

# COOPERATION, AMBIGUITY, AND TENSION

“The pure and simple truth is rarely pure and never simple.”

—OSCAR WILDE, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I

Few relationships have provoked such polarized views as the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership.” Moscow and Beijing portray it as the very model of international cooperation—pragmatic, enterprising, and innovative. In a world still marked by Cold War-era tensions, it embodies the promise of a new “global multipolar order,” not dominated by American “hegemonism” but centered in the “democratization of international relations.”<sup>1</sup> Such bullishness testifies to an extraordinary transformation. Less than forty years ago the two countries were seemingly implacable enemies on the verge of nuclear confrontation. Today they can rightly claim that ties are better than at any time in their history. Ancient antagonisms and suspicions appear to have given way to an unparalleled convergence across multiple policy agendas.

On the other hand, the rude health of the relationship has generated mounting concern in the West about its longer-term aims. Although Russian and Chinese leaders deny that their partnership is directed against third parties, many observers in Washington view it as an anti-American alliance in all but name. For such critics the convergence of Russian and Chinese positions on a range of international issues is not merely unhelpful, but represents a concerted challenge to the United States’ global leadership.

It is perhaps inevitable that such black-and-white views should flourish in an unstable international context, one characterized by growing geopolitical tensions and security uncertainties. The temptation to extol or demonize the

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Sino-Russian relationship is all the more powerful given that so little is understood about the motivations and forces shaping it. Despite its prominence it remains a subject on which there is far more heat than light.

Inconveniently for advocates and critics alike, the real picture is ambiguous, full of contradictions both implicit and explicit. Moscow and Beijing speak the language, and undertake many of the actions, of a multifaceted partnership. Yet practical cooperation is hamstrung by historical suspicions, cultural prejudices, geopolitical rivalry, and competing priorities. Despite satisfaction with the growth of “partnership relations,” there is lingering doubt about their sustainability.

Such uncertainty is rooted in history, but is fueled also by the emergence of an increasingly confident and assertive China. Beijing has worked hard to allay the fears of the international community by emphasizing concepts such as “peaceful rise,” “peaceful development,” and a “harmonious world.” It has adopted a restrained posture on Taiwan, engaged with the United States, and stepped up participation in multilateral organizations. But the sheer speed and scale of China’s transformation from regional backwater into influential global actor have made it an object of concern for many countries, not least Russia.

This anxiety has been accentuated by the turnaround in the strategic fortunes of the two countries since the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the beginning of the 1990s the outlook for Yeltsin’s democratic Russia appeared much more promising than that of a Chinese Communist regime shaken and isolated following the international outcry at the brutal suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Russia seemed destined to remain the “older brother” and China the “younger brother,” as in the “unbreakable” Sino-Soviet friendship under Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong. But over the course of the 1990s the momentum within the relationship shifted inexorably in favor of Beijing, first to an “equal partnership,” and then to one in which China became seen as ascendant by many on both sides.

The changing dynamic reinforced a long-time mutual ambivalence. For Moscow, China has symbolized a “good” and “bad” East—on the one hand, one of the world’s great civilizations; on the other, a barbarous presence that lapsed into decrepitude and medievalism for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For Beijing, Russia/the Soviet Union was at different times avaricious imperial power, patronizing mentor, and indispensable backer. At no stage in the two countries’ common history has there been a period of unalloyed good relations. As Russian leader Vladimir Putin has pointed out, even during the period of “unbreakable friendship” there was

considerable ill-feeling beneath the veneer of Sino-Soviet solidarity.<sup>2</sup> While many Russians envy China its political stability and economic success, the notion of a “China threat” persists. Perceptions of China and the Chinese may be more nuanced and positive than in the past, but Sinophobia continues to exert a significant pull. On specific issues, such as the right of Chinese to live, work, and acquire property in Russia, public responses are strongly negative. And most Russians believe that China benefits far more from the relationship.<sup>3</sup>

By contrast, the Chinese have a relatively benign if faintly dismissive view of their largest neighbor. They value it as a supplier of advanced weaponry to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), as an important source of crude oil, and as a useful ally in balancing American power in Central Asia. Unlike many in the West, they do not regard a resurgent Russia as a serious threat to their national interests. They are somewhat bemused at Moscow’s obsession with “great power-ness” (*derzhavnost*) and frustrated by its double-dealing on issues such as the East Siberian oil pipeline (see chapter 8), but they recognize the need for accommodation in order to concentrate on more important priorities elsewhere. Generally speaking the Chinese attitude toward Russia combines Middle Kingdom *hauteur*, pragmatism, and cynicism. Russophobia, although it exists, is less of an issue than indifference, as China’s governing elite and society increasingly turn their attention to the West.

### Axis of convenience

This asymmetry and ambivalence call into question the conventional wisdom that Russia and China enjoy a bona fide strategic partnership. Although the two countries have come a long way in recent years, they share neither a long-term vision of the world nor a common understanding of their respective places in it, a disjunction reflected in differing perceptions of the bilateral relationship.

This book argues that the dynamic between Russia and China is one of strategic convenience—an *axis of convenience*. It suits Moscow and Beijing to talk up the quality of ties, both for intrinsic reasons and as a significant factor in regional and global politics. But such interaction falls well short of strategic cooperation, which implies not only a common sense of purpose across the board, but also the political will and coordination to translate broad intent into meaningful action. The rationale of the Sino-Russian axis of convenience is often tactical and instrumental, and expediency and opportunism are more relevant considerations than an often illusory likemindedness. Tellingly, the

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Kremlin assigns greater resources to the countries of the former Soviet Union (FSU) and to relations with key EU member-states (such as Germany), while the Chinese leadership is much more focused on engagement with the United States, Japan, the ASEANs (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Africa, and the European Union.

The secondary importance of the bilateral relationship reflects critical differences in the two countries' center of gravity and strategic orientation. Russian foreign policy arises out of an indigenous imperial tradition, a European cultural-historical heritage, and an Americacentric geopolitical culture. The West continues to supply the principal external reference points, even if many of these are perceived negatively. At the same time the longevity of Russia's imperial tradition and recent memory of the Soviet superpower era have ensured that Moscow retains a globalist mindset, despite a much diminished capacity to project power and influence. Within this world-view China has traditionally occupied a peripheral place. Even at the height of Sino-Soviet friendship and later during the U.S.-Soviet-Chinese triangularism of the 1970s, its importance to the Kremlin was more auxiliary than independent, a source of leverage in a bipolar world rather than valued in itself.

China is still in the early stages of evolution from a regional to a global power and from a developing into a developed nation. It is no surprise, then, that its principal foreign policy priorities are essentially inward-looking: to create the most favorable external conditions for domestic modernization; and reunification with Taiwan. The same introspection characterizes its imperial mentality, which reflects the dynastic nature of Communist Party rule rather than empire-building ambitions or irredentist designs.<sup>4</sup> The global extension of its foreign policy in recent years is motivated not by a desire to assert a great power presence on the world stage, but by concrete and fairly narrow goals, such as maximizing access to overseas markets, energy sources, and other raw materials necessary to sustain growth. Although China has shown signs of assuming greater international obligations and becoming a "responsible stakeholder," its approach to global affairs remains utilitarian.<sup>5</sup>

Contrasting foreign policy agendas have not prevented Moscow and Beijing from coordinating positions in certain circumstances. Crucially, however, what binds them is a largely defensive agenda: stability and confidence-building along the common border; resisting the influence of "alien" Western values;<sup>6</sup> emasculating UN action over Iran's nuclear program; and excluding or weakening an outside strategic presence in Central Asia. The axis of convenience is in many respects an "anti-relationship," directed more at contain-

ing undesirable developments than creating new structures and mechanisms for cooperation.

Much of the impetus behind its development has come from a desire to restrain the “hegemonic” power of the United States. In the immediate post–Cold War era, the arrival of the “unipolar moment” encouraged the reassertion of American internationalism, missionary in its zeal and seemingly unchallengeable.<sup>7</sup> This America was seen to threaten regional as well as ex-global powers and provided a natural locus for Sino-Russian convergence. After a brief period of introspection in the first year of George W. Bush’s presidency, 9/11 reawakened Washington’s foreign policy activism. The U.S.-led military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have drawn Moscow and Beijing together in a common purpose—not in combating international terrorism, as Washington had hoped, but in countering the geopolitical presence of the hegemon in their “spheres of vital interests.”<sup>8</sup> Even here, however, the two countries’ approaches are scarcely identical. At a time when Russia is taking every opportunity to contest America’s global leadership, China has adopted a more restrained approach. The contrast between the escalation of Russia-U.S. tensions and the generally positive interdependency between the U.S. and Chinese economies is stark.

### **The new geopolitics**

In challenging the assumption of a Sino-Russian “strategic partnership,” we should not underestimate its wider implications. Perceptions of the national interest can be short-term, but they have regional and global consequences nonetheless. Moscow and Beijing may be “dreaming different dreams,”<sup>9</sup> but this has not stopped them from working together, often to considerable effect, in many areas: Iran, Central Asia, countering missile defense, North Korea.

Such cooperation, more opportunistic than strategic, is facilitated by an international environment where no single world order—unipolar, bipolar or multipolar—predominates, but in which a Hobbesian “anarchy” reigns.<sup>10</sup> George W. Bush’s presidency has seen a spectacular decline in the authority of the United States, with Washington’s global leadership coming under attack from all sides. Yet it will be decades before rising powers such as China and India have the capacity—or will—to compete with it for preeminence. The much-vaunted “multipolar world order” remains more aspiration than reality, while an equitable, more “democratic” international system based on the

primacy of the UN and other multilateral institutions is similarly elusive. There is an “international society” of sorts, in that certain rules of behavior continue to govern interstate relations,<sup>11</sup> but the Helsinki “big idea” of universal rights and norms<sup>12</sup> has become so eroded in recent years as to be meaningless as a frame of reference. In addition to the growing fractiousness of states and proliferation of value-systems, new non-state actors have emerged to undermine established institutions and norms.

A new geopolitics is challenging the Western-driven, positive-sum interdependency that has become discredited in many parts of the world. It is a hybrid phenomenon, reflecting the transitory nature of the contemporary international system. Traditional constructs of space and influence remain influential, but a revolution of means is taking place. This geopolitics is flexible in approach, employing both hard and soft power and making use of multilateral, bilateral, and unilateral mechanisms. And it is flourishing in circumstances where classical conceptions of the balance of power are interacting with new security and economic challenges—international terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the globalization of trade, energy security, climate change. The new geopolitics is not based on fixed and long-lasting “strategic partnerships,” let alone alliances, but on much more supple arrangements that are frequently opportunistic, non-committal, and volatile.<sup>13</sup> Such arrangements are highly susceptible to changing international circumstances and evolving perceptions of the national interest.

That Sino-Russian relations are driven by interests and not ideology (as under Stalin and Mao) is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, it enables Moscow and Beijing to escape some of the baggage of the past, focusing instead on what unites rather than divides them. The disparateness and lack of clarity of the current geopolitical environment also enables their partnership to punch above its weight, in conditions where the illusion of power is often mistaken for genuine clout.

On the other hand the fluidity of the international context makes the relationship a hostage to fortune. While it can strengthen the axis of convenience in dealings with other actors, it feeds tensions and uncertainties within the relationship itself. With so little to be taken for granted, there is no inclination in Moscow and Beijing toward mutual reliance. The notion of a “normative convergence” between them has become popular recently,<sup>14</sup> yet this supposed convergence is fragile and superficial and in no way approximates the shared values that exist within bodies such as the EU.

For all the public packaging, the Sino-Russian relationship is defined by tangible interests and the realities of power. And herein lies its greatest source

of vulnerability. China's rise as the next global superpower threatens Russia, not with the military or demographic invasion many fear, but with progressive displacement to the periphery of international decisionmaking. Although it is fashionable to bracket Russia and China together as emerging powers, along with India and Brazil,<sup>15</sup> the trajectory of their development foreshadows different fates.<sup>16</sup> The aggregate bilateral balance of power—economic, political, technological, strategic—has already shifted in Beijing's favor, and the disparity will only become more marked with time. More than any other single factor, it is this growing inequality in an uncertain world that will inhibit the development of a genuinely close partnership.

### The policy context

Some clarification on the nature of the policy process in this highly ambivalent relationship may be useful. Policymaking is opaque, even in the most transparent and accountable of Western democracies. It is much more so in states where a culture of confidentiality is pervasive, input is limited to the select few, and dissimulation is more often than not a virtue.<sup>17</sup> We can rarely be sure who initiated or influenced particular decisions; a measure of clarity emerges only with time and, in a few lucky instances, with the publication of indiscreet memoirs.<sup>18</sup>

In this connection, it is vital to distinguish between those who drive policy and those who merely articulate it. The recent transfer of the Russian presidency from Vladimir Putin to Dmitry Medvedev illustrates the dangers of a literal approach to the study of policymaking. On the face of things, President Medvedev has become the new power in the land, with direct responsibility for running foreign policy. Yet it is Putin, albeit as prime minister and party leader, who remains the supreme arbiter of Russia's affairs at home and abroad. His personal domination of the body politic and control of elite networks outweigh the institutional assets of a nominally strong presidency.

This book makes liberal reference to "Russia" and "Moscow," "China" and "Beijing," more or less interchangeably. The reader should not interpret this as implying the existence of uniform views, but as shorthand for *the dominant policy line at a given moment*. The abstract concept of "the national interest" has little meaning, except at the most general level—"territorial integrity," "national security," "economic prosperity." In practice, the national interest is a matter of interpretation and perspective. Different groups within the policy elite—big business, economic ministries, the security and intelligence community, the

military—may (and do) view it in different ways. The issue is further complicated by the blurring of public and private interests, especially in Russia. Policy outcomes reflect the interplay of competing interests and agendas; in Russia and China, even more than in the West, they are the product of multiple compromises.

With this in mind, several scholars have adopted an interest-group approach, associating certain attitudes and policies with particular constituencies.<sup>19</sup> But this, too, is not without its problems. Interests and allegiances cut across institutional lines.<sup>20</sup> The Russian military, for example, is sharply divided in its views of China. Some senior officers regard it as the greatest long-term threat to national security, others as an actor of limited military capabilities, while a third group adheres to the Kremlin line that China is a key strategic partner and customer for the Russian arms industry. Divining the inner workings of Chinese policy is more challenging still, since the extreme secrecy surrounding decisionmaking there makes it very difficult to identify distinct policy strands with any confidence. Mark Leonard has categorized Chinese thinking about international affairs in terms of “liberal internationalists,” “neo-comms,” and “pragmatists.”<sup>21</sup> However, it is unclear how far these intellectual currents influence specific government policies. The most plausible, if somewhat unsatisfactory, answer is that they probably all feed into the policy process, but in ways that are extremely hard to gauge.

Part of the problem is that perceptions and attitudes fluctuate. The numerous contradictions in the bilateral relationship have translated into inconsistent policymaking over the years, particularly in the Kremlin. Just as there is no such thing as *the* national interest, so the hackneyed phrase “permanent national interests” is inadequate in explaining the complex motivations behind Sino-Russian interaction. Interests alter in response to changing domestic and international circumstances. Events intervene to change the “normal” course of things. 9/11, for example, disrupted the positive momentum of Sino-Russian relations. Putin seized on the opportunity to re-engage with the United States, leaving the Chinese in little doubt as to their second-class status in the Kremlin’s world-view. Subsequently, the Iraq war and the Orange revolution in Ukraine helped swing the pendulum back toward Beijing. No relationship evolves in a vacuum, especially one between two countries struggling to redefine their place in the international system. Evolution of the “strategic partnership” is inseparable from larger trends in a rapidly globalizing world.

In the end, much of foreign policymaking is ad hoc and reactive, notwithstanding the best intentions of leaders to assert a long-term vision. Although



the talk is of “pragmatism,” this is rarely more than a bland certificate of endorsement (the obverse of pragmatic are the pejorative terms “ideological” and “romantic”). States may be “rational actors” for the most part, yet many of their actions are influenced by irrational considerations; myopia and prejudice often outweigh clear-sighted views of national (or even group) interests. We should not underestimate, too, the role of miscalculation and misperception—especially pertinent in relationships where there is little tradition of trust, as between Moscow and Beijing.

### **The many faces of Sino-Russian relations**

The Sino-Russian axis of convenience operates on several levels—bilateral, regional, and global—that constantly intersect. The following chapters examine key dimensions of this multi-layered relationship: its historical and ideational setting; critical bilateral issues, such as the situation in the Russian Far East and the military balance; the relationship in its regional context (Central Asia, East Asia); and the nexus between the development of Sino-Russian ties and larger global realities, in particular the world’s growing resource hunger and the continuing primacy of the United States. Some of the themes are geographical in focus, others functional, and they frequently overlap. Together they reflect the increasingly complex interaction between two of the world’s leading powers.

Chapter 2 looks at the impact of history and of historical memory. Over the past two decades, Russian and Chinese leaders have sought to transcend a contentious past. These efforts have met with considerable success and are responsible in large part for the generally healthy state of bilateral ties today. However, the burden of history continues to weigh heavily. Many of the underlying tensions and uncertainties in Sino-Russian relations have their roots in a series of historical “episodes”: the thirteenth-century Mongol invasion of Russia and three centuries of Mongol rule; the Tsarist imperial expansion into China in the nineteenth century; the “unequal treaties,” under which the Qing dynasty was forced to cede 1.5 million square kilometers of Chinese territory; the enormous disappointments of the Sino-Soviet “unbreakable friendship” in the 1950s; the border clashes of 1969; and the sharply contrasting experiences of modernization in post-Soviet Russia and post-Mao China.

These episodes are signposts in a relationship that has rarely been comfortable and has frequently been bitter. They have left a mixed legacy: on the one hand, anxiety, alienation, and mistrust; on the other, accommodation,

calculation, and pragmatism. Historical animosities and suspicions have softened, but not disappeared. The outcome of this ambivalent condition is a selective and wary engagement. Enduring Russian fears of Chinese irredentism in the Far East highlight the extent to which history still impinges on the relationship, notwithstanding the best efforts of governments to set the past aside. The longer-term outlook for partnership hinges on the capacity of Moscow and Beijing to embrace present and future opportunities with an open mind.

Chapter 3 lays out the ideational context by addressing the central question of what Moscow and Beijing understand by “strategic partnership.” For Russia, in particular, this has become a near-universal rubric applied to all manner of relationships. Sino-Russian ties have improved beyond recognition in the last fifteen years, and the degree of political, normative, and foreign policy convergence is unprecedented. Yet there are serious questions to be asked about both sides’ expectations of partnership and the extent of their likemindedness.

Although they appear to espouse virtually identical views on many issues, major differences of perspective and emphasis continue to divide them. For Russia, a good relationship with China serves immediate security interests and global geopolitical ambitions. It reinforces the security of its far eastern regions by establishing a common interest in cooperation. It also gives Moscow the confidence to pursue an assertive (“independent”) foreign policy and to challenge Washington’s global leadership. In this sense, China is less a strategic partner to Russia than a strategic counterweight to the United States. Beijing sees its relationship with Moscow differently. Its chief priorities are more practical and less ambitious: to secure its “strategic rear” in the northeast in order to concentrate on domestic modernization and Taiwan; to ensure the continued flow of energy and other commodity imports; and to work with Moscow (and others) toward stability in Central Asia. Although the Communist leadership values Sino-Russian solidarity on international issues, it treats Russia less as a global strategic partner than as a secondary and “limited” partner in niche areas.

The Sino-Russian dynamic is consequently not equal but asymmetrical, a fact that has generated some tensions between them. For the most part the image of “strategic partnership” enables Moscow and Beijing to gloss over its limitations. However, the disjunction between sweeping rhetoric and modest achievement is becoming more difficult to sustain, especially in areas such as energy where real cooperation has fallen well short of expectations. In coming years the relationship faces several major challenges: managing demo-

graphic tensions in the Russian Far East (RFE); translating a largely rhetorical convergence into tangible outcomes; and balancing between cooperation and competition in Central Asia. Such challenges are all the more formidable given the fluid international environment.

Few issues touch the Russian psyche as deeply as the idea of the land (*zemlya*). Territorial integrity is central to notions of Russian national identity and of “Russian-ness.”<sup>22</sup> The specter of a Chinese take-over of the Russian Far East, the subject of chapter 4, goes to the heart of these issues. In its most primitive form, the “China threat” is reflected in the xenophobic image of the “yellow peril”—the Chinese invading in their millions to fill the vast expanse of Siberia and Russia’s Far East. But the issue is more than just about vulgar racism. Even Vladimir Putin, the driving force behind the expansion of relations with China, has suggested that if Russia does not manage to settle the RFE then it may one day lose it.<sup>23</sup> The fate of Russia’s eastern lands is thus of pivotal importance in the evolution of the bilateral relationship. Tensions over “illegal migration” are exacerbated by the widening demographic imbalance between the RFE and China’s northeastern provinces, by Russia’s larger population crisis, and by the growing Chinese economic influence in eastern Russia. Beijing denies any irredentist ambitions, yet many Russians believe that it has not abandoned hope of recovering these territories through surreptitious means—namely, the gradual build-up of a large and influential Chinese presence on Russian soil.

In fact, the real problem in the RFE is the bankruptcy of Soviet and post-Soviet policy toward the region. Decades of neglect and half-baked schemes have truly made this Russia’s forgotten land. Despite Putin’s public commitment to development of the RFE, there has been minimal progress in resolving fundamental problems of corruption, misgovernment, and economic backwardness. In these circumstances the Chinese serve a dual purpose: as chief supplier of essential goods and services to the local population and convenient scapegoat. The combination of socioeconomic dependency and political expediency leaves Sino-Russian relations in the RFE (and beyond) especially vulnerable to changing conditions at home and abroad.

China’s spectacular transformation in the post-Mao era elicits mixed feelings among Russians. For some it proves the wisdom of the Chinese model of socioeconomic development—the “Beijing consensus”<sup>24</sup>—compared with the attempts of Gorbachev and Yeltsin to follow “inappropriate” Western political and economic prescriptions. There is a strong sense of *schadenfreude*, too, at American discomfiture in the face of a rapidly emerging global power that would challenge the Western-dominated international order. Set against this,

however, is the worry that China's rise, "peaceful" though it may be, will eventually threaten Russian interests across the board. The bilateral balance of power in its various dimensions therefore looms large in Moscow. Chapter 5 focuses on two critical aspects of this question. It assesses, first, the two countries' respective military capabilities and potential. Of particular interest here are their contrasting experiences of reform, where the PLA's comprehensive modernization compares strikingly with the failure of successive Russian governments to develop effective modern fighting forces. Although it is inconceivable that China would attack Russia in the foreseeable future, the former's ongoing "revolution in military affairs" is the subject of close scrutiny in Moscow (as well as Washington).

Still more important are the consequences of China's rise as a civilian power, particularly if it becomes the world's leading economy by 2040, as some predict.<sup>25</sup> Moscow frets that Russia is becoming a raw materials appendage of an ever more hi-tech China. Yet the key issue here is the fungibility of Chinese economic might, which is translating into a much enhanced ability to project power across the globe, including in regions where Russia has been accustomed to exercising a dominant influence. The transformation is nowhere more apparent than in the economic sphere. In a world dominated by economic power, the growing asymmetry of the bilateral relationship threatens to accentuate Russia's marginalization from international decisionmaking.

One of the most sensitive areas of the relationship is former Soviet Central Asia, the subject of chapter 6. For well over a century Russia has been the imperial power and (largely) unchallenged hegemon.<sup>26</sup> This continued to be the case even after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the independence of the five Central Asian republics. During the 1990s, American involvement in the region was low-key, while Beijing was content to defer to Moscow, partly because their interests coincided and partly because it lacked the capacity to play a more independent role. 9/11 nullified these strategic understandings. Virtually overnight America became the leading power in Central Asia, reinforced by a long-term troop presence; the limits of Russian influence were severely exposed; and the Chinese leadership realized it could no longer rely on Moscow to take care of business. The emergence of an environment that was "anarchic" (in the Hobbesian sense) established a natural setting for renewed geopolitical competition.

Although some commentators speak of a new Great Game and a *de facto* Sino-Russian alliance against the United States, the real picture is much more confused, involving many players with their own individual agendas. Beijing,

supported by Moscow, has promoted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as an “international organization of a new type,” a purported alternative to geopolitics. But so far the SCO has raised more questions than answers. Is its “Shanghai spirit” of positive-sum cooperation in response to universal threats, such as international terrorism, merely a cover to legitimize a shared determination to force America out of Central Asia? Should the SCO be viewed as an institution of growing stature, or as yet another in the long line of ineffectual multilateral organizations in the former Soviet space? If the SCO is becoming a serious player, then where does it fit in the overall scheme of Sino-Russian relations—as an additional layer that consolidates progress at the bilateral level, or a competitive arena in which Moscow and Beijing vie for the loyalties and resources of the Central Asian states?

Chapter 7 focuses on the dynamics of the Sino-Russian relationship in East Asia. This region represents a unique strategic environment. It is fractured and possesses no collective identity. It encompasses four of the world’s leading powers—the United States, China, Japan, and Russia—three of which are nuclear weapons states that have often been at loggerheads. Rival bilateral alliances rather than multilateral mechanisms have traditionally predominated. And culturally and normatively it is exceptionally diverse, a place where Huntington’s thesis of a “clash of civilizations” is more applicable than anywhere else on the planet.<sup>27</sup> In this unstable context, the key question is not the supposed threat of a Moscow-Beijing axis directed at U.S. interests, as in Central Asia. The real tension is between China’s emergence as a real force in the Asia-Pacific, and the desire of other powers, including Russia, to preserve the strategic status quo. Beneath the surface of apparently convergent interests, there is a fundamental conflict between Moscow’s vision—a Concert of Great Powers, in which Russia is a full and valued member—and Beijing’s determination to carve out a leadership role.

It is no coincidence, then, that Putin has emphasized the importance of “strategic diversity.” He has attempted to improve relations with Japan; raised Russia’s level of participation in Asian multilateral organizations such as APEC (the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation grouping) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF); brought Russia into the Korean Six-Party talks; and engaged actively in the ASEAN-plus dialogue and the East Asia Summit (EAS).<sup>28</sup> His interest in a strategic architecture of checks and balances has led him to flirt with ideas of Russia as a “swing power” between China and Japan, and between China and the West. But this approach carries risks. It undermines Chinese trust in Moscow’s good faith and could, in certain circumstances, be interpreted as part of a larger project of “neo-containment” and

“keeping China down.” In the latter eventuality, the outcome would not be a Concert of Asia, but heightened bilateral tensions, destabilization of the Korean peninsula, and aggravation of existing fault-lines in the region.

The geopolitics of energy is the subject of chapter 8. Energy has become a central plank of the bilateral relationship and of the two countries’ foreign policies more generally. Moscow regards control of oil and gas resources as its most effective means of power projection in the post-bipolar age. For Beijing the quest for energy has become an all-encompassing priority, the engine of China’s modernization. Sino-Russian energy cooperation is emblematic of the potential, but also of the shortcomings of their partnership. It offers a vision of the future as the most plausible avenue for taking relations to the next level, with political and strategic, as well as economic, benefits. However, progress has been slow. Prolonged delays over the East Siberian oil pipeline and the Kovykta gas pipeline have highlighted numerous problems: confusion over routing, pricing disagreements, uncertain levels of investment, and denial of Chinese access to Russian energy equity. Such difficulties reflect Moscow’s reluctance to become too China-dependent in terms of markets, as well as concern that Russia is turning into a resource-cow for Chinese modernization. For its part Beijing has reacted to the Kremlin’s erratic behavior by widening the search for new suppliers of energy. Resource hunger has become the main driver of the Chinese push into Central Asia, one that has led it into growing competition with Russian interests.

Thus energy offers both opportunity and risk for the development of relations. And the same is true of the use of energy as a foreign policy tool. The political elite in Moscow has made much of Russia as an “energy superpower” and attempted to exploit control of energy (especially gas) resources as leverage on the West. In fact, the threat to “go East” by diverting exports away from primary European markets is a bluff. Russia has neither the inclination nor the capability to make good on such threats. In the meantime, however, its reliability as a long-term supplier has been called into question, including in Beijing. The Chinese find they have more in common with energy consumers like the United States than with exporting countries such as Russia.

The Kremlin’s use of energy as a foreign policy tool is consistent with a view of the world as a competitive, often hostile place, where geopolitics is becoming more rather than less important. For all the talk about interdependency and positive-sum cooperation in counterterrorism, WMD non-proliferation and conflict resolution, concepts such as the balance of power and spheres of influence have lost none of their salience. Chapter 9 revisits the idea of the “Grand Chessboard,” put forward by Zbigniew Brzezinski in

1997.<sup>29</sup> Now, as then, the Eurasian continent is the main sphere of geopolitical contestation, while the principal actors—the United States, Russia, and China—remain the same. However, much also has changed in the intervening decade: the advent of a long-term Western presence in Central Asia; the Iraq war; the erosion of American political and normative influence; skyrocketing energy prices that have enabled Russia’s resurgence; and the spectacular rise of China.

Against this background the Sino-Russian relationship has taken on a global character. For the Kremlin, geopolitical triangularism retains a special place, even if good relations with China have come to be valued for intrinsic as well as instrumental reasons. The nature of this triangularism—and the global chessboard—remains unclear. Russia and China share a profound distaste for American “hegemonic” behavior and seek to constrain it. But beyond that general objective the two sides differ substantially. Moscow plays up the “strategic partnership” with Beijing in order to maximize its foreign policy options and compensate for the deterioration of relations with the United States. Making common cause with China is critical to Russia’s larger vision of reasserting itself as a global player.

China’s perception of the grand chessboard, while also colored by geopolitical thinking, is more flexible. It does not deem it necessary to contest Western interests and influence wherever it finds them. Beijing’s commitment to closer relations with Russia has not been prompted by worsening ties with the United States and the EU—indeed, these have improved significantly in recent years—but by the need to achieve specific political, economic, and security goals. It operates on the assumption that China can and must engage with the United States and Europe while maintaining a “strategic partnership” with Moscow. As its cautious approach toward Iraq demonstrates, it is unwilling to jeopardize China’s far more substantial ties with the West for the sake of a partner whose actions at times seem motivated by visceral anti-Americanism. The case for flexibility is reinforced by a sober understanding of the limits of Sino-Russian friendship. The Communist leadership has few illusions that Moscow would offer more than moral-political support in the event of a major crisis in China’s relations with the United States, such as over Taiwan. More important still, it understands that it is not Russia, but America, that is truly China’s indispensable partner.

In spite of many unresolved issues, the short- to medium-term prognosis for the Sino-Russian relationship is good. There is no problem so serious as to lead to an early change for the worse, let alone a crisis. The axis of convenience will hold for some years, as both sides continue to find compelling reasons to

cooperate: maintaining a solid front against Western “interference” in domestic affairs, developing energy ties, and countering American “hegemonism.” Beyond the next decade, however, the future is much less clear. Chapter 10 considers five scenarios for the longer-term evolution of relations: strategic convergence and the continuation of current positive trends; a political-military alliance; the “end of history” based on democratization in both countries; military confrontation; and a state of strategic tension. The last of these scenarios seems the most probable, although by no means inevitable. It envisages a gradual widening of policy differences, but within controlled parameters. The relationship would lose much of its luster, talk of “strategic partnership” would become perfunctory, and the opportunistic nature of ties would be widely evident. Nevertheless, dealings between Moscow and Beijing would remain more or less businesslike, and even effective in certain areas.

This final chapter concludes with some thoughts on the implications for the West of present and future trends in the relationship. As noted at the outset, there is a tendency to portray Sino-Russian convergence in melodramatic terms, as the most serious long-term strategic threat to the West. This alarmist picture is based on a misreading of developments, be they summit communiqués, occasional military exercises, or formulaic declarations on the multipolar world order. Contrary to conventional wisdom, good relations between Moscow and Beijing can contribute to a more stable world and should be welcomed rather than feared. Indeed, historical experience has shown that a souring of Sino-Russian ties is a major destabilizing factor in Eurasian and global security. Western policymakers should therefore examine the axis of convenience on its merits, not through the lens of geopolitical stereotypes or the self-serving rhetoric of “strategic partnership.”