The Three Structural Stages of Russo-Chinese Cooperation after the Collapse of the USSR and Prospects for the Emergence of a Fourth Stage

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1. Introduction

Although the recent trend has been to see our world as flat (Friedman 2005), it is not flat in real life, and the consequences of this reality are becoming apparent with every passing day (De Blij 2009). Yet the flow of research has been geared to analyzing the flatness of the world as much as its differentiation (De Blij 2005; Voskressenski 2006; Fung, Fung and Wind, 2008). Consequently, attempts have been made to look at the development of Sino-Russian relations, arguably the third most important pair of bilateral relations after the Sino-American and the Russo-American ones, from the angle of world flatness (Lukin 2010). Sino-American relations in present times involve both economic and security matters that contribute to shaping the world order in the context of China’s rise as well as the West’s perception of it (Ben Li 2007; Wang Jisi 2007). Notwithstanding the legacy of a bipolar world, over the last twenty years Russo-American relations in the spheres of nuclear disarmament, non-proliferation, and NMD have been limited due to the transformation of Russia into a transcontinental yet regional power as opposed to the USSR, the USA, and China. American unipolarity in the 1990s aided the emergence of a grand strategy aimed at the weakening and marginalizing of Russia, which in turn helped transform Russian internal policy by strengthening its nationalistic and xenophobic elements and weakening a constructive nationalism (Lieven 2011). As several analysts have argued, the rationale for such an American policy vis-à-vis Russia ended with the emergence of a multipolar world, caused primarily by the rise of China and the weakening of Russia. In this multipolar world the USA will arguably need new friendly poles making American foreign policy more pragmatic and constructive toward Russia (Lieven 2011).


So the evolution of the world order during the last twenty years and the possibility to assess the world flatness vs. its differentiation gives us a possibility to assess and explain different structural stages of the Sino-Russian relations.

Sino-Russian relations, though seen as having a strategic character aimed to curb American unipolar preeminence (Louzianin 2005 quoted by Kuchins in Bellacqua 2010, 48) by political leaders in both countries, were described recently in Russia itself as different in reality and not having a clear future beyond a ten-year horizon (Trenin 2012). Yet, contrary to the latter view, the relationship
between Russia and China has in fact acquired a strategic rationale that has emerged as an important conservative anchor in international relations, working to contain Western global politics. There has likewise been a pragmatic, non-confrontational side to Sino-Russian cooperation in the last few years (Galenovich 2007). However, this situation has started to change due to the many transformations taking place on the international arena in connection with the global financial crisis.

The expansion of Western interests and politics on the global arena in the last ten years has actually not been contained by the remnants of the Soviet Union’s military arsenal, inherited by Russia, which vowed to construct an alternative to the Western economic and political domain through a Sino-Russian partnership based on Russian military potential and China’s economic rise. In fact, this development has been primarily due to the aggressive rise of archaic elements of the defeated remnants of non-Western countries and those Western segments of world orders inherited throughout the 17th-19th centuries which had appeared extinguished by historical evolution—the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and (to a much lesser extent) Celestial Empires. Their rise has materialized in the appearance of international terrorism and the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the USA and later on its European allies—as seen in the Bravick case and turmoil in London and Paris. It was only of secondary or even tertiary importance—after the Western economic and political mercantilism that ruled till the emergence of the economic crisis—that Russo-Chinese bilateral economic cooperation helped enhance the two countries’ economic self-reliance and thus strengthened their anti-Western positions as manifested by their recent joint opposition voting in the UNSC that seeks to de-legitimize the Western international stance. Russo-Chinese bilateral economic cooperation in the form of Russia supplying raw materials and energy to the rising China did not hinder the appearance of many economic and political problems in Russia and did not help Russia overcome its difficulties in finding an adequate place in the international arena. At the same time, the aggressive rise of archaic elements of the defeated remnants of non-Western world orders happened to be of no less danger to Russia than to the West in terms of internal threats. The consequences have included the rise of those archaic trends in Russian domestic politics (unenlightened monoconfessional nationalism and idealization of civilizational uniqueness) for which Russia cannot blame the West as it had blamed it for the economic and international weakness of Russia in the late 1990s.

It is obvious that the current policy regarding Sino-Russian relations is now at a critical point and in need of restructuring because of clear evidence that it is no longer helping to strengthen world governance but instead may even increase the international disorder that threatens global economic development. The latter matters for both countries, and even more for China, which is heavily dependent on exports of goods than for Russia, which relies predominantly on exports of oil not covered by any international trade regime or institution. The practically simultaneous change of leadership in Russia, China, and the USA as well as a feeling that the second wave of economic difficulties is not over necessitate a restructuring but do not guarantee that it will have any practical effect due to the rise of civilizational nationalism in both Russia and China. However, the multi-candidate and unprecedentedly transparent presidential elections in Russia though with a known result, certain political turmoil and the cries of the Russian opposition for the political unjustness with the attempt to delegitimize it because organizers of the election campaign previously denied certain political figures to raise to power may hopefully open a possibility for further political changes in the young and fragile Russian democracy, whether it is called a non-Western democracy, a sovereign democracy or a hybrid regime. This created new prospects for future Russia enhancing its political unity with Europe and the USA, a precondition to overcome financial crises and crises in world governance, and crucial if the Russian political elite is seriously thinking about modernization including its technical parameters.

An understanding of such important potential challenges facing both Russia and China is critical in view of how both their internal development and their bilateral relationship might be affected. They should increase their interdependence through restructuring their economic and political domains to better conform to the international rules of maintaining and developing the transnational space and not to strengthen authoritarianism and civilizational uniqueness that separates them from the outside world. It may help us look forward into the future to take into account how the concept of ‘common transnational space’ may explain and influence the ongoing developments in Russo-Chinese relations.