



Title	Introduction to EBR Special Section on Russo-Chinese Relations and Northeast Asia
Author(s)	Wolff, David
Citation	Eurasia Border Review, 10(1), 71-76
Issue Date	2019
DOI	10.14943/ebr.10.1.71
Doc URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2115/78142">http://hdl.handle.net/2115/78142</a>
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	V10N1_06-Wolff.pdf



[Instructions for use](#)

## Introduction to EBR Special Section on Russo-Chinese Relations and Northeast Asia

David Wolff\*

On December 2, 2019, Russia and China had a public video summit to celebrate the putting into service of Gazprom's new pipeline "The Power of Siberia," funneling gas from deep in Siberia to China's energy-hungry economy and consumers. Since gas is perfect for heating, a big beneficiary will be the Chinese Northeast where winter 2019–2020 is just setting in. The operation of this 3,000-kilometer line for the next decades is at the core of the deal made in Shanghai in 2014 between Presidents Xi and Putin, and is the largest business deal of all time valued at roughly \$400 billion. It is also the backbone of strategic cooperation, long-term policy thinking to keep Russia and China friends for decades to come.

Across 5,000 kilometers of Eurasia, 3,000 of which now had a new metallic thread connecting Russia and China, Xi waved playfully to Putin. Putin quickly stood up, buttoned his jacket for the cameras and waved back. The image of their friendly, wordless exchange flashed across the globe, causing concerns among pundits and policymakers in Washington, but quite different and various feelings among fellow-members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICs, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, G20 or One Belt, One Road. For some of these important international organizations, Sino-Russian friendship is a lynchpin.

And relations have certainly improved during the five years that the authors published below have been studying Russo-Chinese ties. Putin and Xi seem to be meeting quarterly to hold wide-ranging conversations. In these highly centralized top-down governments, all the main indicators would have been decided at the highest level. These include: coordinated moves at the UN regarding Syria and Ukraine; new party to party ties between the CCP and United Russia; new sales of advanced Russian weapons systems and components; large Chinese investment in the Yamal LNG plant, Russia's premier industrial enterprise on the Northeast Sea Route (where China also hopes to become a player); and the steady realization of the "Power of Siberia" gas pipeline, estimated to have cost over \$50 billion to construct.

These wide-ranging large-scale measures of rapprochement in several fields of politics and economics have been steadily accumulating, but do not add up to an alliance. In a tight chronological analysis, Tokyo University Professor Emeritus Akira Ishii clarifies the steps from "partnership" to "strategic partnership" to the present "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination." Although exactly how each level of closer partnership differs is unclear, both sides have been at pains to state that this is not an alliance and there is no "target" of deepening Russo-Chinese consultation and cooperation in diplomatic, political, economic, financial, military and technological matters.

---

\* David Wolff is a professor at the Slavic-Eurasian Research Center, Hokkaido University. He thanks the Schlaikjer-McIntyre Foundation for their support.

## The Regional Dimension: Past and Present

But surprisingly, almost shockingly, this massive expansion in relations has not had much impact in the Russian Far East or its neighbor, the Chinese Northeast. Why have cross-border ties not benefitted from the overall warming in the Sino-Russian relationship? Here, insights from Toyama University Professor Norio Horie's paper can help us. Even though application of Chinese capital and labor could make many of the Russian Far East's empty acres bloom, there is resistance not only to the visible presence of Chinese workers, but also to the invisible purchase of Russian lands. This tension between economic calls for additional Chinese investments and "yellow peril" fears of Chinese presence have kept things at a standstill in the border regions. The knowledge that Chinese investors would be planting soybeans, never a traditional harvest crop for Russian peasants, also makes Russian arable land somehow less Russian. Various bridges across the Amur, both rail and road, have taken decades to complete despite the fact that China has built more bridges in recent decades than any other country in the world. The Russians agreed to build only a tenth of the bridge from Heilongjiang province into the Jewish Autonomous Oblast, but that tenth was the last completed.<sup>1</sup>

An analysis by Ivan Zuenko, from the Russian Far East, labeled the 2009–2018 Regional Cooperation Program a failure, but pointed out that in 2018 at the Eastern Economic Forum a new agreement had been signed at the ministerial level where more practical results can be expected, starting with the soon-to-be-inaugurated bridges.<sup>2</sup> But why have the top leaders stepped away from cross-border agreement, allowing relatively low-ranking ministers to sign and take responsibility?

History reveals the answer to this conundrum. Although contact between Russians and Chinese did drive the early stages of development in this area, many tensions also resulted. In order to avoid further conflicts of this nature, the Russians and Chinese are reducing contact and limiting investment, while touting the Great Friendship. In Russia, self-restraint in cross-border activity produces complaints both about the limits of Chinese investment in the Russian Far East and about the Russian government's failure to fully fund its own regional initiatives. The other side of the border, the Chinese Northeast, is less vocal about being left to stagnate, but the rust is palpable. Chinese enterprises and capital are not allowed to undertake any large-scale cross-border ventures without approval from the Center and this is not forthcoming.

What is most interesting about the sensitivities of the Russo-Chinese case is that both sides have suffered from post-colonialism. Chinese remember the depredations of the Tsarist regime, even if they are not allowed to talk about it. (The term *waiman* (Outer Manchuria), i.e., the Russian Primor'e and Priamur, is carefully scrubbed from the internet.) Almost no one remembers that Mao Zedong once opined that the Russians had taken too much land and that the Chinese had not yet presented the bill

---

<sup>1</sup> "Nizhneleninskoye -Tongjiang Rail Bridge" on CSIS website. Consulted on December 10, 2019. Here the bridge is described as "completed." Accessed December 20, 2019: <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/database/projects/nizhneleninskoye-tongjiang-rail-bridge-construction/30914463-4a42-416b-82ac-5283c46e2e12/>

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Zuenko, "A Milestone, Not a Turning Point: How China Will Develop the Russian Far East" *Carnegie Moscow Website*. Accessed November 8, 2018: <https://carnegie.ru/commentary/77671>

for this. Likewise, very few Russians remember that the Chinese forced out long-time Harbiners in the 1950s, once Stalin was dead, discontinuing their pensions. Chinese labor reminds Russians of being exploiters, but the sale of timber, oil and gas to China makes the Russians feel that they are also being exploited for their natural resources. These feelings may seem contradictory, but historical insecurities, virulent nationalisms, and boisterous opportunisms follow no rationale but their own.

Blagoveshchensk State Pedagogical Institute Professor Olga Zalesskaia's historical study of the years 1917–1922 makes clear exactly how chaotic relations between the Chinese Northeast and the Russian Far East can be during a period of power vacuum. Multiple cabinets, governments and military leaders presented themselves as candidates for power in Russia, who needed breathing space in China while they mobilized. China, itself far from unitary, seduced by the Bolsheviks early offer of the Chinese Eastern Railway, the infamous and soon-withdrawn “Karakhan Declaration,” played the currents artfully until White Power faded away. But China's help in establishing the Bolshevik regime would only be repaid with another difficult decade of Soviet claims on the Chinese Northeast, the Chinese Eastern Railway, in particular.

Now both the Russian and Chinese leaders appear to have read these lessons of history correctly and reached agreement on containing these borderland risks, even if that means curtailing borderland opportunities. Xi Jinping's first official foreign trip as President of China was to Moscow where he gave a speech at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, where many future diplomats are trained. In this March 2013 speech, he insightfully addressed the mentalities issue, calling on the young generation to overcome the past:

To keep up with the times, we cannot have ourselves physically living in the twenty-first century, but with a mindset belonging to the past, stalled in the old days of colonialism, and constrained by zero-sum Cold War mentality.

Since Russo-Chinese colonialism happened mostly in Manchuria and the worst moments of Sino-Soviet friction also took place in the Far East, on the border with Manchuria, Xi's dictum consigns the Russo-Chinese borderland to benign neglect. Heilongjiang province's economy, for example, has fallen behind as other provinces advance. In 2000, it was the tenth province ranked by GDP per capita, dropping to sixteenth in 2010 and twenty-seventh in 2018 out of a total of 31 provinces and Special Administrative Regions.<sup>3</sup> Although everyone is supposed to stay cheerful in the interest of bilateral relations, both sides of the Sino-Russian border are far from satisfied with their lack of progress. If the borderland is being ignored, capital politics is certainly drawing more attention.

---

<sup>3</sup> These rankings come from National Bureau of Statistics of China data tabulated on the following website. Accessed December 20, 2019: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Chinese\\_administrative\\_divisions\\_by\\_GDP\\_per\\_capita](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chinese_administrative_divisions_by_GDP_per_capita)

## Parallel Tracks: Territory, Nationalism, Leading Cadres

At every Belt and Road summit in Beijing, Putin is always at Xi Jinping's right hand at center stage. The Chinese press emphasizes Putin's hidden charms, illustrating his fine qualities as a human being, the very emblem of his nation. *China Daily* celebrated Putin's 67th birthday with an image of Putin looking thoughtfully at a Siberian mushroom he had just picked under the title "Putin swaps desk for wilderness pursuits."<sup>4</sup> On May 14, 2017, while "waiting" at the Belt and Road summit, Putin "wandered" into a room at the Xi Jinping residence, where he found a baby grand piano, that unfortunately nobody nearby knew how to tune. He promptly sat down and knocked off two well-known Soviet-era tunes. A Russian camera man conveniently filmed Putin's performance and it aired all over Russia and China and the worldwide web.<sup>5</sup>

With a whole new scale of strategic contact taking place by orders of the Centers in both Moscow and Beijing, together with talk of a Xi-Putin "bromance," there is some grounds to bring up the issue of cross-learning. Approaching twenty years in the saddle, Putin looks more and more like President for Life. It is just not safe to step down. His end of year 2019 press conference hinted broadly at constitutional reforms to come, as well as aid to China to develop a ballistic missile early warning system.<sup>6</sup> Xi, coming to power a decade later, has already removed his own term limits. Both Presidents made use of anti-corruption campaigns to eliminate any possible resistance or alternative leadership. Other parallels are more tenuous, logical enough, but without any solid evidence of cooperation. For example, both Russia and China have powerful cyber-security capabilities, but have employed them differently. China became known for technology theft from international company websites and databases, as well as pioneering big-data AI applications to increase surveillance and control of the population, particularly in restive areas, such as Xinjiang and Hong Kong. Russia, on the other hand, according to a finding of the U.S. intelligence community, attempted to influence the U.S. elections by hacking and distributing stolen emails, as well as by manipulating social media. But all of these are cutting-edge operations, employing cutting-edge hacking technology driven by sophisticated understandings of foreign societies. It is possible that these technologies and techniques have simply evolved in parallel, but also very possible that technology and know-how have been exchanged.

Alexander Gabuev of the Carnegie Institute has noted in *Foreign Affairs* that China and Russia regularly support each other in international meetings where "norms in cyberspace and control over the Internet" are under discussion. Regular mutual support in international regulatory bodies could well be taken as proof that some degree of intergovernmental expert coordination on cyberspace issues is taking place. Gabuev adds that:

---

<sup>4</sup> Ren Qi "Putin swaps desk for wilderness pursuits: Russians treated to images of leader on 67<sup>th</sup> birthday enjoying the outdoors," *China Daily Global Weekly*, October 18–24, 2019, 10.

<sup>5</sup> Putin piano playing on many websites including the following. Accessed December 20, 2019: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5Af\\_Ka0auw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5Af_Ka0auw)

<sup>6</sup> Cited from the website. Accessed December 20, 2019: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/12/19/putins-end-of-year-press-conference-in-quotes-a68686>

Enhanced trust between Russian and Chinese militaries may lead to growing cooperation and coordination in cyberspace, particularly when it comes to probing vulnerabilities in U.S. military and civilian communication systems.<sup>7</sup>

This is stated clearly in the future tense, but just as clearly calibrated to invoke U.S. security analysts' darkest present concerns. The implication is clear: there is still room to develop the partnership that became first "strategic," then "mature" and now "coordinated." But, of course, having a common enemy would make this more like an alliance, in the way that Japan was the object of the Sino-Soviet alliances of 1945 and 1950.

The final article in this section connects our focus on Russo-Chinese relations to the larger regional setting, where our Sino-Russian research team worked in parallel with the Japanese National Institute for the Humanities' Northeast Asia project.<sup>8</sup> In a masterly exposition, Professor Akihiro Iwashita of Hokkaido University takes us behind the scenes of failed border negotiations between Russia and Japan, the so-called Northern Territories issue. Territorial/border controversies have bedeviled Abe's relations with Korea and China as well. Abe's willingness to compromise with Russia and full embrace of Putin have made him less convincing as a "hardliner" towards Korean and Chinese territorial demands. These issues are potent triggers for nationalist, xenophobic and even violent behaviors with strong public resonance in Korea and China, where war memories are fading but still influential. The last eyewitness will soon die, but those who have heard about Japanese cruelty during World War II from their parents and grandparents will still be with us for decades to come.

Beyond the flashpoints of territory and history, Iwashita makes clear that Japanese attempts to make Russia worried about the "Chinese threat" are unlikely to bear fruit. The Russians already know all too well what it is like to have an assertive Chinese neighbor and prefer cooperation, especially when it includes nearly \$100 billion a year in profitable trade. Japan is simply not in a position to counterbalance either the economic or political clout of a resurgent China. Of course, Japan's attempt to play the nationalist card by speaking of a "Chinese threat" is not without local appeal, as Professor Horie's study of regional-level reactions to Chinese "land grabbing" has shown. But it is unlikely to convince Moscow, where cooler heads prevail.

At least for now, Russia is more likely to make common cause with the Chinese and Koreans to make parallel territorial claims on Japan and to denounce Japanese historical insensitivities and inaccuracies. Furthermore, at least since 2014, all oil and gas construction in Eastern Siberia has been made with only one customer in mind. The "Power of Siberia" gas pipeline ends at the Chinese border, thousands of kilometers from any alternative customers. In this sense, the "Power of Siberia" is just as clearly a demonstration of the power of China.

If the results of our research suggest a certain Japanese impotence in the face of the present Sino-Russian alignment, it is important to put this into historical perspective. Japan was explicitly

---

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Why Russia and China are Strengthening Security Ties: Is the U.S. Driving Them Closer Together?" *Foreign Affairs*, September 24, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Scientific Research Fund 15H03319 "Sino-Russian Relations: From Rapprochement to Alliance?" (Principal Investigator: David Wolff)

targeted in the alliances of 1945 and 1950. The fact that Japan is not the main focus of the strategic partnership could be seen as some kind of improvement in the chances for ongoing peace in the region. Professor Ishii finishes his article with a 2014 quote from an eminent Chinese scholar concerned about the unintended consequences of alliance systems in setting off the first and second world wars. These historical memories of alliance “entrapment” make the Chinese especially wary. Alternative scenarios offer potentially better outcomes. When Putin, Xi and Abe all stood on the stage together at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok in October 2018, that too was an image from a more conciliatory Northeast Asian future that remains to be made.