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**Will Russian-Chinese “Strategic Partnership” Stay Until the Year 2020? Plausible Thoughts about “Implausible” Scenario.**

**Abstract**

After the start of political crisis in Ukraine, growth of Russian involvement in it and subsequent sharp deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West, there is much talk in Russia and abroad about Russia “turning to the East” and upgrading her relations with China to the level of “strategic alliance”. However, even the existing framework of ambiguous “strategic cooperation” would be problematic to sustain in the medium term, since the main structural prerequisites for Sino-Russian interaction almost in all fields are bad enough.

By the turn of 2012-2013 years, Sino-Russian bilateral trade reached its “structural ceiling”. For both countries to jump over these limits means to introduce deep systemic change in their respective economic strategies and policies, which seem now highly improbable. In addition, in January of 2015 came the collapse, logically derived from a general contraction of the Russian economy.

The mutual vision of both countries is in many ways incomplete or openly erroneous. The perception of the Chinese reform experience in Russia today has much more emotional than sober, derived from the traumatic defeat in the “Cold War”. This is indeed a kind of “surrealistic” “realistic” discourse, reaching up to fantastic expectations of China supporting Russia militarily or bailing out Russian state and corporate budgets simply because Moscow is defending her national interests in Ukraine against “Western encroachments”.

It is true that China may relish the prospect of fishing in troubled waters of the disagreements between Russia and the West. It may be also true that Beijing – in principle – has nothing against gaining as much economic, financial and even political preferences in Russia, as possible. However, all this has its price and limits. It was definitely not in Beijing’s calculus to have a full-scale confrontation, to say nothing about the new edition of the “Cold War” between Moscow and the West. Chinese were also far from happy to see the first signs of Russian economy melting down in autumn 2014, reasonably fearing its eventual collapse. By late 2014, Beijing leaders became finally aware of the fact that they cannot fully comprehend the dynamics, direction and possible outcomes of Russian-Western relations, Ukrainian crisis and Moscow’s domestic policies. At the same time, China was far from eager to pay for the risks of Russian unpredictability on both foreign and domestic fronts. Moscow’s policy has moved beyond the limits of profitability that Beijing could have derived from the conflict between Russia and the West.

The combination of these factors in the medium term perspective (from three to five years) may lead to what seems now quite an improbable situation with Russia-Western relations substantially stabilized and Sino-Russian interaction perceptibly cooling down. There will be no Russian-Chinese confrontation. What seems more plausible is a certain distancing from each other based on incomplete trust, the objective limits of interaction and some mutual fatigue.

**Key words:** Russia, China, Ukraine, Russian “turn to the East”, “Strategic Partnership”, Limits of Cooperation.

**Will Russian-Chinese “Strategic Partnership” Stay Until the Year 2020? Plausible Thoughts about “Implausible” Scenario.**

*“It is China’s longstanding position not to interfere in others’ internal affairs.*

*We respect the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine. We understand*

*the historical background of the Ukrainian issue and the complexity of the current reality”.*

*Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China.*

*“China believes that Russia can coordinate with other parties to push*

*the political settlement of the issue so as to safeguard regional and world peace and stability”.*

*Xi Jinping, March 5, 2014*

After the start of political crisis in Ukraine, growth of Russian involvement in it and subsequent sharp deterioration of relations between Moscow and the West, there is much talk in Russia and abroad about Russia “turning to the East” and upgrading her relations with China to the level of “strategic alliance”. Since at least late April 2014, many Russian state blue chips – Rosneft, Rostech, Gazprom etc. – started expressing their readiness to broaden cooperation with Beijing in many fields, including high-tech and finance. Russian President Vladimir Putin paid Beijing an official visit in May 2014, signing long-awaited bilateral gas deal, envisaging 70 billion US dollars of joint investment in the new pipeline “The Strength of Siberia” in 4 to 5 years with subsequent supply of Russian gas to China for 30 years.

After the imposition of US and EU sanctions on Russian aeronautics, defense and financial sectors in July and August 2014 there appeared increasing Moscow’s claims that China can and will substitute the West as a provider of technologies, spare parts, raw materials and even capital markets. Most recently, there was the news on Moscow’s consent to allow China to become a stakeholder in the biggest East-Siberian oilfield at Vankor. During Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Russia in October 2014 both sides sighed 38 different agreements and unveiled the plan to rise bilateral trade to 200 billion US dollars by the year 2020.

Russia in line with her reborn “realistic” pursuit of national interests, allegedly so much neglected by the West in the recent couple of decades, seems to terminate what used to be her desire for “European integration” and “turns to face the East”. The biggest natural addressee of this economic and political Moscow’s “Drang nach Osten” is China. Do these developments create a solid ground enough to conclude that relations between Moscow and Beijing are indeed passing through a turning point from “strategic cooperation” to “strategic alliance”? In our view, not by a long short. Moreover, even the existing framework of ambiguous “strategic cooperation” would be problematic to sustain, since the main structural prerequisites for Sino-Russian interaction almost in all fields are bad enough, at least, in the medium term.

**The Mystery of Bilateral Trade.**

In early February 2015, just three month after the countries’ Prime Ministers Dmitry Medvedev and Li Keqiang stated the purpose of increasing bilateral trade to the unprecedented amount of 200 billion US dollars by 2020, the Chinese Bureau of statistics disclosed no less unprecedented figures. In January 2015 Sino-Russian trade decreased 36,4% in annual terms. Chinese export to Russia fell 42,1%, while import from Russia fell 28,7%.[[1]](#footnote-1) Beijing statisticians explained this fact by referring to the decline in business activity in the country on the eve of the Lunar Year celebrations. Bearing in mind, that Chinese officials are always rather sensitive to hurt Moscow’s feelings in open and sensing danger of themselves “loosing face” after recent optimistic proclamations, this explanation looks nothing but politically correct nonsense. In 2015, the Lunar Year celebrations started in China in February, so in December 2014 and January 2015 Chinese business activity could by no means have been responsible for such abrupt decline. Besides, in the same period, Chinese trade with the US grew 4% and with regard to trade with Russia, nothing comparable ever happened before, even indeed on the Lunar Year eve.

The last year of substantial growth in Sino-Russian trade was 2012, when it rose almost by 12%. However, in 2013, quite of a sudden, the growth rate barely exceeded 1%. Russia dropped to 10th place among the trading partners of China, losing to Brazil. Russia's share in the foreign trade turnover of the PRC amounted to only 2%. China, on the other hand, remained the leading Russian trade partner, while Russian export value to China decreased by 10%. Russian overall export fell in 2013 by half percent. At that time, Beijing also tried to explain these data referring to the impact of the contraction in global demand. Nevertheless, in 2013 Chinese overall export grew 8%, import – 7,3%. Trade with the US increased 7%, with the countries of ASEAN – almost 11%.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In 2014, Sino-Russian bilateral trade grew - according to different assessments - from 1% to 6%. Russia sharply increased her crude oil export to China – by 36%. However, growth of Russian export value to China was modest – around 4%. Total two-way trade in 2014 remained around 90 billion US dollars.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What is definitely clear behind all these vicissitudes is stagnation. Bilateral spells about “mutual complementarity” of Chinese and Russian economies may be, technically speaking, true. However, structural dimensions of such complementarity are indeed detrimental for the countries’ more broad economic interaction. The most fundamental reason here lies in the fact that Russian economy of today’s size and condition simply cannot anymore produce enough added value, necessary to provide steady growth of trade with China.

Suffice it to observe the structure of bilateral trade. Despite Moscow’s declarations to improve the structure of Russian export to China making it more value added, the share of raw materials grew constantly since 2009 and in 2013 and 2014 exceeded 75%. The volume of Russian import of machinery, equipment and other processed goods from China has been 66 times bigger than the volume of their export to China.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Sufficient growth of bilateral trade is technically possible, but only if Russia undertakes drastic increase in oil, gas and timber export to China. Such undertaking, however, runs into two fundamental obstacles. One is on the Russian side, namely, the country must carry out considerable investments in extraction of raw materials and infrastructure in her East Siberian and Far Eastern regions. Such investments look highly unlikely now, with Russian mining and banking sectors under Western sanctions and oil prices falling.

The other obstacle concerns China and has to do with the country’s economic restructuring and macro misbalances, introducing substantial constraints on demand for the raw materials. In fact, already by the turn of 2012-2013 years Sino-Russian bilateral trade reached its “structural ceiling”. For both countries to jump over these limits means to introduce deep systemic change in their respective economic strategies and policies, which seem now highly improbable. In addition, in January of 2015 came the collapse, logically derived from a general contraction of the Russian economy.

**Russian “Surrealistic” Realism.**

American Russia watcher Mark Adomanis has written in Forbes in December 2014: “I am amazed, that a bunch of self-described realists like the Russian government, would take Chinese proclamations about partnership at face value…China cares little about any notion of anti-Western brotherhood. It cares a lot more about securing access to oil, gas and industrial products at the lowest possible price. Should the Russian accept a bailout from China, they’ll very quickly learn that Westerners aren’t the only ones with demands”.[[5]](#footnote-5)

It is the matter of considerable importance to understand that Moscow began turning to China for “closer partnership” not only when her economy started to crumble, but also when her community of China watchers remained largely non-functional. There are many complicated and interrelated reasons responsible for such state of affairs. We would like to point here to three systemic causes.

The first one relates to the institutional and ideological legacy of what used to be the Soviet China studies. Modern China and especially China after 1949 as the fields of political and socio-economic research were, perhaps, under the strongest Marxist-Leninist ideological pressure among other fields of International studies in the former Soviet Union. To some extend this was understandable, since the main task, posed by the Soviet leadership before sinologists – at least, since early 1960s – was to prove that it was the Soviet model of socialism that was more really socialist, successful and legitimate, not the Chinese one. What followed was an annihilating criticism of Maoism and then Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and openness”, since both were fundamental deviations from what was the Moscow’s version of “the path to a bright future”.

Such goal setting formed very specific institutional, methodological and personal arrangements that were more suitable for producing propaganda leaflets than for elaboration of balanced assessments and strategies. Ideologically these arrangements naturally collapsed with the collapse of the Soviet Union. However, some important features of the Soviet China studies, especially with regard to institutional and personal relationships as well as general “Cold War” worldview continued existence among considerable part of Russian sinologists in the post-Soviet period.

The second systemic cause relates to the indeed abhorrent economic conditions of the post-Soviet Russian China studies throughout 1990s, even 2000s, with financing drastically reduced and the influx of new generation of researchers dramatically decreased. Those younger were preoccupied with earning money and ad-hoc, predominantly, business consulting, while not all, but quite many of the older preferred to relish their Soviet-time expertize. This situation led to overall stagnation and even recession in the field of Russian China studies, causing methodological failure, following in the footsteps of Beijing’s official statements and indeed “surrealistic” expectations.

Finally, one cannot comprehend the state of mind of many contemporary Russian sinologists without considering the impact of traumatic Soviet collapse on their perception of China today. Rising China servers as a mute reproach to the “failure of democratic reforms”, introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev and “tragedy” of anti-Communist “shock therapy”, implemented by Boris Eltsin. Ironically, the same people, who denounced Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping as opportunists, now make a U-turn in their minds and are inclined to think that both Chinese leaders were much wiser than their Soviet contemporaries were – the first one in fighting “corrupt bureaucracy”, the second one – in implementing market under strict party-state control.

Clearly, such perception of the Chinese reform experience in Russia today has much more emotional and irrational than sober and rational dimensions. People ignore or underestimate a heap of factors and circumstances of cultural, social, economic and political nature. Nevertheless, many tend to think that Chinese “path of reforms” is more efficient, than Soviet or post-Soviet one and look upon rising China as an “opportunity missed by Gorbachev”, a paragon of development for Russia. Quite often, they construe the rise of China today in almost fully “Cold War” terms, which means that former Soviet leadership betrayed and defeated their own country, while China, due to “Deng Xiaoping’s wisdom”, starts now to be on the forefront of the global resistance to Western economic, political, military and cultural expansion. Therefore, it is worth for Russia to form a close political and military alliance with China, while obvious costs of such a step often – quite paradoxically – stay out of the equation.

All this is indeed a kind of “surrealistic” “realistic” discourse, reaching up to fantastic expectations of China supporting Russia militarily or bailing out Russian state and corporate budgets by bringing in suitcases of money simply because Moscow is defending her national interests in Ukraine against “Western encroachments”. “After all, the Chinese “golden rain” poured over Venezuela and Libya at one time”, an expert told me in private conversation.

It would be certainly misleading to present the case so as the absolute majority of Russian China watchers are staunch heirs to “Cold War” mentality in love with China. The real picture “on the ground” is more complex. Along with those who count on “strategic alliance” with China, among “great Russian realists” of today there are those who utterly distrust Beijing and even find plausible Sino-Russian armed clashes in the future. Others – of “pro-Western” liberal orientation – fear of too close relations with China on the political and ideological reasons. Minority of experts – mainly economists and political scientists – indicate internal weaknesses of Chinese economy. In particular, they argue that the instability of the financial system in the PRC makes close Sino-Russian financial cooperation counterproductive for Moscow.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, in the frenzy of “turning to the East” it were the proponents of “alliance” that turned out to be most audible, while others preferred to keep silence or engaged in self-censorship.

There are reasonable grounds to believe that some of those in today Russian political class, who are not China watchers and who may even harbor some suspicions with regard to real Chinese intentions towards Russia, still may feel sympathetic with such argumentation. The whole story of Russian “turn to China” during the year of 2014 in retrospect looks like a political game which, after increased International isolation of Moscow, evolved gradually into a forced and sincere search for possible ways of deepening cooperation with Beijing. For example, Russia and China established bilateral Business Council. Gennady Timchenko, famous “oligarch” under Western sanctions for allegedly close relationship to President Vladimir Putin, became it’s co-chairman from the Russian side. However, this search has consistently suffered from the lack of knowledge of Chinese economic and political reality and from the absence of fine-tuning of Sino-Russian relations on the micro- and medium levels. The latter circumstance is not least due to the cultural differences between the partners and unclear prospects for fast profits. Russian community of China watchers failed to supply Russian leadership with this knowledge, partly because it lacked such expertize, partly because Russian leadership, also somewhat mesmerized by China’s apparent potency, was ready to listen only to what it wanted to hear.

**Beijing’s “Russian Dilemma”.**

Western community of analysts was almost unanimous in saying that China is the biggest beneficiary from the confrontation between Russia and the West over Ukraine. In principle, this statement is quite correct. It indeed looks like Beijing, needed by all sides of the conflict, had the opportunity to play both Western and Russian cards simultaneously. However, we assume that much in this play depends on the true scale of Russian-Western antagonism and the direction of internal developments in Russia.

It is certainly true that in economic terms the West is more important for Beijing, than Russia. China-US bilateral trade, for example, is more than 5 times bigger than that with Russia and potential for growth in China-Western economic and financial cooperation remains huge with its “structural ceiling” far from reached. APEC summit in Beijing in November 2014 clearly demonstrated that despite all sparking in Sino-American relations China is much more welcomed member of International community, than Putin’s Russia. China is rather unlikely to risk all this just to put all eggs in Russian basket. It is also true that in the field of military-technical cooperation Beijing depends on both Russia and Ukraine, and this fact inevitably adds considerable nuances to China’s position in this conflict.[[7]](#footnote-7)

However, there is a number of other quite important Chinese domestic factors and considerations, which are worth to bear in mind.

Chinese political class and expert community clearly split over Russian issue in the Ukrainian drama. On the one hand, notorious “Global Times” writes, that “…if Russia led by Putin is defeated by the West, it will deal a heavy blow to China’s geopolitical interests”. Western China watchers reasonably concluded that “[Chinese] military analysts admire Putin and Russian rejection of the West’s global leadership” and this fact might influence “China’s risk calculus in the hotspots such as South and East China Sea”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In fact, not only military analysts but also a “party” of Chinese civil experts urged Beijing government to back Moscow politically and economically. The proponents of this view stipulated, however, a number of conditions, which Moscow will have to comply with in case it agrees to accept Chinese aid. These conditions suggested that Moscow makes wide concessions to give China preferences in the fields of economy and finance up to implicit possibility of revision of territorial agreements. The speculation was that some people in Moscow tended to agree to some of these propositions, while most found them utterly unacceptable.

On the other hand, official Beijing keeps repeating that “Global Times” and “radical experts” are not a proxy of the Chinese government and reiterates its “longstanding position not to interfere in others’ internal affairs” as well as respect to “the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine”. Chinese leader Xi Jinping urged Moscow to cooperate with all the parties concerned “so as to safeguard regional and world peace and stability”.

My private contacts with a number of high-ranking Chinese experts from the Academy of Social Sciences revealed that Beijing was dissatisfied with the fact that Russia, being a “strategic ally”, did not bother to give even a hint to China in advance about her calculus with regard to Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. The talk about possible Chinese economic and financial aid to Russia usually led to many question marks. How? To whom? When? How much? In what concrete form? Chinese interlocutors seemed surprised - no less than Mark Adomanis - that their Russian partners could have placed so great hopes on Beijing’s assistance, implicitly assuming that Moscow was unaware of many “technical difficulties and obstacles” in the way of such assistance.

To be sure, on the surface China indeed played its part, however cautiously, in Russian “Eurasian gambit”. Obviously, politically motivated signing of a long-awaited gas deal took place in April 2014. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang’s visit to Moscow in October the same year was quantitatively fruitful. Beijing granted Russia a couple of tied loans to buy Chinese food and light industry produce. Still, overall political phraseology of the Chinese side was invariably calm, sometimes even ambiguous.

In September 2014, however, there came indeed an important sign that China tends to decelerate cooperation with Russia in the field, where Moscow not only mostly desired Beijing’s assistance but where both sides have also fundamentally agreed on it. The Chinese side decided to slow down the advance payment of 20 billion US dollars, which it promised to Russia in the framework of the “historic” bilateral gas deal, signed in May during Vladimir Putin’s official visit to Beijing. One of the explanations given on the sidelines was that the two sides still have discrepancies on the issue of the gas price.

There is some ground to conclude that Chinese position with regard to cooperation with Russia became even more cautious after the West introduced harsh sanctions on Moscow in financial and technological fields and Moscow backfired with its “countersanctions”, while the war in Eastern Ukraine went on, shattering the prospects for fast and feasible political settlement. All this was already too much for Beijing.

It is undoubtedly true that China may relish the prospect of fishing in troubled waters of the disagreements between Russia and the West. It may be also true that Beijing – in principle – has nothing against gaining as much economic, financial and even political preferences in Russia, as possible. However, all this has its price and limits. It was definitely not in Beijing’s calculus to have a full-scale confrontation, to say nothing about the new edition of the “Cold War” between Moscow and the West. Chinese were also far from happy to see the first signs of Russian economy melting down in autumn 2014, reasonably fearing its eventual collapse. It was the succession of events in the second half of the year 2014 that made Beijing quite annoyed forcing it to adopt “wait and see” tactics.

Chinese Russia studies are larger in scale, than Russian studies on China. According to incomplete data, there are more than 70 educational and analytical institutions – including the Russian language faculties of the Universities – in the country that engage in tracking and studying Russian developments. They also enjoy better financing than their Russian counterparts do. This, however, do not make them free from quite a few problems, fantasies and misinterpretations. Chinese Russia watchers still operate within certain ideological limits, propagandist schemes and are prone to self-censorship. The fundamental issue that continues to haunt them is how to find both convincing and politically correct answer to the question of why the Soviet Union collapsed and how to assess Russian post-Communist transition. This makes many of their perceptions and explanations of contemporary Russia incoherent, simplistic and – sometimes – frankly naïve, albeit truly “realistic”. In an attempt to kill two birds with one stone, namely to sound both professional and ideologically loyal, they often follow in footsteps of Russian official authoritarian verbal stamps. Perhaps, one of the best examples here is how Beijing adopted and eagerly discussed Russian concept of “sovereign democracy”, ironically, exactly at the time when it began getting cold reception from Russian expert community in the wake of Dmitri Medvedev’s Presidency in the second half of the 2000s. In other words, Chinese Russia watchers may be well versed in Russian developments factually, but not necessarily comprehend fully their internal structure, cultural and political contexts.

Publications about Russia in Chinese press and statements of some Chinese experts in December 2014 – just at the time of abrupt devaluation of Ruble and first signs of monetary panic in the Russian market – testified to a lack of proper understanding of the set or realistic possibilities of dealing with this panic, available to Russian authorities. The most popular recipe, prescribed by Chinese economists to their Russian colleagues, was the imposition of restrictions on capital flow.[[9]](#footnote-9) Russian economic minister Sergey Ulyukaev, for example, openly admitted that he could not even think about such solution, since restrictions on capital flow would be practically impossible to administer and could have thrown Russia into a final spiral of currency chaos.[[10]](#footnote-10)

To sum up, sometime by late 2014 Beijing leaders became finally aware of the fact that they cannot fully comprehend the dynamics, direction and possible outcomes of Russian-Western relations, Ukrainian crisis and Moscow’s domestic policies. At the same time, China was far from eager to pay for the risks of Russian unpredictability on both foreign and domestic fronts. Moscow’s policy has moved beyond the limits of profitability that Beijing could have derived from the conflict between Russia and the West.

**Sino-Russian Relations in the Medium Term: “Partnership”, “Alliance” or Growth of Mutual “Fatigue”?**

In our opinion, the reality is that Sino-Russian relations by now have reached certain natural limits in its development. These limits appear, first, in structural exhaustion of the potential for bilateral economic cooperation. Second, in Russian almost “surrealistic” overestimation of Chinese economic and financial potential and Beijing’s eagerness to through it behind Moscow at the time of high unpredictability of Russian-Western relations. Third, in Beijing’s incomplete understanding of the direction and possible outcomes of Russian domestic and foreign policy and therefore growing caution in Chinese approaches towards Moscow.

We utterly exclude any possibility of formation of Sino-Russian political and military alliance with clear anti-Western orientation. On the other hand, bilateral assurances of maintaining “strategic partnership” will continue. However, mutual distrust is also likely to grow considerably, nourished by stalemates in economic cooperation, unfulfilled spells, cultural differences, Beijing’s disillusionment in Moscow’s predictability, Russian dissatisfaction with Chinese “pragmatism” and rising apprehensions over true intensions of Beijing with regard to Russia.

One also should bear in mind possible complications of the future Chinese development. The country is palpably approaching the next fork in its road with indeed unpredictable consequences of economic restructuring and current style of political leadership. Should Beijing prefer to translate internal tension into external expansion, this most probably would happen in the Eastern or Southeastern, but not in the Northern direction, with Russia remaining too big and risky an option.

Albeit the following scenario may look somewhat unrealistic now, we tend to assume that in due time Russian approach to the West may take a friendlier turnover. The constellation of economic and political resources available to Russia in the mid-term perspective will inevitably push into direction of this choice. Besides, with given century-long history of Russia’s sudden and drastic changes in domestic and foreign policy this scenario looks even more plausible. In fact, to repair Moscow’s relations with the West – despite currently obvious and significant obstacles - may turn out to be structurally easier than to jump beyond the natural limits of her economic, cultural and political interaction with Beijing.

The combination of these factors in the medium term perspective (from three to five years) may lead to what seems now quite an improbable situation with Russia-Western relations substantially stabilized and Sino-Russian interaction perceptibly cooling down. We in no way predict the beginning of Russian-Chinese confrontation. What seems more plausible is a certain distancing from each other based on incomplete trust, the objective limits of interaction and some mutual fatigue.

Verbal framework of “strategic cooperation” between Moscow and Beijing may even persist. However, its real content may become more modest, than it is now.

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