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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zhang, X. (2021). "Endogenous Drives" with "No-Limits": Contrasting Chinese Policy Narratives on Sino–Russian Relations since 2014. *Russian Analytical Digest*, 265, 5-8. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000476768>

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“Endogenous Drives” with “No-Limits”: Contrasting Chinese Policy Narratives on Sino–Russian Relations since 2014

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000476768

Abstract

This article compares the two policy narratives that have recently become prominent among Chinese political and expert circles regarding the Sino–Russian relationship: “no limits” and “endogenous drives”. While the two policy discourses convey a certain degree of internal tension, they converge on portraying Sino–Russian relations as operating on a level distinct, and higher than that of the “axis of convenience” or the “revisionist challenger to liberal order” conceptualizations of the relationship that are prevalent in Western discourse.

Sino–Russian Relations through Western Eyes

Sino–Russian relations during the early 2000s were popularly characterized as an “axis of convenience” or “marriage of convenience” within western expert discourses (Lo 2008). Such perceptions portray Sino–Russian bilateral relations as predominantly tactical and short-term in nature, and driven by reactive responses to common threats from the outside world, in particular, geopolitical pressure from the U.S. and its major allies. More recently, Russia and China have been defined as the greatest threat to the liberal democratic capitalist world and liberal international order, because of the proclaimed fundamental differences and incompatibility between the Russian and Chinese domestic models and the western liberal democratic models.

Against this background, this article maps out Chinese policy discourses regarding Sino–Russian relations, which since 2014 have operated under the aegis of two seemingly contradictory key concepts: “no limits” and “endogenous drives”. This article aims to unpack the hidden nuances and internal vagueness of Chinese policy narratives regarding Sino–Russian relations, by scrutinizing the hidden assumptions, and associated geopolitical imaginations contained within them.

Post-Crimea World and the Big Triangle

The years since the 2013/4 Ukrainian crisis would seem to have vindicated the “axis of convenience” thesis: closer ties between the Chinese and Russian states are driven predominantly by mounting pressures from the international system that are common to both countries.

The successive rounds of sanctions applied on Russia by western states since 2014 have led many within the Russian elite converge on the view, rather unwillingly, that Russia has no other choice than to be more

accommodating to China, lending further support to the Russian “Pivot to Asia” strategy, formally announced by Putin in late 2013. In the immediate years following the Ukrainian crisis, top level Russian and Chinese officials frequently visited one another and these exchanges resulted in a series of key agreements, some of which went beyond earlier constraints that the elites of both states had placed on such collaborations. In particular, the President of China Xi Jinping’s symbolic appearance as the only guest of honor among the great powers that attended the 70th anniversary of the Victory Day celebrations in Moscow in 2015 showcased the special status and value that relations with the other had reached for both Russia and China. During the 2015 Xi-Putin summit, Putin also openly outlined that China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the Russia’s Eurasian Economic Union represented complementary, rather than competing projects, leading to the signing of a “conjugation deal” between the two countries’ most ambitious regional development projects. Subsequently, Russia has shown increasing signs of accommodating Chinese interests in areas in which Russia has traditionally enjoyed the status of the “incumbent” influence. For example, Russia has been willing to grant Chinese firms more shareholding stakes in its key energy projects. Russia also appears to be more willing to support China’s efforts to brand itself as a legitimate “near Arctic state”. Although much of this post-2014 agenda for bilateral collaboration was assembled in a rush (Gabuev 2015), these developments unquestionably led to intensified collaboration between the two countries.

About four years later, when the US–China trade war broke out and the US sanctioned Chinese agencies, it was an *aha* moment for many Russian specialists working on Sino–Russian relations, who sent messages to their Chinese counterparts saying “see, we have warned you long

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ago! What happened to us will happen to you.” Since then, for Beijing, Russia’s anti-sanction measures, partial success in developing import substitution in certain economic sectors, and partial decoupling from dollar-dominated financial markets have provided further opportunities for China to strike bilateral deals more on its terms, as well as to learn from Russia’s relevant experience of operating its national economy in an increasingly hostile external economic environment. The emphasis on “internal circulation” in the so-called “dual circulation” strategy advocated by Xi Jinping in July 2020 has generated intense debate within China. Among the multiple interpretations of this policy concept, at least one major camp sees China’s top leader as calling for beefing up “internal circulation” as a sign to move towards greater self-reliance in response to a hostile external market, by emphasizing the advantages of its large domestic market and huge untapped consumption potential. For the same reason, the Chinese authorities and wider policy circles have become increasingly concerned about overreliance on the dollar as the international currency system, with one senior Chinese diplomat calling de-dollarization “the most significant issue in current global political economy”. Russia’s recent experiences in responding to barriers to international markets by promoting domestic alternatives, and the possibility of Russia–China policy coordination and even joint counter-reactions in this regard, has meant that greater engagement with Russia has come to be seen by Chinese elites as an attractive option or even a necessity.

All these recent domestic and bilateral dynamics can be interpreted, at least partially, as being based on the common responses of Chinese and Russian state elites to what they consider as a hostile external environment maintained by pressure from the US. Thus, the Russian–Chinese relationship may now be described as following an inverse “axis of convenience” thesis. While it may be that both the Russian and Chinese authorities ultimately continue to care more about their relationship with the US than each other and that their bilateral relationship is derived on this basis, their respective relationships to the US no longer represents the ultimate benchmark and reference point for measuring progress in the bilateral relationship, but rather serves as the source of common threat that drives Sino–Russian relations.

From “No Alliance” to “No Limits” and “Endogenous Drives”

The wording of the 2001 *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation*, intended to be the foundational document for the Russian–Chinese bilateral relationship, was rather cautious. It was even interpreted by some Russian experts as “a careful attempt to refrain from ideological declarations or knowingly unrealiz-

able obligations” that “indicated that the leaders of the two countries were thinking long-term and tried to avoid mistakes made fifty years earlier” (Gabuev 2015). Informally, the “three-no” principles also became the de facto guiding principles for Sino–Russian relations: “no alliance, no conflict, and no targeting of any third country” (Fu 2016). This loosely parallels the informal “three-no” principles of China’s Deng Xiaoping-era foreign policy: non-alliance, non-intervention, and non-leadership. This approach was later summarized in an even more succinct fashion as “partners, but not allies”, further indicating the lack of interest on both sides in establishing a formal military alliance.

However, since 2013, bolder statements began to be heard, such as there are (or should be) “no limits” to the development of Sino–Russian relations. That expression has taken on several different forms. For example, former State Councilor, and at one time a key figure in relations with Russia, Dai Bingguo (2016) commented that there should be no “upper-ceiling” for Sino–Russian relations. In a similar vein, China’s Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Le Yucheng told Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov in 2019: there is no cap (or no ceiling) and no limits to the development of bilateral relations (Le 2016). Gradually, such narratives were further developed informally into various forms for the new “three-no” principles. Among others, Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi (2021), recently suggested that for Sino–Russian strategic cooperation there is “no end limit, no forbidden zone, no upper bound”. Most recently, in early 2021, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Hua Chunying (2021) reiterated that “in developing China–Russia strategic cooperation, we see no limit to how far this cooperation can go, and no forbidden zone”. However, up till now, neither Russia’s, nor China’s primary political leader has openly used or endorsed such “no-cap” or “no-limits” narratives. Nor have such phrases been used in formal official documents.

It is in this context that the search for “endogenous drives” or the “endogeneity” of Sino–Russian relations began to appear in Chinese academic and policy circles. The first openly available publication making direct reference to “endogenous drives” in Sino–Russian relations can be traced back to 2013 (Yujun 2013), with this soon followed by similar comments from top Russia experts in China (Feng 2013). Unlike the “no-limit” narrative, “endogeneity”, and related concepts, has been taken up and used by China’s paramount leader. President Xi Jinping (2015) used it for the first time when meeting with the then Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev in 2015, stating that “there is both solid political consensus, solid public opinion support, and strong endogenous drives for developing the Sino–Russian comprehensive strategic partnership”. Xi (2020) again referred to such

phrases in his latest telephone conversation with President Putin, stressing that China–Russia relations have strong “endogenous dynamics” and independent values, which are not affected by changes in the international arena and are not disturbed by any other factors. Since 2014, there has been a dramatic rise in references to either the “endogenous drives” or the “endogeneity” of Sino–Russian relations among senior officials, scholars and think tankers.

Interpretations and Implications

Although there are clear limits on what can be gleaned from an analysis based on policy narratives alone, the two discourses on “no-limits” and “endogeneity” can be said to demonstrate two distinct trends within China’s Russia-watching community, as Chinese political elites seek to adjust and redefine the China–Russia relationship in the light of the evolving global context and changing domestic conditions in both countries. These relational complications are clearly manifested in the seemingly contradictory nature of the two narratives.

The references to “no-limits” narratives, mostly, by representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been echoed among a relatively small scholarly and expert community. These actors have shown strong interests in providing a vague, but flexible and large enough space for imagination in conceptualizing the bilateral relationship, beyond that which is offered by the 2001 *Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation*, soon to be automatically extended for another five years.

Within the “no limits” narratives, the previously popular phrase “partners, but not allies” is now presented not as a way of “constraining” the relationship. The implied connotation is that traditional military alliances, which the US is said to have masterfully used as the foundation of its global hegemony, does not represent the “highest” level of relations between sovereign states. Indeed, the “no-limits” narratives imply that the Sino–Russian relationship has already moved to a higher stage than that of a traditional military alliance. Thus, the “no-limits” discourse aims to drum up excitement about the possibility of the relationship further expanding and extending beyond its current level, in a way distinct to prevailing ideas about military alliances. Such interpretations lend support to another claim: that the idea promoted by Chinese state actors about a “new type of major-country relations” that was originally intended to be “sold” to an American audience in 2013, has, somewhat unexpectedly, partly materialized between China and Russia. In other words, Sino–Russian relations have already become the archetype for the model of a “new type of major-country relations” (Xing 2016). Such phrasing

has been used in many open comments and speeches made by Chinese senior officials.

In contrast, the “endogenous drives” narrative, emanating initially from the scholarly and think tank community, before later being taken up by China’s political leadership, reveals another set of more recent calculations, based on a more pragmatic and rational perception about the bilateral relations. The rise of the “endogenous drives” narrative serves as a self-corrective mechanism, taking one step back from the “no-limits” trend and foregrounding the previous overreliance on external factors in bilateral relations. It also reflects the more candid and coolheaded attitudes among China’s expert community toward both the status quo and possible future trajectory of Sino–Russian relations.

In this regard, one can further note a few related, more specific observations. First, the “endogeneity” discourse essentially advocates a better understanding of the differences between two countries, including their different takes on key international issues, divergent interests, and even competitive relations in certain key policy areas and differing concerns about third party’s reaction. Second, it candidly acknowledges that one should not expect the other to be in perfect alignment with them on every policy issue, and that to strive for perfect asymmetry between the two countries would be a mistake. Consequently, it also implies greater alertness to the need for conflict management in the relationship. This reflects the recent experience of the overly idealist and optimistic imaginations of the bilateral relationship, which quickly translates into disappointment when one side finds that they do not have resolute support from the other (Yang 2020). Lastly, it acknowledges that both countries are developing diverse sets of relationship with other actors in an increasingly “multiplex” world, and that neither side wants to put the other in a situation of having to make an either-or choice in maintaining the bilateral relationship. In sum, the “endogeneity” approach, particularly as seen from the expert community, has been derived from the “three-no” principles, acknowledging that the bilateral relationship has been primarily delineated by “what shall not be done” as a supposedly healthier and more sustainable foundation.

Xi Jinping’s recent reference to “endogeneity” adds a slightly new tone to the narrative. According to Xi (2020), the bilateral relationship holds value independent from one other’s interaction with other parties; and thus that it will not be affected by any changes in the wider international arena or by any other exogenous factors. As Xi (2020) put it, it is this endogeneity that resulted in “strengthened strategic cooperation between China and Russia that can effectively resist any attempts to suppress and divide the two countries, and build a solid barrier to safeguard international justice and equity”.

Conclusion

The “no-limits” and “endogenous drives” narratives outlined by China’s Russia expert community and officials since 2013–14 convey a certain degree of internal inconsistency, tension, and even contradictions reflecting their different understandings of and expectations for Sino–Russian relations. The rise and expansion of two such seemingly contradictory policy narratives indicate the contradictory tendency among Chinese policy makers, who are concerned about the uncertainty and vagueness underlying the relationship with Russia, but who are also simultaneously seeking to utilize such uncertainty to their advantage.

What the two policy narratives have in common, however, is that they portray Sino–Russian relations as operating on a level distinct, and higher than the “axis of convenience” or the “revisionist challenger to

liberal order” conceptualizations prevalent in Western expert discourse. The “no-limits” and “endogenous drives” narratives, at the very least, imply an intention to, and interest in, proactively constructing the relationship in a way that is not constrained by existing vocabularies and ideas in the mainstream policy space about Sino–Russian relations. It leaves room for “striving for more achievement” in the field of China–Russia relations, while still emphasizing the value of sticking to the “three-no” principles. No matter which policy narratives comes to be dominant in the official and expert policy communities in China, the Chinese–Russian bilateral relationship will be phrased and framed in a way that goes beyond their respective relationships to the US and the “liberal international order” debate that remains popular in the Anglophone world.

About the Author

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ANALYSIS

Russia and the China–India Rivalry

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000476768

Abstract

The deadly Himalayan border clash between China and India in June 2020 and the ensuing breakdown of China–India relations posed a challenge for Russia’s foreign policy. Russia has consistently sought to balance its relations with China and India, while also encouraging cooperation among the members of the Russia–India–China (RIC) triangle in seeking to increase their role in global governance. The deterioration of relations with the West has led Russia to strengthen relations with China, but Russia has also sought to avoid excessive reliance on China through diplomatic outreach to other countries, especially India. Tensions between China and India have long served to hinder Russia’s strategy, a problem that the events of 2020 compounded. In the face of growing concerns about China, India in recent years turned to the United States for support, becoming an active participant in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy. This trend is accelerating following the border clash. Both Russia and India seek to maintain strong relations with one another, but the intensification of great-power rivalry in Asia is placing an increasing strain on this relationship, hindering Russia’s objectives related to the Russia–India–China triangle.

Russia’s recent “pivot to the East” has led primarily to close ties with China, even as the balance of power in the bilateral relationship continues to tilt rapidly in

China’s favor. In search of diversity in its foreign policy, Russia has sought to strengthen its relations with other Asian countries, especially India. Ideally, from Rus-