



## **Russian Writers on the Decline of Russia in the Far East and the Rise of China**

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### **Summary**

*Russia's rapprochement with China began in the 1980s and 1990s; while its "pivot to Asia" began in 2008. Thus Russia has never completely absented itself from Asia even though for a long time the region played a secondary or tertiary role in Russian foreign policy. But today this "pivot to Asia" is a major priority for Russia and has become even more so since the invasion of Ukraine in 2014. The economic-political-strategic goals of these moves, however, have not fundamentally changed. The rapprochement with China was an attempt to reset the global balance in Russia's favor and tilt it away from the U.S. Since then domestic and geopolitical factors have interacted in both Beijing and Moscow to render both governments ever more anti-American and anti-liberal. But the pivot to Asia was to allow Russia to play an independent, major role in East Asia among all Asian states, not just China, and to do so by modernizing the Russian Far East (RFE) and simultaneously obtaining large-scale Asian investment in the area, particularly its energy, to facilitate that modernization. Indeed, that modernization is a precondition for achieving the status Moscow craves in Asia. However, in 2016, it is apparent that not only has the modernization of the RFE run aground, the tie to China is becoming an alliance where Russia depends more on China than China does on Russia. This essay analyzes these negative outcomes in terms of the assessment of these trends by Russian writers.*

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### **Introduction**

Russian elites have long known that failure to develop the Russian Far East (RFE) could cost Moscow control of its territory. Losing such control not only subjects the region to a form of external colonial control, it also blocks any possibility that Russia could compete in this region. Beyond these considerations, failure to develop the RFE would entail a loss of standing and influence in Asia vis-à-vis China and other Asian-Pacific powers, as well

as be an unmistakable sign that Russia has failed in its quest to be regarded as a great power in Asia and, more generally, globally. Failure to make something of the East calls into question not only the great project of President Vladimir Putin's regime to restore that status and perception at home and abroad. It also places the issue of irretrievable decline squarely on the political agenda and calls the legitimacy of the Putin system itself into question. As the statements below show, Putin and the Russian elite fully understand this, but they have found no means to make the RFE conform to their vision. Indeed, the very nature of Putin's system militates against the realization of this dream, as shown below.

Already in 2000, Vladimir Putin warned that if the RFE did not develop, its residents would be speaking Chinese, Japanese or Korean. [1] Over a decade ago, Dmitri Trenin of the Carnegie Endowment observed that the reconstruction of the RFE and Siberia was Russia's civilizational imperative for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. [2] Failure to master this problem could then become Moscow's most serious challenge. [3] By 2006, Trenin warned that the RFE was vulnerable and that its integration with Siberia and the rest of Russia would be a test of Russia's political acumen. [4] At the end of that year, Putin warned that the socio-economic isolation of the RFE and its failure to exploit its resources represented a threat to national security. Typically, albeit not unjustly, he attributed the problem to the failure to coordinate a comprehensive state program of strategic development of the RFE, and he advocated a new socioeconomic commission to be formed to formulate a regional development strategy. The government appeared to follow suit by establishing a commission that was supposed to have "the status of a governing body and could be a ministry for the Far East." [5]

In 2008, then-president Dmitry Medvedev reiterated that if Russia failed to develop the RFE, it could become a raw material base for more developed Asian countries (a trend that already seems to be well under way); and "unless we speed up our efforts, we can lose everything," he declared. [6] It also is clear to whom Russia could lose this challenge—China—or otherwise fall into a pattern of a neo-colonial trading relationship in which Russia is the colony. In 2012, Medvedev again warned that not many people live in the RFE and that the task of protecting those who do live there from "excessive expansion by neighboring states" remains paramount. He also warned against Russia allowing enclaves of foreign citizens to develop there. [7] These warnings underline that Moscow's failure to develop the RFE is long-standing, structural in nature, and extremely consequential. However, apparently little has changed despite officials' long-running arguments that developing the RFE is necessary for a successful Russian foreign policy; in turn, Russian authorities have asserted, an effective foreign policy is key to providing the basis for foreign investment in the region. [8]

### **The Causes of Economic Failure**

How does one account for this ongoing failure? Clearly the Russian government craves foreign investments and is searching throughout Asia to obtain them. [9] Yet, foreign investment is not materializing. Aleksandr Gabuev of the Carnegie Endowment's Moscow office reports that, "in 2015, Russian companies did not carry out a single public offering or debt placement on Asian exchanges." [10] Moreover, in 2015, trade with China, Japan,

and South Korea collapsed, with recovery unlikely. This was driven by the economic slowdown in China; the collapse of commodity prices, which hit Russia particularly hard because of its dependence on energy exports; and the devaluation of the ruble, which forced a drop in purchasing power and imports. [11] To complicate matters, Chinese banks will not lend money to Russia and thereby run afoul of the stringent penalties imposed by Washington on banks doing business with Russia. Moreover, Chinese firms are tough negotiators and clearly skeptical about Russian economic conditions. [12] In fact, Chinese returns on investment in the European Union and the United States are far greater than one might expect in Russia. Chinese banks, which are the primary if not main source of hope for relief from sanctions for Moscow, are de facto complying with the sanctions regime. By doing so, they constrict any hope for major investment in Russia in general and in the RFE in particular. [13]

Japan is also unwilling to undertake major investments in the RFE until and unless the territorial issues between Russia and Japan are resolved and the Japanese government gives a green light for such investment. And while South Korea might be willing to help, it cannot match the scope of Chinese or Japanese investment. Moreover, implementation of South Korea's major infrastructural projects that involve Russia—like a trans-Korean gas pipeline tied to the RFE—have now run aground due to new sanctions imposed on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK—North Korea) because of its reckless policies of nuclear and missile testing. Those projects, as Western and Russian analysts admit, lie at the core of Russia's Korean strategy and efforts to involve both Korean states in the regeneration of the RFE. [14] Yet, both projects are now stalled. Thus Russia's pivot to Asia has become a pivot to nowhere. [15]

In this context, much of the commentary from officially connected Russian think tanks, for example the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, concerns Russia's need to emancipate itself from international economic globalization—which alone can generate investment funds for the RFE and Russia. Failure to do so entails a loss of sovereignty, an argument that appears to be either delusional or, perhaps, imposed on its authors by higher authority. [16] In fact, as Gabuev makes clear, Asian businesses and governments are unwilling to invest in Russia in general because of the terrible state of its economy, and because they recognize that in fact, rhetoric aside, Asia is actually a rather low priority for the Russian bureaucracy. [17] Not even Putin will spend the time necessary to convince Asian governments or investors of the positive benefits awaiting them from such investments despite his many articles on the subject. [18]

Indeed, a major cause of the failure of Russia's plans for the RFE, both from the domestic and foreign standpoint, must be found in the nature of the state and its bureaucracy. Because foreign Asian investment in the RFE is a matter largely of granting licenses to state firms in China, these projects meet political opposition and delays in Russia right from their inception. Any project is expected to take 5–7 years of preparation before it moves forward. The energy pipelines to China and the projects discussed regarding Korea exemplify such delays. [19] And while the government formally welcomes foreign investment, its leaders are clearly ambivalent. They are more likely to regard it as a potential threat to Russia's sovereignty or interests.

Gabuev notes that Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov's team fought hard to overcome resistance to Russia's joining in China's Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank (AIIB). But even though Moscow decided to join two weeks before the bank was launched, the government failed to win a role for Russia among the bank's senior officialdom. [20] Likewise, for all the talk about grandiose plans for connecting with the Chinese Silk Road—the One Belt One Road (OBOR) plan to transform Central Asia and bind it to global infrastructure, trade and investment networks—in fact, since the agreement with China was signed, “nothing has been really achieved.” [21] Skepticism clearly is warranted about other such programs, for example, calls for setting up an economic space including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). [22] Indeed, the EEU is itself in great difficulties because the devaluation of the ruble has forced further devaluations across Central Asia and trade rows among its members. The union has not proved to be a panacea for retrieving Russia's economic or political positions in either Central Asia or the RFE. [23] Nonetheless, Putin advanced just such proposals in 2015 as a means of overcoming the economic crisis and the political isolation imposed upon Russia due to its aggression in Ukraine. [24] But these remain proposals without energy.

In sum, this failure epitomizes not just the unwillingness of the bureaucracy to prioritize Asia, but also fundamental pathologies of the state administration that preclude a major advance either from external financial stimulus or from internal stimulation and development of the RFE. [25]

### **State Failure Continued: Internal Colonialism**

Alexander Etkind, a Russian professor at the European University Institute in Florence, describes the unreformed nature of Putin's governance as having relapsed into traditional Russian patterns of imperial and Soviet rule. These patterns are a fundamental source of the ongoing under- or even misdirected development of the RFE. Consequently central, regional and local officials relate to their territories through the phenomenon of internal colonialism. [26]

This internal colonialism, discerned by Etkind manifests itself as follows. [27] Russian authorities related and still relate to their subjects as if they were the masters of a colonial government ruling over subjects who were both alien to them and not to be regarded as autonomous human beings. [28] Consequently, their governing practices have consistently blocked the emergence of inclusive political institutions while imposing extractive ones on Russia, an imposition that can only be sustained by force at the price of continued backwardness and misrule. [29]

The situation is made worse because the system by its nature is simultaneously oriented toward perpetual militarization or simulation of military conflicts, on one hand, and excessive centralization that stifles local and/or regional autonomy, on the other. In other words, empire in the Russian context predisposes the state to rent-seeking and rent-granting policies; those policies, in turn, presuppose rule by force in the interior, not only in colonial

peripheries like the North Caucasus, but also in the RFE, where force is the preferred instrument. This reliance on force continues to be compounded by Russia's over-militarization of its economy and state because its institutions did not allow it to compete with foreign neighbors and interlocutors for influence on an equal basis. As Lilia Shevtsova has written,

In short, Russia has developed a unique model for the survival and reproduction of power in a permanent state of war. This situation was maintained even in peacetime, which has always been temporary in Russia. The country is constantly either preparing for war against an external enemy or pursuing enemies at home. Russia has survived by annihilating the boundary between war and peace. Its state simply could not exist in a peaceful environment. The militarist model has been used to justify the super-centralized state in the eyes of the people. Militarization made Russia different from other transitional societies and became a tremendous impediment to transformation. [30]

Thus the enduring model for the development of the RFE remains Etkind's model of neocolonialism. [31] This system cannot but breed endless grandiose and centrally formulated plans that are then marred by bureaucratic pathologies and left unfulfilled. A good example is the central policy for the development of the RFE and Siberia, which vividly illustrates the interaction of grandiose dreams and recalcitrant bureaucratic rivalry, whose logical outcome is a rent-seeking, patrimonial, and despotic system. In 2012, Putin called the development of these regions the "most important geopolitical task for Russia." He stated that these regions' development must outpace that of Russia as a whole. He subsequently suggested prioritizing the development of railway and port infrastructure connecting these zones with European Russia and the Asia-Pacific region. As part of this plan, Russia would set up a huge state corporation to superintend regional development, prioritize energy and transportation infrastructure projects there, and create a joint Sino-Russian investment fund of \$4 billion for joint projects. These new plans came on top of huge earlier investments prioritizing the same kinds of projects totaling \$327.4 billion for processing and refining raw materials and chemicals and energy produced in the region. In tandem with these large-scale domestic plans, which were to be supervised and administered by the central government, the new Far East Corporation Russia would simultaneously pursue a balanced program of soliciting foreign investments from all Asian and other interested parties, with the objective of avoiding excessive dependence on any one investor. [32] Yet, that plan failed spectacularly. A new plan has been proposed, but it offers no better prospects of success. [33]

In addition, the state bureaucracy, including these corporations, simply ignores or cannot understand inconvenient central directives. Therefore, bureaucrats and functionaries do not implement them. In 2011, Putin acknowledged that up to 80 percent of Kremlin orders to the regions are routinely ignored. [34] Despite the emphasis on investment in transportation infrastructure from 2001 to 2011, the actual share of investments in this sector remained about 2.5 percent of GDP, not the targeted 4 percent. [35] This situation has not improved since 2011. In May 2013, Putin charged Prime Minister Medvedev with devising a plan to ensure local fulfillment of central decrees; he further chastised his ministers for failing to

carry out his instructions. [36] In many critical areas of state policy, regions could not meet contracting or funding targets, which resulted in falling revenues in regional governments, not least Siberia and the RFE, and the consequent inability to deal with critical issues when they could not find funding to move forward. [37]

At one point, the State Corporation for the Far East so utterly failed to meet its responsibilities that its discredited chief was replaced after only a year. A 2013 study by Andrew Kuchins of the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington summed up the disastrous record of the State Corporation for the Far East. Kuchins wrote that this corporation's mandate is

...broadly defined to include the implementation of all state programs and federal targeted programs for the Russian East, including long-term projects such as those included within the *Energy Strategy*, for 2030. Many officials within the regions have opposed the operations of this ministry, as they believe it impedes the development projects underway on the regional level while not significantly adding to the economic development of the Far East. Last spring, President Putin himself accused the ministry of not fulfilling its purpose and failing to effectively direct the economic development of the region. He was especially critical of the fact that the ministry had not fully developed a full-fledged policy program and that it has exhibited considerable financial waste. Importantly, Putin's dissatisfaction with the ministry has led his government to reconsider the development of a state corporation for the development of these regions. [38]

In September 2013, Putin fired the minister, split the leadership into two, appointed new people to head the ministry, and placed it under Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev's Far East Commission. It is too soon to tell how this new scheme might work out, but skepticism is justified. Certainly the previous scheme had led to substantial bureaucratic and administrative dysfunction, culminating in a woeful response to flooding in these provinces in the summer of August 2013. [39] Medvedev wrote a powerful article, on September 27, 2013, decrying the stagnation of the economy, with its dependence on bloated public sector spending and the energy sector. He urged lifting restraints on entrepreneurs and greater regional freedom of action. Whereas, Putin replied by denying the possibility of a sharp fall in energy prices, stating to the contrary that oil exports would build money reserves in Russia that could guarantee economic stability for some time to come. [40] The collapse of energy prices in 2014–2016 and the accompanying international sanctions quickly ended that dream.

Undoubtedly governance factors have contributed to the failure to realize the potential of expanded commercial and political relations with East Asian countries, not just with China but also South Korea and Japan, where the Kurile Islands issue has also retarded development. [41] Those factors are certainly not the whole story behind the failure to realize the potential of truly dynamic large-scale economic relations with Asia. Such links are a necessary precondition for the concurrent development of the RFE, and, consequently, the realization of Russia's claim to great power status in East Asia. Hence, Moscow's shortcomings in reaching out to Beijing, Seoul or Tokyo should not be

minimized. Developments since the annexation of Crimea have only compounded the RFE's problems. Beyond the sanctions and their international implications, falling energy prices, the devaluation of the ruble, and the inherent structural difficulties of the RFE and the Russian economy, Russia has had to pay for Crimea by robbing, among other things, infrastructure programs in the RFE and retirees' pensions. [42] And now it turns out that the centerpiece of these Crimean infrastructure projects, the bridge over the Kerch Peninsula connecting Crimea to the Russian Federation, cannot be paid for. [43]

Ultimately, the fundamental problem in realizing Russia's foreign policy objectives in Asia, including its great power status, is the nature of its political system. And that includes the ideological representations of it as being a strong state with a "power vertical." As innumerable authors have shown, the state is the private plaything of a small number of elites who cannot govern Russia and are more interested in exploiting the country than in developing or governing it. [44] To quote the Bulgarian analyst Ivan Krastev, "Russia has not engaged in capacity building but in incapacity hiding." [45] Especially in Asia, where the name of the game is the linkage between enhanced capacity and economic development, this kind of masquerade ruins any hope of improving one's position.

In 2015, Trenin celebrated the arrival of a Eurasian economic-political network stretching "from Shanghai to St. Petersburg. [46] Yet, in June 2016, he wrote:

The dream is over. Eurasia—as another name for the former Russian empire, then the Soviet Union, and finally the former USSR—is no longer useful as a description of a geopolitical and geo-economic region. The rump "little Eurasia" of the Eurasian Economic Union is a modest economic arrangement unlikely to evolve into a close-knit unit. Thus Russia stands alone, partly in Europe, partly in Asia, while the country itself belongs to neither. [47]

Moreover, he points out that one cannot talk of a Russian strategy for Asia but rather individual approaches to different states "that need to be harmonized." [48] In other words, the state cannot bring about either a domestic transformation of the RFE or generate external support for a transformation of the RFE. As a result, Trenin's civilizational imperative and the warnings by Putin, Medvedev *et al.* are no closer to being heeded or the situation in the RFE transformed today than they were in 2006. Instead, for the first time in modern history, Asia or Eurasia is being integrated by China—and at Russia's expense.

A recent Russo-Chinese agreement on Chinese investment in the RFE has aroused a lot of unfavorable domestic Russian commentary. There is little doubt that the Russian government needs the investment, or that China has been searching for ways to relocate overproducing low-profit factories that produce less technologically-intensive goods—for example cement directed to markets with lax environmental enforcement—as potential for local market growth, and cheap labor. While environmental enforcement is lax in the RFE, hope for local market growth is scant, and the area is by no means a cheap labor platform, probably quite the opposite. Thus it is at best problematic that massive Chinese investment is being counted on to regenerate the RFE. [49] But it is also no more likely that anyone

else, including Moscow, can or will invest there. If this is true, then Russia's entire pivot to the East and its strategic rationale are compromised from the beginning.

Whether or not Russia deserves to be a great power or is doomed to be one, insofar as Asia is concerned it neither is nor will be a great power under its present leadership. Paradoxically, the system that more stridently proclaims Russia to be an independent sovereign great power is mostly incapable of realizing that objective, and its continuation in power is the most unbridgeable obstacle to the attainment of that goal. And if Russia, due to its predatory and archaic governing system, is increasingly marginal to both Asia and Europe, others will not regard it as a great power; perhaps more meaningfully, it cannot regard itself as one. [50] When this masquerade ends, a new drama whose outcome nobody can foretell will begin for both Russia and for Asia.

### **Assessing the Rise of China**

At the same time, a comprehensive inventory of Russian views on China and Russo-Chinese relations comprises a small library. Below is a list of some of those views, particularly official views, as well as some diverging assessments from the academic and expert community. In general, the different analyses reveal that many experts feel obliged or constrained to extol Russian policy even when they are critical of it; others simply cannot bring themselves to be openly critical, particularly in today's repressive climate. Therefore, some Russian commentary on China may also reflect "Aesopian language"—i.e., a veiled critique of Russian trends. [51] Putin asserts that Russia is a victim of outside threats, and as such, the country must turn toward the Far East, particularly to China, with greater intensity. Considering the enormous pressure today to conform to this vision of the world, Russian experts are increasingly compelled to omit or sidestep critical analysis of Moscow's policies. Typically, this pressure reincarnates long-standing Russian cultural tropes that depict all serious challenges as being imported from foreign enemies; however, such accounts invariably end with the idea that Russia either is triumphing or will triumph over those challenges. So regarding Russia's policy toward China and Asia, this abiding official narrative proclaims that all is—or will be—well and that Moscow, despite its problems, conducts a wise and successful Eastern-oriented policy, one that it has purportedly been forced to undertake because of Western pressure and anti-Russian spite. Obviously, this imposed mode of assessment leads leaders and analysts astray.

Some articles vastly exaggerate claims that Russia's Asian policies are overwhelmingly succeeding and that Moscow is already being acknowledged as a great power in Asia. [52] These observers and government officials profess satisfaction and optimism in their accounts of Russia's Asian policy as of 2016. According to them, Moscow is steadily upgrading the quantity and quality of its ties with North and Southeast Asian countries, even as they concede the existence of leftover problems. Vladimir Petrovsky writes that,

Russia has thus begun detailed and painstaking efforts to join in the mechanisms of economic integration in the APR [Asia-Pacific Region]. Unfortunately, as Academician Sergei Rogov has pointed out, the Russian Federation's "critical mass" remains small here—approximately two percent of the world's population



and three percent of its GDP. These ratios are greater for Eurasian integration, but lag behind other regional bodies considerably. However, the correct choice of a path and the readiness to follow it to the end is a guarantee of ultimate success. [53]

Along the same lines, Dmitry Shakura, a foreign ministry official, observes that in the Asia-Pacific region Russia can be compared “by its aggregate potential or by some of its aspects” with China and the United States. [54] A more objective look suggests that this is quite a stretch. Choosing the “correct choice of a path and the readiness to follow it to the end” neither guarantees success, nor, more importantly, is it necessarily true. This is clearly demonstrated by the divergences between official “narratives” and those of the analytical community, which is clearly internally divided.

Open criticism warning of China’s rising power and designs on Russia have become rather rare, owing to the political constraints imposed from above. Thus, Sergei Karaganov, the well-connected director of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy (SVOP), previously said that, “Not only in Russian public’s sub-consciousness, but also in the minds of elites, China is now more and more seen as a threat rather than an opportunity.” [55] Since 2007, Karaganov and SVOP have celebrated cooperation with China and now advocate a Russian initiative for a greater Eurasian community, which has become Putin’s mantra as well. [56]

Two critics who have previously openly warned about the Chinese military threat are Aleksandr’ Khranchikhin and Alexei Arbatov. Khranchikhin, who heads the Analytical Department of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, has long argued, “China will unavoidably expand and China will occupy Siberia and the Far East. China’s occupation of the region will not be achieved by peaceful means like immigration and economic expansion, but rather by force.” [57] He further wrote that:

There is no other state that would so openly declare its right to military aggression due to the lack of resources and territory. The underpinning idea of this concept is that due to the growing population and the limited resources China is facing natural need to expand its living space in order to support further economic activities and broadening its sphere of survival. It is assumed that territorial and space frontiers only delimit the area where the state can commit military force to effectively protect its interests. Strategic frontiers of the living space should be extended as China’s comprehensive power increases. This concept envisages moving hostilities from border areas closer to strategic frontiers or even beyond them, as armed conflicts can be brought about by difficulties in ensuring legitimate rights and interests of China in [the] Asia-Pacific. China believes that the frontiers of the great powers’ living space lie far beyond their national borders, while the spheres of influence of smaller nations are less than their national territories. [58]

Meanwhile Arbatov argued that:

Without going into unnecessary military and technical detail, according to some most competent Russian experts, China has up to 800–900 nuclear warheads available for operational deployment (440 air bombs to be carried by aircraft of

different types, 360 warheads for ICBMs, MRBMs [intercontinental and medium-range ballistic missiles, respectively], and operational-tactical missiles, and 45 warheads for SLBMs [submarine-launched ballistic missiles]). All of them can be deployed so as to reach Russia (and more than 80 weapons are within reach of the US). China may have a total of 40 tons [of] weapon-grade uranium and 10 tons of plutonium. This would be enough to produce 3,600 nuclear warheads, although a large part of the weapon-grade nuclear materials and nuclear warheads may be kept at storage sites in reserve. [59]

Retired General Viktor Yesin, another nuclear expert, concurs with Arbatov's figures. [60]

Given the importance of Russo-Chinese relations for their bilateral relations, every participant in this discussion of regional security in East, South, and Central Asia knows that failure to keep pace with China signifies Russia's decline and will also transform any "alliance" with China into an unequal relationship whereby (*pace* Otto von Bismarck) China is the rider and Russia the horse. As stated above, in 2000 Vladimir Putin warned that if the RFE did not develop, its residents would be speaking major Asian languages. Subsequently the prominent Sinologist, Alexander Lukin, who defends the close Sino-Russian relationship, nevertheless warned that:

Although China's strategic planning continues to be restricted by the country's "key interests," the range of these interests keeps expanding. Under Deng Xiaoping, these focused only on the issues of Taiwan and control over Tibet and Xinjiang. Today, however, they have been broadened to include the protection of China's positions in territorial disputes with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and in the conflict in the South China Sea. Some Chinese experts also insist that the country's key interests should include the need to secure a worthy place for China in the world more generally. [61]

Everyone understands or at least should grasp that continuing Chinese aggrandizement inevitably entails Russia's failure to attain its primary strategic objective of becoming "a major independent center of power—positioning itself as the linchpin of Eurasian integration." And that failure inevitably presages Russia's ensuing decline. [62]

Nevertheless, and despite these risks, Russian leaders increasingly speak not only of having reached the highest stage of relations with China in both countries' history, which is true; they also increasingly invoke a large-scale alliance with China even if they do not always use that word. Putin recently noted:

As we had never reached this level of relations before, our experts have had trouble defining today's general state of our common affairs. It turns out that to say we have strategic cooperation is not enough anymore. This is why we have started talking about a comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration. "Comprehensive" means that we work virtually on all major avenues; "strategic" means that we attach enormous inter-governmental importance to this work. [63]

This is too close to advocacy of an alliance to be coincidental. Putin, if not his colleagues, clearly deny a potential China threat. Putin has also spoken of Russia catching the wind of China's growth in its sails and derided the China threat theory. [64] Putin also indicated recently that Russia and China would begin discussing a vast "Eurasia project," which we may assume comprises both China's One Belt One Road (OBOR) and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). [65] Presumably, these talks are based upon China's earlier assent to the idea of linking Russia's plans for integrating Eurasia through the EEU to the OBOR project. [66]

This "linking" actually underscores Russia's growing weakness vis-à-vis China. Sergei Ivanov, Putin's chief of staff, may claim that the "Silk Road" will link to Russia's Baikal-Amur and Trans-Siberian railroads and then have a great potential by connecting East and Southeast Asia with Europe. [67] Yet, thanks to collapsing energy prices as well as Western sanctions, imposed for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow has now had to withdraw altogether from this project. [68] This sequence displays China's victory over Russia and Russia's inability to compete with China. Russia now is merely a "younger brother" in such endeavors. Typically, China graciously but decisively punctured Russia's grandiloquent Eurasian and great power pretensions. And Russia's recklessness and failure to reform greatly assisted in this process. Given the expansive geostrategic benefits that China will gain while realizing its OBOR vision, the evolving bilateral relationship on this issue portends a massive and decisive Russian strategic defeat in Eurasia, rendering it here, as in energy, China's raw materials appendage. [69] Furthermore, because the EEU had as one of its original purposes restricting Chinese trade in Central Asia, China's integration of Russia's project to its own subordinates Russia's program to China's vision. [70]

Despite Russia's grandiose visions, China has been unwilling to invest in Russia to anywhere near the degree that Russians have expected or hoped for. China's two economic downturns account for some of this unwillingness. As stated above, so does the reluctance of Chinese investment agencies to run afoul of US banking sanctions. In any event, the Chinese are disenchanted with Russia's failure to fulfill the terms of previous economic agreements, such as those from 2009. [71] Consequently, many Russian analysts have admitted that the so-called pivot to Asia is more talk than action, and that in any case this pivot in reality is only toward China, which leads Moscow to depend more on Beijing than is good for it. [72] At the same time, some analysts still extol China's willingness to participate with Russia in this vast yet unfocused plan for a Eurasian bloc, even if almost nothing has happened on the ground since 2015. However, no analyst can overcome the fact that Eurasian countries' trade with Russia, including China's, has steadily fallen along with Russian investment. [73] Similarly, there are those analysts who, following Putin, have proclaimed the SCO a paradigm of successful cooperation, despite the organization's failure to produce anything visible or tangible to promote regional security. The SCO's "achievements" remain more honored in the breach than in the occurrence thereof. [74]

These contending assessments are important. For if Russia is truly losing out to China in Central Asia and cannot compete practically with China in organizing a genuine Eurasian economic community (not the formal organization so entitled but a genuine community), then Russia cannot compete as a truly independent and great Asian power. Valery Kistanov

notes that a precondition of achieving this critical policy goal is consolidating a continental bloc of former Soviet republics around Russia. Since China, but not Russia is doing this, the chances for any success in Russia's "grand strategy" regarding Asia diminish commensurately. [75]

Yet, that has not stopped policymakers from openly advocating an alliance, going beyond the official terminology, and describing bilateral ties as a comprehensive strategic partnership with China. In 2014, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated:

I cannot fail to mention Russia's comprehensive partnership with China. Important bilateral decisions have been taken, paving the way to an energy alliance between Russia and China. But there is more to it. We can now even talk about the emerging technology alliance between the two countries. [76]

Lavrov immediately followed by observing that "Russia's tandem with Beijing is a crucial factor for ensuring international stability and at least some balance in international affairs." [77] Simultaneously, the minister of defense, Sergei Shoigu, and his deputy, Anatoly Antonov, speaking in Beijing, openly advocated a military alliance with China. Shoigu argued that Russia and China confront not only US threats in the Asia-Pacific but also US-orchestrated "color revolutions" and Islamic terrorism. Therefore, "The issue of stepping up this cooperation [between Russia and China] has never been as relevant as it is today." [78] Specifically, he advocated enhanced but unspecified bilateral Sino-Russian security cooperation and cooperation within the SCO. [79] Shoigu, along with Antonov, further included not only Central Asia but also East Asia. Moreover, Shoigu stated that, "In the context of an unstable international situation, the strengthening of good-neighborly relations between our countries acquires particular significance. This is not only a significant factor in the states' security but also a contribution to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond." [80]

This overture fundamentally reversed past Russian policy to exclude the People's Liberation Army (PLA) from Central Asia and retain the option of military intervention there solely for Russia itself. This gambit signified Russia's growing dependence on China under mounting Western and economic pressure. Such an alliance would also reverse Chinese policy shunning military involvement in Central Asia while characteristically abdicating those responsibilities to Russia. [81] But there are some signs that Beijing is rethinking this position. On the one hand, China's Ministry of Defense spokesman went out of his way at an international press conference, on November 27, 2014, to deny that an alliance with Russia existed:

I need to emphasize here, though, China and Russia adhere to the principle of no alliance, no confrontation, and not targeting a third party in military cooperation, and therefore it will not constitute threats to any country. It is inappropriate to place normal military cooperation between China and Russia in the same category as the US-Japan military alliance. [82]

On the other hand, on December 16, 2014 after Shoigu's visit, Prime Minister Li Keqiang proposed that that the SCO become the "guardian of Eurasia." Obviously this relates to Chinese concern for its showcase policy of a new Silk Road through Afghanistan and Central Asia to Europe, which would come under severe pressure if Afghanistan collapsed. And in August 2014, Russia and China held their largest SCO exercises to date, with China contributing J-10 and J-11 fighters, JH-7 early-warning assets and control aircraft, and WZ-10 and WZ-19 attack helicopters. [83] There also were signs that China might actively contribute to the struggle against the Islamic State by supporting coalition air strikes even if does so independently and apart from the US-led coalition. [84] If true, this, too, would mark a revision of past Chinese policies and indicate an impending major policy change toward a genuine Sino-Russian military-political alliance in Central Asia against terrorism and Islamism in all its forms.

Russia's new defense doctrine proposes to "coordinate efforts to deal with military risks" in the SCO's common space. [85] It also provides for the creation of joint missile defense systems. While Moscow has previously pursued this with the West, it indicates a new willingness to work with China in creating missile defenses. Shoigu further stated that, "In the context of an unstable international situation, the strengthening of good-neighborly relations between our countries acquires particular significance. This is not only a significant factor in the states' security but also a contribution to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond." [86] Shoigu noted that, "During talks with Comrade [Defense Minister] Chang Wanquan, we discussed the state and prospects of the Russian-Chinese relations in the military field, exchanged opinions on the military-political situation in general and the APR in particular... We also expressed concern over US attempts to strengthen its military and political clout in the APR," he said. His conclusion: "We believe that the main goal of pooling our effort is to shape a collective regional security system." It would be difficult not to see this objective as an invitation to an alliance.

Advocacy for an alliance openly contradicts Russian and Chinese stated policy at the highest levels, despite media and official statements urging further broadening of bilateral ties. Vice President Li Yuanchao told Sergei Ivanov, Putin's chief of staff, that, "China is willing to work with Russia to fully implement the fruits of a meeting between the two nations' leaders in Shanghai and conduct cooperation on a larger scale and with greater depth." [87]

Ivanov clarified that while Moscow and Beijing will complement each other both bilaterally and internationally (note: not regionally), neither he nor China saw any point to a military alliance. Meanwhile Russo-Chinese military relations were directed against nobody and were purely bilateral. [88] He even argued that Russo-Chinese relations are based on human relations at the highest and lower levels not on "politicking". Moreover, the crisis in Ukraine does not affect these relations. [89] In July 2014, Putin reiterated that joining an alliance subordinates Russia to the other parties and undermines its sovereignty.

Any nation that is part of an alliance gives up part of its sovereignty. This does not always meet the national interests of a given country, but this is their sovereign

decision. We expect our national legal interests to be respected, while any controversies that always exist, to be resolved only through diplomatic efforts, by means of negotiations. Nobody should interfere in our internal affairs. [90]

Even so Russia clearly called for a more formalized alliance. China sidestepped the issue, but is clearly prepared to upgrade cooperation with Russia, especially since Moscow's rising dependence upon its largesse and support can be turned to China's advantage. In their book about the RFE, Artem Lukin and Rensselaar Lee insist that Putin has offered China an alliance. [91] If this is accurate, then even analysts who write about Russian foreign relations generally—and not only experts on China—understand that this means Russia is becoming not just a junior partner to China but also losing a place of primacy on the overall international agenda given the dynamism of Asia's economies and the many arenas of geopolitical strife there. [92]

Despite this risk, there clearly are champions of closer ties to China, if not a formal alliance. Apparently the military and the Ministry of Defense are among them, even though these particular elites fully understand that China, by virtue of its rising power and capability, as well as the increasing reach of its capabilities and interests (e.g. in the Arctic) could constitute a military threat to Russia. [93] Dating back to Yevgeny Primakov's quest for a "strategic triangle" with Russia, China and India, the Russian government has routinely denied any threat or cause for alarm from China. This process also includes SVOP (The Council on Foreign and Defense Policy), which reached this conclusion back in 2007. [94] Nonetheless, the military was also concerned about China's rising interest in the Arctic and growing military capability, including the possibility of a mass ground attack on the RFE based on the Chinese 2009 Stride Exercise. [95] In 2010, the Russian government undertook the Vostok-2010 exercise, which culminated in a nuclear strike on the stand-in for the PLA. As Jacob Kipp observed in 2010,

A year ago, informed Russian defense journalists still spoke of the PLA as a mass industrial army seeking niche advanced conventional capabilities. Looking at the threat environment that was assumed to exist under Zapad 2009, the defense journalist Dmitri Litovkin spoke of Russian forces confronting three distinct types of military threats: "an opponent armed to NATO standards in the Georgian-Russian confrontation over South Ossetia last year. In the eastern strategic direction Russian forces would likely face a multi-million-man army with a traditional approach to the conduct of combat: linear deployments with large concentrations of manpower and firepower on different axis. In the southern strategic direction Russian forces expect to confront irregular forces and sabotage groups fighting a partisan war against 'the organs of Federal authority,' i.e., Internal troops, the border patrol, and the FSB." [96] By spring of this year, a number of those involved in bringing about the "new look" were speaking of a PLA that was moving rapidly towards a high-tech conventional force with its own understanding of network-centric warfare. [97] Moreover, the People's Liberation Army conducted a major exercise "Stride-2009," which looked like a rehearsal for military intervention against Central Asia and/or Russia to some Russian observers. [98]

Beginning in 2009, overt discussions of a potential Chinese military threat began to surface in the military press, calling attention to Chinese military prowess. [99] And they all pointed to the threat of an invasion, not just by a large, multi-million man army, but also to the example derived from China's military modernization that has led China to an informatizing, if not informatized, high-tech capable military, i.e. one with a plenitude of information technology capabilities in just over a decade. [100] In the RFE,—a dilapidated and remote economy-of-force theater with vast distances, inadequate infrastructure, and a declining industrial and manpower base—Russia already faces a situation of conventional inferiority. Kipp further wrote:

In the first instance, in any military conflict the Russian VVS [Air Force] cannot guarantee air superiority against the Chinese. Moreover, they do not possess sensor-fused cluster munitions, though in theory their surface-to-surface missiles (SSMs) could deliver cluster munitions depending on whether the missile troops remained intact long enough. Faced with an advancing PLA division or divisions, early use of TNW [thermonuclear warheads] would present a viable option. [101]

Nevertheless, by 2014, Shoigu and Antonov were advocating an alliance, and Moscow was selling China the crown jewels of Russian defense production like the S-400 air defense system, the Su-35 fighter plane, and the Amur-class submarine. Regular joint naval exercises have now taken place, not only in the Far East but also in the Mediterranean, signifying Russian acceptance of China's interests there and desire to lean on Chinese power in the Levant. Indeed, as a result of these exercises, including the most recent, Aerospace Security-2016, Russia may now sell China the nuclear capable Kalibr' cruise missile for use on Russian-made Kilo-class diesel-electric submarines, even as Russia for its own purposes continues the ongoing combined arms buildup of its Far Eastern Military District (FEMD) and overall military buildup. [102] The Russian Pacific Fleet also joined with the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) recently to sail into the disputed Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, provoking a significant Japanese response—an action that appears senseless unless the military and the government are trying to intimidate Japan into an agreement with Russia. [103] But Russia appears to have second thoughts. It backed out, for now, from selling highly capable rocket engines to China, something that had hitherto not been the case. [104] Still, a recent Russo-Chinese aerospace simulation drill of a joint response to a ballistic missile attack—clearly intended against the US—indicated “a new level of trust” between these governments, which shared highly sensitive information on missile-launch warning systems and ballistic missile defense. This “indicates something beyond simple cooperation,” according to Vasily Kashin, an analyst at the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, in Moscow. [105]

## **Conclusion**

Russia's pivot to Asia has essentially been a pivot to China, leading to a loss of maneuverability and freedom to act independently in Asia, a declining reputation among erstwhile friends, and growing subordination in the bilateral relationship to Chinese designs in Central, South, Southeast or Northeast Asia. While partnership will continue as long as a shared anti-American ideological-political discourse dominates strategic

thinking, Russia will benefit little, and China may chafe at being attached to a reckless declining power.

Will Russia accept being subordinated strategically to China? This would represent both an irony and a crowning indignity, since the entire purpose of Russian foreign policy is to assert and gain acknowledgement for Russia's sovereign independence and greatness as a foreign policy actor across Eurasia, which is why Russia leans on China in the first place. Such an alliance, Putin's apparent current default option, possesses an inherently explosive quality, not least for Russia.

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