour" kept China on the course of economic reform and opening-up. Maintaining a peaceful external environment for economic modernisation became the first priority for the Chinese leadership in the early 1990s (Zhao, 1993). Therefore, reducing mutual distrust and threat with its northern neighbour fitted with China's national strategy of economic growth and reform.

China and Russia did emphasise economic, political, and even strategic cooperation in international affairs in their joint statement along with the "constructive partnership" pledge.

In Russia, the harsh reality of an economic downturn after Yeltsin's failed marketisation and privatisation programs in Russia, in addition to the cold shoulder from the West, damaged Yeltsin's reputation and credibility as a democratic fighter in Russian domestic politics. Consequently Yeltsin was caught in a power struggle with members of the legislative branch over control of the government. Yeltsin ordered the military to shell the parliament building during the famous "constitutional crisis" in October 1993. Yeltsin's hard-line approach helped consolidate his power, and the later constitutional referendum further strengthened his control of the

Russian government. Due to his preoccupation with domestic struggles, Yeltsin also hoped to maintain good diplomatic relations with China (Mankoff, 2009; Tsygankov, 2010; Hopf, 1999). Therefore Yeltsin proposed the "constructive partnership" with China in his New Year's letter to Jiang in December 1993, because a peaceful border with China would save him much time and energy to focus on domestic challenges.

China and Russia did emphasise economic, political, and even strategic cooperation in international affairs in their joint statement along with the "constructive partnership" pledge. However, these proposals seem more rhetorical and diplomatic in nature given Russia's domestic disarray and China's inward-looking foreign policy after the Tiananmen incident. For example, bilateral trade volume was US$ 7.67 billion in 1993 and dropped dramatically to US$ 5.08 billion as a result of Russian government-imposed visa restrictions on the Chinese population (Wilson, 2004). Although Russian arms sales to China increased dramatically in the 1990s, as some scholars point out, it is by no means the "driving force of the relationship" (Wilson, 2004; Donaldson and Nogee, 2009; Donaldson and Donaldson, 2003). Obviously, mere arms sales were not sufficient to form common economic interests between the two nations.

THE 1996 SECURITY PARTNERSHIP

Soon after China and Russia formed the "constructive partnership" in 1994, the security situation dramatically changed for both partners. While China experienced the third Taiwan crisis from July of 1995 to March of 1996, which almost escalated into a military confrontation with the United States, Russia faced tremendous strategic pressures from both NATO's eastward expansion and the first Chechen war. Consequently, the common threat from the West, especially the United States, pushed China and Russia to move closer on the security front.

The Taiwan crisis was triggered by Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui's visit to Cornell University in the United States in 1995. With its "one China" policy, the US government had assured China's foreign minister that Lee would not be issued a visa (Lampton, 2001). However, the US Congress imposed political pressure on the Clinton administration so that it finally broke this promise to the Chinese government. Lee visited the United States in June and delivered a speech on "Taiwan's democratisation experience," which was treated by the Chinese government as a pro-independence statement by Taiwan. Consequently, China initiated a series of military exercises

and missile tests across the Taiwan Strait from July 1995 to March 1996 to demonstrate China's military resolve against Taiwan's independence movement, and to target Taiwan's presidential election in March 1996, in which Lee was a front runner (Ross, 2000). The Chinese government may have hoped that China's military intimidation would dissuade Taiwanese voters to from supporting the pro-independent Lee.

Soon after China and Russia formed the "constructive partnership" in 1994, the security situation dramatically changed for both partners. While China experienced the third Taiwan crisis from July of 1995 to March of 1996, which almost escalated into a military confrontation with the United States, Russia faced tremendous strategic pressures from both NATO's eastward expansion and the first Chechen war.

However, China's military intimidation against Taiwan proved counterproductive. Not only did Lee win the election with the "help" from Beijing, but also the United States had to become involved. Because 1996 was an election year in the United States, Clinton did not want to appear weak in the face of China's hawkish policy toward Taiwan. On March 8 Clinton sent two aircraft carriers to the Taiwan Strait area to show US support for Taiwan. Although the Taiwan crisis was finally defused after Beijing stopped its military intimidation, the Sino–US relationship reached its nadir after the Tiananmen incident (Garver, 1997; Suettinger, 2003; Mann, 2000). On April 17 the United States signed a joint declaration with Japan to strengthen the US–Japanese security alliance. Although both the United States and Japan publicly denied that the US-Japanese alliance targeted China, in the eyes of Chinese leaders the United States had become the most threatening state to China's security (Yan, 2000).

The United States also made Russia uncomfortable in Europe. Soon after declaring his democratic victory against communism in Russia, Yeltsin adopted a pro-Western and pro-US foreign policy with the hope of joining the Western club. However, what Yeltsin and other Russian elites soon found out was that a declining Russia was not welcomed by either the European Union or by NATO. Instead, Russia's traditional sphere of influence was penetrated by European powers led by the United States. The Council of Europe admitted six former satellites of Russia in 1993 and actually

opened the door for them to join the European Union. In 1994, NATO proposed admitting three former Eastern European satellites, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic in 1997. However, when Yeltsin indicated that he wanted Russia to be considered for memberships in both the European Union and in NATO, the answer was a clear "no" (Goldgeier and McFaul, 2003).

To a certain extent, Yeltsin and other Russian elites felt betrayed by the West, especially the United States. The disappointment toward the West gradually developed into strong resentment in Russian society. A public opinion survey showed that 44% of the elites and 75% of the population believed that the Russian economy was essentially in foreign hands. In addition, during 1993–1995 the number of those viewing the United States as a threat increased from 26 to 44% among the general public and from 27 to 53% among elites (Zimmerman, 2002).

The common security threat from the United States convinced China and Russia to form a "partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and trust and oriented toward the 21st century" during Yeltsin's summit in Beijing on 25 April 1996.

The common security threat from the United States convinced China and Russia to form a "partnership of strategic coordination based on equality and trust and oriented toward the 21st century" during Yeltsin's summit in Beijing on 25 April 1996. The timing of the establishment of this strategic partnership cannot be more symbolic, because it was one month after the Taiwan crisis and about one week after the US–Japanese joint declaration of strengthening their security alliance. Although China and Russia claimed that their strategic partnership did not target any third party, the joint statement advocated the development of the trend "toward a multipolar world" (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 1991). Compared to the military alliance between the United States and Japan, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is only symbolic in nature. However, it reflected a shared perception of external threats from the United States and indicated further security-oriented cooperation between China and Russia.

On April 26, China and Russia signed a treaty to enhance military confidence-building measures together with three Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in Shanghai. This so-called "Shanghai Five" signed

another treaty of reduction of military forces in border regions in Moscow in April 1997. The significance of the Shanghai Five and the security arrangements along the borders was to further reduce mutual distrust among these five neighbouring states, especially between China and Russia (Chung, 2010). In December 1996 Russia and China reached a series of arms sales agreements, including the Su-27 licensing and the sale of Sovremennyi class destroyers. Moreover, they also signed a military technology transfer agreement.

However, economic cooperation and trade volume did not move alongside the increased security-oriented cooperation, which indicates a lack of common economic interests in bilateral relations. For example, the total trade volume in 1999 was $5.7 billion, which was even less than that in 1992 ($5.8 billion) (Wilson, 2004). Although the 1998 financial crisis was one of the key reasons for the sudden fall in bilateral trade in 1999, the low level of bilateral trade through the earlier 1990s reflected divergent economic interests between them. Another example is the fruitless discussions and negotiations on energy cooperation between China and Russia. Although Russian oil and gas are two major commodities that China demanded and longed for, neither the government nor the energy sector in Russia paid high attention to the prospects of energy collaboration with China (Yu, 2007). Clearly any meaningful economic cooperation needed them to work together. However, either bureaucratic or strategic reasons precluded Russia from being on the same page as China regarding economic cooperation, especially on energy, in the 1990s.

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This threat-rooted security partnership was continuously strengthened between China and Russia in the second half of the 1990s. The US-led Kosovo crisis and the NATO expansion in 1999, despite Russia's furious opposition, cornered Yeltsin strategically and politically (Goldgeier and McFaul, 2003). In 1999 Russia's National Security Council drafted a new version of the National Security Concept, which was officially signed by Putin in January 2000 after Yeltsin resigned. The document claimed that "NATO's assumption, as its strategic doctrine, of the practice of the use of (military) force beyond the alliance's area of responsibility and without the

sanction of the UN Security Council may destabilize the strategic situation in the world" (Tsygankov, 2005). The mention of NATO military action without UN authorisation is a clear reference to the Kosovo War.

Although China originally refrained from direct involvement in the Kosovo war, the "embassy bombing" incident dragged China into the crisis. Chinese leaders were also deeply concerned that the Kosovo type of "humanitarian intervention" might happen to China's separatist regions such as Tibet, Xinjiang and even Taiwan (Yan, 2001; Jia, 2005; He, 2009). Moreover, Chinese leaders and the general public were furious about the "embassy bombing" incident and the US 'wrong map' excuse. Soaring nationalist sentiments triggered large-scale anti-America protests in China, during which the US embassy and consulates were damaged by angry protesters (Swaine and Zhang, 2006). The Chinese government quickly reversed the downfall of Sino-US relations and reached a WTO accession agreement with the United States in 2000 after long and tough negotiations. However, Chinese leaders and the general public further confirmed their threat perception regarding the United States in the later, 2001, EP-3 incident in which a Chinese pilot was lost in a mid-air collision between a Chinese fighter and US surveillance plane over the South China Sea (Swaine and Zhang, 2006).

Coincidentally, China and Russia signed a "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation" in July 2001, about three months after the EP-3 incident. Although the treaty included nothing new except reemphasising their "strategic partnership," it laid a legal foundation for the two countries to strengthen their security-oriented cooperation. For example, the treaty stated that both countries were committed to "upholding the global strategic balance and maintenance of security…to strengthening the role of the United Nations in the maintenance of peace and development" (Chinese Foreign Ministry, 1991). These commitments implied a common strategic stand in opposing US missile defence systems and the Kosovo intervention.

THE 2001–2004 ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP

The September 11 tragedy changed the world and also influenced Sino-Russian relations in the early 2000s. Both Russia and China supported the US "War on Terror" soon after the terrorist attacks. Both adjusted their threat perceptions regarding the United States, which undermined the security bond in their bilateral

relations. While some tactical cooperation in international affairs continued, their attitude toward each other turned aloof and dropped to the level of "economic partnership" at best, with lethargic and unimpressive economic interaction.

With Putin in power, his first priority turned to domestic development, including economic growth and regional stability. Fortunately for Putin, high oil and gas prices allowed him to maintain high economic growth for the two terms of his presidency until 2008 (Sputnik International, 2008). The major headache for Putin in the early 2000s was Chechen separatism and related terrorist attacks. At the time of the 1999 Chechen war Putin was Prime Minister, but he still played a leading role in directing the military actions during the war. After he became President in 2000, separatism and the associated terrorism were still seen as a top priority of national security. It is arguable that at the early years of leadership Putin had inputs from other key decision makers, senior leaders and military officers, but soon Putin consolidated power and assembled strong support around him.

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In international affairs, Putin adopted a "multi-vectored" foreign policy, aimed at developing relations with all countries, including the United States (Lo, 2004). After September 11, this similar, bitter experience of terrorism moved Putin closer to the United States. Although threats from the United States and NATO may never have disappeared in Putin's mind, the common interest in counterterrorism reduced or diverted Putin's threat perceptions regarding the West. As some scholars have pointed out, Putin's support of the United States in fighting terrorism was not "tactical, but came from his principal belief system" (Tsygankov, 2005). Policy-wise, Russia not only agreed to share intelligence information on terrorism and open up airspace to relief missions, but also endorsed the US military presence in Central Asia.

China's threat perception regarding the United States also changed, although not as dramatically as Russia's. Since the 1995–1996 Taiwan crisis, the Taiwan issue has been the major obstacle in US–China relations. The Kosovo war heightened Chinese leaders' suspicions and even fears of US policy toward Taiwan in the future. During

his presidential campaign in 2000, Bush labelled China a "strategic competitor" rather than a potential "strategic partner" as the Clinton administration had done in the late 1990s. When he came to power in 2001, Bush even publicly stated that he would offer "whatever it took" to help Taiwan defend itself if China invaded the island (Sanger, 2001). Although the US State Department clarified within hours of Bush's statement that the United States had not changed its Taiwan policy, Chinese leaders were still put on alert to ward off possible implications for China's security in the future were there to be a shift of US policy.

Soon after the September 11 attacks, China voiced its support for US fight against terrorists. China voted for the anti-terrorism resolutions in the UN Security Council, which granted the US a mandate to conduct military action in Afghanistan. China helped the United States freeze financial transactions of terrorist suspects in Chinese banks. At the 2001 APEC summit China supported the US request to include the anti-terrorist cause in the joint statement. Moreover, China permitted the US to open its first FBI office in Beijing, in order to facilitate "cooperation and coordination of US efforts on counter-terrorism, trans-national crime, and drug trafficking" (US Department of State, 2004).

Nevertheless, China's support for the US War on Terror did not change Chinese leaders' threat perception of the United States, especially on the Taiwan issue. Unlike Chechnya and the related terrorist activities for Russia, the Taiwan issue is in a different category than global terrorism. While Putin might share a similar feeling against terrorism with the United States, Chinese leaders were more concerned over what the United States would do after its victory over terrorism. The superior US military capabilities shown in both the Kosovo War and the anti-terrorism campaign deepened Chinese leaders' threat perceptions regarding the United States; therefore, China started to increase its defence budget after the Taiwan crisis and continued to do so into the 2000s to modernise its military capabilities (He, 2009).

The divergent threat perceptions between Russia and China led to a temporary "aloof" status in their partnership. Although the 1996 strategic partnership statement mentioned that both countries would coordinate in security affairs, it is reported that there was "only minimal consultation" between Moscow and Beijing when Russia encouraged the Central Asian republics to provide military facilities for the US war on terror (Lo, 2004). Since Central Asia is close to China's Xinjiang province, a US military presence and power penetration in the region will indicate a higher threat to China than to Russia. In January 2002 the United States formally

announced its withdrawal from the ABM treaty. Putin showed a "relaxed attitude," which surprised China because the US action was a clear challenge to the common stand between China and Russia against US anti-missile defence systems. Moreover, Russia signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty with the United States in May 2002. As a "strategic partner" of Russia, China felt betrayed by Russia's "solo dancing" with the United States (Lo, 2008). As one scholar points out, Putin's pro-American policy after September 11 "caused genuine consternation in Beijing" (Merry, 2003).

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However, Sino-Russian trade increased dramatically after Putin came to power. In 2000, bilateral trade was US$ 8 billion, which rose to US$ 21.2 billion in 2004 and continued to grow through the most of the 2000s. During Putin's 2001 visit to Beijing the two states signed an agreement to conduct a feasibility study for the construction of a 1,700 kilometre oil pipeline and to give the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom permission to construct a gas pipeline in China. This agreement was a breakthrough for Russian–Chinese energy cooperation in the early 2000s. Even though China had a huge demand for oil and gas, Russia had seemed reluctant to start the pipeline construction with China. Furthermore, the development of energy cooperation was by no means smooth between China and Russia because Russia started to play the energy card between China and Japan. Japan as a net energy importer was also eager for Russian oil and gas. Therefore, Japan offered Russia billions of dollars for a pipeline to Russia's Pacific coast instead of one to north-eastern China. In 2003 Russia finally decided to build two pipelines to both China's Daqing province in Northeast China and Russia's Pacific port of Nakhodka, which can provide oil to China and other Asian markets, including Japan and Korea (Jakobson, Holtom, Knox and Peng, 2011).

A major reason for the rapid growth of bilateral trade and economic cooperation is Putin's "authoritarian" control of energy sectors during his presidency. After the Beslan hostage crisis in September of 2004, anti-terrorism became a legitimate reason for Putin to tighten central control from Moscow over regions. Consequently, the central administration started to regain control over the disposition of natural resources. Since natural resources, including oil and gas, are the major trading

commodities from Russia to China, the increasing control by the central government over the energy sector had, in reality, facilitated economic cooperation between the two nations because disturbance over bilateral economic cooperation from Russia's local authorities was minimised (Lotspeich, 2010).

The energy deals as well as the increasing trade volume in the early 2000s indicated gradually converging economic interests between Russia and China. In this sense we can categorise the "partnership" between the two as an "economic partnership" in the early 2000s. However, if we highlight the economic difficulties and Russia's suspicions of Chinese immigrants in the Russian Far East and Eastern Siberia regions, then the common economic interests would seem to be an exaggeration.

The end of the rapprochement between Russia and the United States injected new momentum into the Sino-Russian partnership. The two states started to strengthen their security-oriented cooperation. In June 2005 China and Russia exchanged ratification of the Supplementary Agreement on the Eastern Section of the China–Russia Boundary Line. This agreement finally settled the border problems between the two countries.

Soon after the US initiated its war in Iraq in 2003, Russia and China started to reclaim their lost threat perception convergence regarding the United States. Russia joined France and Germany in the Security Council to block US attempts to seek authorisation from the UN for its war with Iraq (Cheng, 2009). In 2004 NATO admitted seven countries, including three former Soviet Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, as new members after the 1997 enlargement. Russia furiously opposed such an enlargement, which led to the termination of the short honeymoon between Russia and the United States after 9/11. As Reuben Steff and Nicholas Khoo (2014) point out, Russia, therefore, started its internal "hard balancing" against US threat, especially regarding the Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) systems in the 2010s.

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the two countries. In July 2005 Hu and Putin released a Sino-Russian Joint Statement on New World Order in the Twenty-first Century. In the joint statement the two countries called on the United Nations to "play a leading role in global affairs" and stated that "the international community should completely renounce the mentality of confrontation and alliance; there should be no pursuit of monopoly or domination of world affairs" (People's Daily , 2005). Apparently, the implicit target of this joint statement was the United States and the US–Iraq War.

Even if the 2005 joint statement was only rhetorical posturing, Russia and China started some substantial military cooperation in the second half of the 2000s. For example, the two countries conducted their first-ever joint military exercise – "Peace Mission 2005" in August 2005. In 2007, China and Russia with all other members in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), conducted a joint anti-terror military exercise – "Peace Mission 2007." It was the first joint military exercise within the framework of the SCO. Although the SCO publicly denied being a military alliance, it is the only regional security arrangement without the direct involvement of the United States. The military exercise among the SCO members was to strengthen their military ties with one another. Although China and Russia had some disagreements and even competition within the SCO (Lo, 2008), no one can deny that close military cooperation serves the security interests of both countries well, especially against US threats.

THE 2010 FULL PARTNERSHIP

The 2008 Georgia War further strained the relationship between Russia and the West, especially with the United States. Although China's relationship with the United States stabilised in Bush's second term and at the beginning of the Obama administration, it turned sour in 2009 when China's assertive diplomacy was widely criticised and the United States started its "pivot toward Asia". The Sino-Russian relationship entered a new phase of "full partnership" driven by convergent perceptions of external threats and economic interests.

The 2008 Georgia war between Russia and Georgia was a proxy "war" between Russia and the West, although the West, especially the United States, did not send troops to the battlefield (Asmus, 2010). The Georgia war was inspired by the colour revolutions in former Soviet republics such as Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in 2003–2005. The pro-Western opposition politicians overthrew the pro-Russian

incumbent leaders. During the war on terror the United States had established military bases in Central Asia and dispatched military advisors to Georgia. Georgia adopted a pro-Western policy and tried to bid for NATO membership at the end of 2008.

The Sino-Russian relationship entered a new phase of "full partnership" driven by convergent perceptions of external threats and economic interests.

Just two weeks before the outbreak of the Georgia war, the United States and Russia conducted two parallel military exercises in the region. In the later Russian-Georgian military conflicts, Russia invaded the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. Soon after the conflict Russia claimed to recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia. Although the United States strongly condemned the Russian invasion, it did not get directly involved. Instead, the United States led NATO to send humanitarian aid to Georgia. Soon after the Georgia war, Russia publicly claimed that it had privileged interests in certain regions, implying the CIS region (Mankoff, 2009). This statement can be seen as Russia's "Monroe doctrine", which aims to push the United States and European countries out of its sphere of influence.

Since the Georgia war Russia's relations with the West have deteriorated continuously. The 2013 Ukraine crisis and the later annexation of Crimea by Russia in March 2014 was a result of Russia's concerns over its sphere of influence against Western penetration. Western economic sanctions after the Ukraine crisis led to massive devaluation of the Russian currency and the later economic crisis. Russia's relations with the West dropped to a post-Soviet nadir after the Ukraine crisis. China kept mostly a low profile over the Georgia war (Mouritzen and Wivel, 2012).

Since 2008 many Western scholars and politicians have criticised Beijing's assertiveness in its diplomacy towards the outside world (Shambaugh, 2010; Mann, 2010; Bisley, 2011). Economically, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao started to lecture the US about its economic mismanagement during the 2008 financial meltdown and refused to revalue the Chinese currency as the US requested (Pomfret, 2010). Diplomatically, China responded furiously to Obama's decisions of arms sales to Taiwan and a meeting with the Dalai Lama in early 2010 with a threat of sanctions on American companies. Politically, China reluctantly cooperated with Western

countries, especially the United States, to punish North Korean and Iranian nuclear provocations to the international order. Many other examples, from the diplomatic standoff between China and the Philippines to its announcement of the East China Sea "Air Defense Identification Zone" (ADIZ), have been listed as indications of China's assertive behaviour since 2008 (Swaine, 2010; 2011; Swaine and Taylor Fravel, 2011; Perlez, 2012; Johnston, 2013).

Starting in 2009, Obama initiated a series of foreign policies with a strategic focus on the Asia Pacific. It was later labelled the "US strategic pivot" or "rebalancing" toward Asia, aimed at strengthening US multi-dimensional engagement in the region. Militarily, the United States boosted its military ties with its traditional allies such as Japan, Australia and South Korea. Politically, the United States joined the East Asia Summit and backed the ASEAN countries in the South China Sea disputes with China by claiming it engaged its "vital interests" in the region. Economically, Washington promoted the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) with its Asian allies and close economic partners, but it intentionally excluded China. For Chinese leaders, Obama's pivot or rebalancing toward Asia was clearly intended to contain the rise of China, despite the US government's denial (Nathan and Scobell 2012a and 2012b; Lieberthal and Wang, 2012; Yan, 2013).

It is not the purpose of this report to evaluate which party should be blamed for the strained relations between Russia and the United States as well as between the United States and China. Instead, I demonstrate that Sino-Russian relations developed dramatically when both perceived the United States as threatening. In September 2010 Russia and China signed a joint statement to upgrade their "strategic partnership" to "comprehensive strategic partnership" and Moscow confirmed that its bilateral relation with China was one of the priorities in Russia's foreign policy. The addition of the adjective "comprehensive" indicated that the Sino-Russian partnership had moved to "full partnership" phase, in which they faced common security threats and had shared economic interests.

China has been Russia's top trading partner since 2009, while Russia was China's seventh biggest trading partner in 2014. Their bilateral trade volume hit $95 billion in 2014. China and Russia have proposed that the total volume should reach $100 billion in 2015 and $200 billion by 2020 (Wu and Zhang, 2014). In February 2009 China and Russia signed their largest-ever energy cooperation agreement in Beijing. According to the agreement China will loan $15 billion and $10 billion, respectively, to OAO Rosneft Oil Company (Rosneft) and Russia Oil Pipeline Transport Company (Transneft), while Russia will export 300 million tons of crude oil from 2011 to 2030

and build an oil pipeline to China (Guan and Sha, 2009). In 2014 the two countries signed another huge energy deal, a $400 billion natural gas agreement. Compared to the stagnant development of energy cooperation in the 1990s and even in the 2000s, these two deals represent a real breakthrough in economic cooperation between the two nations. Their economic relations are no longer the "weakest link" in bilateral relations, as some scholars described it in the 1990s and the 2000s (Wilson, 2004; Yu, 2007).

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In 2012 Putin made China his first state visit destination after he assumed the presidential office (Ding, 2012). In 2013 Xi returned the honour with his first state visit to Russia. This "first-state-visit" practice indicated the significance of bilateral relations in both countries' foreign policy agenda (Ding, 2013). During Xi's visit China signed 20 agreements with Russia on wide-ranging issues like trade, economy, energy, investment, local cooperation, cultural exchange and environmental protection. The two countries also expressed mutual support for each other's core interests concerning sovereignty and territorial integrity. In practice, China and Russia also conducted coordination and cooperation on many international issues. For example, they held a common stand on the Iran and Syria issues in the United Nations. Since 2007 China and Russia have vetoed together six times in the United Nations and four times on the resolution related to the West-initiated draft resolutions against Syria (The other two vetoes China used were on Myanmar in 2007 and Zimbabwe in 2008).

CONCLUSION

Through re-conceptualising "partnership" relations in the post-Cold War era, the analysis in this report specifies a "threat-interest" model of partnership to explain the evolution of Sino-Russian relations after the Cold War. It suggests that the ups and downs of the Sino-Russian partnership are shaped by two perceptual factors: external threats and economic interests. When the two countries do not have shared external threats and economic interests, the "simple partnership" relationship mainly aims to reduce mutual distrust and fears generated by the anarchic logic of the international system. Sino-Russian relations in the early 1990s reflect this type of partnership between the two nations.

When the two countries face a common threat perception, it is more likely that they will establish a "security partnership" so that they can conduct security-related cooperation. The 1996 "strategic partnership" illustrates the logic of this threat-based partnership. When the two countries shared a convergent view on economic interests, they were more likely to establish an "economic partnership" focusing on economic cooperation. The bilateral relations between China and Russia after the 9/11 attacks represent this type of partnership, following on from the loss of convergence of common threat perceptions regarding the United States. Finally, when the two countries held convergent views on both external threats and economic interests, a "full partnership" was more likely, with strengthening cooperation in both security and economic arenas. Sino-Russian relations after the mid-2010s support the logic of this "full partnership", because both countries have concomitantly faced mounting pressure and threat from NATO, led by the United States.

As the "threat-interest" model has indicated, common economic interests are not naturally generated by the market. Although the energy sector has huge potential for cooperation, the real breakthrough in both gas and oil cooperation between the two countries did not happen until the Ukraine crisis and the Russian economic crisis. There are two possible implications. First, the economic cooperation between the two countries will face more challenges than promising opportunities in the future. As reported, Russia has made huge compromises in negotiating the energy deals with China (Downs, 2014). This temporary compromise might entail future friction between the two nations. Second, the common security threat plays an important role in enhancing economic cooperation. Consequently, a decrease of the security threat may also have a negative impact on economic cooperation in the future.

As previously discussed, the Western economic sanctions against Russia are the major force pushing Russia to seal the energy deals with China. However, both countries understand that overdependence entails vulnerability for national interests. China has tried to diversify its oil supply by increasing its economic cooperation in Central Asia, traditionally Russia's backyard. Russia has also striven to expand its energy market with other Asian countries, such as Japan, India, Mongolia, South Korea, and Vietnam (even North Korea). Intentionally or not, Russia's energy cooperation with some Asian countries has made China somewhat uncomfortable strategically. For example, Russia's 2012 energy deal with Vietnam in the South China Sea, where China has claimed its undisputed sovereignty, was seen as Russia's "stab in the back" in the eyes of some Chinese analysts (Feng, 2015). In the same vein, Russia has deep concerns that China's "Silk Road economic belt" across Central Asia will undermine Russia's geopolitical influence in Eurasia (Feng, 2015).

The Western economic sanctions against Russia are the major force pushing Russia to seal the energy deals with China. However, both countries understand that overdependence entails vulnerability for national interests.

Moreover, Russia's arms trade with China is not all about money. Admittedly, Russia is China's most important supplier of weapons and military technology. However, it is an open, and also an understandable, secret that Russia has been hesitant to transfer advanced military technology to China – its potential competitor in the world. As for the S-400 missile system deal in late 2014, it is widely seen as a practical financial decision rather than a strategic one. Russia's military cooperation with China's

neighbours, such as Vietnam, entails strong deterrence and balancing ramifications toward China in the South China Sea. For example, Russia has sold three kilo-class submarines to Vietnam since 2009, which are more advanced than what China has obtained from Russia.

Despite divergent economic and strategic interests, the rapid development of bilateral relations in the second decade of the 2000s is remarkable. The "full partnership" between the two states is primarily driven by the perception of common threat from the United States. The common threat and economic interests have mutually reinforced the strengthening of bilateral relations between the two nations. Will this "full partnership" become a formal military alliance against the United States, or challenge the Western order in the future? The answer is: it depends on what the United States does. Right now, the "full partnership" between the two powers is at best a "soft balancing" strategy against the United States. However, if the United States continuously pushes Russia through NATO and China through its "rebalancing" in the Asia Pacific, it will certainly drive Russia and China to move closer to each other. The deepening economic and security cooperation between the two will not only serve to beef up their military capabilities, but it might also create a military platform for alliance formation. When US threats towards both countries reach a certain point, a Sino-Russian alliance could become a harsh reality for the United States and the Western order.

Russia's arms trade with China is not all about money.

It is by no means easy for China and Russia to move to a military alliance. Their bitter history may preclude them from trying, because of what they had experienced during the Cold War. In the new geopolitical game, in which the United States, at least for the time being, remains hegemon, the US actually holds the first-move advantage to determine how the game will play out. It is natural for the hegemon to try hard to preserve its hegemonic position. Moreover, as Quansheng Zhao (2007) points out, the rise of China does not necessarily mean the decline of the United States and the "managed great power relations" between the United States and China might lead to a peaceful power transition in the 21st century. Nevertheless, if the United States tries to take both Russia and China down simultaneously in the game, it might produce a self-fulfilling prophecy: that successful soft balancing by the Sino-Russian partnership will accelerate US decline instead of safeguarding US hegemony. US policymakers and European leaders should therefore reflect on their policies toward China and

Russia. Why can two former enemies move so close despite their previous huge ideological, material and ideational differences? It is time for the United States and European countries to consider how to reset their relations with China and Russia before it is too late. China and Russia will also need to be cautious in testing the red lines of the US and the West in general. Even though a Chinese-Russian alliance is formidable, the differences between the two major powers are obvious, and the areas of possible frictions are ever-mounting. Neither has the intention to sever completely their relationship with the West, particularly with the US, nor to sacrifice their Western link for the sake of the alliance.

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