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Alexander Lukin, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement*, Polity: Cambridge: 2018, 272p., ISBN: 978-1-509-52170-8

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Sino-Russian relations have become a topical issue in contemporary debates on international politics. An impressive number of books, journal articles and think-tank reports have been published over the last couple of years. Alexandr Lukin – a seasoned China scholar based in the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, MGIMO – set himself a task of bringing the Russian perspective to the Western audience in his most recent book, *China and Russia: The New Rapprochement*.

Lukin seeks to navigate between two interpretations of Sino-Russian relations, popular in the scholarly and public debates in the West: one which dismisses to-date cooperation between Moscow and Beijing as lacking substance and another that warns of an emerging authoritarian alliance. He argues that the relationship is neither an empty partnership nor an alliance. It is a "close strategic partnership" that is driven mostly by the Western predominance in international politics. It is Russia's and China's shared unwillingness to accept U.S. primacy and a vision of multipolar global order that bind them together. The belief in the role of structural factors finds its reflection in the book's structure, with the first chapter discussing the contemporary international political system. Against this backdrop, two subsequent chapters reconstruct Chinese and Russian debates on the other. Chapters 4 and 5 analyse particular aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship.

Alexandr Lukin emphasises continuity rather than change in the post-Cold War relations between the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai. He underlines that Russian-Western tensions accelerated but not initiated Russia's turn to China (pp. 176–177) and traces current cooperation back to the late-1980s and Gorbachev's opening to China, followed by the establishment of 'strategic partnership' under Boris Yeltsin (1994–1996). There has been some incremental change in the relationship, which led to closer and more multi-vectoral collaboration embracing new areas: "the Russian-Chinese rapprochement is taking a less sensational but a more practical, routine, solid and irreversible form" (p. 180).

The interpretation offered by this book is dominated by geopolitical and strategic considerations. While economic issues are discussed, their relevance for the relationship is neglected. Lukin notices shifts in trading patterns and the rise of China's importance for Russian trade but does not see it as a serious challenge. Some political-economic developments, such as the construction of the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline's branch to China are presented as self-evident and facing no obstacles. Lukin does not pay a lot of attention to details of policy implementation, even if he notices the discrepancy between agreements that had been signed and those that had been implemented.

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This prioritisation of geopolitics may explain why Lukin does not recognize the asymmetry in Sino-Russian relations as a challenge, unlike other authors writing on the topic. However, regarding both states as equal partners leads to unexpected comparisons, for instance when he speaks of "difficulties faced by both economies" in the mid-2010s (p. 144). It is worth reminding that the Chinese economy is several times bigger than Russia's and it is growing at a pace of 6–7 percent a year, while Russia has been struggling not to slide into recession for most of the current decade.

The book's argument is embedded in a very clearly defined political context. The departure point is the belief in irreversibility of the rupture between Russia and the West after 2014. Lukin speaks of a psychological breakthrough for the Russian elite who has understood that there are no prospects for qualitative change in Russian-Western relations and that the West would not accept Russia as its equal. Without Western pressure, Russia would be a bit more restrained towards China (p. 92), but it will take "no commands from the Euro-Atlantic political center" (p. 93). While the West's search for domination is one reason behind this, another is the growing gap in moral values, with conservative and traditional Russia facing the morally corrupted West. Against such backdrop, Russia's cooperation with China gains additional justification.

Russian-Chinese relations in the interpretation offered by Lukin appear to be pre-determined. Their evolution is explained as a natural course of events that was shaped by structural factors rather than resulted from concrete policy steps. The author underlines continuity regardless of leaders and external changes. The state-centric perspective prevails with regard to contemporary Russian-Chinese relations. While discussing developments in the 1990s, Lukin pays a lot of attention to different domestic players and the role of their parochial interests. Once we enter Putin's era, Russia's policy towards China becomes portrayed as a completely rational and strategic undertaking. There is limited place for foreign policy choices and alternative paths: "(…) the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership is based on an ever growing and developing cooperation network, and this growth has continued regardless of changes in leaders in Russia and China or changes in the international situation" (p. 137).

One of the book's biggest weaknesses is Lukin's unwillingness to engage in a dialogue with Western scholars writing on the topic. While he gives them credit in the introduction, he dismisses all interpretations that do not fall in line with his argument. The English-language literature on Russian-Chinese relations is of secondary importance for Russian and Chinese scholars as they "have often long since discussed and resolved the very issues in question" (p. xi). As a result, readers receive a mixed picture. On the one hand, Alexandr Lukin offers a nuanced view on Russian-Chinese relations and in-depth reading of China's policies and debates. On the other, however, Lukin shies away from critical analysis. He tends to support his arguments by referring to Russian and Chinese official documents, which he takes at face value, without ever questioning motives behind specific narratives propagated by Moscow and Beijing.