

Răzvan-Paul Tudose

## THE DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

*Tudose Răzvan-Paul*

National University of  
Political Science and Public  
Administration, Bucharest  
[razvan.tudose100@gmail.com](mailto:razvan.tudose100@gmail.com)

### ABSTRACT

*China and Russia are two major powers standing before the construction of a new type of bilateral relation, one based on mutual trust that today is more solid than ever. In April 2018, the Chinese Foreign Affairs Minister, Wang Yi, whilst in a work trip to Moscow, stated that the relations between the two are at: "the best level in history" (Westcott, 2018). This statement stirred a lot of controversies and even panic among many international actors, that felt threatened by the closeness of the two countries (Hille, Manson, Foy & Shepberd, 2020; Ganguly, 2020). All political and academic circles seem to agree on one aspect: the punitive measures and the attitude of the West throw Russia in China's arms and make it pivot more and more towards the East (Lukin, 2018, p.176, 190-191; Ying, 2016). At this time, these events have become the main drive for the development of the relations between them. In the author's opinion, the West must start making concessions if it wants to stop this turn, seen by many as irreversible. However, this would also correspond to the wishes of the two countries. Starting from these insights, this case-study will attempt to provide a better understanding of the relations between Russia and China, offering an in-depth analysis of the relations from a military, economic and cybernetic standpoint, as well as an analysis of their interaction in different international organizations.*

### KEYWORDS

- Sino-Russian relations
- Bilateral relations
- Military Sino-Russian relations
- Economic Sino-Russian relations
- BRICS
- SCO
- UNSC

### 1. Introduction

The fears and controversies born by the improvement of the Russian-Chinese relations brought to light the possibility of a military alliance between the two. To this end, there was no small number of experts who rushed to accept or deny this idea. Dmitri Trenin does not believe in a military alliance and states that the military alliances are patterns of the past, considering the relation between the two rather an Entente. The definition of Entente for Trenin consists of: „a basic agreement about the fundamentals of world order supported by a strong body of common interest” (Trenin, 2018). Alexander Lukin (2018) considers that the Sino-Russian rapprochement does not have to mean that one of them will have to offer help to the other in its confrontations with the West, but the attitude of the West will only accelerate the

rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow. In fact, Western actions in Syria, Libya and Iraq have only deepened cooperation between Russia and China, and Lukin believes that less aggressive Western actions would slow this accelerated rapprochement which started with the crisis in Ukraine (Lukin, 2018, p.191).

Jo Inge Bekkevold does not see Russia and China entering into a military alliance, although both see the United States as the main threat to their security (Lo & Bekkevold, 2018, p.313). China is not hiding this, and it is well known that it wants strategic flexibility at the international level, an alliance with Russia being unlikely at the moment. Joseph Cheng affirms that while the relationship between the two has improved considerably in recent years, we cannot talk about an alliance. For example, Russia refused to get involved in the territorial dispute between China and Japan and maintained its position of neutrality even though Beijing would have wanted a common front against Japan (Cheng, 2016, p.249). In the opinion of Marcin Kaczmarek, the economic crisis of 2008 only showed that China has gradually begun to become the dominant party in the Sino-Russian relations. The increase of interdependence between the two supports the strategic partnership in case of possible shocks at internal or international level (Kaczmarek, 2015, p.24).

On the other side, Alexander Gabuev, specialist in the Sino-Russian relations, stated that the United States and the Western capitals are naive to the fact that the antagonizing policies of the two influence and grow the cooperation level between Russia and China, in a dangerous way for the current world order (Gabuev, 2018). Gabuev continued and stated that: „The deepening of military ties between these two former rivals is real, and a stronger strategic partnership between Beijing and Moscow could, given time, upend a half century of U.S. military planning and strategy” (Gabuev, 2018).

The former U.S. Defense Secretary, James Mattis, being asked if he is worried about a possible alliance between China and Russia, stated that: „I see little in the long term that aligns Russia and China” (Gabuev, 2018). Like James Mattis, Robert Kaplan asserted that: „The Chinese-Russian military alliance is only what you see above the surface”, continuing and saying that: “What’s below the surface is serious geopolitical competition between China and Russia” according to Chandran (2018).

Therefore, Bobo Lo considers that regarding Sino-Russian relations, there are two schools of thought comprising the believers and the skeptics. Skeptics place more emphasis on what separates the two states: tensions, disagreements, asymmetric relations or historical friction, but they admit that there are some areas where Russia and China are cooperating more and more effectively. (Lo & Bekkevold, 2018, p.3-5) On the other hand, those who believe in a healthy relationship between Russia and China bring to the fore the international institutions in which they cooperate (UNSC, BRICS, SCO), unprecedented energy and military agreements, official speeches by government and presidential institutions, or the antagonism of both by the US. In the opinion of those who believe in this arrangement, the arguments related to the historical past laden with mutual tensions, or to the asymmetrical relationship that foreshadows are becoming weaker in the face of the effects of cooperation (Lo & Bekkevold, 2018, p.3-5).

This study will not analyze in depth what unites or separates the two on the

long, medium or short term, but rather it will try to find and define the stage of the actual relations from an military, economic and cybernetic level. Answers shall be sought to questions such as: „Who leads the relation from a military and economic standpoint?”; „Why?”; „Who manages to impose its vision better in their interactions within BRICS and SCO?”

## 2. The military dimension

Nowadays, China and Russia have similar opinions regarding the new world order. They both opt for a world order characterized by multipolarity and not the unipolarity of the last decades. Nonetheless, in September 2018, the President of China Xi Jinping stated that Russia and China should work together to change: “unilateral approaches to international problems” (Osborn, 2018). Vladimir Putin, at his turn, showed he is content „Thank God, this situation of a unipolar world, of a monopoly, is coming to an end” (Reevell, 2018). The idea of promoting a multipolar world dates back from 1997, a statement to this end being signed at Moscow: „*Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order*” (UN General Assembly, 1997).

On the military level, their interactions accelerated as their relations with the United States had to suffer. And the Russian military exercise Vostok-2018 is supporting this idea. The inter-operability of the Russian and Chinese troops alarmed the West, the participation of approximately 3,000 Chinese troops (Yang, 2018) showing once again that the military relations between the two have reached new heights.

Vostok-2018 is considered the largest Russian military exercise since the end of the Cold War era, taking place in the East of Russia and involving approximately 300,000 of Russian troops (Yang, 2018). No less important is the desire of the Chinese military to learn and take from the war experiences of the Russian military in theaters of war like the one in Syria and Ukraine. Whilst the number of the troops involved could be questioned, Vostok-2018 highlights a turning point for the Russia and China’s external policy (Osborn, 2018).

In the author opinion, Russia appears to be sending a message to the West that it no longer considers China a rival, but an important partner. The positive answer of China to Russia’s invitation to take part to this exercise is commented by Alexander Gabuev, who states that: “The two countries have entered a new chapter in military cooperation” (Huang, 2018).

Jeffrey Mankoff, former counsellor on US-Russia relations for the US State Department, comments the participation of Chinese troops: “Russia is telling Beijing that China is not the focus of Russian planning in the Far East anymore, and signaling to the U.S. and NATO that if the relationship stays bad, Russia has other options” (Morgan, 2018). The Vostok-2018 military exercise took place nine months after the US Defense Secretary, James Mattis, revealed a new national defense strategy which emphasizes less global anti-terrorist fight and more strategic competition with Russia and China (US Department of Defense, 2018). Mark Simakovsky, senior fellow at the Atlantic Council said that: „this exercise indicates a wider alliance against the United States, but clearly these two countries will continue to cooperate to subvert U.S.

interests in Asia” (Morgan, 2018). Michael Kofman, who studies the Russian military capacity at the Center for Naval Analyses, considers that Vostok-2018 was a good opportunity to use the lessons learnt by the Russian militaries in the wars in Syria and Ukraine: „(The Russians) really have been learning how to fight in Syria, how to do combined arms warfare and also the kind of information-driven warfare that they have long watched the United States and its allies practice” (Morgan, 2018). The rhetoric of the Russian officials is slightly different, Nikolay Lakhonin asserting that „Vostok-2018 is not directed against other countries and is in line with our military doctrine, which is defensive in character” (Morgan, 2018). For China, Vostok-2018 was also a good opportunity to learn about Russian mobilization tactics, Russian military’s war experiences and an opportunity to put another brick in the building of military relations between the two.

Another exercise that defines very well the level of Sino-Russian military cooperation is the “Joint Sea”. These are large naval exercises undertaken by the Chinese and Russian navies. In 2015, such an exercise took place in the Sea of Japan, in 2016, a similar exercise took place in the South China Sea, while in 2017, the two maritime powers met in the Baltic Sea. Due to Vostok-2018, the next “Joint Sea” exercise took place in 2019, when the two naval powers met in the port city of Qingdao on China’s Yellow Sea. These exercises also provide a concrete exhibition of China’s aspiration to become a major global naval force. James Goldrick, from Lowy Institute, drew the attention on these exercises: „The Russians have not, in the past, proved eager to share tactics and doctrine with other navies, even those which have been customers of their ships” (Goldrick, 2017). These exercises can suggest an alignment between China and Russia in relation to the behaviour of China in the South China Sea or the East China Sea, as well as a similar approach from China related to the ambitions of Russia in the Baltic Sea.

From the standpoint of military expenditures, the gap between the two states is getting bigger. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), China spent \$266.449 billion in 2019, while Russia spent \$64.144 billion, spending almost as much as India or Saudi Arabia (SIPRI, 2019). To have a better picture, the cumulative military expenses of countries like Germany and Italy are higher than those of Russia. So do the cumulative expenses of France and Spain. The US military expenditures in 2019 were \$718.689 billion (SIPRI, 2019), which is about three times higher than China’s and eleven times higher than Russia’s.

According to the SIPRI Yearbook from 2018, in terms of weapons exports, Russia has a considerable advantage over China, accounting for 22% of the world’s weapons exports, while China holds only 5.7% (SIPRI, 2018, p.8). In terms of imports, China holds 4% of the world’s weapons imports, while Russia produces a lot on its own (SIPRI, 2018, p.8). According to these data, Russia is a major producer and exporter of weapons worldwide, while China has a much more balanced position, with exports being approximately equal to imports (SIPRI, 2018, p.8).

THE MAIN EXPORTERS AND IMPORTERS OF MAJOR WEAPONS, 2013-2017			
EXPORTER	GLOBAL SHARE (%)	IMPORTER	GLOBAL SHARE (%)
1. USA	34	1. India	12
2. Russia	22	2. Saudi Arabia	10
3. France	6,7	3. Egypt	4,5
4. Germany	5,8	4. UAE	4,4
5. China	5,7	5. China	4,0
6. UK	4,8	6. Australia	3,8
7. Spain	2,9	7. Algeria	3,7
8. Israel	2,9	8. Iraq	3,4
9. Italy	2,5	9. Pakistan	2,8
10. Netherlands	2,1	10. Indonesia	2,8

*Fig. 1: Big importers and exporters of weapons 2013-2017*  
*Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2018, p.8*

When it comes to nuclear arsenal, Russia still holds a parity with USA in terms of nuclear warheads, whilst China has a much more limited nuclear stock (SIPRI, 2018, p.11). Nonetheless, the fact that Russia is a nuclear force contributes to its status of great power at the international level. It is worth mentioning that the development of the Chinese nuclear arsenal did not fall under the provisions of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, as it was the case for Russia and USA until February 1<sup>st</sup> 2019.

WORLD NUCLEAR FORCES, 2017			
COUNTRY	DEPLOYED WARHEADS	OTHER WARHEADS	TOTAL INVENTORY
1. USA	1750	4700	6450
2. Russia	1600	5250	6850
3. UK	120	95	215
4. France	280	20	300
5. China	-	280	280
6. India	-	130-140	130-140
7. Pakistan	-	140-150	140-150
8. Israel	-	80	80
9. North Korea	-	(10-20)	(10-20)

*Fig. 2: World Nuclear Forces*  
*Source: SIPRI Yearbook 2018, p.11*

The nuclear arsenal is also one of the reasons why Russia is awarded the second

place in terms of military capabilities by Global Firepower, while China ranks third (Global Firepower, 2019).

In general, Russia and China do not see a potential threat in each other, although planning against each other has been made over time (Kashin, 2018). The risk of a conflict that could erupt between the two is very unlikely at this moment. This view is also shared by Vasily Kashin from the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who asserts that both Russians and Chinese are diligent students of military reforms (Kashin, 2018). Moreover, the military reform initiated by Xi Jinping in 2015 is based in part on the analysis and results of the so-called Serdyukov reforms that took place in Russia between 2009-2012 (Kashin, 2018).

The effects of military cooperation between China and Russia are obvious also in Central Asia. In this respect, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) remains the main regional security provider involving Sino-Russian cooperation. At the basis of the Sino-Russian cooperation in Central Asia is the fighting of the three evils: separatism, terrorism and extremism. (Gabuev, 2017). On the other hand, Russia remains the main security guarantor for Central Asia, while China is satisfied with the economic privileges it holds in the region (Indeo, 2018). However, in order to increase security in the region and in Afghanistan, China has launched the “*Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism*” initiative, which includes countries such as Tajikistan, Pakistan and Afghanistan, but does not include Russia. For its part, Russia has control over the CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization), which is an inter-governmental military alliance of six former Soviet states.

The continuation of Russian military technology exports to China is also based on the idea that Sino-Russian military relations are at a very high level. The purchase of S-400 missile systems in 2018 and Sukhoi SU-35 aircrafts in 2015 from Russia have put China very close to its military strategy of creating the “Air Defense Identification Zone” (ADIZ). The East China Sea ADIZ covers almost the entire East China Sea, where China has an active territorial dispute with Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands and where its own ADIZ is overlapping with Japan’s own ADIZ. The creation of the ADIZ have created new air traffic restrictions over the area it cover. The fact that for SU-35, the only states that use them are Russia, China and Egypt (Gady, 2019; The Eurasian Times, 2020), and for the S-400 missile systems the only states using them are Russia, China and Turkey (Gady, 2018; Al Jazeera, 2019), shows once again the close connection and confidence given by the Russians to China. Another reason for the sale of these military technologies may also be represented by China’s increased level of military technology. It is believed that Russia will no longer be an arms exporter for China because its arms industry: “is advancing by leaps and bounds thanks to massive investment in indigenous R&D” (Gabuev, 2018). Moreover, Russian military superiority sustained mainly by nuclear arsenal and military technologies is expected to decline in the face of a China whose main objective is to modernize its armed forces to become a maritime superpower (Kaczmarek, 2015, p.22-23). As for the concept of „soft power”, China has the advantage again.

Kashin (2018) points out that: “The Chinese took note of some of the recent Russian strategic innovations such as the non-nuclear strategic deterrence concept as well as Russian approaches to strategic stability” (Kashin, 2018). In fact, the US

decision to withdraw from the Treaty of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) is not just the fact that the US believe that Russia is in violation of the treaty. One of the reasons is China, which is not a signatory of this treaty, which puts the US at a military disadvantage, because of the treaty constraints. On this topic, the President of the US, Donald Trump, was of the opinion that: “We cannot be the only country in the world unilaterally bound by this treaty, or any other” (Gearan, Sone & Morello, 2019).

In the US Nuclear Posture Review, China is viewed as a country that: “is modernizing and expanding its already considerable nuclear forces. Like Russia, China is pursuing entirely new nuclear capabilities tailored to achieve particular national security objectives while also modernizing its conventional military, challenging traditional U.S. military superiority in the Western Pacific (US Department of Defense, 2018, p.1). Furthermore, in the same report, there are signals about the danger which comes from multiple directions: “While the United States has continued to reduce the number and salience of nuclear weapons, others, including Russia and China, have moved in the opposite direction. They have added new types of nuclear capabilities to their arsenals, increased the salience of nuclear forces in their strategies and plans, and engaged in increasingly aggressive behaviour, including in outer space and cyber space” (US Department of Defense, 2018, p.2).

Frank A. Rose from Brookings also draws the attention on Russia’s nuclear strategy and considers that: “of particular concern is Russia’s development of a new ground-launched cruise missile (GLCM), the SSC-8, which is a direct violation of its obligations under the 1987 Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty” (Rose, 2018). China is also concerned about the US missile defense shield, which is why: “China has prioritized the deployment of MIRVs in order to improve its warhead penetration capabilities in response to advances in U.S. and, to a lesser extent, Indian missile defenses” (Rose, 2018).

After the US withdrawal, Vladimir Putin announced the end of Russia’s commitment to the INF treaty: “Our American partners declared that they will suspend their participation in the treaty, so we will suspend ours as well. They said they would start research and development, and we will do the same” (Troianovski, 2019). This unfolding of events cannot but raise question marks and cannot but lead us to think of a new nuclear weapons race, reminiscent of the Cold War period.

And as if that was not enough, in August 2018, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis announced that a US space force is needed to protect US satellites from China and Russia. He said that: “We understand the message that China was sending – = that they could take out a satellite in space” (Burns, 2018), referring to an exercise from 2007 in which China has destroyed one of its non-functioning weather satellites with the help of a ground rocket. There are also fears from Russia, which is said to be developing new anti-satellite missiles (Burns, 2018). Asked if the development of this space force will create a space weapons race, James Mattis replied: “We are not initiating this. We are saying we will be able to defend our satellites in space. At the same time, if someone is going to try to engage in space with military means, we will not stand idly by” (Burns, 2018). During Donad Trump adminsitration, the Space Force became a reality and currently has 2,500 guardians (Mittal, 2021). The Space Force formation is important because space is expected to play a significant role in future conflicts, US

being committed nowadays to defend its own satellites in space, arguing that space militarization will only happen if China or Russia will do the same. In 2014, China and Russia proposed the “Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects”, but the US rejected it (Zhen, 2018).

In December 2018, it was revealed that China had also launched an experiment to change the Earth’s atmosphere in order to improve and protect their signals while trying to block others’ signals. According to the South China Morning Post: “The militaries have been in a race to control the ionosphere for decades” (Seidel, 2018). Moreover, this experiment had Russia as its partner, noting that: “The effect of the Russian transmitters was measured by a Chinese electromagnetic surveillance satellite, Zhangheng-1” (Seidel, 2018). Not only does Russia have such technology, but the US also operates similar technologies in Alaska (Seidel, 2018). Currently, China is developing technologies with the capability to manipulate the ionosphere over the entire South China Sea (Seidel, 2018). As such, the control over the ionosphere has become an ambitious project for some military forces the aim being to interrupt the communication of enemy satellites.

Russian-Chinese military cooperation also involves the training of Chinese personnel in Russia. Until 2016, according to Russian Defense Minister Sergey Shoigu: “Russians had trained more than 3,600 Chinese officers in their military academies and training centres” (Kashin, 2018). Regular consultations are also held between Russian and Chinese generals, in which issues such as the development of military relations or strategies are discussed (Kashin, 2018).

In conclusion, the position of the two armies is a totally different one, defined also by the different security and national interests needs of the two states. China aspires to become a major naval force, due to its territorial disputes that need the development of maritime capabilities for their defense. Such examples are the Taiwan issue, the disputes with Japan in the East China Sea, or the disputes in the South China Sea. In another study, it was reported that disputes in the South China Sea have led to the development of China’s maritime power in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans (Tudose, 2017, p.8, p.53). On the other hand, Russia is more concerned with the development of nuclear capabilities, as well as the improvement of the aerospace industry and ground forces, which will help to operate easily in the vicinity of Russia (Kashin, 2018).

### 3. The economic dimension

For the economic relations between Russia and China, 2018 was the year of setting a record in terms of trade volume, exceeding \$100 billion for the first time in history (China Daily, 2019). According to the Russian government, trade volume with China is expected to reach 200 billion by 2024 (TASS, 2018).

According to the World Trade Organization, the role of China and Russia in the other’s economy is very disproportionate. While China is for Russia the main economic partner after the European Union, Russia is not even in the top ten states as economic partners for China (WTO, 2019). For China, the main economic partners



are the United States, the European Union, Japan or South Korea (WTO, 2019).

At the same time, the GDP of China is at approximately 14 trillion USD, whilst the Russian GDP is at approximately 1.7 trillion USD, being eight times lower in comparison to that of China (WTO, 2019). To have a better perspective regarding Russia's GDP, for instance, Belgium and Holland's GDP is slightly less than that of Russia, jointly accumulating approximately 1.4 trillion USD (WTO, 2019).

The Russian economy is based on the export of fuels and mining products (59,4%), manufactures (20.1%) or agricultural products (8.8%), while it mainly imports manufactures (79.5%) and agricultural products (12.4%) (WTO, 2018). On the other hand, the Chinese economy is based on export of manufactures (93.2%), while the import is based on manufactures (61%), fuels and mining products (26.4%) and agricultural products (9.1%) (WTO, 2018). China ranks first in terms of export of merchandise and second in terms of their import, while Russia is 16<sup>th</sup> in terms of export and 20<sup>th</sup> in terms of merchandise import. It is worth mentioning that the main Russian exports to China consist of fuels and arms.

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the economy's estimated growth rate is at 2.3% for Russia and 6.6% for the Chinese economy (OECD, 2018). The inflation rate in China is at 2.1, while in Russia is at 2.9 (OECD, 2018).

From an economic standpoint, Russia wants Chinese investments to grow in order to mainly develop the Russian Far East and the Arctic area. Nonetheless, China is a cautious economic actor and the Chinese investments do not fully meet the Russian requirements for these areas. This caution is also due to the US sanctions which China can be subjected to, later on (Hess, 2018). Such sanctions are "The Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" (CAATSA), which was passed in 2017 to provide the Trump administration with the necessary means to target Russia, Iran and North Korea with economic and political sanctions. There are fears also from the Russian side, according to which, in time, China will simply take over the resources in Siberia (Trenin, 2012).

In 2012, the „Russia-China Investment Fund" (RCIF) has been founded, which has an aim to generate competitive returns by investing in projects that advance bilateral economic cooperation. Last year, Russia provided to foreign investors one million hectares of arable land in Russian Far East. In regards to this, China is dealing with an insufficiency of soy beans following the trade war with USA, but the real problem with the low Chinese investments in the Russian Far East is represented by its infrastructure and transportation – this area being less connected to the commercial markets (Zheng, 2018).

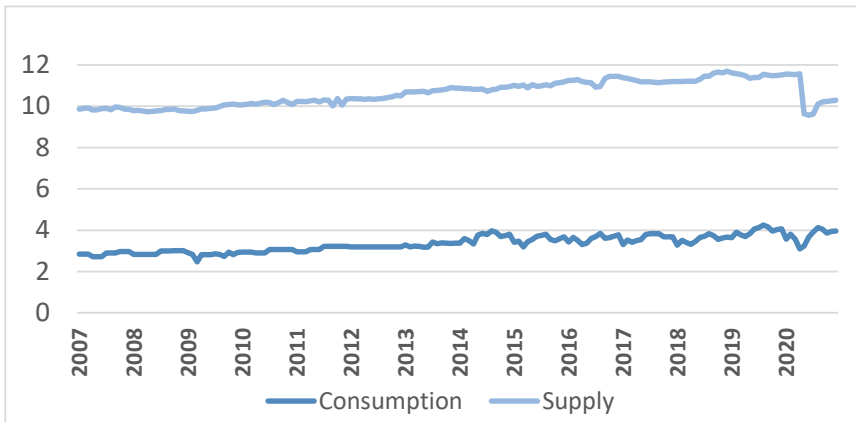
When asked if Moscow should be concerned about the commercial disparity, Alexander Lukin, one of the main Russian experts on China, said that „convergent geopolitical interests between the two states – namely a shared desire to keep the United States' global influence in check – more than compensates for any economic imbalance, from Moscow's viewpoint" (Eurasianet, 2018). Russia clearly is in a subordinate economic position, even if the two countries choose to view themselves as equals for now. To this end, Lukin reassures that in Russia: „psychology would not allow them to be a junior partner to anybody" (Eurasianet, 2018). If China is to

take measures that would substantially alter the geopolitical and economic balance in Eurasia in the future, Russia will be left with few tools available to influence China's decisions.

In 2017, China became the main importer of oil for Russia with about 60 million tonnes (Kulintsev, 2018). Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline has seen significant capacity growth and is expected to continue to grow in the coming years. The “Yamal LNG” natural gas project, of which China owns approximately 30%, will open a line with a capacity of 5.5 million tonnes of liquefied natural gas per year (Kulintsev, 2018). The total capacity through three pipelines is expected to be of about 17 million tonnes and is expected to be completed by 2021 (Kulintsev, 2018). The main export market will be of course China. In May 2018, 83% of the natural gas pipeline “Power of Siberia” was already built (Kulintsev, 2018). The Russian-Chinese agreement for this project has been called the “contract of the century”, costing about \$400 billion (Kulintsev, 2018). It is estimated that the Chinese state will receive gas through this pipeline in 2019, with an initial amount of 5 billion cubic meters of gas per year. It will reach 38 billion cubic meters of gas per year when it achieves full capacity (Kulintsev, 2018).

Russia is considered a key piece of the oil price puzzle. Nick Cunningham from OilPrice.com believes that Russia is not as interested in rising oil prices as Saudi Arabia, for example (Cunningham, 2018). From this point of view, Russia's position is much stronger, as the rouble is a flexible currency: “That cushions the blow during a downturn, allowing Russian oil companies to pay expenses in weaker roubles while still taking in U.S. dollars for oil sales. Second, tax payments for Russian oil companies are structured in such a way that their tax burden is lighter with lower oil prices” (Cunningham, 2018). Even if a drop in oil prices persists, Russia can still rely on its sufficient reserves of foreign currencies. The effects of the Russian dependency on gas and fuel will be seen only in time. Experts from the US Energy Information Administration believe that economic sanctions and low oil prices have led to a reduction in foreign investment, especially in projects in the Arctic area, and have made other financing projects difficult (US EIA, 2017). To a large extent, Russia's economy is dependent on revenues from oil and gas exports, accounting for more than one-third of revenues from the budget of the Russian Federation.

The accumulation of gold reserves is part of a strategy of diversifying the Russian reserves. Gold is owned by central banks and is only one of the reserve assets along with foreign exchange reserves. Gold keeps on growing in the Russian official reserves. Russia and China are among the largest gold producers, accumulating huge gold reserves as a strategy to put pressure on the US dollar and put an end to its hegemony. The reserves of the Chinese central banks were at 1842.6 tonnes in July 2018, while the reserves of the Russian central banks were at 1909.8 tonnes (Chossudovsky, 2018).



*Fig. 3: Supply and consumption of oil and other liquids in Russia*  
*Source: US Energy Information Administration (Graphic recreated by author)*

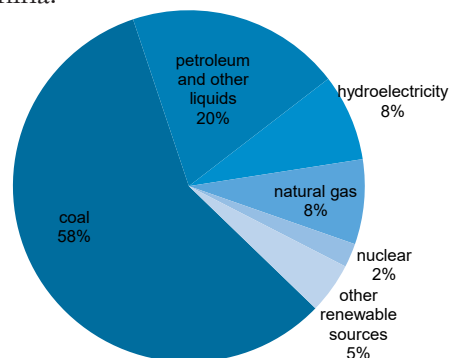
According to Enerdata statistics from 2019, it is simple to point out the gap between China's total energy consumption which is 3.284 million tonnes, and the total energy production which is 2.684 million tonnes (Enerdata, 2019). China is the world's largest energy producer and consumer according to the same statistics. Russia can boast a production of 1.506 million tonnes and a consumption of only 779 million tonnes. Also, in 2019, Russia produced no less than 560 million tonnes of oil, 501 billion of cubic meters of gas, as well as 225 million tonnes of coal (Enerdata, 2019).

China is a large coal producer, while oil and natural gas production is much lower. Also, China's electricity consumption has increased at an accelerated rate, reaching 6,510 terawatts in 2019 (Enerdata, 2019). Due to the limited supply of fossil fuels, this discrepancy between production and consumption has made energy a part of China's national security, mainly because it depends on international stability and the current status quo. The fact that electricity production is based on coal consumption made pollution inevitable, China facing today some of the highest levels of carbon dioxide in the air. Therefore, diversification of the energy field and investments in renewable energy have become a priority for China.

*Fig. 4. China's total primary energy consumption by fuel type, 2019*

*Source: US Energy Information Administration (Graphic recreated by author)*

*Note: Total may not equal 100% because of independent rounding. Includes only commercial fuel sources and does not account for biomass used outside of power generation*



The infrastructure projects of the two states include the cross-border bridge on the Amur River which is due for circulation in 2020. It has to be mentioned that throughout history this has been the area of territorial disputes and military confrontations between the Chinese and the Russians. The bridge's traffic capacity is expected to exceed three million tons of goods by 2020 (Onuchin, 2019).

The Russian government is fighting to differentiate export categories with China. In September 2018, the Chinese President as well as the Russian one made an appeal for promoting the sub-national cooperation with the purpose of consolidating the bilateral relations (Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 2018). The Chinese President Xi Jinping wishes to: „create a better business environment and more convenient conditions for the companies of the two countries to invest in each other's regions (...) In addition, he called for increasing people-to-people and cultural exchanges, cementing the mainstream public opinion and social foundation for cooperation, and promoting institutionalized and regular exchanges in culture, tourism, education and media at sub-national levels” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018). Therefore, both Russia and China want their economic relations to reach new heights, and the goals are no longer intended for mega-projects, but they are also starting to focus on the cooperation of the states at the subnational level.

Following the conclusion of the “Eastern Economic Forum” in September 2018, an event attended by Chinese President Xi Jinping for the first time, it was made publicly the intention of Russia and China to use the national currency in the trade between them (Miracola, Ambrosetti, 2018). After new sanctions were imposed by the United States, Russia sold \$100 billion of its reserves to buy euro and yuan: “Russia is making a strategic shift in its reserves towards holding fewer dollars and more assets in other currencies” (Doff & Andrianova, 2019). China was also among the countries which accused the role of USD in the 2008 economic crisis (Wallace, 2018). In the view of both states, USA is the one using the USD payment system in order to impose economic sanctions onto other countries (Wallace, 2018). Dmitri Medvedev, during a visit in China stated that: „No one currency should dominate the market, because this makes all of us dependent on the economic situation in the country that issues this reserve currency” (Yeung, 2018). The problem is that so far, no other currency proved to be a good replacer for the USD, the first problem in using the national currencies would be that the Russian rouble is extremely volatile.

Xi Jinping made an appeal to the countries of North-East Asia to benefit of the solid cooperation between the Russian Far East and the Asian North-East, asserting that he wishes to create: “A harmonious, united and stable Northeast Asia with mutual trust conforms to the interests of all countries and the expectations of the international community, and is also significant for safeguarding multilateralism and promoting a more just and equitable international order” (Xinhua, 2018). China thus accused the commercial protectionism promoted by the United States lately.

In the article called „Russia in Decline”, Paul Goble from Jamestown Foundation assess that the Russian economy is a disaster (Goble, 2017). This would not only be due to economic sanctions as reported by Russian President Vladimir Putin, but also due to the use of profit from the sale of natural resources as a mean of enriching himself and

his elite (Goble, 2017). Also, the Russian economy cannot afford to distribute the large amounts to the military area. The same specialist believes that Russia has one of the biggest gaps between the poor and the rich, the Russian state being unable to provide a decent living standard for its citizens (Goble, 2017). Moreover, the infrastructure is a catastrophe, Paul Goble considering that “Russia has fewer miles of paved highway than does the US state of Virginia” (Goble, 2017). Demography is also problematic for Russia, Nicholas Eberstadt referring to the invasion of Crimea, ironically said that: “seizing foreign territory has proved to be the Putin Kremlin’s most successful policy for increasing the national population” (Eberstadt, 2016).

In a World Bank’s analysis, attention is drawn also on the problem of diversifying the exports in Russia: “Yet Russia’s progress in export diversification is limited, with the share of oil/gas products still totaling a high 59 percent in exports of goods in 2017; about 25 percent of fiscal revenue” (World Bank Group, 2018, p.11). Therefore, in Russia, there is a need for increased private investment and structural reforms to stimulate investors’ confidence. Lack of competition, constraints on infrastructure connectivity are also obstacles to a faster pace of the Russian economy. The decree of May 2018 “On National Goals and Strategic Objectives of the Russian Federation through to 2024” includes, among others: the increase of life expectancy at 80 years by 2030, the decrease of the population living in poverty from 13.2% to 6.6%, rising wages and pensions above the inflation level, improving living conditions, developing road, rail, port infrastructure, accelerating the introduction of digital technology in the economy, increasing productivity and exports in the processing industry and in the agro-industrial complex, and Russia to be among the top five economies of the world (President of Russia, 2018).

China has been the largest contributor to global growth, since the financial crisis in 2008. Yet, China is still a developing country, with per capita income being at a low level in comparison with the advanced economies, and some of the reforms being still incomplete (World Bank, 2019). For example, in 2015, in China there were 55 million inhabitants in the rural area who lived in poverty (World Bank, 2019). Moreover, the fast economic growth of China meant also high inequality, fast urbanisation, challenges for the environment sustainability and external imbalances (World Bank, 2019). The 13<sup>th</sup> five-year plan of China (2016-2020) is attempting to tackle these issues and includes measures such as: decrease of pollution, decrease of social imbalances, increase of energetic efficiency, improvement of access to education and medical assistance (National Development and Reform Commission of PRC, 2016). According to World Bank: „The 13th Five-Year Plan’s annual growth target is 6.5%, reflecting the rebalancing of the economy and the focus on the quality of growth while maintaining the objective of achieving a ‘moderately prosperous society’ by 2020” (World Bank, 2019).

Our chapter on economic relations reaches the regional development, where both China and Russia came out with their own version: the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) for Russia and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for China. The EEU was founded in 2015 and became a sophisticated institution by which Moscow tried to bring back its neighbours under its influence (Bond, 2017). EEU members are: Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kirghistan and Russia. EEU is mostly shaped after

the European Union's model and it copies the EU in its attempt to create the free circulation of merchandise, services, work and capital. Although the EEU member states opened their markets, they are still doing it gradually. The great difference between EU and EEU is that EEU is limited only to the economic area (Bond, 2017, p.3-4).

The idea of creating the Belt and Road Initiative was born in 2013, upon the initiative of the President Xi Jinping. The Belt and Road Initiative is very little institutionalized, although highly ambitious in terms of geography and available resources. The Belt and Road Initiative is very important for China also from a geopolitical point of view, and namely the increase of China's influence globally. By means of the BRI, China also ensures an alternative route in terms of energy security in case any of the current maritime routes are to be blocked (for example: „The Malacca Dilemma”). “The Malacca Dilemma” was coined in 2003 by then-president Hu Jintao. Currently, most of China's imports from the Middle East and Angola are passing the Malacca Strait. It is believed that in the event of a conflict, the Malacca Strait can become a strategic asset for a rival nation to China, cutting off its primary energy resources.

The BRI does not currently have its own structure but is under the authority of a leading group formed by prominent Chinese political figures, who reports directly to the State Council of the People's Republic of China, this being a proof of the BRI importance to the government. The main investment engines for future projects are likely to be AIIB (Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank) with approximately \$100 billion in capital and Silk Road Fund with \$40 billion in capital (Bond, 2017, p.4-7).

The idea of linking the Eurasian Economic Union to the Belt and Road Initiative occurred for the first time in May 2015 and is becoming an important topic for discussion for both Russia and China. In this regard, in May 2017, a trade and economic cooperation agreement was signed between China and member states of the EEU. This agreement aims: “to improve conditions for access of goods to the China market through norms for simplification of trade procedures present in the document, increase the transparency level and improve the level of interaction across all spheres of trade cooperation” (TASS, 2018; Eurasian Economic Commission, 2018).

Although from the rhetorical point of view, the image of two great powers working together to achieve mutual economic goals exists, everything else remains confusing as to the significance and definition of this connection. Cholpon Orozobekova drew attention in this regard and stated that: “Although Chinese sources are describing this partnership as a real game changer, the integration initiative has taken no concrete steps so far; it is only in the consultation phase” (Orozobekova, 2016). Gregory Shtraks from The Jamestown Foundation was of the opinion that both: “Russia and China share a long term vision for the Eurasian region” (Shtraks, 2018), but it is to be seen how all of this will work out in the end. The fact that this linking creates so much confusion shows that with regard to Central Asia, Russia and China are trying to accommodate each other's aspirations and motivations. For the countries in the region, Russia is no longer a real candidate for economic development, while China holds all the necessary financial resources.

Although Chinese investments are overflowing, there is also the risk that states

from the Central Asian region become too dependent on China, as it is the case of Kazakhstan's energy sector (Remyga, 2018). The relation between China as an investor and the countries within the region is not always equitable. In this regard, Oleg Remyga was of the opinion that: "China usually seeks to negotiate with each partner separately because a more powerful economy inevitably shifts the power equation in its favour" (Remyga, 2018). This behavior finally led to the emergence of Sinophobic feelings of the Kazakh population (Shtraks, 2018). As a response to these concerns, the trade and economic cooperation agreement signed in May 2017 between China and member states of the EEU helped the countries from Central Asia to have a more equitable trade cooperation with China.

China and the EEU member states should take more steps towards creating a free trade area and liberalizing the capital in the area, even if this road will be a difficult one. Zachary Paikin stated for the European Council on Foreign Relations that China's involvement in Central Asia will create even more conviction that authoritarian regimes will remain in power and that the risk of revolutionary outbursts in this area will remain reduced (Paikin, 2019). Same author is of the opinion that "Russia's calls for an integrated 'Greater Eurasia' are partly a response to the launch of the BRI – an attempt by a declining power to buy time while projecting an image of itself as an equal co-architect of a fledgling Eurasian order" (Paikin, 2019).

Joseph Cheng is of the opinion that increasingly fruitful economic relations will be the basis of the future Sino-Russian relationship, which in times of tension or conflict, will have sufficient reasons to stay together (Cheng, 2016, p.257). However, Paul J Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross believe that political relations are much more important than economic ones (Bolt & Cross, 2018, p.293). Evan S. Medeiros and Michael S. Chase are also of the opinion that this economic component has lagged behind the security and political components, but that: "Their economies are complementary, with Russia supplying military equipment, energy, and raw materials, while China provides capital and consumer goods" (Chase, Medeiros, Roy, Rumer, Sutter & Weitz, 2017, p.10).

#### 4. The cybernetic dimension

Control over information dates back in Russia to the Soviet era, when the Soviet government used the information media to influence its population (Maurer & Hinck, 2018). "Information Security Doctrine of the Russian Federation", dating back to 2000, correlates information security with internal stability, Russia playing an important role in counteracting foreign interference in this area (International Telecommunication Union, 2000).

This doctrine was replaced in 2016 with a similar one, which requested the Russian government to adopt "a national system of managing the Russian segment of the Internet" (Coalson, 2016). Among others, this doctrine includes the fighting against propaganda on the Internet, cyber espionage and cybercrime (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Doctrine of Information Security of the Russian Federation*, 2016).

In Russia, there are already concerns that the government wanted to hold an increased control on the use of Internet (Coalson, 2016). Andrei Soldatov and Irina

Borogan assessed for *The Guardian* that „Russia has been working on incorporating elements of China’s Great Firewall into the ‘Red Web’, the country’s system of internet filtering and control, after unprecedented cyber collaboration between the countries” (Soldatov & Borogan, 2016).

In China, the „Cyber Security Law” was adopted in 2016, and came into effect upon June 1<sup>st</sup> 2017. Its main purpose is to protect China’s national security. This law brings regulations on how organizations and businesses need to protect digital data, as well as instruments to protect the Internet from possible cyber-attacks.

The Sino-Russian agreement from May 2015 on cyber security is based on two major characteristics: mutual assurance of non-aggression in cyber space and support for the acquisition of cyber sovereignty (CSIS, 2015). The Arab Spring and the events in Georgia and Ukraine prompted the Russian state to expand its control over the Internet even more. In addition to the cyber-attacks of Russian hackers causing mostly physical damage (e.g. attacking critical infrastructures of other countries), Russia has also taken on a cyber-war to support and promote its own national interests in the world.

Like China, there is also a high suspicion in Russia of an extremely close link between state and hackers. It is believed that this connection is based on a tacit tolerance whereby the Russian state promises not to take punitive measures against hackers if they promise not to attack Russia or the former Soviet states (Maurer, Hinck, 2018). An exception to this rule is Ukraine, which has become the target of several attacks by alleged Russian hackers following the Ukrainian crisis. One such example is the Sandworm group, which has attacked several Ukrainian government organizations and companies since 2015, undertaking attacks on the media and causing power outages using logic bombs (Greenberg, 2018).

This method is of great help to Russian security services, because when in need of talented hackers, they will know who to call. An example is Yahoo hacking from 2014 when Russian security services allegedly hired criminal hackers to compromise the Yahoo network (Maurer, Hinck, 2018).

In terms of its global cyber-war, a good example is given by the possible influence of the US elections in 2016. By manipulating the social networks and hacking the emails of election campaign officials from the Clinton’s side, Russia led a widespread misinformation campaign that led to the discreditation of the Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton (Nakashima, Harris, 2018).

With the Russian model in mind, China is also enhancing its ability to create influential campaigns by “altering information online, shaping Chinese views and potentially the views of U.S. citizens” (Fazzini, 2019). China is also viewed as a threat due to its capacity to cause temporary disruptive effects on critical infrastructure.

In relation to the non-aggression pact in the cyber space between Russia and China, an enterprise security company found that only two months after its signing, an attack based on Chinese language targeted the telecommunications and military fields in Russia, so this pact having also its limits (Wei, 2016).

The cyber cooperation between them is significant in terms of promoting cyber sovereignty in contrast to the cyber freedom supported by the US. China considers the Internet a sovereign territory of the state, and it should not be subject to foreign



interference, each state having the right to control its own cyber space. In this regard, both Russia and China see potential cyber threats to internal stability in the cyberspace. China is the state that has more restrictive control over the internet compared to Russia (Bolt & Cross, 2018), but censorship and surveillance are common practices in the doctrine of both states. Both countries put pressure on the UN to adopt the “International Code of Conduct for Information Security”, which would give states sovereignty over the Internet (Bolt & Cross, 2018). Moreover, the UN should establish a set of rules and resolve disputes regarding cyber space. Criticism of this project came from the United States, which sees the free flow of information as a fundamental right (Farnsworth, 2011).

During the forum on the development of security of information and communication technologies between Russia and China in February “the Russian attendees echoed the concerns brought forward by Chinese delegates about US reluctance to share its sovereignty over today’s Internet, and aggressive media propaganda, meaning the incoming information from the West” (Wei, 2016). Therefore, in China and Russia there is a constant fear regarding the influence of the West over the online content, the Western model being perceived as having the potential to ultimately collapse their governments.

In terms of cyber-attacks, China is focusing mainly on theft of trade secrets. A report from a cybersecurity technology company recalled that the Chinese state has become the largest sponsor of cyber-attacks against the West (Hymas, 2018). Its attacks are aimed at companies, universities, government departments or NGOs. The same report revealed that in the first six months of 2018, 36% of attacks were targeted at technology. Attacks on biotechnology, pharmaceutical, defense, mining and transportation companies are also on the rise (Hymas, 2018)

The US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) revealed that Russia and China are the biggest threats in terms of cyber espionage and cyber-attacks against the West (Zengerle, 2019). Dan Coats, former director of US National Intelligence said: “China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea increasingly use cyber operations to threaten both minds and machines in an expanding number of ways – to steal information, to influence our citizens, or to disrupt critical infrastructure” (Zengerle, 2019).

In this regard, an interesting article was written by Martin Feldstein, President Emeritus of the National Bureau of Economic Research, who believes that the current conflict between China and the US is not a trade war (Feldstein, 2019). It draws attention to the technological thefts undertaken by China, stating that: “Although the US has a large trade deficit with China, that is not the reason why it is imposing high tariffs on imports from China (...) The purpose of those tariffs is to induce China to end its policy of stealing US technology” (Feldstein, 2019). This was ultimately denied by the approach and focus of Donald Trump on resolving the issue of the US trade deficit with China and other countries (Palmer, 2020).

Feldstein is of the opinion that China is stealing US technology and then using it against the American companies in various parts of the world (Feldstein, 2019). Their agreement from 2015 is not enough, Chinese cyber-attacks are increasing again in the last years. (Feldstein, 2019). Consequently, in this conflict, the US wishes to force China to take seriously the cyber issues and to negotiate to this end.

China and Russia support each other in their talks about the cyber sovereignty and cooperate to this end. While China uses the cyber-attacks mainly for technological stealing, so with a financial purpose in mind, the attacks of Russia are aimed at promoting and defending its interests globally. In the absence of a competitive economy, the cyber war led by Russia became a method of undermining Western governments by operations of influencing. At the base of this war, the misinformation campaigns in the social media became an essential tool. In relation to this, the legendary hacker Kevin Mitnick assessed that „it's easier to manipulate people rather than technology” (Summers, 2018).

## 5. The Sino-Russian relations within the international organizations

### *The United Nations Security Council (UNSC)*

Both China and Russia are members of the UN Security Council. Russia is the country that used its veto right the most, blocking no less than 100 resolutions since the creation of the council in 1945 (Council on Foreign Relations, 2018). The United States ranks second from this point of view, while China started to use the veto right more frequently in the last few years.

The Libyan crisis in 2011 was a good lesson for Russia and China, because at that time they decided to stay neutral in the UN Security Council and thus the air attacks against Libya of Muammar Gaddafi were authorised. The crisis had a direct impact on the decisions taken later on by Russia and China in the UNSC. Such an example is the veto which would have allowed the Western military intervention in Syria. China and Russia understood that, withholding the veto right as in the case of Libya, they will lose everything and will gain nothing while the West will become more and more powerful in the region (Chaziza, 2014, p.251-252). In relation to the crisis in Libya and the reactions of Russia and China, Mordechai Chaziza from The Middle East Institute considered that „NATO actions against Libya exceeded a lot their expectations. Consequently, the crisis in Libya served as a good example of exceeding the limitations of resolutions of UN Security Council (...) After being tricked once, they were not ready to be tricked again by the West in order to support the sanctions of UN Security Council or the military intervention against Syria” (Chaziza, 2014, p.252).

One can consider that the Libyan crisis is an extremely important event for the actual connection between Russia and China within the UN Security Council. The Obama administration was very disappointed by Russia and China, after the Syrian government allegedly used chemical weapons against its own citizens, a resolution that was rejected by Russia and China. Former US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley was saying that: „Russia and China ignore the facts and put the friends of Assad regime before our global security” (DeYoung, 2017).

The crisis in Ukraine found again China adopting a neutral position from the official standpoint but taking maximum advantage of the current situation in Ukraine. Although the EU tried to bring China on their side to put pressure on Moscow, China did not deviate from the non-intervention principle and did not get involved to this end (European Council on Foreign Relations, *Relations with China on Russia/Ukraine*,

p.48). China avoided to criticize Russia directly and withheld its vote in the UN Security Council when the resolution was voted for sanctioning the referendum in Crimea. This abstention proved once again the ability with which China is operating at the international level, without officially supporting Russia, but without giving its direct help to the West. Nonetheless, the intervention of Russia in Ukraine does not seem to have affected the relations with China. On the contrary, the sanctions imposed by the West onto Russia seem to have got the two even closer, Russia being thus pushed in the arms of China.

In relation to the North Korean issue, China considered that the Security Council: “should reward Pyongyang for the ‘positive developments’” (Lu, 2018), following the meeting the President of the United States, Donald J. Trump and the President of North Korea, Kim Jong-un, had. Once again, Russia was the country which backed the position of China, considering that the Security Council should send a signal to the North Korea, in support to the positive behavior showed. The United States was of a different opinion and asserted that this loosening of sanctions should occur only after the process of de-nuclearization is checked (Lu, 2018).

The South China Sea is nowadays the source of territorial and maritime disputes between China, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan, Philippines and Vietnam. Even if Indonesia is not officially part of these disputes, China claims there is a maritime dispute in the vicinity of Indonesia’s Natuna Islands. In 2016, an international arbitral Tribunal constituted under Annex VII of UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea), which judged the case brought by the Philippines regarding China’s maritime claims in South China Sea, decided against China’s claims. Although China is a state signatory of the UNCLOS, it assessed that the arbitral Tribunal has no jurisdiction over this dispute. Also, China shall not take part to any arbitration organised by UNCLOS. The Tribunal though invoked Annex VII of UNCLOS, which offers jurisdiction in the litigations of the South China Sea (Tudose, 2017, p.49-50). The decision of the Tribunal in relation to the historical rights of China in the South China Sea was that these rights were incompatible with the international laws: “Although Chinese navigators and fishermen, as well as those of other states, had historically made use of the islands in the South China Sea, there was no evidence that China had historically exercised exclusive control over the waters or their resources (...) there was no legal basis for China to claim historic rights to resources within the sea areas falling within the ‘nine-dash line’” (Permanent Court of Arbitration, 2016, p.1-2).

China rejected the Tribunal’s ruling and recalled that the current disputes in the South China Sea must be resolved by bilateral agreements between the claimant states. Although Russia has avoided taking an official stance, Vladimir Putin has supported China in this dispute, stating that he opposes any interference from third parties: “We stand in solidarity and support of China’s position on this issue – not to recognize the decision of this court... This is not a political position, but purely legal. It lies in the fact that any arbitration proceedings should be initiated by the disputing parties, while the arbitration court should hear the arguments and positions of the disputing parties. As you know, China did not address the Hague arbitration and no one listened to its position there” (Sputnik, 2016). Moreover, the Russian President said that Xi Jinping never asked him to comment or intervene in this dispute (Sputnik, 2016).

Apart from all these, the crisis in Venezuela found again in antithesis Russia and the US inside the UN. The US wishes the UN Security Council to demand free and fair elections in Venezuela (Nichols, 2019). On the opposite side, Russia considers that some states want to get involved in the crisis in Venezuela, but that the situation must remain under national jurisdiction (Nichols, 2019). For Russia, a military intervention on the Venezuelan soil is absolutely unacceptable (Nichols, 2019). China, Russia, but also South Africa and Equatorial Guinea have blocked the Security Council from issuing a declaration recognizing the National Assembly as the only democratically elected institution (Nichols, 2019).

Therefore, within the UN Security Council, China and Russia seem to understand each other, respect each other, and support each other when situations are convenient. They do not want to find themselves isolated in the UNSC and this would actually be their response to the France-UK-US triplet.

### *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)*

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was founded in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The activity of this organisation was mainly focus on security and fighting the „three evils”: terrorism, separatism and extremism. The separatism promoted by certain groups of the Xinjiang Uyghur population prompted China to expand cooperation with SCO partners. Turkistan Islamic Party, an extremist Islamic group founded by Uyghur jihadists in western China, is considered a terrorist group, suspected of having links with militants from Central Asia, Afghanistan or Pakistan.

Also, the Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia was based on preventing colorful revolutions in the region, limiting the US influence, while OBOR and the EEU would shape the Eurasian plateau especially from an economic point of view: „China and Russia have jointly established the SCO as a vehicle for cooperation in Central Asia, although Russia is in favor of the CSTO because it has more influence there” (Bolt & Cross, 2018, p.293).

The organisation is traditionally dominated by China, and to a smaller degree by Russia. In an article for Jamestown Foundation, Abigail Grace noted: „Chinese official newspapers and netizens have described the organization as a forum for China to explore and implement a new model of international relations” (Grace, 2018). The organisation has an agenda based on security, economic development and humanitarian cooperation. Apart from China’s interest on security, Central Asia could provide China with transportation routes for oil and gas from Central Asia to China. Also, China can use the region as an export market for its products (Gabuev, 2017). Russia’s role has been extremely significant, helping China to enter this region, which had been historically dominated by Russia. Like Russia, China is not interested in changing the authoritarian regimes in these states. Russia did not feel threatened by the routes for the export of hydrocarbons from Central Asia to China. In fact, it is a better idea for these states to export to China than to Europe, where it could threaten Russia’s position. SCO has been an extremely effective tool for correlating security interests for both China and Russia.

China's economic ambitions were actually much bigger and were based on the creation of a SCO development bank and a SCO free trade area: "China's own goals for deepening financial ties with Central Asia came into conflict with Russia's security-centric priorities for the organization" (Grace, 2018). The Chinese projects did not turn into reality because of Russia's questioning and hesitant position. However, China has begun to provide loans to Central Asian states bilaterally through its banks, and Russia has been unable to oppose it, as it was lacking such funds to compete with Beijing (Gabuev, 2017).

In 2013, China's President Xi Jinping came up with the idea of creating the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and infrastructure development programs were signed with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Finally, Russia signed an agreement on the coordination of the "Belt and Road Initiative" with the "Eurasian Economic Union". From this point of view, the BRI is: "much more useful for promoting Beijing's geo-economic interests than the institutionally defined SCO, in which all decisions were made strictly by consensus" (Gabuev, 2017).

India's admission to the SCO, a friend of China, was made in 2017 along with that of Pakistan, a friend of China. It is believed that India's admission will somehow limit China's rule over the SCO (Grace, 2018). As the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) became more developed, Russia had more and more difficulties to manage China's rise. According to Felix K. Chang, a senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, in order to promote its interests in Central Asia, China did not necessarily need SCO anymore (Chang, 2018). Ambitious projects of development of commerce, infrastructure and investments are supported now by huge Chinese financing commitments (Gilholm, 2015).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization still remains an organization in which Russia and China can find common interests and in which China, in particular, can promote its interests and increase global influence. Regarding both SCO and BRICS, Sarah Lain from the Lowy Institute believes that: "This demonstrates the prioritisation of Chinese foreign policy through its multilateral organisations. Thus, the hierarchy within BRICS and SCO is shifting in favour of Chinese goals" (Lain, 2015).

The author's opinion is that SCO is a successful story from a security and political point of view, while in terms of economy, it did not achieve all its goals mainly because of Russia's anxiety regarding a more pronounced role from China in a region historically under the Russian sphere of influence. Equally true is the fact that Russia does not currently have the ability to compete with China in terms of investment in the region. With China's power unchecked by Russia, the fear is that the countries within the region will become too dependent on China.

#### *BRICS (Brazil-Russia-India-China-South Africa)*

BRICS was launched in 2009 upon the initiative of Russia, and was then called BRIC, as it only included Brazil, Russia, India, China, with South Africa joining the group in 2011. The main purpose of the initiative was to create a more equitable, democratic and multipolar world order. Behind this idea was the West's continued control over the large international financial institutions. The West was also considered

over-represented in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank.

Since its beginnings, BRICS wanted “to reform international financial institutions to create greater voice and representation for emerging economies”, being united by their growth potential (Ayes, 2017). BRICS is not a political alliance or trade association, but BRICS has the potential to form an extremely powerful economic bloc. Relations between the BRICS members are based on the UN Charter, as well as other norms and principles of international law. In this regard, according to BRICS’s official internet, page the following attributes remain relevant in relation to third parties: openness, solidarity, pragmatism and neutrality.

Despite the economic discrepancies or the role that BRICS members have at international level, their partnership within BRICS has developed, showing their ability to create financial institutions, like New Development Bank (NDB): “The BRICS and to a lesser extent the SCO forums have long been symbols of declining advanced-economy dominance of international institutions and power” (Gilholm, 2015). As in the case of SCO, BRICS is becoming increasingly led by China.

For Russia and China, this powerful bloc of emerging economies is the perfect tool to show to the Western world that the developing countries are not secluded. But not everything is perfect within BRICS, because India is also a member, a country which is often in disagreement with China or the other way around (Stratfor, 2017). Tensions between them were intense at the start of Xiamen summit in 2017 after Chinese and Indian troops were on the verge of a conflict over a territory claimed by China and Bhutan in Doklam plateau. More recently, the China-India skirmishes which started in May 2020 and led to the death of 20 Indian soldiers in June 2020 made the bilateral relations between them extremely tense. The opinion of Alyssa Ayres from the Council on Foreign Relations is that: “It’s hard, thus, for the BRICS to maintain a unified agenda beyond noncontroversial subjects when two of the organization’s five members have a history of conflict that still flares occasionally into the outrightly adversarial” (Ayes, 2017). However, the author opinion is that regional security is a secondary goal in the BRICS agenda. Moreover, China cannot permit the BRICS disappearance because it will be a heavy blow to China’s foreign policy. And Russia, which is in good terms with both India and China, is often found in the position to bring balance in the relationship between the two.

It is well known that BRICS has a goal of rebalancing and challenging the current world order. This idea can be supported by figures too. The BRICS member states hold about 43% of the global population, generate about 23% of gross domestic product worldwide and have contributed more than 50% to global economic growth over the past 10 years (BRICS, 2017). However, the fact that the only tangible project was New Development Bank says a lot about the potential of BRICS to challenge the global order as it is today. The consensus is quite difficult to be reached which makes it difficult for the five states to work together, thus creating a bottleneck within BRICS. In regards to Russia, Paul J. Bolt and Sharyl N. Cross considered that despite its rhetoric: “it does not offer a clearly defined alternative vision to the current order” (Bolt & Cross, 2018, p.300).

The call for multilateralism belonged to China at the last summit, denouncing the economic protectionism promoted by the Donald Trump administration. South

African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, said that: “We felt we need to do everything we can to strengthen the multilateral trade system which is now under attack. There are many attempts to weaken it” (Monteiro, Mbatha, 2018).

Although, there is support for some of the Russian and Chinese positions, it should be noted that BRICS members are sovereign nations and will never accept being pressured to take part in any conflict or dispute. In this regard, China or Russia should not think that BRICS members will take any stance against the US, for example.

The Chinese economy is dependent on exports and will do everything to fight economic protectionism overseas. China will try to bring other countries by its side, and BRICS seems to serve this purpose wonderfully. At the June 2018 meeting in Pretoria, the BRICS ministers reiterated their commitment to multilateralism: “The Ministers pledged their support to efforts towards making global governance more representative with greater participation of emerging markets and developing countries in global decision making” (BRICS, 2018).

## 6. Conclusions

When talking about Sino-Russian relations, the military dimension is an extremely complicated one. This is due to more complex and advanced military instruments than ever before. In this analysis, we found out that Russia and China hold the necessary means to improve their military cooperation, with positive results like military agreements, military training of Chinese personnel or combined military exercises. Whilst Russia and China do not see each other as potential enemies, they both take decisions and modernize their militaries, having the US military actions and developments in mind. Although the official rhetoric of the three countries does not seek to alarm, the reality is vastly different, each of the three being in a total race for global militarization. From a military point of view, the perspectives are in favor of China if we are to compare it to Russia, but Russia will also remain a military force for the following decades. This is thanks to its natural resources, advanced military technologies which it produces, as well as for the impressive nuclear arsenal which it still holds.

From an economic standpoint, China and Russia have an asymmetrical relation, Russia not being well-positioned in relation to China. Nonetheless, in the last years, the economic relations between the two became more comprehensive. Russia is an important energy and military technology provider while China is selling its manufactured products in Russia. The economic sanctions enforced onto Russia by the West were a good chance for China to demand „friendly prices”, in exchange for a retail market for the Russian exports. The Chinese investors were also attracted once the economic barriers were reduced and subsequently made investments in the railway and telecommunications areas. However, the Russian needs are not fully satisfied economically by the relation with China. At a first glance, the situation seems suitable for Chinese as well as for the Russians, a „win-win” strategy that China is promoting globally.

In the UN Security Council, Russia and China are actually searching for mutual support with the goal of not finding themselves isolated. Regarding the issues that

target the change of regimes in the world, there are low chances that Russia and China will be given a favorable vote in the UNSC anymore. That is because it was proven that they will increase the risks even more and will cause more suffering and instability in the local populations (The Department of Foreign Affairs of the European Union, 2013). Along these lines, some hidden interests could include the defense of their allies and regimes and the protection of their own national interests, be they economic or strategic.

BRICS and SCO are for both China and Russia efficient tools for promoting the national interests and ways to increase their influence at the international level. While SCO has the great benefit of protecting and defending Central Asia, as well as being a necessary mechanism in terms of Sino-Russian commitment in the region, BRICS has the role of protecting the multilateral commercial system and, also, of creating a more representative global governance. However, with the exception of the NDB, there are few tools at the disposal of BRICS to reach the objectives it set up. And, according to most research, Russia is in an inferior position in relation to China in BRICS and SCO.

Following the above-mentioned analysis, we can conclude that China is the one holding the reels in the bilateral relation with Russia. In spite of the rhetoric about equality, China is in a favorable position vis-à-vis Russia when we talk about their economies, military prospects or the influence in BRICS and SCO. China's needs are linked to hydrocarbons and advanced Russian military technology. Russia needs China as an economic partner following the economic sanctions imposed by the EU and the US. It also needs the Chinese retail market and investments from the Chinese businessmen for the development of the Arctic area and the Russian Far East.

Russia is not in the position to deal with the economic requirements coming from Central Asian states or the former Soviet states, so that China is starting step by step to take its place and fill that gap. Russia still has a significant nuclear arsenal and could therefore still be considered a major global player, but it is a declining power by all other measures. Its military efforts can no longer be easily sustained by a less modernized and digitalized economy. The innovations regarding cyber capabilities and military endeavors are also worth mentioning, given that they help increase its influence internationally, in the absence of economic arguments.

Despite the apparent suitable relation and immediate positive results, there is a high risk that in the long-term Russia will feel exploited in the relation and hold less and less instruments to control China on each pillar of their relation. As it has been shown, China is in a superior position economically, is gaining more weight militarily and is dominant in SCO and BRICS compared to Russia. However, until the normalization of the relations between Russia and the West, we will continue to witness the consequences of what the two have called the best relation in history.



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