

# CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONS IN A FRAMEWORK OF STRATEGIC CONTAINMENT<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

This article examines Russian foreign policy in its Asian dimension, placing Russia's relations with China in the broader framework of Russia's foreign policy "Asia Pivot" strategy. In recent years, particularly after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, Russian foreign policy has been marked by a more pragmatic, revisionist and militarized mold. This mold reflects the wider foreign policy goal of asserting its status in the international system, as well as the tensions that this goal suggests, for instance, regarding a West increasingly criticized as hostile, or a China whose economic buoyancy, to be expanded to other areas, requires prudence. The Russian narrative underlines a multipolar world, in which the hegemony of the United States is restricted and accompanied by revisionist actions aimed at an alternative order and a differentiated recognition of Russia in this new order. The more militarized Russian interventions, as in the case of Syria, evince this willingness to equate speech with action, thus materializing the purpose of international affirmation and recognition. When approaching Russia's relationship with China, an analysis of Russian foreign policy is essential for understanding the material and ideational framework in which decisions and actions are pondered. In fact, China has always been on Moscow's foreign policy agenda, and the issue of managing an enlarged space where this actor has increasingly taken on a crucial presence, as is visible in Central Asia, for example, becomes relevant. However,

## ABSTRACT

This article analyses Russian foreign policy in its Asian dimension, placing Russia's relationship with China in the broader framework of Russia's foreign policy "Asia Pivot" strategy. The study concludes with a cautious reading of this relationship, anchored in the notion that, underneath the layer of greater closeness and intensified collaboration, lies a relationship of double strategic containment, both regarding the US and the West, and between these two giants. For Russia, the relevance of China in political and economic terms is evident and clearly assumed, but the fear of imbalances resulting from substantive differences between the two has held back a number of actions, while encouraging others in a logic of much-needed refocusing and rebalancing for Moscow.

*Keywords:* Russia, foreign policy, Asia pivot, China.

## RESUMO

### AS RELAÇÕES CHINA-RÚSSIA NUM QUADRO DE CONTENÇÃO ESTRATÉGICA

Este artigo analisa a política externa russa na sua orientação para a Ásia, situando as relações da Rússia



com a China no quadro mais lato da política externa russa e da sublinhada estratégia «pivô Ásia». O estudo conclui com uma leitura cautelosa deste relacionamento, entendendo que subjacente a uma maior proximidade e colaboração intensificada há uma relação de contenção estratégica dupla quer em relação aos Estados Unidos e ao Ocidente, quer entre estes dois gigantes. Para a Rússia, a relevância da China em termos políticos e económicos é incontornável e claramente assumida, mas o receio de desequilíbrios resultantes de diferenças substantivas entre os dois tem refreado ações, e motivado outras, numa lógica de recentragem e reequilíbrios muito necessários a Moscovo.

Palavras-chave: Rússia, política externa, pivô Ásia, China.

if in many respects these two actors share a common vision, in many others the existing differentials are clear. Is this relationship a strategic partnership or rather a partnership of convenience<sup>3</sup>, or even a consequence?<sup>4</sup> This article analyses Russia's relationship with China, in the scope of which the "Asia pivot" strategy and regional spaces and organizations – such as the Eurasian Economic Union, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – understood also in the broader context of their relations with the United States and its Western allies, are relevant matter. The article begins by analyzing Russian foreign policy in its Asian dimension and subsequently discusses the more or less formal regional integration dynamics in order to understand Russia-China relations both in a bilateral and multilateral context. The broader framework of difficult relations with the United States and the West will also serve as a backdrop to this study, especially since in normative and material terms the opposition to a U.S.-led order has been the basis for a contestation narrative by Russia and China. The article engages with the debates that still pervade reference bibliography between those who deem that tense relations to the West are fostering a greater closeness between Russia and China and even, for some, the possibility of the formation of a Sino-Russian alliance, while others understand that this is an overly benevolent reading of the relationship between these two actors, which in fact must deal with structural differentials. The study concludes with a cautious reading of this relationship, understanding that beneath the layer of greater closeness and intensified collaboration lies a relationship of double strategic containment, both regarding the United States and the West, and between these two giants. For Russia, China's political and economic relevance is indisputable and clearly acknowledged, but the fear of imbalances resulting from substantive differences between the two has curtailed some courses of action and encouraged others, in a logic of recentering and rebalancing greatly needed by Moscow.

### **RUSSIA'S ASIAN POLICY IN A CONTEXT OF STRATEGIC CONTAINMENT**

Russian foreign policy has been highly consistent in its goal of affirming Russia as a great power, finding novelty essentially in the dimension of discourse, increasingly critical of the West, and in the sphere of implementation in which the militarization of foreign policy has been patent. The revisionist inclination acquired an even greater preponderance with the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the military intervention in Syria in 2015. Russian foreign policy reference documents describe Russia as a relevant actor pursuing policies that allow it "to achieve strong positions of authority in the world

community that best meet the interests of the Russian Federation as one of influential centers in the modern world.” The documents underline Russia’s status as one of the “leading states of the world” and its “increased responsibility for setting the international agenda and shaping the system of international relations”, consolidating “the Russian Federation’s position as a center of influence in today’s world”.<sup>5</sup>

This narrative of power and of Russia as a great power is accompanied by the national-patriotic conservative approach that Putin has instilled in his policies, combining the *realpolitik* and identitarian dimensions<sup>6</sup>. This course of affirmation has been anchored in a society defined as multi-ethnic, in the civilizational, historical and traditional values framing the evolution of policies, and in the distinctive character of Russia, as underlined in the foreign policy’s strategic documents. In terms of discourse, this trend is emphasized by the post-annexation of Crimea “new normal”, in which the civilizational discourse and the propensity for the use of force arise in the political rhetoric and foreign policy performance with a new clothing of justification, legitimation and affirmation of power. The trend towards militarization has been particularly reinforced in the last decade, including the reform of the armed forces, investment in the development of new military capabilities and technologically advanced equipment, as well as more robust interventions. The normative dimension rooted in this narrative of civilizational and traditional values, and the mission which it entails, are interwoven with the question of status – which implies a reconfiguration of Russia’s place in the international system – and with the identitarian dimension, which embodies the uniqueness of Russia, built between Eastern and Western influences. These normative, status and identitarian dimensions have accompanied Russian foreign policy throughout time.<sup>7</sup>

The new Russian strategic security document, published in July 2021, asserts Russia’s status as a major power and has a clear focus on internal dynamics (demographics, political stability and sovereignty, economic development, among others). The definition of the international context follows, unsurprisingly, the line of “strategic containment”, by identifying the international system as increasingly marked by greater tension with the United States and the West in general. These are labelled as hostile and undervalued in their importance within the framework of Russian strategies, as patent in the emphasis on traditional Russian values and on their distinctiveness vis-a-vis the Western narrative, and in the identification of technological development or environmental issues as pressing on the agenda<sup>8</sup>. Nothing in this alignment is new, although the tone is more forceful in asserting Russia’s status with its own place in the international system, and in discarding the “liberal phraseology of the 1990s”<sup>9</sup>, underlining instead its own principles and values not necessarily coincident with the Western ones. Western actions, including the use of new technologies, propaganda and disinformation, are considered part of Russia’s containment policy. China and India are identified as Russia’s strategic partners, and multilateral institutions such as SCO, institutional cooperation formats such as BRICS<sup>10</sup>, and even those of a more informal nature, as in the scope of the Russia-China-India trio, are highlighted.

This alignment was also quite present in Putin's annual address to the Federal Assembly in April 2021, with a clear focus on internal issues, in which the context and impacts of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic occupy a major part of the discourse. However, the speech

THE EVOLUTION OF RUSSIA'S AFFAIRS  
WITH CHINA HAS INTENSIFIED IN THIS CONTEXT  
OF CHALLENGING RELATIONS TO THE WEST.

did not fail to mention the response to all those who "cross the red line" in their dealings with Russia, without being specific, and stressed the relevance of all regional processes – SCO, Eurasian Economic Union,

Collective Security Treaty Organization, BRICS – as an essential part of an integrated development strategy, in which infrastructure investment is key. In the two references made to the West, in his speech, the criticism is blatant: in the interference in Belarusian policies and in the rejection of Russian proposals for international dialogue on communications and cybersecurity. The Eurasian dimension of foreign policy acquires prominence, while relations to the West are barely mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

The evolution of Russia's affairs with China has intensified in this context of challenging relations to the West. The increase in the number of agreements signed between Russia and China is evident, reflecting the very evolution of a policy of noticeable rapprochement in the late 1980s, which evolved into a strategic partnership in the mid-1990s and the signing of the Treaty on Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation in 2001, establishing the foundations of the relationship. After twenty years, the parties believe that a solid foundation has been built for the bilateral relationship<sup>12</sup>. The legal basis of this relationship is evident in these multiple agreements, accompanied by regular meetings and several joint working committees, as well as in the context of collaborations in multilateral forums such as SCO. Russian and Chinese official statements highlight that, while not aiming for an alliance, their positions on key global issues are "one of the core elements of regional and global stability" and that the two countries "draw from each other's support" as they face global challenges<sup>13</sup>. At various times, Chinese and Russian leaders have stressed the relevance of the strategic relationship while avoiding referring to it as an alliance. In China, relations with Russia are defined as adhering to the three 'nos' policy: non-aligned, non-confrontational, not directed against third parties<sup>14</sup>. This understanding is relevant to the debate on a likely Sino-Russian alliance, which in political discourse is downplayed in favor of strategic cooperation or strategic partnership. In the context of the 20th anniversary of the Treaty on Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, in August 2021, a statement from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs mentioned that the parties agree that, given the complexity and volatility of the regional and international situation, they will maintain regular communication on multilateral and bilateral affairs<sup>15</sup>. Along the same lines, Putin commented that relations are at an "unprecedented level of cooperation", also stressing the importance of this relationship in a context of international instability.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, a Russia-China military alliance would have implications for the outline of multipolarity and might not be favorable to Russia, implying that principles of equality in confronting the enemy (a reference to the United States) would have to be applied<sup>17</sup>. David Kerr, quoted in Wishnick<sup>18</sup>, warns moreover that “the compatibility of Russian and Chinese views on these political constructions [as with regard to their position vis-à-vis the hegemony of the United States or in the scope of the SCO, for instance] does not predetermine the interaction of their interests.” And, in fact, logics of resistance and different understandings have been perceptible in the relations between these two major actors. Some authors go so far as to argue that it is not in the interest of the United States to foster this rapprochement, so that a separate policy for Russia could be important in managing this relationship<sup>19</sup>. Still others counter that the United States would have nothing to gain from a rapprochement to an autocratic Russia, and that the compromises potentially involved in this rapprochement, for example with regard to Ukraine, would be too heavy<sup>20</sup>. And there are authors who alert to the implications of this rapprochement between illiberal powers, which should raise concern in the West, since this is no mere relationship of ‘convenience’, but also geopolitical at its core.<sup>21</sup>

One of the preferred areas of articulation, as visible in the signed agreements, has been the dimension of counterterrorism, laying bare the fear of threats to the regime and of internal instability. The dimension of military cooperation, however, has been less present, except for the agreements on non-use of force and arms sales<sup>22</sup>. Still relevant, as Thomas Ambrosio’s study shows<sup>23</sup>, is the disconnection between bilateral agreements and those which are negotiated in the framework of the SCO. Clearly, the parties prefer bilateral agreements to this multilateral environment. In the opinion of Verlin and Inozemtsev<sup>24</sup>, it seems that these relations are informed by the expression “noise above, silence below”, given the frequent dialogue and regular meetings, and the signing of various agreements when confronted with the realities of this relationship. In fact, the

“SCO ends up working as an instrument of double containment: mutual containment between China and Russia, and containment of the United States’ involvement in the area. It also reveals that the strategic relationship that both states pursue is imbued with mistrust, limiting the scope of the bilateral relationship itself, and makes it clear how it emerges at various times as an ‘axis of convenience’<sup>25</sup>, working more in an instrumental than in a strategically pondered fashion.”<sup>26</sup>

These reflections reveal the intense debate between different understandings of Russia’s international position and its articulation with China, swaying between a more benevolent reading highlighting common traits underlying the relations between these two actors, and a more critical reading that questions the existing differentials and how they can hamper strategic cooperation. In the face of a revisionist Russia and a more assertive China at the international level, how can we understand the relationship between these two giants?

**RUSSIAN REVISIONISM AND CHINESE ASSERTIVENESS:  
POINT OF CONVERGENCE OR OF CONFRONTATION?**

The reading that can be made of Russia-China relations shows how in fact the various points of convergence and of confrontation are unfolding. Very clear on the agenda of both these actors is the counterpoint to neoliberal hegemony led by the United States and its Western allies, a position that is no novelty, but which has acquired clearer outlines in recent years. Already in the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, the goal of developing a fair and rational international order based on strict compliance with the principles and norms of international law is mentioned<sup>27</sup>. The principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity of states and non-interference in internal affairs are shared, and Russia-China alignment in these matters is clearly observable at many times, for example within the framework of the United Nations Security Council. In fact, as far as political discourse is concerned, Russia and China refer to their relationship as central in a multipolar international order, for the promotion of peace and stability and for the projection of a fairer, more peaceful and balanced order. It is not, therefore, a

zero-sum relationship, as understood by the parties, but rather an affable coexistence between two world powers.<sup>28</sup>

The arguments pertaining to Russia and China's readings of the 'other' highlight the aspects repeatedly presented by analysts, such as the idea of containing the United States in the context of a multipolar order;

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the sharing of concerns in the fight against extremism and terrorism, which have played a prevalent role in the framework of the SCO; the maintenance of the political regimes while avoiding internal or external challenges to the *status quo*; economic and trade cooperation, essential to Russia's economic performance and important for the supply, in particular, of energy resources to China. Zuenko<sup>29</sup> even speaks of the importance of this logic of rapprochement in the context of the post-annexation of Crimea (2014) as a way of making it possible to compensate for the sanctions imposed to Russia by the West, helping Russian economy to recover, given that China is Russia's largest trading partner. However, this argument is not linear. In China, the economic issue is deemed secondary to the maturation of the partnership, and, in Russia, the matter is altogether circumvented by stressing the security dimension of this relationship<sup>30</sup>. In fact, the economic differential is huge in China's favor. However, the lack of Chinese investment in Russia and the low trade levels, which for years were referred to as limiting Moscow's capabilities, have changed. This state of affairs even led Russian authorities to emphasize the security and military dimension, turning Russia in Beijing's eyes a possible source of instability in the Asia-Pacific region, given the revisionist slant of Russian policies<sup>31</sup>. The instance of the natural gas agreement signed between Russia and China

in May 2014, amounting to US\$400 billion over thirty years, illustrates the existing ambivalences. On the one hand, it seemed to offer, after years of negotiations, an openness for greater collaboration between the energy parties; on the other, it turned out to be a cautious move on the part of China, in its support to Russian projects such as the Western corridor, which was understood as a political project with a limited cost/efficiency ratio.<sup>32</sup> Despite this, the provision of energy supplies has not been stagnant, as shown by the Power of Siberia gas pipeline and the idea of a new project through Mongolia, Power of Siberia 2<sup>33</sup>. What's more, and despite these differences, China's position in Russian trade increased from 10.5% in 2013 to 16.7% in 2019 and 18.3% in 2020, even in the context of a pandemic. This substantial increase is reflected in the decline in Russia's trade relations with the European Union, which in the same periods fell from 49.4% to 41.6% and in 2020 to 38.5%. Chinese investment policy is also consolidating. However, despite the discernible alignment between these two major actors, some consider this reading too benevolent, overlooking flaws in the consolidation of this partnership. The next section analyses these differentials, in an attempt to understand how logics of strategic containment take shape.<sup>34 35</sup>

#### DOUBLE CONTAINMENT?

For Mastanduno<sup>36</sup>, the element repeatedly referred to as an aggregator of understanding – opposition to US leadership in the international system – is itself infused with differences. For this author, American hegemony is more enduring in Europe than in East Asia. Although Russia seeks to undermine US relations with their European partners by interfering in electoral processes, for instance, its capacity has proved limited since it has found it difficult to offer an alternative to the current hegemonic order. China presents different challenges: it is center of the regional economic order in Asia; some of its regional security initiatives have led some states, such as Singapore and Vietnam, to reach out to the United States, but, in the case of others, such as the Philippines, to chart a course of rapprochement with China<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, China, unlike Russia, has the capacity to undermine US partnerships in Asia, and former US President Donald Trump's withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) reinforced China's perception of itself as the central actor in the region<sup>38</sup>. For Pavel Baev<sup>39</sup>, one of the factors that explain this differential has to do with the interpretation that both parties make of multipolarity. While, for China, multipolarity supports its own peaceful growth, which does not violate its principles, adding it to the legitimate centers of power, for Russia, on the other hand, in line with the revisionist logic it has pursued, multipolarity implies competition and, if necessary, a greater propensity for the use of force. This reflects the distinct priorities and views sustained by these two actors regarding international order. Indeed, as Baev points out<sup>40</sup>, Russia has shown willingness to use its military capabilities, as in the case of Syria and even in the context of Ukraine, always with a strong anti-US/West angle. This tendency imparts an exceptional importance to

the security dimension, which is a matter of concern for China, which prefers to control any escalation of tensions in the South China Sea, for instance, revealing mistrust of Russia's capacity for moderate management of instability in this context. In Kaczmarek's words,

“China supports economic globalization, even though it continues to protect large chunks of its economy. In many ways, Beijing prefers the maintenance of the status quo for the sake of predictability and stability. Russia, on the other hand, seems to turn more towards protectionism and finds regionalization a better way for maintaining its position in the international pecking order.”<sup>41</sup>

THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION IS UNDERSTOOD DIFFERENTLY IN BOTH RUSSIA AND CHINA, WHICH HIGHLIGHTS THE DISTINCT GEOPOLITICAL READINGS THAT THESE ACTORS MAKE OF THIS REGIONAL SPACE.

And the author further argues that China “appears to be genuinely interested in contributing to political and economic stability, while Russia seeks first and foremost the symbolic confirmation of its great-power status and does not mind playing the role

of an occasional spoiler”. The dynamics in the multilateral context help to better understand the logic of strategic containment accompanying this relationship, as analyzed below.<sup>42</sup>

#### THE INDO-PACIFIC AND THE REGIONAL ARRANGEMENTS: PERCEPTIONS OF (IN)SECURITY

The Indo-Pacific region is understood differently in both Russia and China, which highlights the distinct geopolitical readings that these actors make of this regional space. China promotes a geoeconomic vision of the Indo-Pacific centered on the BRI, while Russia seeks to promote a reading of this space focused on Eurasian integration and the concept of Greater Eurasia<sup>43</sup>. Moreover, Russia openly criticizes the US policy of renaming the Asia-Pacific region as the Indo-Pacific, deeming it necessary to take into account the interests of all parties in the area. According to Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu, the artificial expansion of spheres of cooperation for the so-called Indo-Pacific aims to create lines of division, fostering tension among the countries of the Asia-Pacific and ultimately compromising regional development (cited in Denisov et al.)<sup>44</sup>. The authors proceed to argue that Russia fears a military alliance involving the United States, India, Japan and Australia – the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) – which might eventually contribute to increase US influence in the area, in line with its multipolar understanding of the international order. For Lukin and Torkunov, quoted in Denisov et al.<sup>45</sup>, in Moscow the concern is that the design of an Indo-Pacific bloc by the United States could take on an anti-China tone, in addition to undermining Russian cooperation plans in the Eurasian region. The shift in relations that might

result from an initiative such as this, for instance by relegating Russia to a less priority position on India's agenda, would have important regional implications. As stated by Denisov et al.<sup>46</sup>, a strategic partnership between Russia and China promotes the rapprochement of the countries of Asia to the United States, just as Russia's confrontation with the West promotes Russia's rapprochement with China. Kazantsev et al.<sup>47</sup> also make this rebalancing point. This logic of pursuing new balances recreates a realistic reading of the international system in which alliances, even if informal, are readjusted according to the distribution of power, and identities are relaxed in favor of national interest. In these new arrangements, the institutional weakening of the ASEAN or China's containment mechanisms are not favorable to Moscow. The Indo-Pacific Development Strategy should be, in Moscow's understanding, inclusive, not based on blocs, and an opportunity for Russia to play a central role in the management of the Eurasian area. And it is precisely in this context that Russia remains extremely attentive to the recent Aukus defensive alliance, presented in September 2021 and involving Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States<sup>48</sup>. Aukus envisions the acquisition by Australia of nuclear-powered submarines, and principles of interchange of technology and know-how, collaboration in cybersecurity and artificial intelligence matters, endowing Australia with differentiating capabilities in the region. Clearly underpinning this new initiative is the goal of increasing the influence and presence of the United States in the Indo-Pacific, giving substance to strategic foreign policy principles previously outlined and committing to China's containment agenda. Russia sees this new arrangement as challenging the *status quo* in the Indo-Pacific, along with other initiatives such as the Quad, for example. Already described as "prototypes of an Asian Atlantic Alliance" in Russian political media, they reveal, in Moscow's view, a stance of hostility and containment by China in particular, but also on the part of Russia, promoting a regional policy of rearmament and transforming the Indo-Pacific into an area of tension and insecurity<sup>49</sup>. With Aukus, not only does unpredictability increase, the view of the "West" also finds disagreements between the United States and old allies such as France, but also difficulties in articulating the transatlantic relationship. If, for Moscow, the weakening of the West is seen as favorable to its own projection of power, on the other hand, a West that is "compartmentalized" into different arrangements with varied compositions represents a challenge. Adding to the criticism, Moscow also underlines the question of the implications of this agreement on the nuclear non-proliferation regime, disapproving the followed approach as promoting deviations from the regulation. But Russia also believes that the new *status quo* resulting from these developments can eventually be harnessed in a positive way, allowing it to enhance negotiation of its nuclear technologies with other partners, using this understanding as a precedent in the matter<sup>50</sup>. In other formats, BRICS sought to incarnate the intent of opposing the dominant order, translating the need for greater integration of developing countries into the global economy, thereby shifting Western hegemony in the control of financial institutions,

for instance, and the strengthening of relations in the context of the global South. At the various summits of the group, this alternative order is always referred to as a form of promoting the creation of a fairer international order, which implies greater representation of developing countries in international institutions<sup>51</sup>. The principle of coexistence is presented by some as translating the aggregating element that allows a strategy relying on the creation of a system based on standards to co-lead the international order. This principle recognizes that different States can legitimately pursue their own economic and political interests, but that they must do so within these rules which ensure peaceful coexistence<sup>52</sup>. However, the narrative repeated at the annual summits and even the investments that have been made in this context do not blur the existing differentials – both in political and ideological terms –, the geographical dispersion and distinct regional contexts, the huge disparity in terms of economic capacity between these five States and the difficulty in promoting a collective vision of the international order that seem to curb the potential of the BRICS in promoting an alternative order<sup>53</sup>. Very close to this discourse are clearly the opposition to the United States and the principles of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of States, as well as non-interference in internal affairs and the principle of non-use of force, very strong

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IN CENTRAL ASIA HAS CAREFULLY AVOIDED  
CHALLENGING RUSSIA'S POLITICAL PRESENCE  
AND SECURITY PROJECTION IN THIS SPACE.

in the framework of the BRICS and reiterating the guiding principles of these relations. The joint declarations echo this normative very clearly, affirming a multipolar world and a new order – also through articulation within the United Nations to

curb the hegemony of the United States – and identifying mechanisms for settling border disputes and regarding the presence of armed forces along borders<sup>54</sup>. Kaczmarek, quoted in Ambrosio<sup>55</sup>, goes as far as arguing that the changes in the material capabilities of these actors have been understood as part of a process of peaceful transition of power, which consolidates the basis of these relations.

In this context, several authors refer to SCO as a mechanism which is central to the bilateral and multilateral cooperation that promotes the strengthening of China-Russia relations. Furthermore, the involvement of Central Asian countries in this organization allows for an easier management of regional disputes and a likely benevolent strategic containment, which indeed involves the redefinition of areas of influence as a more flexible concept. China's growing economic presence in Central Asia has carefully avoided challenging Russia's political presence and security projection in this space. There is definitely at stake here a sensitive management of spaces of influence.

The core objectives of the SCO are political cooperation based on equality between its members, the security dimension being under a great deal of pressure<sup>56</sup>. Russia has endeavored to integrate security elements into the agenda, in addition to the fight against extremism and terrorism, taking care that its leadership role in the Collective

Security Treaty Organization, of China is not a part, is not downplayed. As Chao argues<sup>57</sup>, China is intent on dealing with border and territorial disputes in Central Asian States, maintaining stability in Xinjiang, and securing energy resources by means of its leadership. Central Asia is, in this context, understood as a source of diversification of resources vis-à-vis the Middle East and Africa. Terrorism and extremism are a priority on the agenda, and once again in this dimension cooperation with central Asian countries is deemed highly relevant in the containment of terrorist groups. Chinese authors consider that China already possesses considerable influence and leadership capacity in the SCO, having adopted several of the structuring concepts advanced by Beijing, such as the “Spirit of Shanghai”, which has translated into mutual gains, equality, dialogue, respect for cultural differences and aspiration for joint development<sup>58</sup>.

In the framework of the SCO there has been military cooperation, the first joint exercise having involved all members in 2007 – the Peace Mission, as it was called – an exercise that focused on fighting counter-terrorism activities. Several joint military exercises have taken place with the engagement of all the members or a share of them, allowing the training and preparation of forces. These exercises, whether in the framework of the SCO or in bilateral Russia-China format, have already become a substantive and recurrent part of military cooperation year<sup>59</sup>. This year, the Peace Mission 2021 exercise took place on Russian territory in September, with a focus on counterterrorism action in the context of the withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan<sup>60</sup>, and Sibiu/Cooperation-2021 drills were conducted on Chinese territory, signaling the consistency of military cooperation between Russia and China<sup>61</sup>. More recent highlights are the joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean, Baltic and the South China Sea, with the most recent naval exercise being conducted in the Sea of Japan in October 2021<sup>62</sup>. It is interesting to note, in this context, as Baev argues, that the Russian pivot to the Asia-Pacific was accompanied by the strengthening of Russian military capabilities and a greater openness of its armaments industry. In fact, Moscow has changed its policy on this matter, following the view that it can benefit more by its presence in this market than by protecting its research/production in the face of technological developments in Chinese armaments. This shift does not mean, however, that Moscow has put behind its fears regarding its strategic position in the Asia-Pacific, which is perceived as subdued in the face of the growing Chinese presence.<sup>63</sup>

But SCO also has a relevant economic dimension, in which energy resources have taken on a measure of centrality. The basic assumption is that economic development promotes stability. Investments in energy allow China to reduce its dependence on Russia by increasing its influence in the Central Asia region. Projects under the BRI illustrate it amply<sup>64</sup>. At the same time, the fact that Central Asian countries have their own agendas for the potential diversification of their external relations means that the articulation between Russia and China in terms of their policies for this area is relevant as a way to minimize challenges to logics of integration<sup>65</sup>. It is worth noting that Central Asian

states did not acknowledge the annexation of Crimea, nor the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the war in Georgia, nor did they replicate the sanctions that Russia imposed on the West in response to Western sanctions after the crisis in Ukraine and the destabilization of the Donbass. In concrete terms, this means that Russia needs greater integration within the framework of the Eurasian Economic Union and stable agreements with the countries of Central Asia to promote its agenda there<sup>66</sup>. Moreover, as Samokhvalov argues<sup>67</sup>, in Central Asia the Russian presence has building up in the form of regionalism led by the hegemonic power (“hegemon-sponsored regionalism”, as Alison named it in 2004). China’s economic expansion in Central Asia did not challenge Russian symbolic dominance in the region. However, the BRI undermined Russia’s role as a civilizing power in the Eurasian area, leading Russia to seek a policy of balance relying on the inclusion of Central Asian States in the Greater Eurasia project<sup>68</sup>. But China also faces challenges within the framework of the Organization, which Chao<sup>69</sup> summarizes in how it manages relations with India, Pakistan and Russia; in the response to calls to turn the SCO into a political and military quasi-alliance; in the management of Russian suspicions in the face of a greater Chinese presence and influence in this space which is a part of the Russian “vital space”; and in the management of relations so as to avoid interference in the internal affairs of the Member States. These multilateral integration dynamics lay bare what is also evident in the logic of cooperation/competition accompanying Russia-China relations. There is indeed some difficulty in articulating the central themes of the agendas, whether these are political-security or economic, for instance, because the existing imbalances are manifest. The logic of containment takes place, therefore, at these various levels: in the relationship with the United States and the West, in the relationship between Russia and China, and in the multilateral frameworks in which they are integrated.

#### **CONCLUSIVE NOTES: RUSSIA’S DILEMMA**

The Russian goal of affirming itself as a great power remains well present on the foreign policy agenda, which, in a context of hostile relations with the West, has unfolded, in the Asia option and in particular in the relationship with China, as the viable alternative to power reconfiguration. The Russian project ‘Asia pivot’, in this context, was part of a rebalancing effort that Russia sought in its affirmation of identity and power, counterbalancing its European dimension and thereby allowing it to conquer space in international affairs<sup>70</sup>. However, these options have a cost. Russia-China relations are marked by various imbalances that are deepening. If previously the economic dimension was the most discernible, the development of military technological capabilities in China decreased the advantages that Russia had in this matter, emphasizing the asymmetry. At the political level, the common rhetoric aggregating principles which both consider central to international relations – visible in the alignments so often present in the UN Security Council, in underlining national sovereignty and the principle of non-inter-

vention, as well as in contesting an international order which they deem hegemonic and unfair, around the United States and Western values – is an important pillar of this relationship. But it also shows, as seen above, the often disparate interpretations underlying these (dis)alignments. While Russia’s tighter relationship with China is crucial to Moscow’s policies, in a context of counterweighting the West and strengthening its international presence, on the other hand, Moscow is well aware of the imbalance that this relationship entails and does not intend to become a “minor partner” at key decision-making moments on the international order. This ambivalence is notorious. Despite the immediate gains which this close relationship may bring, the costs that may be associated with it, including in the perception of Russia’s international status, are still part of an important dilemma. The visible containment logics illustrate clearly the Moscow’s current concerns. <sup>RI</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

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