

DOI: 10.20542/0131-2227-2023-67-11-24-34

EDN: AJUXRX

RUSSIA-CHINA PARTNERSHIP IN THE CONTEXT OF US-CHINA RIVALRY: SEARCH OF STARTING POINT AND ASSESSMENT OF PROSPECTS

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Received 23.06.2023. Revised 27.07.2023. Accepted 16.08.2023.

Abstract. The article is dedicated to the analysis of Russia-China strategic partnership in the context of decoupling and rivalry of USA and China. The author revises popular amongst Western experts idea that Russia-China contingency started after decline in relations between Russia and the West in the XXI century. Instead, the author argues that Russia (Soviet Union) –China partnership is a result of long-term and systematic contingency that started in the 1980s. Trigger for that was US-China rapprochement in the 1970s – a process, which took Soviet leadership over a rough road at the final stage of the cold war and stimulated it to the search of normalization of relations with China, its neighbor with a vast land border. However, later Russia-China relations had been developing regardless of the American factor – a fact that proves mutual interest of both Russia and China in cooperation. Russia-China relations level reached its peak in the period when both Russia and China benefited from relations with the USA and so-called “Global West”, so it can not be concluded that their partnership is the result of worsening relations with the West only. Nevertheless, it’s obvious that currently geopolitical and sanctions pressure of the USA towards both Russia and China brings them even closer to each other but it is still not the prime cause of Russia-China partnership. Assessing the prospects of Russia-China partnership one should take into the consideration that even in the case of the US-China new rapprochement Russia and China would continue to be the key economic partners for each other (especially in the context of energy trade, technology transfer and cargo transportation via Eurasia and Northern Sea Route) so that their partnership would develop regardless of situational changes in their relations with the West.

Keywords: Russia, China, USA, cold war, reforms.

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РОССИЙСКО-КИТАЙСКОЕ СБЛИЖЕНИЕ В КОНТЕКСТЕ СОПЕРНИЧЕСТВА КНР И США: ПОИСК ОТПРАВНОЙ ТОЧКИ И ОЦЕНКА ПЕРСПЕКТИВ

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Статья поступила 23.06.2023. После доработки 27.07.2023. Принята к печати 16.08.2023.

Аннотация. Статья посвящена анализу сотрудничества России и Китая в контексте отношений двух стран с США. Ставится под сомнение точка зрения, согласно которой нынешнее сближение РФ и КНР вызвано охлаждением между этими государствами и Западом в XXI в. Аргументируется вывод о том, что стратегическое партнерство двух стран Евразии является результатом длительно-го процесса, начавшегося в 1980-х годах. Американско-китайское сближение на завершающем этапе холодной войны действительно подтолкнуло руководство СССР к поиску взаимопонимания с Китаем, однако этот процесс в дальнейшем отнюдь не главным образом зависел от “американского фактора” – значимого, но не определяющего для российско-китайского сотрудничества.

Ключевые слова: Россия, Китай, США, холодная война, реформы.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The central trends in current international relations are associated with the interaction of the three peaks of the conventional “geopolitical triangle” – Russia, China, and the USA (see [1, 2] about this concept). First of all, this is the ongoing multifaceted pressure of the United States and its allies – the “global (or collective) West” – aimed individually at Russia and China in order to limit their sovereign development, maintain their own dominant position on the world stage, and prevent further transition of the post-bipolar world order to a multipolar one. Relations between Russia and China play a special role against this background, even despite the fact that the parties are not bound by formal allied obligations and promote the concept of “relations of a new type”, free from “bloc thinking”, and therefore, according to their official positions, Russia and China are not allies “against the West,” but on their own.

As an illustration of this thesis, the statement of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China Qin Gang should be cited: “China and Russia, by their example, showed the whole world how to build strategic, trusting and good neighborly ties between powers, and proposed a new type of interstate relations. Those who are accustomed to making value judgments about China-Russia relations (i. e., Western observers – I.Z.) still live by the stereotypes of bloc confrontation. Relations between China and Russia are based on the principle of non-alignment and non-confrontation. We are not allies against anyone, we do not threaten anyone, and no one can interfere with us or quarrel with us. China-Russia relations are a driver for the development of a multipolar world and the democratization of international relations; they are the key to global strategic balance and stability. In a word, the less stability there is in the world, the more important it is to strengthen the China-Russia relations” [source 1].

In the West, as the Chinese diplomat rightly noted in his speech, they are really inclined to explain the Russia-China rapprochement, which has now reached the level of “the best relations in history” [source 2], by the desire to compensate for the deterioration (and in the case of Russia, an actual break) in relations with the West. In this

regard, in various works devoted to Russia-China relations, such events as the start of a “trade war” against China by Donald Trump in 2018 [3], the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 [4, p. 212], or the processes of the “Arab Spring” and attempts to implement a “color revolution” in Russia, dating back to 2011–2012, are called as a fundamental starting point for the rapprochement of two states [5]. Herewith, of particular importance is the beginning of the special military operation in February 2022, which gave Western authors the basis for analogies between the situations in Ukraine and around Taiwan. Russia-China partnership in this perspective, contrary to their official position, appears almost exclusively as an “alliance of two authoritarian regimes” aimed at a “new division of the world” [6], or even a “pact” (see [7, 8]).

The political interests of those forces that propose such a concept of Russia-China rapprochement are clear. If the partnership is solely a response to strained ties with the West, it’s reasonable to expect that any warming of relations between Russia and the West might impede the Russia-China dynamic. This raises questions about the long-term viability of Russia’s strategic pivot towards the East, particularly in terms of its alliance with the PRC.

In order to find out to what extent the Russia-China partnership is determined by the “American factor,” it is necessary to identify the true starting point of Russia-China rapprochement and establish the true basis and further prospects for Russia-China cooperation.

Since the roots of this partnership, according to the author’s hypothesis, should be sought in the late Soviet period (from the late 1970s until the collapse of the USSR), most of the study is based on historical materials and uses historical methodology.

It should be noted that Russia-China relations are considered in the study based on historical material precisely in the context of the “American factor.” Although the development of the Russia-China partnership in previous decades has already been analyzed in a large number of publications (e. g., [9, 10, 11, 12]), the abundance of newly emerging sources (primarily memoirs, declassified archival materials) suggests that the topic has not been thoroughly studied and needs additional re-

search, as well as the available information needs to be systematized. This study is aimed at partially fulfilling these tasks.

THE US-CHINA RAPPROCHEMENT AS A MOTIVATION FOR THE USSR

The history of Russia-China relations spans over 400 years and tends to be cyclical. Throughout this time, the countries occasionally engaged in armed conflicts, though these were limited in scale and frequency, often involving minor skirmishes rather than full-scale wars. As a rule, short-lived, local armed conflict was followed by extended periods of cooperation: this was the case after the Albazin Campaign¹ of 1649–1689 and the conclusion of the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689, after Russia's participation in the suppression of the "Boxer Rebellion" in 1900 and, finally, after the period of the Sino-Soviet split of the 1960s–1970s, caused mainly by ideological differences and ambitions of the leaders of the global communist movement. The ongoing phase of normalization in bilateral relations, following these historical rifts, warrants a distinct discussion.

During the period of the Sino-Soviet split, the parties again found themselves on the verge of war and were again able to refrain from it. In 1969, border conflicts on Damansky Island (Ussuri River) and near Lake Zhalanashkol, although being accompanied by the use of heavy weapons and having ended with dozens of people killed on both sides, did not turn into a large-scale conflict between two nuclear states. Moreover, it was in the same year of 1969 that relations between the two countries, having reached the bottom, were able to push off from it, and a long, complex, but still movement forward was outlined. On September 11, less than a month after the armed conflict at Lake Zhalanashkol, the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR A.N. Kosygin made a visit to China. Negotiations between Kosygin and the Premier of the State Council of the People's Republic of China Zhou Enlai took place in the building of the Beijing airport, during which it was decided to remove

¹ The Albazin campaign (*Yakesa zhanyi*, 雅克萨战役) is a Chinese term applied to the early stage of the Russian people's exploration of the Amur region and the Far East. In Russian historiography, the definition "Russian-Qing border conflict" is more often used.

relations from the "dead zone" and resume the exchange of ambassadors and economic contacts.

However, ideological differences persisted, and throughout the 1970s, against the backdrop of ideological stagnation in the leadership of the USSR and the PRC, the countries maintained hostile relations. The rejection of Maoist China among the Soviet elite was aggravated by the fact that it was perceived as a real alternative to the USSR and the CPSU from the point of view of other participants in the world communist movement. As M.V. Karpov emphasizes, censorship affected sinological materials even to a greater extent than, for example, those devoted to the United States, since any conclusions about the regularity or adequacy of the processes taking place in China undermined the conviction that only the Soviet model of socialism could be successful². All this led to the excessive politicization of the image of China, which in a certain sense, during the 1970s, began to be perceived as a greater threat than the United States. The Soviet Union was treated similarly in China. An analysis of the materials of the main journal of that time, focused primarily on the research of current processes in East Asia, *Far Eastern Affairs*, shows that Soviet sinology literally "slept through" the qualitative changes in the PRC associated with the completion of the "Cultural Revolution" and the beginning of reforms. Deng Xiaoping, who actually came to power in 1978, was perceived in journal articles as a continuator of the "neo-Maoism" legacy (i. e., no distinction was actually made between him and Hua Guofeng). The authors of the journal wrote in 1979: "The policy of the new Beijing leadership is still aimed at strengthening the military-bureaucratic dictatorship created during the Cultural Revolution, at militarizing the country and creating a powerful military machine, at achieving great-power hegemonic plans" [13, p. 61]. About the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee, from which the Chinese themselves subsequently began to count the history of the policy of reforms and opening-up, it was said: "By creating an updated version of Maoism, the current Beijing leaders are trying to hide from the Chinese and world public the true content of ideas and Mao's policies" [14, p. 135].

² Materials of the public lecture by M.V. Karpov "M.S. Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping. Reform of socialism. The Art of the Possible" (Tomsk, Tomsk State University, 17.05.2022).

Hostility toward the PRC has increased exponentially since the start of the Sino-American rapprochement, launched in 1971–1972 on both sides in order to gain advantages in the struggle against the USSR (see [15]). As materials from that time show, the Soviet leadership was clearly aware that as a result of the rapprochement between Beijing and Washington, the USSR and pro-Soviet states (“Eastern Bloc”, Mongolia, the Karmal regime in Afghanistan) were actually encircled by hostile countries (NATO, China, Pakistan). This geopolitical encirclement necessitated a significant expenditure of resources to maintain defense capabilities, posing the risk of a strategic calamity [16]). The height of Soviet concerns regarding Beijing’s hostile position came in 1979, when the United States and the PRC established diplomatic relations with each other, and the leadership of the PRC, immediately after Deng Xiaoping’s visit to the United States, began an invasion of Vietnam, an ally of Moscow.

Feeling essentially cornered, Moscow made serious efforts to change its situation. If normalizing ties with the United States was unrealistic at that time, due to the profound socio-economic and ideological differences, then re-engaging with the PRC – which steadfastly adhered to socialist principles – was more viable. Furthermore, the long land border shared with the PRC required significant security resources and was impeding the development of Russia’s eastern regions. Nevertheless, maintaining military balance with NATO could be achieved through buffer states or strategic weaponry. This led to the shift in the ‘pendulum’ of relations with the PRC back towards cooperation, initially driven by the Soviet Union.

In March 1982, General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee L.I. Brezhnev delivered a speech in Tashkent that, although replete with sharp criticism of China, contained a number of points signaling Moscow’s readiness for dialogue with Beijing. Thus, the PRC was recognized as a socialist country, hope was expressed for improving relations with China, and it was noted that the Soviet Union, unlike other powers, never denied that Taiwan was part of the PRC [source 3, p. 501]. Brezhnev also proposed resuming negotiations between the USSR and the PRC at the level of dep-

uty foreign ministers, interrupted after China’s invasion of Vietnam. In September of the same year, two months before his death, Brezhnev repeated his proposals in Baku.

The Chinese side, for its part, also showed readiness for dialogue, as evidenced by the arrival in Moscow in November 1982 as a guest of the Chinese ambassador, the head of the section for Soviet Affairs in the Department of the Soviet and East European Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC Yu Hongliang [17, p. 193]. Here-with, Beijing continued to insist that in order to normalize relations between the two countries, it was necessary to “remove three obstacles” (reduce the grouping of Soviet troops on the border with China and in Mongolia, withdraw troops from Afghanistan, and encourage the Vietnamese leadership to withdraw troops from Cambodia).

In these difficult conditions, the so-called film channel was implemented at the level of employees of the embassies of the two countries. The USSR Embassy in China and the Department of the Soviet and East European Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of PRC each assigned two employees as contact persons who, under the pretext of transferring Soviet films to Beijing for viewing by the Chinese side, regularly met, passing messages to each other [18]. Under Yu.V. Andropov, who actively promoted the idea of normalizing Russia-China relations among the Soviet elite, contacts intensified, two groups of Soviet specialists went to the PRC for scientific and technical exchange (silkworm breeders and metallurgists), and work began on a visit to Beijing by I.V. Arkhipov – First Deputy of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, who in the 1950s worked as a counselor in the PRC Embassy. This visit, after being postponed, took place in December 1984, after Andropov’s death, and demonstrated the readiness of the two countries to develop cooperation [19]. K.U. Chernenko, who replaced him as General Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, generally continued the line toward a “thaw” in Sino-Soviet relations.

The final recovery from the crisis in bilateral relations occurred in the second half of the 1980s and was associated with the activities of M.S. Gorbachev. In July 1986, the “young” General Sec-

retary of the CPSU Central Committee, during a visit to the Far East, delivered the famous “Vladivostok speech”, in which he publicly declared the USSR’s readiness to resolve those problems that, as the Chinese side specified, were hindering the transition to large-scale cooperation. In particular, the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan and readiness to consider the withdrawal of troops from Mongolia were announced, and attention was focused on issues of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Asia-Pacific region. Gorbachev declared: “I want to confirm that the Soviet Union is ready at any time, at any level, to seriously discuss with China issues of additional measures to create an environment of good neighborliness. We hope that in the near future the border dividing us (I would like to say connecting us) will become a border of peace and friendship” [source 4, p. 30].

Important gestures were made in other areas as well. For example, in 1987, a collection of selected speeches by Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping was published in the USSR, which marked the overcoming of ideological contradictions between the two parties [source 5, p. 216]. At that time, “perestroika” was in full swing in the Soviet Union, and in the PRC, the formal leader of the party was Zhao Ziyang, who was inclined to deepen reforms, including in the political sphere. From 1987 to 1989, interest in “perestroika” and the processes in the USSR reached its maximum, which was facilitated by the activities of Zhao Ziyang and his adherers. Against this background, preparations were made for the historic Sino-Soviet Summit in Beijing.

The Summit took place on May 15–18, 1989. During a visit to Beijing, M. S. Gorbachev met with Deng Xiaoping (the de facto leader of the PRC), Zhao Ziyang (General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee), Yang Shangkun (President of the PRC), and Li Peng (Premier of the State Council of the PRC). Deng Xiaoping’s proposal to “close the past and open the future” has become an important milestone in the complex history of Russia-China relations. In fact, the May 1989 Summit marked the end of a long period of searching for ways to normalize relations, which began in 1969 with negotiations between Kosygin and Zhou Enlai and opened the way to cooperation, which the two countries are on now.

Therefore, from Kosygin’s Beijing trip in 1969 to Gorbachev’s Beijing trip in 1989, 20 years passed, which are clearly divided into two stages, and the watershed between them is 1979, when China, after establishing diplomatic relations with the United States and Deng Xiaoping’s trip to the States began an armed invasion of Vietnam. If before 1979, relations between the USSR and the PRC remained under the influence of ideological differences, then after 1979 active steps toward rapprochement began. It is quite obvious that the “trigger” for this was the American factor, or rather, the feeling of a strategic catastrophe that the Soviet leadership apparently experienced at the turn of the 1970s–1980s.

Thus, the basis of the current stage of the Russia-China partnership, the movement which began in the 1980s, really lies in Moscow’s desire to avoid the position of “one against two” in the “geopolitical triangle”. However, was this desire the only reason? This can be judged by how cooperation developed in the same years in the regional aspect.

THE ROLE OF REGIONS IN COOPERATION BETWEEN THE USSR AND THE PRC IN THE 1980s

If, at the highest levels, the initiative to resume cooperation between the USSR and the PRC belonged to Moscow, then, at the regional level, the Chinese would be more active. To a large extent, this is due to the earlier start of economic reforms in China, already in the second half of the 1970s.

The active development of cross-border cooperation was reinforced by the fact that the process of decentralization was developing in China, and regional authorities received significant powers into their hands, as well as motivation to develop local businesses, since the bulk of the income remained locally. For the landlocked northeastern provinces of Heilongjiang and Jilin, cooperation with the USSR, in fact, had no alternative. Among the arguments in favor of such cooperation were the complementarity nature of the economies, as well as the technological interconnectedness of the industry in Northeast China, built largely with the assistance of Soviet specialists, and the Soviet Union.

A key element of the motivation of the Heilongjiang government to develop cross-border cooperation was the desire to receive from the Center any preferential treatment, the beneficial effects of which were evidenced by the experience of the southern and eastern coastal provinces (Guangdong, Fujian, and later Zhejiang and Jiangsu). The topic of cooperation with the USSR became “a lifeline that allowed entering into a dialogue with Beijing regarding the opening of special economic zones in Heilongjiang, the introduction of tax benefits, and the transfer of additional administrative powers to regulate foreign economic exchanges” [20, p. 88].

The intensification of relations on all fronts – from trade to humanitarian cooperation – was preceded by conceptual elaboration. According to the recollections of the Vice-Governor of Heilongjiang Province Du Xianzhong, immediately after the Third Plenary Session of the 11th CPC Central Committee, the provincial authorities, together with the Institute of Siberian Studies of the local Academy of Social Sciences, began to study options for cross-border cooperation with the USSR. According to the American sinologist E. Wishnik, the work to “open” the province for cooperation with the Soviet Union was “officially sanctioned” after the visit of the General Secretary of the CPC Central Committee Hu Yaobang to Heilongjiang in August 1982. As Du Xianzhong recalled, Hu Yaobang said that economic interactions with the USSR “may contain the war,” and “enthusiastically” determined the need to develop cross-border interactions with the Soviet side (quoted from: [20, p. 89]).

The period of 1984–1989 saw a gradual “opening” of the border through the development of trade, economic, and humanitarian contacts “from the bordering places”, as well as interstate relations in such areas as student exchanges (since the 1984/1985 academic year) and joint scientific expeditions: thus, in 1985, a Sino-Soviet trip was conducted along the border along the Amur River basin. The first episode of the “opening of the border” from the bordering places, apparently, was the invitation of the official delegation of the urban-type settlement Pogranichny, a regional center in the Primorye Territory, to the “Lantern Festival” in China in February 1984. A similar

event was held between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk [21, p. 192]. In August 1984, a delegation of railway workers from the Suifenhe station arrived in Pogranichny, which, among other things, brought 500 kg of watermelons to the Soviet settlement. With this kind of “watermelon diplomacy,” as the stand in the Suifenhe City Museum says, “the door between Russia and China opened”³. In October, a response delegation from the settlement Pogranichny attended the celebration of the National Day of the PRC [source 6, p. 17].

Since 1986, work has been organized to increase the number of border crossings and customs points. Previously, only the Grodekovo-Suifenhe and Zabaikalsk-Manzhouli railway crossings functioned, as well as the Blagoveshchensk-Heihe river checkpoint (resumed its work in 1982). However, in 1986, in accordance with Beijing’s decision to transfer the right to open checkpoints to the regional level, adopted a year earlier, traffic was launched on the ice of the Amur between the settlements of Tongjiang (PRC) and Leninskoye (USSR). Thus, the process of creating new centers of cross-border cooperation began, the driver of which has always been the Chinese side. In order to expand cross-border contacts, in 1989 the Heilongjiang government sent a number of requests to the Center to create a network of checkpoints on the border with the USSR. In April of the same year, the PRC State Council approved the creation of new border crossings in Mohe, Hulin, Mishan, Zhaohe, Luobei, and Jiaying, in December – in Dongning and Sunwu, but refused to open crossings in Fuyuan, Sunke, Huma, Tahe, and Suibin, justifying it by the lack of agreements with the Soviet side [source 7].

The Soviet side at that time, having responded positively to the impulse from the opposite side of the border, was still limited by the ideological and organizational framework associated with the primacy of the Center and the party. For example, in July 1987 the Central Committee of the CPSU adopted the resolution “On the development of border ties between the Far Eastern regions of the RSFSR and the corresponding regions of the People’s Republic of China” [source 6, p. 84], in order

³ Data from the Museum of Suifenhe (Heilongjiang Province, China), obtained by the author during field research in 2019.

to implement it, the authorities of the Primorye Territory planned, first of all, to intensify contacts through friendship societies, the regional council, enterprises and departments, sports teams, and cultural institutions. Control over all this work was assigned to the propaganda and agitation department of the Primorsky Regional Committee of the Communist Party [ibid.]. At the same time, party bodies throughout the second half of the 1980s experienced degradation and degeneration, which led to ineffective management activities. Thus, the process of intensifying cross-border ties, on the one hand, at some point began to develop on the Russian side spontaneously and uncontrollably, on the other hand, by the time of the collapse of the USSR, the Chinese side turned out to be much better prepared for it.

In relation to this issue, another obvious point should be noted: the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, which began at the highest levels as a reaction to the rapprochement between the United States and the PRC, was actively promoted at the regional level on the initiative of the Chinese side independent of any American influence. This process continued after the historic Sino-Soviet Summit in May 1989, in the context of the rapid collapse of the Soviet system. This proves that in the presence of a long land border, cooperation, not competition, met the fundamental interests of Russia and China, the people themselves, and not just the leadership.

ON THE WAY TO “THE BEST RELATIONS”

So, if 1979 became the “starting point” of the Russia-China rapprochement, and 1989 was an important milestone that drew a line under the long period of division, then the next milestone should be 2001, when the Russia-China Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation was signed, which recorded the transition of relations between the two countries into the phase of “equal, trusting partnership and strategic interaction” [source 8].

Accordingly, the period of 1989–2001 can be called the path to “the best relations in history.” On the one hand, from the point of view of the objectives of this study, it is noteworthy that relations

between the two countries developed against the backdrop of positive dynamics in the relations of all three sides of the “geopolitical triangle”, and this once again proves the value of cooperation between Russia and China for themselves, regardless of pressure from the USA. On the other hand, the “American factor” could not be avoided completely. The United States reaction to the events in Tiananmen Square in June 1989 – the starting point in the long process of US-China divergence – should be noted, which, however, over the subsequent decades did not interfere with the positive dynamics in trade exchanges.

The issue of the United States’ participation in organizing the “Tiananmen events” is still debatable, as current sources do not conclusively prove any such interference. Despite this, Washington’s negative reaction, complemented by the introduction of sanctions and aggressive rhetoric toward the Chinese leadership (noteworthy, for example, is the comparison with the “Beijing butchers” made by US presidential candidate B. Clinton in 1992; cited from: [22]), sent a clear message to Beijing. This reaction underscored the impracticality of China adopting a “conciliatory stance” towards U.S. perspectives on its foreign and domestic policies if it wished to pursue independent development. For the U.S., the manner in which China handled the Tiananmen situation was seen as evidence that Beijing would act according to its own interests, challenging American expectations and potential global dominance [23].

In the Soviet Union, despite sympathy for the protesting students on the part of individual politicians and representatives of the public (e. g., in 1989, at the First Congress of People’s Deputies of the USSR, A.D. Sakharov demanded to recall the Soviet ambassador from Beijing, and in 1990 in Moscow, near Moscow State University, a “solidarity hunger strike” was held in memory of the events in Tiananmen Square, in which 196 people took part), the authorities took a clear position of supporting Beijing’s actions. This gesture was highly appreciated in China. In turn, in 1991, when the Soviet Union found itself in an even greater crisis, ending with the collapse of the CPSU and the collapse of the Soviet state itself, the Chinese showed a willingness to cooperate with the new authori-

ties, regardless of their ideological orientation (for more details, see [24]).

Thus, on May 16, 1991, the new leader of China, Jiang Zemin, made a visit to Moscow, which was presented as a response to M. Gorbachev's visit. During the visit, the Sino-Soviet Border in the eastern sector was signed. On December 27, 1991, the PRC recognized the Russian Federation – the day after the Council of Republics of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR adopted a declaration on the cessation of the existence of the Soviet Union. The impulse that M. Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping set in 1989 was continued by B. Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin.

The continuity of this course has been preserved under all subsequent leaders of the two states, which once again proves its profitability and independence from situational fluctuations in the geopolitical situation. Thus, the aforementioned “Big Treaty” of 2001 was signed by Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin in Moscow, and the important Addendum to the agreement on the state border of 1991, which fixed the demarcation of the disputed areas, was signed by Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao in 2004. Xi Jinping, already at the beginning of his reign, in March 2013, made his first visit as President of the People's Republic of China to Moscow. Modern Chinese researchers emphasize the significance of this visit by the fact that it was in Moscow, in the conference hall of MGIMO University of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, on March 23, 2013 that the cornerstone concept of a “community of common destiny for mankind”⁴ for the entire foreign policy of the PRC during Xi's reign was voiced for the first time.

From the 1990s to 2010, Russia-China economic relations and humanitarian contacts pro-

⁴ It should be noted that during the 2010s, other “dates of birth” of this concept were named in Chinese literature, but from 2022–2023 in official sources, the dating clearly comes from Xi Jinping's speech at MGIMO (e. g., see [source 9]). According to the author of the study, this is due to the tendency to level out the ideological influence of Xi Jinping's predecessors (in particular, Hu Jintao), whose speeches also contained references to the “community of a common destiny for mankind.” This process became obvious after the publication of the Resolution of the CCP Central Committee on the Major Achievements and Historical Experience of the Party over the Past Century (November 2021). See also [25].

gressively developed – this statement in the context of the objectives of this study does not require additional justification. Herewith, it should be noted that the development of the Russia-China partnership occurred in parallel with Russia's attempts to build constructive, mutually beneficial relations with the United States and other Western countries. In other words, even when the need to “be friends with China in order to avoid encirclement on all sides” (the situation in 1979–1989) had already disappeared, and the thesis about “friendship with China against the USA” had not yet become relevant, there was still a steadfast interest in cooperation with the PRC.

Until the mid-2010s, due to the Western-centrism of the Russian elite, the “Chinese” vector of Moscow's policy was in the shadow of the “Western” one. However, at the regional level, interest in active cooperation was more noticeable, and the stagnation of many cross-border projects in the 2000s could be explained not by a lack of interest in their implementation, but by a change in the format of interaction (from the spontaneous and chaotic “opening of borders” in the 1990s to centralized coordination, built since the early 2000s). The severance of previous ties with the West after 2014 and especially after 2022 contributed to a partial getting rid of the above-mentioned Western-centrism and stimulated a genuine “Russian turn to the East,” the key element of which is the expansion of cooperation with the PRC.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF RUSSIA-CHINA RELATIONS

As it has been demonstrated, the Russia-China partnership does not depend on situational geopolitical fluctuations. It is developing on an independent basis, meets the fundamental interests of the two countries, and will continue regardless of the position of the United States and the personalities of government leaders. However, the other fact is also true: while both Russia and China are under pressure from the United States, they simply have no alternative to further rapprochement with each other. Moreover, it is extremely important that the rapprochement is reached on a solid foundation established since the 1980s.

This conclusion has two dimensions: bilateral and global. Russia needs China as the largest buyer of Russian goods, as a huge solvent market, directly bordering the territory of Russia, as a source of investment and advanced technologies, the introduction of which will ensure the rapid development of the eastern peripheral regions of the country, which are still underdeveloped in comparison with its European part. Finally, Russia needs China as an adherer and a reliable partner on the international stage.

However, Russia's role is just as critical as China's. Russia serves as a stable and reliable supplier of strategic resources and acts as a conduit for Chinese goods to the markets in the western part of Eurasia. It ensures efficient land transport with minimal cross-border delays, and looking ahead, Russia will likely facilitate cargo movement along the Northern Sea Route – the most direct maritime path. Moreover, in terms of geostrategic and military-political expertise, Russia has more experience than China. Such a partnership endows China with greater assurance on the global stage.

Globally, the existence of such a strong tandem as China and Russia, in which there is no leader and follower (economic imbalances are compensated by military-political potential, experience in international affairs, and influence in neighboring countries), and both sides successfully defend their

sovereign national interests, serves as an example for other leaders of the Global South, and ultimately is an important factor in the formation of a truly multipolar world.

At the current stage of human history, which the Chinese leadership characterizes as “colossal unprecedented changes in the world during the last 100 years” [source 10], there has been a notable rise of nations in the Global South. This has led to the creation of more equitable and mutually beneficial cooperative conditions between these nations and Western countries. Within this context, Russia's role as a catalyst in the shift away from the bipolar system is becoming more pronounced. In many sectors, including economic and technological development, Russia finds that its collaboration with China is without alternative. Despite ongoing efforts to foster partnerships across Asia, Africa, and Latin America, the significance of China in Russia's international relations remains paramount.

Therefore, the opinion about the positive prospects for Russia-China relations in the coming years seems justified. Their mode of interaction eschews the establishment of a ‘vassal dependence’ or the imposition of bloc obligations. Instead, a key characteristic of their partnership, which Moscow and Beijing consider a model for other nations, including the United States, is the prioritization of national interests within cooperative endeavors.

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