

Sino-Russian Relations: Conflict and Cooperation

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B.A. Honors Thesis
International Relations
Lehigh University

May 2015

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Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union at the beginning of the 1990s did not only end the bipolar Cold War era, but it also marked the restructuring of the international security scenario, especially in Asia. When the Soviet Union, a primary world power, was immediately replaced by a more unstable and vulnerable Russia, it created a window of opportunity for competition and even confrontation for the surrounding states, among which China was the most qualified challenger to Russia due to its aggregate strength and geographical proximity. Although China responded to the crisis with precaution, silence, and retrospection instead of making aggressive moves to expand its territory and influence, a delayed confrontation between the two countries has remained to be a possible outcome. Today, Russia and China have claimed a “strategic partnership” with shared political, economic and security interests; however, this relationship is an aberration of their history of antagonism and enmity.¹ With the absence of an immediate threat and the growth of its economy in the 1980s, China’s security policy has shifted from aggression that seeks to secure its survival, to international instability prevention that tries to minimize potential conflicts. However, in the past twenty years, many people have expected to see a higher level of conflict between Russia and China. Where do these expectations come from? What explains their low level of conflict across border regions and in general since the early 1990s? These are the questions that this paper aims to answer.

¹ Bobo Lo, “The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia’s Evolving China Policy,” *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 295-309; Kerry R. Bolton, “Russia and China an Approaching Conflict?” *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 154-194.

Expectations of Conflict

Following the settling down of the Soviet revulsion in the mid-1990s, the view of the new regional order in Asia and among post-Soviet states was not optimistic in the eyes of Russian scholars, politicians, and western observers. With the sudden shift of Russia's identity from a world-class hegemon to a regional power living in future uncertainty, the Russians grew a high consciousness of threat perception along with a desire of defending their vast while underpopulated territory. While largely remaining reticent after the revulsion, China is Russia's most qualified challenger in the East. In fact, it is now commonplace to suggest that the strategic partnership between Russia and China is driven largely by pragmatic considerations. As Elizabeth Wishnick precisely put to describe the nature of this relationship: "Russia, a declining great power, aims to recover its lost status, while China, a rising power, resists efforts to constrain its emerging global role".² Despite their many common interests and positions, the divergent nature of Russia and China's current situation and the absence of strategic calculations put the solidity of their partnership into question. While various conflict scenarios are expected between the two countries, the puzzle is about the absence of direct confrontation, given their great power interests and their several border regions. This is an anomaly in comparison to their power relations in history from the nineteenth century to the Cold War, as well as other cases of neighboring great power politics. In fact, instead of going to direct confrontation or making deterring moves, Russia and China remain peaceful and even cooperative with very few disputes. Therefore, concerning the mismatch between expectations and the reality, I will first examine these expectations and their origins in the mid-1990s, when the Sino-Russian rapprochement then made it possible for open evaluations on

² Elizabeth Wishnick, *Mending Fences, The Evolution of Moscow's China Policy from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Seattle, Wash.: University of Washington Press, 2001), 133.

the new relations between the two countries. In essence, I believe that expectations of conflict are mostly rooted in unilateral mistrust, fear, or discontent from Russia. Because the Chinese are taking more initiative and providing the driving force to this partnership, they are generally more content with their relationship with Russia, and are less likely to respond to Russian's negative attitude or to exacerbate potential tension. In addition, following pragmatic considerations of this partnership, both Russian and Chinese officials have been trying to ease the existing tensions and promote an image of friendship. However, these expectations of conflict remain valuable in understanding the nature of the Russia-China partnership.

Expectation of conflict: historical antagonism

In general, the Russians manifest a higher level of insecurity and concern than the Chinese do, and most expectations of conflict look at Russia's potential reaction to an emerging China. There are several case-scenarios with conflict expectations between Russia and China. The first one derives from historically and racially based antagonism between Russia and China, which is now expressed as the Russians' mistrust to the Chinese. Also known as the "yellow peril" sentiment, it sometimes comes along with the prejudice against the inferiority and the dangerous nature of Asians.³ Since Russia identifies itself with a superior European identity, lack of cultural affinity or common norms in society-level contact with China creates friction between the two countries.⁴ Furthermore, such prejudice is further fueled by the fear of Chinese irredentism that is discontent

³ Bobo Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia's Evolving China Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 295-309; Brian Carlson, "The Limits of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in Central Asia," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 18 (Spring 2007): 165-187; Viktor Larin, "Interregional Cooperation between Russia and China at the Beginning of the 21st Century: Experience, Problems, Prospects," *Far Eastern Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2008): 1-17.

⁴ Robert H. Donaldson and John A. Donaldson, "The Arms Trade in Russian-Chinese Relations: Identity, Domestic Politics, and Geopolitical Positioning," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (Dec. 2003): 709-732.

with border demarcation, and by other fears of Chinese military modernization, Chinese economic development, and Chinese migration to the Russia Far East (RFE) and Eastern Siberia.⁵ In particular, this “China threat” argument is well-developed among some Russian scholars. In a historical context, assertive Chinese gestures in the South China Sea (1995, 1997) and the East China Sea (1996) and other questions of disputed borders were perceived as evidences of a belligerent and expansionist China.⁶ According to Mikhail Titarenko, director of Russia’s key China think tank, Institute of Far Eastern Studies, over twenty years of alienation and enmity (from the early 1960s to the late 1980s) left very deep scars “in the hearts of the two countries’ people”.⁷ Additionally, some Russian elites believe that an alliance with China will relegate Russia to a subordinate position and deprive it of its distinctiveness.⁸ They fear that Russia could be transformed into a raw material appendage for a rising China, first as a warehouse of resources, and then becoming economically and politically affiliated. In short, the Russian perspective on China is affected by a complex amalgamation of geopolitical, economic, historical, and cultural factors that result in a profound ambivalence toward their rapidly growing neighbor.⁹

Although there is no clear sign that such anti-Chinese sentiment has affected the decision-making of Moscow, its existence in the federal government can still be discerned. For example,

⁵ Bobo Lo, “The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia’s Evolving China Policy,” *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 295-309.

⁶ For a comprehensive list of Russian opinions, see Anastasia Solomentseva, “The ‘Rise’ of China in the Eyes of Russia: A Source of Threats or New Opportunities?” *The Quarterly Journal* 14, no. 1 (2014): 3-40; William A. Callahan, “How to Understand China: The Dangers and Opportunities of Being a Rising Power,” *Review of International Studies* 31, no. 4 (October, 2005): 701-714.

⁷ Mikhail Titarenko, “The Role and Importance of Russian-Chinese Relations in the Context of the Basic Features of the Current International Environment,” *Far Eastern Affairs* 38, no. 1 (2010): 1–14.

⁸ Alexander Lukin, “The Russian Approach to China under Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin,” in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 143; Sergey Karaganov, “Russia’s Asian Strategy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, July 2, 2011, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Russias-Asian-Strategy-15254>.

⁹ Andrew Kuchins, “Russian Perspectives on China: Strategic Ambivalence,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. J. Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 33.

Sergey Karaganov, Russian political scientist who heads the Council for Foreign and Defense Policy and the former Presidential Advisor to both Boris Yeltsin and Vladimir Putin, is a representative figure of this view. He once wrote: “To the Russian public mind and most of the elite, China is still [more of] a threat than an opportunity. It is believed that China may directly threaten Russia’s sovereignty”.¹⁰ Similarly, the former vice-chairman of the Federal Council, Vasily Likhachev, shared this view that China poses a geopolitical threat to Russia, and the former Russian Defense Minister Igor Radionov once listed China among the main potential enemies of Russia.¹¹ Even President Vladimir Putin (then Prime Minister), in his speech addressing the issue of Russia’s defense, brought up the mistrust of China: “To be honest, the three top-tier centres of power – the United States, Europe, and China – are not exactly our friends...with respect to our relations with China...we should proceed with caution here. I’m referring to the protection of our national interests”.¹² Therefore, this threat perception occasionally expressed by the state officials indicates a long-standing Russian mistrust of China. Although this mistrust has not yet dominated actual policies, it has the potential to gain a larger voice once it is triggered by disputes or divergent interests in the future. Therefore, concerned with the growing Chinese power and imbalance of economic development, the Russians have more reasons to be threatened by China; and Russia’s mistrust toward China is more likely to correspond to this expected version of conflict.

¹⁰ Sergey Karaganov, “Russia’s Asian Strategy,” *Russia in Global Affairs*, July 2, 2011, <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/pubcol/Russias-Asian-Strategy-15254>.

¹¹ Alexander Lukin, “Russian Perceptions of the China Threat,” in *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, ed. Herbert Yee and Ian Storey (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 92-94.

¹² “Prime Minister Vladimir Putin meets with experts in Sarov to discuss global threats to national security, strengthening Russia’s defences and enhancing the combat readiness of its armed forces”, Archive of the Official Site of the 2008-2012 Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin, February 24, 2012, <http://archive.premier.gov.ru/eng/events/news/18248/>.

On the other hand, China's attitude towards Russia has been quite ambivalent, but the public opinion is moving toward the positive side.¹³ In history, due to the confrontation with Imperial Russia in Qing (Dynasty) China, the humiliation (perceived by the Chinese) of the Sino-Soviet Treaty,¹⁴ and the Sino-Russian military clash over Zhenbao (Damansky) Island (a small island located on the Ussuri River on the border) in the 1960s, a certain amount of Chinese still see Russia with suspicion. The combination of historical fear and political-cultural stereotyping kept Chinese strategic planners vigilant to signs of Russian aggression.¹⁵ During the Cold War, Mao regarded the Soviet Union as equally interested in blocking China's rise as the U.S. was. Later on, Tsarist imperialist aggression was often recalled during the time of the Sino-Soviet split as another sign of mistrust. Even in the 1980s with China's open reforms, Beijing still viewed Moscow as an offensive threat possible of ending up with a preemptive war.¹⁶ However, Gorbachev's normalization policy transformed Russia's relations with China after he made concessions and announced substantial troop cuts in Mongolia and the Far East.¹⁷ Subsequently, Beijing's determination to take a positive approach to the newly established Russia was reflected by an immediate visit of a high-level Chinese delegation to Moscow two days after the Soviet Union ceased to exist.¹⁸ Therefore, three decades after the most recent dispute, each of these decades saw barriers that limited rapid development in bilateral ties, but nevertheless some success in removing

¹³ According to the BBC poll conducted by GlobeScan and PIPA at 2006, the Chinese public's impression of Russia is 56% positive. This result corresponds to the number provided by the Pew Research Center, according to which a Chinese favorable view of Russia has been around 50% from 2007 to 2013, and reaches its peak of 66% at 2014.

¹⁴ Here it refers to the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance, a treaty of alliance signed by the PRC and Soviet Union on February 14, 1950. The new Chinese regime was eager to be recognized by the international community (mostly the communist community) at the time, and this treaty recognized Soviet Union's benefits in the Far East.

¹⁵ Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 335.

¹⁶ Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 49, 133-134.

¹⁷ Paul Marantz, "Moscow and East Asia: New Realities and New Policies," in *East Asian Security in the Post-Cold War Era*, ed. Sheldon W. Simon (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 29.

¹⁸ Li Jingjie, "From Good Neighbors to Strategic Partners," in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 73.

existing serious impediments.¹⁹ With more frequent high-level exchanges and deepening Sino-Russian dialogue, threat perception and mistrust were greatly reduced on the Chinese side, and elite perceptions of their need for each other steadily strengthened.²⁰

Despite some general discussions on the “lack of mutual trust” between Russia and China in Chinese literature, skeptical views towards the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership are not explicitly revealed by officials in both countries due to pragmatic considerations and the policy goal of maintaining stability. Therefore, even the grievances and biases left by history still have an adverse psychological effect on efforts to bring the two countries closer, Chinese mistrust towards Russia remains in a small voice and is not likely to be the main destabilizing factor to trigger another Sino-Russian confrontation. Although the Chinese do recognize the lack of mutual trust between the two countries and some even remain vigilant toward Russia, they do not have further threat perceptions or expectations of conflict, given China’s growing economic power and political influence. In short, this expectation of Russian-Chinese conflict based on fear and mistrust tends to be a unilateral perception of the Russian side.

Expectation of conflict: Chinese expansion into the RFE

Another popular Russian-Chinese conflict scenario is based on the potential Chinese expansion into Russian territory; this version is mainly voiced by a few western scholars and by the Russian public in the regions that border China.²¹ While this prediction on the potential Chinese expansion takes various forms that range from food-crisis to growing economic needs,

¹⁹ Gilbert Rozman, “The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership. How Close? Where to?” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. J. Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 14.

²⁰ Gilbert, Rozman, “Sino-Russian Relations: Mutual Assessments and Predictions,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 154.

²¹ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 48, 65.

demographic expansion and illegal immigration are the most plausible ones.²² In fact, flourishing cross-border trade leads to a growing Chinese presence in the border areas, especially in the Russia Far East (RFE); and this change of demography has created negative feelings in the local public. Although the number of Chinese population in the RFE is not known with any precision, local government politicians and analysts tend to use an over-estimated number. In 1993, different estimates of Chinese population in the RFE ranged from 200,000 to 2 million, and the latter accounted for nearly one-third of the local population, which was an extremely exaggerated and highly speculative figure.²³ In fact, according to a more accurate calculation, the number of permanent Chinese residents in the RFE was quite small, with no more than 20,000 people, and the real number of Chinese immigrants should not exceed 50,000-80,000 people between 1992 and 1993.²⁴ Moreover, the shrink of local population further contributed to a false perception of the size of Chinese population in the region. Due to the lack of Moscow's subsidies and the subsequent deterioration of living conditions, the Russian population in the RFE has been in rapid decline since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Estimated 9000,000 people fled the region in the

²² The food-crisis version of Chinese expansion is mainly represented by Harrison Salisbury, who contends that a food-population crisis, which is periodically throughout China's history, would result in China's seeking living space and resources in Russia. This point is further supported by a few American scholars, among whom Lester Brown predicts that a food shortage would motivate Beijing's aggressive policy. However, these arguments are mostly based on the assumption of a huge Chinese domestic disturbance, which is not discussed and concerned by the mainstream literature. For more information, see Harrison E. Salisbury, *The Coming War between Russia and China* (London: Pan Books, 1969) and Lester R. Brown, *Who Will Feed China? : Wake-Up Call for a Small Planet* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995). For a full list of "China Threat Theories", see Yong Deng, *China's Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 106-107.

²³ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 59-60; Pavel A. Minakir, "Chinese Immigration in the Russian Far East: Regional, National, and International Dimensions," in *Cooperation and Conflict in the Former Soviet Union: Implications for Migration*, ed. Jeremy R. Azrael and Emil A. Payin (Washington D.C.: RAND Corporation, 1996), 94. The book is accessible online at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/conf_proceedings/2007/CF130.pdf.

²⁴ According to reliable data from the Institute of Economic Research in Khabarovsk, even in 1992-93, the peak period of Sino-Russian border trade, 50,000-80,000 Chinese worked in the Russian Far East, which include 10,000-15,000 contract workers and 10,000- 12,000 students, and 5,000-6,000 illegal immigrants. According to estimates from a leading Russian specialist on Chinese migration, as of 2000 there were 250,000-450,000 Chinese in Russia, including approximately 20,000-25,000 in Moscow and a maximum of 20,000 in each of two of the border regions in the RFE. For more information, see works of Vilya G. Gelbras, and Elizabeth Wishnick, "The Securitization of Chinese Migration to the Russian Far East: Rhetoric and Reality", Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, Hilton Hawaiian Village, Honolulu, Hawaii, Mar 05, 2005.

1990s, and throughout 1991-2011, 11.5 % of its population migrated to more prosperous areas of Russia.²⁵

However, the reality does not ease the anxiety of a Russian-perceived Chinese demographic expansion as the result of over-estimated numbers. Local newspapers and academic articles argued that China was pursuing a deliberate policy of solving its unemployment and overpopulation at the expense of Russia. This belief of the Chinese “moving to the North” was well accepted among the border regions,²⁶ and an official document issued by the Primorskii Krai administration in 1997 perceived China as one of the most active expansionists into the RFE.²⁷ Following the large number of Chinese immigrants, a pessimistic scenario pictures growing Chinese influence over the region’s economy and policies, increasing Chinese ownership of privatized properties, regional political instability and weakening control of Russian central government, as well as increasing ethnic and cultural tensions between the Russians and the Chinese.²⁸ Furthermore, as the Chinese population expands and the Russian population declines, this sense of regional vulnerability leads to the fear of “Sinofication” and massive anti-Chinese propaganda. During the 1990s, regional leaders such as Primorye governor Yevgeniy Nazdratenko and Khabarovsk governor Victor Ishaev exploited popular sentiments by selling the Chinese threat of “illegal migration” and “creeping

²⁵ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 197-122; Zhanna Zaionchkovskaya, Nikita Mkrtchian, and Elena Tyuryukanova, “Russia’s Immigration Challenges,” in *Russia and East Asia: Informal and Gradual Integration*, ed. Tsuneo Akaha and Anna Vassilieva, (New York: Routledge, 2014), 232.

²⁶ Alexander Lukin, “Russian Perceptions of the China Threat,” in *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, ed. Herbert Yee and Ian Storey (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 92-94.

²⁷ “Proposals of the Administration of the Maritime Territory on Completing the Demarcation of the Russian-Chinese Border in Ussuri and Khasan Districts,” in *The Russian Maritime Region on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, cited in Alexander Lukin, “Russian Perceptions of the China Threat,” in *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, ed. Herbert Yee and Ian Storey (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 94.

²⁸ Alexei D. Voskressenski, “Russia’s Evolving Grand Strategy toward China,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 135; Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 127.

expansion". These political expediencies do not distinguish well between the threat of Chinese population and the China threat, but only associate them with hostile intent of Beijing.²⁹

Another version of the Chinese expansion that focuses on material requests is expressed more frequently in public opinion. An article in the *Moscow Times* argued that, although the border issue between Russia and China was settled in 1996, the scenario of a more aggressive China is still possible. Spurred by economic needs, security concerns, and its own great-power ambitions, China would "no doubt take a hardline against its weakened neighbor to the North".³⁰ With substantial Chinese settlers yearning toward the RFE, China might recall its history and raise the question of its return to the region. In addition, another interview with a number of Russian experts on the issue of the Sino-Russian border agreement proved the concern that China might put forward new territorial claims and that such an agreement might establish a precedent for Japan. In particular, these Russian experts feared that a small territorial compromise made by Moscow may trigger something bigger, such as the demand for the entire Khabarovsk territory.³¹ Therefore, the prediction of China expansionist threat has a good number of audience especially among the local population in the RFE.

The concern of a Chinese population expansion is also discussed in Moscow and results in political reverberations at the federal level. Government officials in the Federal Border Service, the Federal Migration Service, the Ministry of Interior, and the procuratorial offices have all expressed an "institutional hostility" toward the Chinese presence in the RFE.³² For example,

²⁹ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 65.

³⁰ Yevgeny Bazhanov, "Reading China's Future," *The Moscow Times*, January 15, 1995, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/sitemap/free/1995/6/article/reading-chinas-future/338272.html>.

³¹ BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union - Political Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring. The territorial compromise here refers to a treaty on border demarcation signed in 1991, according to which Russia and China exchanged several areas of land but Russia gave up slightly more than China.

³² Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 122-124.

Alexander Khramchikhin, Deputy Director of the Analytical Department of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, believed that China would unavoidably expand at the expense of occupying Siberia and the Far East. “China is objectively a non-viable in its current borders. China must be a lot more if it does not want to be much less. It cannot survive without expansion abroad to capture the resources and territories, this is a reality.” He argued that although a peaceful form of expansion (economical and demographical) was preferred, the military one remained to be a possible option.³³ Similarly, the former acting Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar openly subscribed to the theory of China’s “population threat,” and argued that the stark contrast of population density across the Sino-Russian border was the real reason for this confrontation.³⁴ Later in 2000, President Vladimir Putin addressed the concern in his lecture: “if we do not take concrete steps in the immediate future, then in a few decades even the native Russian population of the Far East will be speaking Japanese, Chinese, and Korean”.³⁵ In short, the Russians in the RFE and Siberia believe that no matter how sweet the political relationship is, a sharp asymmetry of population and vital resources across the border of Russia and China creates a natural vacuum that will drive the Chinese to expand.³⁶

In response to these predictions, China issued its first rebuttal in 1995, equating them with the Cold War mentality, ill will, and bias against China. Since then, the government as well as official media have tried to assure other countries of China’s peaceful and cooperative intent.³⁷ The

³³ Alexander Khramchikhin, “‘It Is Not a Question Whether China Will Attack Russia but Is When It Is Going to happen’, the Russians Say,” Kavkaz Center, March 15, 2010, <http://kavkazcenter.com/eng/content/2010/03/15/11632.shtml>.

³⁴ Alexander Lukin, “Russian Perceptions of the China Threat,” in *The China Threat: Perceptions, Myths and Reality*, ed. Herbert Yee and Ian Storey (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002), 99.

³⁵ Alexander Lukin, “Russian - Chinese Relations,” Institute for International Political Studies, no. 167 (April 2013).

³⁶ Kerry R. Bolton, “Russia and China an Approaching Conflict?” *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 154-194; Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 179.

³⁷ Yong Deng, *China’s Struggle for Status: The Realignment of International Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 114.

Chinese have been well aware of the sensitiveness of this fear of demographic expansion, and they have sought with some success to nullify its impact on their relations.³⁸ Despite these efforts, China's potential threat has already been felt economically and demographically in the RFE while the RFE is becoming increasingly reliant on the Chinese investment. Although the current Chinese leadership does not have territorial assertions toward Russia, a dominant view in the Chinese society is that Russia gained some territories in the Far East from China through "unequal" treaties, and this perception may further exacerbate the voice for "living space".³⁹ Therefore, the problem of the RFE continues to be a potential trigger for a Sino-Russian confrontation.

Expectation of conflict: a new Great Game

The last expectation of conflict derives from the prospect of Russian-Chinese competition in Central Asia, and this is a view less of the public than of Moscow. Despite the shared interests of Russia and China in Central Asia, their policies in this region still conflict frequently. First, when Moscow is engaging in an activist project of reestablishing itself in a traditional sphere of influence, any involvement of outside power may be deemed a threat to its interests, even if it targets only on economic interests. This grand Russian ambition was revealed in an article published by President Putin (then Prime Minister) to inaugurate Eurasian integration projects; he stated that "by building the Customs Union and Common Economic Space, we are laying the foundation for a prospective Eurasian economic union...We plan to go beyond that, and set ourselves an ambitious goal of reaching a higher level of integration – a Eurasian Union".⁴⁰ Thus, given Russia's frequent

³⁸ Gilbert Rozman, "Turning Fortresses into Free Trade Zones," in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 177-202; Gilbert Rozman, "Northeast China: Waiting for Regionalism," *Problems of Post-Communism* 45, no.4 (July-August 1998): 3-13.

³⁹ Alexander Lukin, "The Russian Approach to China under Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin," in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 153.

⁴⁰ "Article by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin 'A new integration project for Eurasia: The future in the making'," Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the European Union, October 3, 2011, <http://www.russianmission.eu/en/news/article-prime-minister-vladimir-putin-new-integration-project-eurasia-future-making-izvestia-3->.

claim in the post-Soviet space for vital interests and national security, little space is left for a more active Chinese presence in the region. Second, if the new East-West transport route in the possible future of Central Asia bypass Russia, it may restrict the RFE development and hurt its economy. Russia thus fears that the fast development and exploitation of Central Asia would potentially damage its territorial integrity.⁴¹ Last, the energy reserve in Central Asia further complicates the issue. Russian officials have actively opposed Chinese efforts to acquire majority ownership of Central Asian energy assets, since Russia prefers to have resources under Russian domination through its powerful state-run energy companies or Central Asia's pliant national governments.⁴² This arrangement will help Russia to secure its sphere of influence and maintain relative monopoly in the energy market. However, in conflict with Russia's insistence on maintaining control, China desires to exert direct supervision over regional energy assets.

Although China remains deferential to Russia by not challenging Russia's primary role in the region, the shadow of Chinese existence is growing and being felt by the Russians due to the dynamism and the strength of the Chinese economy. Therefore, there is an uneasiness in Russia about the Chinese influence in the region.⁴³ In short, the two countries are direct competitors in Central Asia, since Russia wants to return to the previous domination while China wants to be more active and acquire more interests (especially economic interests) in the region. Hence, some western scholars believe that when China is no longer able to achieve its objectives by diplomatic and subtle means, it is likely to drop its label of "good-neighbor" and move to aggression.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Brian Carlson, "The Limits of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in Central Asia," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 18 (Spring 2007): 165-187.

⁴² Richard Weitz, *China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism without Partnership or Passion*, U.S. Army War College, (Strategic Studies Institute, 2008); Brian Carlson, "The Limits of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in Central Asia," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 18 (Spring 2007): 165-187.

⁴³ Kerry R. Bolton, "Russia and China an Approaching Conflict?" *The Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 34, no. 2 (Summer 2009): 154-194.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

Therefore, this scenario has the potential to become direct confrontation between the two countries.

Regional Explanation vs. Systemic Explanation

Different theoretical frameworks have been provided by existing literature to explain this anomaly of Russia-China peace and their “strategic partnership” in the twenty-first century. Given Russia and China’s many border regions and overlapped interests abroad, the nonexistence of confrontation between the two regional powers, if not global, drives scholars to explore this new great power relationship when the traditional measurements of power transition and balance of power within clearly defined boundaries have been challenged by globalization and technological advancement. In general, there are two main explanations. The first one argues that under existing regional systems, Russia and China are more cooperative, either because of their convergent mutual interests in strategic regions or because potential conflictual issues have not yet been revealed. On the other hand, the systemic explanation puts the discussion under the global context. It argues that the whole idea of considering these regional issues separately has been overwhelmed by the global incentive to avoid conflict and seek cooperation due to Russia and China’s shared threat perception to the third transregional party, notably the U.S.

According to the regional explanation, Russia and China’s behaviors are mainly guided by the consideration of a regional system in which they are situated in. Because of the risk of the regionalisation of conflict, which refers to both the outward spillover of a local conflict into neighboring countries, and the inward impact on the region in the form of diplomatic interference and conflict resolution carried out by some kind of regional body, states and actors in a particular geographical area may direct their interaction to maintaining a peaceful, if not cooperative, security

community.⁴⁵ In particular, Russia and China have security interdependence, or a regional security complex, that either of their security cannot be considered apart from one another. The foundation of the Sino-Russian partnership lies in the strategic convergence between the two countries and many mutually beneficial ties.⁴⁶ This relationship reflects a converging understanding on the importance of regional stability facing notable threats in the region, and of domestic challenges to Russia and China's economic development. Although Sino-Russian relations in their early years were motivated by a strategic rationale with an important conservative anchor against Western global politics, a congruence of Sino-Russian interests marked the later structural stage of the Sino-Russian relationship; focusing on a pragmatic and non-confrontational aspect, closer cooperation in all fields as well as a certain complementarity in their economic structures conceptualize the Sino-Russian partnership in full detail.⁴⁷ Furthermore, strategic and political concerns bring the two countries together, creating the foundations for an incipient alliance and fertile ground for new triangular maneuvering with the U.S.⁴⁸ Therefore, Russia and China remain together because their respective interests across many border regions prevent them from confronting each other.

On the other hand, to see this Sino-Russian partnership in the global context, the idea of a regional system no longer matters. According to this explanation, Russia and China's behaviors are greatly affected by their respective global contest with the U.S., since they both perceive the U.S. as their primary concern.⁴⁹ This global balance of power conforms to structural realism,

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁴⁶ Rajan Menon, "The Strategic Convergence between Russia and China," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 39, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 101-125.

⁴⁷ Alexei D. Voskressenski, "The Three Structural Stages of Russo-Chinese Cooperation after the Collapse of the USSR and Prospects for the Emergence of a Fourth Stage," *Eurasian Review*, no. 5 (November 2012): 3. Specifically, Voskressenski argues that this partnership with China is important for Russia in the intermediate term, as it provides markets and labor resources for Russia and psychologically compensates for Russia's vulnerability in Eurasia. For China, partnership with Russia is the major factor bolstering its efforts to transform itself into a global power.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Wishnick, "Russia and China," *Asian Survey* 41, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 798.

⁴⁹ Jeanne L. Wilson, "Prospects for Russian-Chinese Relations: Whither the Strategic Partnership," in *Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: A Threat to American Interests?* Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report

which predicts that Russia and China together seek to challenge the unipolar order by promoting multipolarity.⁵⁰ The foundation of this partnership is a shared worldview; bilateral relations are energized more by the two countries' wariness of the emerging global environment than by their approval of it or by interest concerns about cooperation or conflict.⁵¹ Despite being a "second-tier" grouping that cannot offer a concrete alternate paradigm to the present international system, this partnership can serve to exert pressure against the West in order to pursue their respective interests.⁵² Moreover, some believe that the two countries are pursuing an alternative to the prevailing Western model; instead of relying on democracy or communist ideology to create loyalty to the political system, this model stresses a combination of economic growth and nationalism.⁵³ Despite systemic differences of the two regimes and their different policy consistency, Russia and China's compatible need for independent political positions both domestically and internationally lies in the innermost assumption of contemporary Russo-Chinese bilateralism.⁵⁴ Furthermore, some argue that the prospect for a Sino-Russian strategic partnership is contingent upon each's relations with the United States; the more the U.S. acts unilaterally, the more likely Russia and China will be drawn together to check this unipolar trend.⁵⁵ Therefore,

no. 99, September 2001, 15; Steve I. Levine, "Some Reflections on the Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership," in *Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: A Threat to American Interests?* Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report no. 99, September 2001, 4.

⁵⁰ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 197-198; Brian Carlson, "The Limits of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in Central Asia," *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 18 (Spring 2007): 165-187.

⁵¹ Gilbert Rozman, "Mutual Assessments and Predictions," in *Sino-Russian Relations*, Report #2, The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, August 1997, 4.

⁵² Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008); Steven I. Levine, "Some Reflections on the Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership," in *Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: A Threat to American Interests?* Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report no. 99, September 2001.

⁵³ Gideon Rachman, "Illiberal Capitalism: Russia and China Chart Their Own Course," *Financial Times*, January 8, 2008, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f7aa8626-be00-11dc-8bc9-0000779fd2ac.html#axzz471NdOTmk>.

⁵⁴ Ronald C. Keith, "The Post-Cold War Political Symmetry of Russo-Chinese Bilateralism," *International Journal* 49, no. 4, Russia's Foreign Policy (Autumn 1994): 751-787; Susan Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspective* 33, no.1 (January 2009): 159-184.

⁵⁵ Alexander Lukin, Commentary Delivered during a Seminar, cited in Gang Lin, "Introduction," in *Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: A Threat to American Interests?* Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report no. 99, September 2001, 2.

their partnership is an expedient move that depends on the existence and the intensity of their common threat perception; in other words, whether or not Russia and China have any cooperative interests in strategic regions will have little weight according to this explanation.

Methods

The method section is arranged as followed. The identification of Russia and China's interests at a global and at a regional level will be the first step. After comparing the results to this finding, a two-level filter is applied to narrow down the case scenarios to those of critical importance to the two countries and hence are most constructive to the maintaining of Russia-China relations. Specifically with the second level filter, two independent variables are derived respectively from the two theories suggested above. After the coding rules are explained and justified in each cases, we select two pairs of case studies that will shed insight into our understanding to Russia-China relations at large.

Furthermore, evidences are collected mainly in the time period of late 1990s and the 2000s. In addition to historical events and pure facts, I first examine public discourse made by political leaders and elites, which are of great value in reflecting the mentality and the beliefs of decision-makers in a country. Second, I look at private and public conversations of experts and opinion articles; these sources provide reliable information and convincing analysis, as well as well-articulated perspectives. Finally, commentaries and news articles are also examined to reflect public opinion. In particular, since official statements usually can be grandiose while lack in substance, I evaluate their specific word choice and expression as the indicators for countries' interest or perception.

Russia and China's Interests Abroad

Russia and China have a broad spectrum of interests abroad, and these interests have presented the two countries with countless opportunities of cooperation as well as some potential conflicts. Their first concern exists in the global system vis-à-vis the U.S. hegemony. Russia's approach to build strategic partnership with other powers including China allows it to have more room for maneuver on a global scale and ensures its continuing high-profile participation in the international mainstream.⁵⁶ Therefore, Moscow shares many security interests and threat perceptions with Beijing. Both Russia and China pursue a counterbalancing role centered on the system of international values and institutions, which fosters international multipolarity and emphasizes the primacy of the United Nations in the global decision-making.⁵⁷ In their bilateral relations, Russia and China promote the five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty, non-aggression, non-interference in each other's internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.⁵⁸

Russian and Chinese convergence of interests on these international issues was affirmed in April 1997 when they signed the Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order. Unlike other statements, this one exclusively dealt with international issues and stressed the critical role of the Security Council of the U.N. in maintaining peace and global security.⁵⁹ One prominent scholar in the field pointed out that the two sides' aim

⁵⁶ Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 109.

⁵⁷ Alexander Lukin, "Russian - Chinese Relations," ISPI Studies, no. 167 (April 2013); Bobo Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia's Evolving China Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 295-309.

⁵⁸ Ronald C. Keith, "The Post-Cold War Political Symmetry of Russo-Chinese Bilateralism," *International Journal* 49, no. 4, *Russia's Foreign Policy* (Autumn, 1994): 751-787; Alexander Lukin, "Russian - Chinese Relations," ISPI Studies, no. 167 (April 2013).

⁵⁹ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 122-149.

is “nothing less than a counterthrust against a new world order led by the United States”.⁶⁰ By the end of the 1990s, two issues could be identified in their joint opposition to the U.S. foreign policy agenda: (1) the role of NATO as an international organization, especially in terms of its expansion; and (2) U.S. efforts to develop missile defense systems and to modify the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.⁶¹ In late 1998 and 1999, Russia and China condemned U.S. displays of power, especially in 1999 war in Yugoslavia. Despite that Russia and China’s denial that their partnership is directed against any specific country, they want to build at least a loose coalition of rival powers against the West, which can prevent them from being isolated and labeled as rogue states individually.⁶² Later on, George W. Bush’s global war on terrorism led to military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, which resulted in Moscow and Beijing coming together in a common purpose of “countering the geopolitical presence of the hegemon in their ‘sphere of vital interests’”.⁶³ Therefore, to a large extent, balancing the U.S. hegemony is one important factor that shapes Russian and Chinese foreign policy.

Besides their traditional balance of power against the U.S. hegemony, Russia and China are also driven together by other converging interests on the regional scale. As one scholar precisely puts, Sino-Russian strategic relations are more opportunistic than strategic when they work in concert on a range of international issues.⁶⁴ Among their many shared interests, security interests and energy-economic interests are the two main categories.

⁶⁰ Gilbert Rozman, “Sino-Russian Relations: Mutual Assessments and Predictions”, in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 147-174.

⁶¹ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 122-150.

⁶² Gilbert Rozman, “Sino-Russian Relations: Mutual Assessments and Predictions”, in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 147-174.

⁶³ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 5.

⁶⁴ Ibid.; James Bellacqua, “Contemporary Sino-Russian Relations Thirteen Years of a ‘Strategic Partnership’,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 5-6.

Security Interests

Separatist groups consisting of nationalists and religious extremists in Central Asia fight open conflict with local governments and feed terrorist activities in Russia and China. Both countries have seen separatism as a great concern that threatens their national integrity and sovereignty. Notably, the end of 2003 witnessed the beginning of a clear Russian security involvement in Central Asia, which was reflected in substantial political-military cooperation and joint plans responding to criminality and security threats.⁶⁵ Furthermore, the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation of 2013 identified its national interests in security priorities including the neutralization of security threats and the prevention of destabilization of the situation in Central Asia.⁶⁶ Similarly, Beijing identified the “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism, mostly under the concern that Islamic fundamentalism might threaten the Chinese domestic region Xinjiang. In addition to this political instability, drugs and criminal activities may also flourish, flow across the borders, and become a threat.⁶⁷ These threats were the initial reason that drove the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and created a different base of security cooperation other than that against the U.S. hegemony.⁶⁸ In sum, Russia and China have made efforts with the potential of creating an authentic counterterrorism capability, an alternate power pole in a multilateral power.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Maria Raquel Freire, “Russian Policy in Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing, or Imposing?” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 2 (2009): 125-149. Several Russian officials include P. P. Vasko, Deputy Chairman of the Coordination Service of the Council of the Border Guard Commanders of the CIS Countries; M. D. Inferev, Counselor to the CSTO Secretariat; V. K. Novikov, First Deputy of Head of the Main Operational Departments, General Staff of Russia’s Armed Forces; and V. I. Nemchin, First Deputy Head of the Administration of FSS of Russia.

⁶⁶ “The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: Approved by President of the Russian Federation V. Putin on 12 February 2013,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, accessible online at http://www.mid.ru/bdomp/brp_4.nsf/main_eng.

⁶⁷ Kevin Ryan, “Russo-Chinese Defense Relations, The View from Moscow,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 188.

⁶⁸ Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 164-165.

⁶⁹ Kevin Ryan, “Russo-Chinese Defense Relations, The View from Moscow,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 190-191.

Meanwhile, concerned with the Korean nuclear crisis and other unpredictable factors of North Korea, Russia and China find their national interests in the preservation of the *status quo* on the peninsula. Under Putin's presidency, he revived the effort to maneuver Russia as a mediator between the North and the international community, and this was the objective of his diplomacy in cultivating Kim Jong-Il over 2000-2002.⁷⁰ Similarly, China's national interests mostly conform to those of Russia. They both oppose North Korea's nuclear project while resisting international intervention that may create chaos on the peninsula. The unification of Korea by the means of the North being absorbed by the South would not be favored by either Russian or Chinese national interests, since a powerful pro-American state would lead to more American forces in the region. However, despite their short-term common objective of conflict prevention, Russia and China's long-term strategies over the peninsula differ somewhat: Russia does not share China's vital concern over the survival of the North regime; instead, Russia's goal is to preserve their regional influence on diplomatic relations and crisis resolution, and to seek balanced relations with the two Koreas. However, China looks on the Korean Peninsula as its own sphere of influence and on North Korea as its protégé, and this belief limits China's willingness to accommodate to Russian concerns when they are not identical to that of China.⁷¹

In addition to Russia and China's similar position on the war against terror, other issues include the non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, international conflict management, the support of secular regimes, and economic and social development for the states in Central Asia.⁷² Furthermore, Russia and China see each other as a guarantor of their respective

⁷⁰ Leszek Buszynski, "Overshadowed by China: The Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region," in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 271.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 271-273.

⁷² Bobo Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia's Evolving China Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 295-309; Alexander Lukin, "Russian - Chinese Relations," ISPI Studies, no. 167 (April 2013).

independent foreign policies and of their position as an independent power center.⁷³ Both of them value the expression of support for the principle of non-interference regarding human rights, territorial claims, and notably, direct security concerns. In particular, Beijing has publicly backed Moscow over the issue of the Chechen conflict, and Russia has also given its support to Beijing's suppressive efforts in Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as "One China" policy towards Taiwan.⁷⁴

Energy-economic Interests

Energy and economic interests are another pillar that greatly affects Russia and China's relationship. On one hand, Russia's core national interests in Central Asia are manifested mainly as energy and economic interests, with security interests being the complimentary goal to ensure the prior two interests.⁷⁵ Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov once stated that "Russian foreign policy today is such that for the first time in its history, Russia is beginning to protect its national interest by using its competitive advantages," which referred mainly to energy geopolitics.⁷⁶ Therefore, viewing Central Asia as its sphere of influence, Moscow has insisted on its priority rights of developing resources in Central Asia due to its historical involvement and infrastructure investment.⁷⁷ As energy becomes a very important resource and leverage today, being able to control energy reserves in Central Asia energy sector is important to revitalize Russian economy through profitable energy resale in the lucrative European market.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Bobo Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia's Evolving China Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 295-309.

⁷⁵ This idea is also expressed by Maria Raquel Freire in her article "Russian Policy in Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing, or Imposing?" *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 2 (2009): 125-149.

⁷⁶ "Russia: Kremlin Sees Its Foreign Policy Star on Rise," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, March 21, 2007. See also Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 385.

⁷⁷ The energy sector in Kazakhstan has been extremely close to Russian energy companies, and these companies represented by Gazprom also enjoy a monopoly of the oil market of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

On the other hand, China's energy and economic interests in Central Asia are growing significantly with its increasing reliance on energy imports to fuel its economic growth. Beijing's commitment to multibillion dollar investment in Russia and Kazakhstan demonstrated its resolve to make Central Asia part of its long-term energy strategy. In 1995, China imported roughly 400,000 barrels of oil a day, and this figure turned out to be 6.2 millions of barrels in 2013.⁷⁸ The Chinese look at Central Asia as an alternative source of energy to the Middle East, with the objective to rely less on Gulf oil and to buy more gas.⁷⁹ However, such a large demand and China's ability to plan, fund and execute deals have raised the bar in the Central Asian energy game. By enhancing the Central Asian states' bargaining power in negotiations with Russia and granting them more economic autonomy, Beijing's expanding economic links in the region potentially undermine Russia's political and economic influence over its neighbors.⁸⁰ Therefore, this may be seen as a conflict of interest between Russia and China.

In short, Russia and China's interests that could cause cooperation or conflict in a given region can be categorized into three kinds. At the global level, they concern their counterbalance with the U.S. hegemony, while at the regional level, their concerns and interests are associated with third party threats and energy and economic interaction.

The First Level Filter: Regions of Interest

Looking at Russian and Chinese foreign policies, we identify several regions of their substantial involvement. These regions are the Russia Far East (RFE), Northeast Asia (Korean

⁷⁸ For more information on Chinese oil production and consumption, see information provided by U.S. Energy Information Administration, which is accessible at <http://www.eia.gov/countries/cab.cfm?fips=ch>.

⁷⁹ Alexandros Petersen and Katinka Barysch, *Russia, China and the Geopolitics of Energy in Central Asia* (London: Centre for European Reform, 2011), 11-13. It is also accessible online at http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Petersen_CER_Eng.pdf.

⁸⁰ Mark Burles, *Chinese Policy toward Russia and the Central Asian Republics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1999), 46.

Peninsula and Japan), Southeast Asia (South China Sea and ASEAN), South Asia (above all, India), Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Middle East, and Africa. Since it is unlikely that these regions all have the same weight to Russia-China relations, the first step involves further narrowing down the list to critical regions. To understand different dynamics of Russia-China interaction and behaviors across regions, I use a two-level filter to select useful cases for further study. The first level filter is geographic proximity, and the second level filter is a region-by-region comparative selection.

Table 1:

Region/Country	Russian Interest	Russian Power Projection	Chinese Interest	Chinese Power Projection
RFE	Y	Y	Y	Y
Northeast Asia	Y	Y	Y	Y
Southeast Asia	N	N	Y	Y
South Asia	Y	Y	Y	N
Central Asia	Y	Y	Y	Y
Eastern Europe	Y	Y	N	N
Middle East	Y	N	Y	N
Africa	N	N	Y	N

An important condition for the existence of national interests is geographic proximity, which should serve as the primary criteria to target a region with strategic potential. Although Russia and China have interests across the world, geographic proximity of a region to both Russian and Chinese homeland is the premise to involve their core national interests at the same time. In other words, only when a region is sufficiently close to Russia and China's own territory, will the situation there have a direct impact to them, and would they care much about this region at the cost of affecting their grand relations with each other. Furthermore, significant interests are only made possible with countries' capability of power projection. For this reason, geographic proximity

attaches great importance to the discussion. Because both Russia and China do not have overseas military bases across the world,⁸¹ nor sizeable navy fleets with aircraft carriers that are powerful enough to project their power over long distance, it is unlikely that they will engage in direct confrontation with each other across the world. And even if they do in remote regions, they are not likely to escalate their level of engagement due to a high operational cost.

To begin with, for the reason of geographic proximity to both countries, Eastern Europe and Africa should be excluded. Russia has a great threat perception to the issues of NATO expansion and EU enlargement; it is eager to maintain its natural sphere of influence in the former Soviet states, or at least to preserve a buffer zone with NATO and EU by using both geopolitical and economic methods.⁸² However, China has little interests there due to the region's long distance to China's mainland; the Chinese see Eastern Europe as a gateway to the greater European market, while only focusing their interests there on trade and investment. Similarly, when China is promoting investments and building infrastructures in Africa, Russia does not have a similar agenda. Thus, due to China's lack of attention to Eastern Europe and Russia's indifference to Africa, the prospect of a Russian-Chinese conflict over Eastern Europe or Africa is very dim.

Furthermore, the Middle East should be excluded. The lack of geographic proximity greatly limits Russian and Chinese involvement and interaction in the Middle East; they do not find incentive to deal with the anarchy or to confront the U.S. existence there in the long run, nor to

⁸¹ Although Russia does have several military bases in the former Soviet sphere of influence and certain former Soviet countries, this military force is not capable of projecting its power across the continent.

⁸² Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 168-171.

compete against each other. Because of its geographic distance to Chinese territory, the Middle East has never been a top security concern for China. Although China's growing need for oil and other resources following its economic development led to an upswing of Chinese attention to the region, China is reluctant to take strong positions against the U.S. and its allies in dealing with Iran, Iraq, and other issues of controversy.⁸³ With often conflictual imperatives, Chinese policies in the region are well balanced to prevent damages on any party's interests, which makes their actions somewhat ambivalent and muddled.⁸⁴ On the other hand, Russia has significant interests in the Middle East since it re-established political ties with its former Soviet clients, such as Syria. An approachable geographic proximity also keeps the region open to Russia.⁸⁵ With Russian Muslims accounting for one-seventh of the country's population, Russia cannot help caring about the origins of Muslim extremism and terrorism in the Middle East. In particular, two Chechen campaigns made the Russian leaders realize the security threats coming from the South, and concerns on nuclear proliferation and oil and gas market price further attracted Russia's attention to the region.⁸⁶ However, after the Cold War, Russia has not developed a coherent foreign policy towards the Middle East, and Putin's efforts to engage the Middle East are not productive. Some scholars argue that Russia's ability to veto UN resolutions does not grant it real influence in the

⁸³ Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 357.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 364-365.

⁸⁵ The distance between Grozny, Chechnya's capital, and Iraq's Mosul is about 600 miles.

⁸⁶ Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Policy in the Middle East: Prospects for Consensus and Conflict with the United States," A Century Foundation Report, (Washington, D.C.: The Century Foundation, 2010), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/trenin_middle_east.pdf.

Middle East, and its real power projection capability remains limited.⁸⁷ Therefore, the Middle East is not a point of contention for either China or Russia and thus is not taken into our consideration.

Similarly, Southeast Asia should be excluded as well. Since the closure of Russia's naval asset in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam in the early 1990s, Russia's interests in the region have been primarily about arm sales, along with a reemerging interest in energy sales.⁸⁸ However, besides its accordance with Russia's vision of multipolarity and economic development (arms and energy), Southeast Asia attaches no concrete nor unique importance to Russian national interests; instead, Russia's attention in Southeast Asia is more a matter of prestige for restoring Russia's greatness and relevance to world affairs. In fact, Russia did not formulate the "Concept for Russia's Participation in APEC" until two years after its accession to the organization, and this ill-preparation indicated that this move was essentially aiming for prestige rather than based on concrete interests.⁸⁹ Therefore, the role of Southeast Asia is not unique in itself, and it is unlikely that Russia's foreign relations would be affected and shaped by this region. At last, Russia no longer has any significant power projection capability in the region after the old Soviet security alliances ceased to exist. The internal problems of Russian military and economy limit Russia's role to a regional land power, and Russian influence on the Southeast Asian economic order is also constrained by weak infrastructure and past Soviet neglect.⁹⁰ Despite that Russia stresses the

⁸⁷ "Russian Strategy in the Middle East," Carnegie Russia and Eurasia Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 26, 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/01/26/russia-s-strategy-in-middle-east>.

⁸⁸ Joseph P. Ferguson, "Russian Strategic Thinking toward Central, South, and Southeast Asia," in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 205-223.

⁸⁹ Paradorn Rangsimaporn, "Russia's Search for Influence in Southeast Asia," *Asian Survey* 49, no. 5 (Sep 2009): 786-808.

⁹⁰ Charles E. Ziegler, "Russia in the Asia-Pacific: A Major Power or Minor Participant?" *Asian Survey* 34, no. 6 (June 1994): 529-543.

importance of the Asia-Pacific region, it has mainly placed itself in the position of major arms supplier in the region, failing to offer a supporting basis for any further ambition.⁹¹ Thus, Southeast Asia is not taken into our consideration either.

In short, reviewing Table 1 presented above, there are four regions with less than one “N” mark, and these four regions left for our discussion are Central Asia, the Russian Far East (RFE), Northeast Asia, and South Asia.

The Second Level Filter: Coding Rules

After the first level selection, the second level filter targets on Russia and China’s specific involvements in the identified regions. The two independent variables aim to measure 1) bilateral interests’ maximization by cooperation or conflict and 2) global common perception toward a third party. In other words, these two variables are the two countries’ interest consideration in the bilateral and global context respectively. According to the two explanations discussed earlier, we have two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: the more bilateral interest that Russia and China can cooperate to maximize in identified regions, the lower level of conflict between Russia and China in the identified region should we expect to see.

Hypothesis 2: the higher level of global common perception toward a third party that Russia and China share, the lower level of conflict should we expect to see.

⁹¹ Leszek Buszynski, “Russia and Southeast Asia: A New Relationship,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia: A Journal of International and Strategic Affairs* 28, no. 2 (August 2006): 276-296. Specifically, as Buszynski pointed out, “Russia’s ambition to be treated like a great power is belied by its many economic weaknesses, its excessive reliance upon energy to sustain economic growth, and its weak manufacturing sector which has been long surpassed by most of the ASEAN countries it deals with”.

As the regional explanation sees the new peaceful great power relationship as the result of Russian and Chinese security interdependence and their convergent understanding on many issues, identifying the types of their respective interests in particular regions is the key to demonstrate the plausibility of this explanation. Therefore, to measure whether their national interests have an impact to their relations at large, we need to demonstrate whether the patterns of their interests' interactions correspond to a peaceful relationship. Accordingly, interests' maximization by cooperation or conflict is coded by "cooperation" where it involves win-win economic development such as trade and other pure mutual interest behaviors, "strategic interaction" where it involves variable payoffs that differ from strategy to strategy such as investment in energy and infrastructure,⁹² and "conflict" where it involves zero-sum behaviors such as traditional power balancing and creating a sphere of influence.

On the other hand, the systemic explanation believes that the Russia-China relationship is maintained mainly by external threat perception, which comes from two sources: the U.S. power existence and other non-traditional security problems that pose a trans-regional threat. Thus, we need to prove that both Russia and China care enough about the presence of the same third party in a global context. Measurement of common perception toward a third party focuses on the identification of common challenges they face, as well as the efforts they devote to counter these challenges. The following argument and coding rules are built on the assumption that accurate perception and calculation are possible. I am fully aware of the difficulties of establishing accuracy

⁹² Strategic interaction refers to the scenario in which Russia and China's preferences among the outcomes are partly coincident and partly opposed, motivating the players both to cooperate and to compete.

in measuring perceptions. However, since a number of scholars have identified several factors that may contribute to the formation of perception (especially threat perception),⁹³ there remain some standards and indicators that will shed light on patterns of perception under different circumstances.

Generally speaking, threat perceptions are socially constructed within and among private and public conversations of experts, political leaders, and publics.⁹⁴ Here I borrow three common indicators: the articulations of decision-makers (i.e. their expression of judgment), descriptions of contemporary spectators (foreign diplomats, colleagues etc.), and evidence of exploration by decision-makers on alternative responses to the threat (internal consultation or the search for external support).⁹⁵ Thus, Russia and China's common perception toward a third party is coded by "high", where both countries' diplomatic attitudes reflect concerns with highly overlapping issues, which also appear frequently in official discourse and third party spectators; "medium", where countries' official discourse brings up this concern and the literature discussion in the related subject can be found with some overlap in the content of issues but less match in opinions; "low", where none or only a small amount of literature touches the topic in the discussion or they have little overlap in content.

⁹³ Janice Gross Stein, "Threat Perception in International Relations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* 2nd ed., ed. Leonie Huddy, David O. Sears, and Jack S. Levy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), xx. The contributing factors to the formation of perception is summarized by Janice Gross Stein, and these are changing balances of power, ambiguity in the environment, structural attributes of the political system, socio-cultural conditions, and breaking of norms.

⁹⁴ Christoph O. Meyer, "International Terrorism as a Force of Homogenization? A Constructivist Approach to Understanding Cross-national Threat Perceptions and Response," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 22, no. 4 (December 2009): 647-666.

⁹⁵ Raymond Cohen, "Threat Perception in International Crisis," *Political Science Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (Spring 1978), 93-107. These indicators are borrowed from Raymond Cohen, who originally established four indicators, with the last one being "'coping processes' put into effect by decision makers in response to the threat (such as the strengthening or mobilization of resources or diplomatic countermeasures)". However, I discard the last indicator because it tends more to be the result and the response to threat perception, which has less value in indicating the initial level of perception.

For example, in Northeast Asia, both Russia and China want to maintain regional stability and prevent an escalation of tension or any external military intervention. Although their perceptions to danger converge in the short term, their interests vary in dimensions in the long term (which will be further discussed in the following section). Therefore, their common perception is labeled “medium”. Whereas *if* either Russia or China supports a more aggressive North Korea to unify the Korean Peninsula and presents threat perception toward the contaminating political ideology of South Korea (as in the case of the Cold War), their common perception would be “low”: one would concern a serious conflict and its consequences, while the other would worry about the domino effect of a rival ideology.

At last, the dependent variable is the level of conflict between Russia and China. The level of conflict is coded by “high” where there are direct observable indicators of countries’ threat perception in the identified region, such as significant troop deployment or military exercises under threat perception; “medium” where there are open disputes over specific identifiable issues but no visible evidence that either side engages in any military mobilization; “medium-low” where there is no open dispute but some traces of potential dispute or divergent policy goals; “low” where there is no trace of any identifiable dispute or conflict in any form.

The distinction between the code “medium” and “medium-low” may be tricky in this context, and an example may be helpful to illustrate where to draw the line. To take the RFE as an example, the level of conflict in the region is coded by “medium” because some government officials take sides in the dispute while the political message of Russian military exercises is blurry. This

ambiguity of the Russian side leaves many room for outside interpretations of the conflict between Russia and China. Whereas *if* the dispute remains in opinion pieces and the local government shows no sign of hostility toward China, or *if* a clearly identifiable political message is conveyed in the military exercises that China is not targeted as the hypothetical enemy, the level of conflict would be “medium-low” or even “low,” depending on the situation.

Coding Rule Studies

On Independent Variable #1: Bilateral Interest Maximization by Cooperation or Conflict

In Central Asia, Russian and Chinese interest maximization should be characterized as strategic interaction. Their security interests coincide entirely, but their energy and economic interests are partly opposed. After the Cold War, Russia found it hard to maintain the security and regional stability in Central Asia against Islamic extremists, as Russia’s unstable domestic politics and diminishing economy could no longer provide incentives to Central Asian countries’ development. This is the reason that Moscow allowed the U.S. military presence in the region after 9/11, and the establishment of the SCO was deemed as Russia’s acquiesce of China’s access into their traditional sphere of influence. Therefore, instead of continuing to maintain regional supremacy in Central Asia, Russia turned to an open alliance and a joint position with other external powers, namely China, in the issues of regional development and counter-terrorism. For example, one prominent strategic thinker in Russia claimed that the SCO is a “testimony to the Kremlin’s awareness of its own limitations, China’s ambitions, and the new states’ [of Central Asia] independence.”⁹⁶ Another thinker argued that since the great power understandings that

⁹⁶ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia’s Asia Policy under Vladimir Putin, 2000-5,” in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 115.

allowed Russia to enjoy a hegemonic position had broken down, the Kremlin turned to co-opt China and the Central Asian states in constraining “outside” influence.⁹⁷ For Russia, it cannot dominate regional development by itself, and maintaining regional stability and containing non-traditional security threats would be harder without Chinese financing and cooperation.

In terms of energy and economic interest, Russia seeks a leading role in the offshore Caspian oil and gas reserves. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area (CISFTA), as well as the conception of a CIS Common Economic Space, are all Russian efforts to strengthen ties with local states and to achieve dominance by reinforcing their dependence through various soft power means.⁹⁸ In the long run, these unilateral efforts are likely to limit Russia-China partnership in the region, and China’s attempts to gain access to Central Asian energy resources conflict with Russia’s goal of establishing monopolistic control over the region’s energy sector.⁹⁹ Regarding the SCO, Russian leaders have expressed concerns over Chinese designs in the region, and they have been careful not to allow China to turn the SCO into its tool to increase China’s influence.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Russian and Chinese interest maximization in Central Asia should be labeled as strategic interaction, as they both compete for a larger share but none of them can achieve prosperity and stability without cooperating with each other. Therefore, they are motivated both to cooperate and to compete.

⁹⁷ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 95.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 99; Maria Raquel Freire, “Russian Policy in Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing, or Imposing?” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 2 (2009): 125-149.

⁹⁹ Brian Carlson, “The Limits of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership in Central Asia,” *Journal of Public and International Affairs* 18 (Spring 2007): 165-187.

¹⁰⁰ Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov concerned about China’s domination of the SCO, and he has proposed SCO-NATO cooperation. See Stephen Blank, “Moscow Offers Muted Repose to Possible End of EU Arms Embargo against China,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 2, no. 42 (March 2005), cited in Joseph P. Ferguson, “Russian Strategic Thinking toward Central, South, and Southeast Asia,” in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 205-223.

Differently, interest maximization in the RFE should be characterized as “cooperation”. Since the border was settled in the last century, Russia and China are presented with no visible security threat but the common interest in maintaining the regional stability. Their economic interests lie in a deepening economic relationship with cross-border trade and investment. In fact, the RFE needs China, which is one of the most important trade partners for Russia, and the Far East in particular. Moreover, China is also a necessary partner for RFE economic development, regional integration, and Russia’s Asia-Pacific policy extension. Despite discontent and tensions that appeared at the local level, the Chinese and Russian governments adopted an understanding, calm, and realistic attitude toward potential disputes.¹⁰¹ Both governments have manifested substantial efforts and a high degree of forbearance that aim to diffuse existing tensions.¹⁰² Therefore, Moscow and Beijing are trying to develop a benign trade and economic relationship in the RFE, and a certain complementarity of economic structure of the RFE and Chinese Northeast will maximize their mutual interests with a deepening level of cooperation.

In Northeast Asia, Russia and China have similar goals despite in different approaches sometimes. In the security realm, China and Russia are mutually concerned with the evolving political and military situation, and they both seek to maintain the *status quo* and the regional stability in Northeast Asia, especially on the peaceful resolution of the North Korea nuclear crisis and the maintenance of the nonproliferation regime.¹⁰³ Additionally, none of them would like to see an escalation of tension, fearing that the spread of conflict and inflow of refugee would threaten

¹⁰¹ Li Jingjie, “From Good Neighbors to Strategic Partners”, in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 83.

¹⁰² Gilbert Rozman, “Sino-Russian Relations: Mutual Assessments and Predictions,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 149.

¹⁰³ Richard Weitz, *China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism without Partnership or Passion*, U.S. Army War College, (Strategic Studies Institute, 2008), 78-81.

their own security.¹⁰⁴ Complementary efforts include the two countries taking the same stance in involving North Korea in international cooperation regimes, rendering humanitarian aids, and urging Pyongyang to adopt economic and political reforms. In particular, for Russia, regaining diplomatic influence in any security initiatives concerning the Korean Peninsula would be a geostrategic opportunity for Russia to regain its great power influence and status.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, as long as Russia and China still perceive the regional stability in the Korean Peninsula to be their highest interest, their major security interests would co-exist in cooperation.

Furthermore, Russia and China's economic interests in Northeast Asia do not conflict with, if not complement to, each other. The stability in Northeast Asia would be very conducive to the economic development of the Russian Far East, which is a key Russian presence in the Asia-Pacific. Russia identified significant interest to exploit North Korea-Russian trade, and the potential for free trade led to the formation of the Rajin-Sonbong Special Economic Zone in North Korea. In particular, Russia's economic interests in the region involve energy sales. With the growing energy shortage in the Asian market (including in China), Russia sees the Northeast Asian region as an energy export market that could back up its unreliable European market. This interest was reflected in the energy giant Gazprom's proposal in December 2011 to provide \$3 billion to finance construction of a 700-kilometer gas pipeline.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, although in the long run Russia and China will potentially compete for greater economic integration and transportation networks in the Korean peninsula, their essential interests in security and energy will promote joint efforts in Northeast Asia. Therefore, Northeast Asia should be labeled as "cooperation".

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 83.

¹⁰⁵ Chang Kyoo Park, Er-Win Tan, and Geetha Govindasamy, "The Revival of Russia's Role on the Korean Peninsula," *Asian Perspective* 37, no.1 (January-March 2013): 131.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 138.

South Asia, especially India, arguably has great potential to influence the future of the Sino-Russian partnership. Despite that Russia and China's practical security interests and economic interests have little overlap in South Asia, they tend to converge in the global dimension. Specifically, since India has long been Russia's customer in arm sales, Russia's interests in India are consistent with its military-industrial complex. India has been Russia's traditional ally during the Cold War, and even in the post-Cold War era Moscow's ties with New Delhi remain much stronger than those between Beijing and New Delhi. On the other hand, China has long cultivated close ties with India's rivalry Pakistan and remained on the agenda of limited cooperation with India. In particular, issues like unresolved border disputes and India's growing security ties with the U.S. consistently impede China and India from becoming closer.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, despite Russia and China's different roles in South Asia, no respective bilateral issues with India are weighed sufficiently to affect Russia-China relations. Although some argued that Russia, with substantial defense collaboration and more advanced arm sales to India than to China, uses India as a surreptitious way to balance against China,¹⁰⁸ no evidence suggests this argument's consistency, validity, or direct potential for conflict.

However, in the global dimension and in the context of the official doctrine of a multipolar world, Russia and China find their incentives to cooperate over issues regarding India. As the third power in Asia, India's position is important in maintaining the multipolar order at least in Asia, and thus both Russia and China would not like to see India to be drawn closer to the U.S. pole. Although this triangular relationship remains a preliminary stage compared to the Russia-India or Russia-China relationship, the general tone has been harmonious and cooperative. Russia and

¹⁰⁷ Richard Weitz, *China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism without Partnership or Passion*, U.S. Army War College, (Strategic Studies Institute, 2008); Robert G. Sutter, *Chinese Foreign Relations: Power and Policy since the Cold War* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 296-308.

¹⁰⁸ Yelena Tikhomirova, "Kitai nam drug, no istana dorozhe," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, January 2006, cited in *ibid.*, 280.

China's interests in South Asia have been primarily strategic, since the two countries and India together face similar security environment and take similar positions on many international issues.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, Moscow has been the proactive actor to bring the three countries together, as it repeatedly affirm the Asian triangle partnership proposed by Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in 1998 to bring India and China together.¹¹⁰ Therefore, Russia and China relations in South Asia should be characterized as cooperative.

On Independent Variable #2: Global Common Perception toward a Third Party

Russia and China have high common perception toward a third party in Central Asia. Above all, Russia and China both have very explicit and clear identification of threat that comes from “three evils” of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.¹¹¹ After the 9-11 attacks, Beijing was quick to recognize Uighur activists as terrorists, and the Chinese identified East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) as a terrorist organization. Similarly, Russia linked the Chechen conflict to the international terrorist movement.¹¹² Since the fight against terrorism has been a driver for Russia's policy and involvement in Central Asia, Russia has pushed for a more proactive role in the region, particularly after the terrorist attacks by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Kyrgyzstan (1999 and 2000) and Uzbekistan (2000).¹¹³ For instance, the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation in 2000 states that “we attach a priority importance to joint efforts toward

¹⁰⁹ Joseph P. Ferguson, “Russian Strategic Thinking toward Central, South, and Southeast Asia,” in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 205-223; Xia Yishan, “China-Russia-India Relationship and its Prospects,” *China Report* 39, no. 3 (August 2003): 359-360.

¹¹⁰ Gilbert Rozman, “The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: How Close? Where to?” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 26; Leszek Buszynski, “Overshadowed by China: The Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 280.

¹¹¹ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 92.

¹¹² Charles E. Ziegler, “Russia and China in Central Asia,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 234-235.

¹¹³ Maria Raquel Freire, “Russian Policy in Central Asia: Supporting, Balancing, Coercing, or Imposing?” *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 2 (2009): 125-149.

settling conflicts in CIS member states, and to the development of cooperation in the military-political area and in the sphere of security, particularly in combating international terrorism and extremism.”¹¹⁴ In addition, Russia and China also identify other shared security issues. When Chinese President Jiang Zemin’ visited Central Asia in 1996, he stressed on promoting regional stability and countering drug trafficking and organized crime.¹¹⁵ These threats were also addressed in Policy Concept of the Russian Federation in 2008, which claimed to “combat common challenges and threats, primarily international terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration.”¹¹⁶

Although Russia and China acquiesced to the U.S. military presence in Central Asia, the long-term consequences of the greatly expanded U.S. presence in the region worry both parties. On one hand, a number of Chinese literature advocated for this threat perception by evoking the heartland thesis of Sir Halford Mackinder to warn about the U.S. expansion in Central Asia.¹¹⁷ Additionally, Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of the general staff of PLA noted in March 2002 that China “pays close attention to how long the troops of the military will stay in that region.”¹¹⁸ On the other hand, Russia also had strong and negative perceptions toward the U.S. presence in the region. It concerned that U.S. force would stay after the operation and the U.S. would try to encircle Russia with its military bases. In particular, Gennady Seleznev, speaker of the State Duma, declared that

¹¹⁴ “The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: Approved by Vladimir Putin, President of the Russian Federation on June 28, 2000,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, accessible online at <http://fas.org/nuke/guide/russia/doctrine/econcept.htm>.

¹¹⁵ Martha Brill Olcott, “Russian-Chinese Relations and Central Asia,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 392-393.

¹¹⁶ “The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation: Approved by Dmitry A. Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, on 12 July 2008,” The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, accessible online at http://www.russianmission.eu/userfiles/file/foreign_policy_concept_english.pdf.

¹¹⁷ He defines the “Eurasian Heartland” as the vast strategic land space between central and northern Europe, and Middle East, and eastern Asia. He argues that “who rules the heartland commands the world island”.

¹¹⁸ Interfax, 19 March 2002, cited in Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 171.

“Russia will not welcome the creation of permanent American military bases in Central Asia”.¹¹⁹

Therefore, the common perception toward the third party in Central Asia is labeled “high”.

In contrast to Central Asia, the Russian Far East is a case scenario that does not see any threat perception shared by Russia and China. Russia’s threat perception in the region mainly comes from Chinese demographic expansion and illegal immigration to the RFE. With all the evidences and opinions discussed earlier in the first section on the expectations of conflict between Russia and China, the potential tension in the RFE remains a bilateral issue, or even a local issue that originates from Russian domestic politics. Therefore, the common perception toward the third party in the RFE does not exist at all and is thus “low”.

In Northeast Asia, Russia and China’s common perception can be traced, but is not as high and as convergent as in the case of Central Asia. In general, in addition to the clear Chinese wishes for regional stability that secures their investments, the Russians are also interested in seeing a stabilized Northeast Asia that leads to a prosperous RFE and simultaneously a counterbalance against the regional strategic dominance of the U.S.¹²⁰ As a senior Russian official noted, “We have to think of preventive measures to defend our interests and...to defend our populations in territories contiguous to Korea in case of a serious conflict in that region.”¹²¹ Prompted by the fear that the U.S. would resort to force, Russia and China were brought together by the second Korean nuclear crisis. During the meeting between Putin and Jiang Zeming in Beijing in December 2012, both leaders expressed their concern over the Bush administration’s intention to deploy ABM

¹¹⁹ Andrei Kazantsev, “Russian Policy in Central Asia and the Caspian Sea Region,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 6: 1073-1088.

¹²⁰ Chang Kyoo Park, Er-Win Tan, and Geetha Govindasamy, “The Revival of Russia’s Role on the Korean Peninsula,” *Asian Perspective* 37, no.1 (January-March 2013): 126.

¹²¹ Clay Moltz, “DPRK Briefing Book: Russian Policy on the North Korean Nuclear Crisis,” Nautilus Institute, April, 2003, <http://nautilus.org/publications/books/dprkbb/russia/dprk-briefing-book-russian-policy-on-the-north-korean-nuclear-crisis/#6>.

systems in East Asia.¹²² During another nuclear crisis in 2013, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov reiterated the concern by stating that “We are concerned that alongside the adequate, collective reaction of the UN Security Council, unilateral action is being taken around North Korea that is increasing military activity.”¹²³ However, the Russians found out that the mutual concern about an American resort to force did not receive equivalent and unconditional Chinese support. Beyond the common concern for a U.S. intervention, China has a special interest in supporting the North regime as a buffer state, which was not shared by Russia.¹²⁴ Therefore, Russia and China have a common perception toward the escalation of tension in the Korean peninsula and U.S. intervention; however, their perceptions diverge in the long term, and their common perception toward a third party should be labeled as “medium”.

South Asia is concerned by both Russia and China as a regional great power on the continent, but their interests and perceptions tend to have little overlap in relation to the local states. The Chinese perception to India can hardly be identified as positive. While Sino-Indian relations have been gradually improved since the 2000s, India’s hegemonic ambition and its effort to contain China in cooperation with the U.S. stagger China’s improving perception toward India.¹²⁵ In contrast, India has been Russia’s traditional ally in the region, and Moscow is able to maintain a cordial relationship with New Delhi throughout the time. Despite that Russia finds itself constrained by its economic and diplomatic resources to attract India, Putin has personally demonstrated his keen desire to reinvigorate the traditionally strong relationship between Moscow

¹²² Leszek Buszynski, “Overshadowed by China: The Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 270.

¹²³ David Chance and Phil Stewart, “Russian Warning over North Korean Threats,” *Herald Scotland*, March 30, 2013, <http://www.heraldsotland.com/news/world-news/russian-warning-over-north-korean-threats.20658483>.

¹²⁴ Leszek Buszynski, “Overshadowed by China: The Russia-China Strategic Partnership in the Asia-Pacific Region,” in *The Future of China-Russia Relations*, ed. James Bellacqua (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 271.

¹²⁵ Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 211-214.

and New Delhi.¹²⁶ Therefore, although Russia and China share a common understanding to see India as a trade partner and recognize its role in supporting the multipolar geopolitical order and cooperating on security issues in Central and South Asia (mostly by containing Islamic extremists in Afghanistan or Pakistan), the discussion of a more meaningful triangular relationship remains at a grand strategic level with little literature centered on how Russia and China's respective perception to India overlap and how they can have consequential effects on Russia-China relations. As most of their dealings with India remain separate and bilateral, it is hard to identify to what extent they agree or conflict on how they should jointly care about India. Therefore, their common perception toward a third party in South Asia is "low".

On Dependent Variable: Level of Conflict

The identification for level of conflict between Russia and China across these four regions is easy with all the empirical evidences presented earlier in this paper. Under the third expectation of conflict in Central Asia, China's deepening presence and increasing influence in the region is felt by Russia officials and is extensively discussed by opinion articles regarding the potential conflict over China's expansion into Russian sphere of influence. However, as China would like to respect Russia's authority at least in the foreseeable future and remain deferential to Russian policy goals in the region, there is no open dispute between the two governments. Therefore, we code the level of conflict in Central Asia as "medium-low".

In the Russian Far East, the dispute of an increasing Chinese demographic expansion as well as other relevant issues such as organized crime and illegal immigration is much more evident. While scholars and some regional political leaders constantly accuse China of these problems with

¹²⁶ Joseph P. Ferguson, "Russian Strategic Thinking toward Central, South, and Southeast Asia," in *Russian Strategic Thought toward Asia*, ed. Gilbert Rozman, Kazuhiko Togo, and Joseph P. Ferguson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 205-223.

massive anti-Chinese propaganda, the governments of both sides also take measures to impose stricter regulation and to diffuse existing tensions. However, the Russian military exercises in the region in the recent years have complicated the situation. These exercises, called Vostok, are small in scale but are meant to display Russia's ability to conduct combined arms operations. While on one hand, some external interpretations have seen these exercises as warning to China and Japan; on the other hand, there is no clear evidence that Russia has any specific threat perception or any warning information to convey through these moves. Therefore, we code the level of conflict in the Russian Far East as "medium".

In Northeast Asia, as previously discussed, Russia and China have converging interests in maintaining the regional stability in the short run, but their long-term interests and vision to the future of the Korean Peninsula do not really overlap. While China wants to maintain the *status quo* and continue its leading position vis-à-vis North Korea, Russia aims to exert more great power influence in the region and expects to benefit from the peaceful coexistence and a higher level of economic integration of the two Koreas.¹²⁷ Since China regards the Korean Peninsula as its own sphere of influence and on North Korea regime as a protégé, Beijing may lack the willingness to accommodate Russian concerns when they are not identical to those of China. Therefore, due to Russia and China's diverging policy goals in the long run and occasional concerns expressed in literature discussion, Northeast Asia should also be coded as "medium-low" for level of conflict.

At last, scenario for conflict between Russia and China in South Asia is hardly discernable. Despite that Russia enjoys a stronger relationship with India than China does, their interests are not in conflict with each other, with perhaps the most disputable conflict being Russian arms sales

¹²⁷ "The Korean Peninsula: Challenges and Opportunities for Russia," NAPSNet Special Reports, October 07, 2010, <http://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/the-korean-peninsula-challenges-and-opportunities-for-russia/>.

to India. Although Russia tends to sell more advanced weapons to India than to China, and India has become Moscow's main foreign customer, the decline in Russian arm sales to China for years is mainly due to Beijing's shifting to domestic manufacturing of advanced weaponry.¹²⁸ Conflict over arm sales is in fact non-existent and there is no trace of any other identifiable conflict. Therefore, Russia and China's level of conflict over South Asia, if there is any, is of little interest to opinion articles, and hence it should be identified as "low".

With the decreasing likelihood of conflict, the coding rule presented above can also be represented in a number scale from 1 to 3. Therefore, for the first variable, we have conflict (1), strategic interaction (2), and cooperation (3); for the second variable, we have low (1), medium (2), and high (3). For dependent variable, we have low (1), medium-low (2), medium (3), and high (4). See Table 2:

Table 2:

Region/Variable	IV1: Bilateral interest maximization by cooperation or conflict	IV2: Global common perception toward a third party	DV: Level of conflict
Central Asia	Strategic interaction (2)	High (3)	Medium-low (2)
Russian Far East	Cooperation (3)	Low (1)	Medium (3)
Northeast Asia	Cooperation (3)	Medium (2)	Medium-low (2)
South Asia	Cooperation (3)	Low (1)	Low (1)

Since it is impossible to manipulate the development of Russia-China relations in these respective case scenarios in order to study their processes and consequences, comparative case

¹²⁸ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russian Arms Sales," *WordPress*, March 15, 2015, <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2015/03/29/russian-arms-sales/>.

studies are introduced to explore the causation of IVs and their respective relations to DV. In particular, I use the strategy of looking at the cases that maximize variation across the DVs and IV. According to Table 2, we identify two pairs of comparative case studies: Central Asia vs. Northeast Asia, and Russian Far East vs. South Asia. These comparative case studies can shed light on our understanding of Russia-China relations in general because their variable configurations take on their extreme values. On one hand, in the first pair of cases Central Asia vs. Northeast Asia, these two regions have different and even opposite configuration on independent variables (IV1 and IV2), while the dependent variable (DV) remains identical. Therefore, we wonder if IV1 and IV2 play the same role in affecting DV, and if not, how we should explain their roles in the specific cases. On the other hand, in the second pair of cases Russian Far East vs. South Asia, we find the same configurations of IVs but quite opposite DV. Thus, it interests us to explore what may be the reason to this sharp contrast; how the result to these case studies will challenge, refine or sharpen our two hypotheses; and finally, what explanations can be provided to understand the peaceful Russia-China relations overall.

Comparative Cases Studies

Central Asia vs. Northeast Asia

The patterns of power distribution in Central Asia and Northeast Asia indicate that both regions are part of an established sphere of influence, where the leading power is willing to cooperate with the other, but only to the extent that the former's leading position is not challenged and its policy goals are not compromised. Central Asia is regarded as Russian sphere of influence while Northeast Asia is China's. In either case, the leading power has been substantially involved

and invested before the other country steps into the region. On one hand, Russia has devoted to reestablish its leading role after it walked out of the chaotic and gloomy domestic situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. On the other hand, China continues to regard North Korea as an asset whose loss would result in negative shift in the strategic balance of the Korean Peninsula.¹²⁹ With these policy goals in mind, however, both of them see the need to cooperate with each other for their common security interests against, above all, Islamic extremism and separatism in Central Asia and nuclear crises in Northeast Asia. Moreover, Russia and China are pushed further together under the concern that a large scale turbulence following a third party military intervention would completely disrupt the *status quo* and the regional power configuration, resulting in them losing their leading power position in the region.

Furthermore, the type of interest to defend also plays a role in how countries react to potential conflicts. Generally speaking, security interests tend to be weighed more in conflict calculation than economic interests do. In this case, Russia's dominant interest in Central Asia is primarily economic interests. Since Russia has virtually no spare export capacity with its domestic energy production, it attempts to use partnerships with energy-rich neighboring countries, namely Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, to ensure the reliable energy revenues from transit functions and to gain leverage over European gas markets.¹³⁰ Because Russia's economy depends heavily on oil and gas revenues (export of oil and gas accounts for about 60% of Russia's federal budget revenues and two thirds of its exports), Russia's economic growth thus can be significantly affected by the situation in Central Asia. Therefore, we see Moscow's effort in supporting the activities of Russian state-owned energy company Gazprom, whose resource base holds natural gas from Central Asia

¹²⁹ Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 177.

¹³⁰ "The Brookings Foreign Policy Studies Energy Security Series: The Russian Federation," The Brookings Institution, October, 2006, <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/reports/2006/10/russia/2006russia.pdf>; "Russia Energy Survey 2002," International Energy Agency, 2002, http://www.iea.org/publications/freepublications/publication/russia_energy_survey.pdf.

and Transcaucasia as a crucial element.¹³¹ On the other hand, China's dominant interest in Northeast Asia is mainly political and security interests, with other economic interests only being complementary to consolidating the North Korea regime in order to fulfill the former two interests. This is not to say that China is preventing the two Koreas from reunification; instead, China assures other powers that it is very supportive toward reunification. What China truly concerns is that this unification would not take place in the form of war and the collapse of the North regime (which would threaten China's own security), nor the assimilation of the North by the South (which would shift the power balance in the region towards the U.S.). Therefore, China positions itself as the indispensable force for facilitating talks and balancing powers, and its leading role exists primarily to defend its security interests.¹³²

Furthermore, security interests tend to have prior importance to economic interests, because activities involving security interests are more likely to be zero-sum games and economic interests can be offset or reimbursed in one way or another. In this case, although China increases its presence in Central Asia in forms of infrastructure development and energy resource investment, Russia has a higher level of tolerance toward Chinese economic expansion in its sphere of influence (to the level of "strategic interaction") without generating more conflicts. The high level of common threat perception to terrorism and separatism in the region as a security concern further offsets Russian's loss of economic interests, if there is any, due to Chinese presence; and this balance keeps their level of conflict to minimum ("medium-low" on the scale). On the other hand, in Northeast Asia, although Russia and China's common threat perception is not as notably high as in the case of Central Asia, their convergence of security interest, at least in the short run, drives

¹³¹ Neil Buckley and Tobias Buck, "Duma Votes for Russian Gas Export Monopoly," *Financial Times*, June 6, 2006, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f042c74a-fd59-11da-9b2d-0000779e2340.html>.

¹³² Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 177-197.

them to take the same stance and to maintain their conflict of interest at a low level. In other words, although it appears that Russia and China's interests conflict more in Central Asia than they do in Northeast Asia, economic expansion from one another is less threatening than a security threat perception, even if the threat comes from a third party. Thus, we conclude that when comparing the effect of overlapped interest and common perception on the two countries' relations, all else being equal, the one IV pertaining to security issues tends to be enforced and weighted more in shaping countries' relations.

Russian Far East vs. South Asia

In the case studies of the Russian Far East and South Asia, we observe the same patterns of IVs, but opposite DV. Strictly speaking, these two regions are not comparable because the RFE is domestic to Russia while South Asia is dominated by another major power, India. Therefore, in either case, Russia and China cannot interact to the extent that allows them to freely pursue their interests; in other words, their interaction are partly restrained by factors external to their foreign policy goals such as Russian domestic concerns and India's interests and reaction. However, the comparison of these two cases still shed light on our understanding of Russia-China relations as how they interact with each other in a constrained environment and what factors, even if partially revealed, contribute to their patterns of interaction.

In these two regions, Russia and China's security interests are very limited. In South Asia, both their security interests and economic interests are barely related. In fact, most of these interests remain bilateral with the local power India and do not directly concern the other. Even if they have differences over certain issues (such as India-Pakistan conflict and Russian arm sales to India), these differences are overshadowed by their interest to cooperate in the global dimension to advocate for a multipolar world order. Thus, their interests in South Asia are not pushing them

towards conflict. Additionally, as previously showed, their common perceptions toward a third party in both the RFE and South Asia are very low. Therefore, both IV1 and IV2 in this case follow our hypotheses, so South Asia is not a valuable case in itself to be examined.

However, the RFE is a peculiar case; it is domestic to Russia, and there is no visible security threat for either Russia or China since the border has been settled in the last century. Russia and China share security interest in simply maintaining the regional stability, or at least the unavailability to locate evidences about their other security interest indicates that this region is of low security concern to the both countries. In terms of Russia and China's economic interests, the complementarity of the economic structure of the RFE and Chinese Northeast benefits both parties and makes their interactions cooperative in nature. With Russian design to use the RFE to extend its existence in the Asia-Pacific, Russia's priority is to revitalize the RFE and to strengthen its economic links with Russia's Asia-Pacific neighbors. While other than Chinese general policy goals in the realm of trade, investment, and energy resources, we can hardly identify any Chinese core national interest in particular to this domestic region of Russia. Therefore, the convergence of their interests (IV1) does not create scenario for high conflict in the region.

As the level of conflict in the RFE ("medium") is an anomaly to our hypothesis #1, which predicts that more cooperative interests would result in lower level of conflict, we look specifically at the RFE as a deviant case worth studying. This "medium" level of conflict is coded as the result of the large number of Russian dispute and threat perception discovered among local officials, local media, and opinion literature.¹³³ Therefore, to understand the code ("medium") assigned to the DV in this region, we need to trace back and examine the core evidence to this conflict. In retrospect, military exercises Vostok are arguably the symbolic moves targeting on other regional

¹³³ Tamara Troyakova, "A View from the Russian Far East," in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 219-222.

powers, including China. Many western scholars have observed the exercise as a Russian preparation that allows it to counter Beijing's potential threat and supremacy.¹³⁴ However, the commander of Vostok 2010, Army-General Nikolai Makarov, stated that this exercise was not directed against any country or military bloc: "We did not look at any particular country and did not look at any particular enemy. We are talking about what direction we will create our own operational-strategic situation in the course of which somewhere a group of terrorists or large group of separatists are active." Additionally, according to Russian Defense Minister, Anatoliy Serdyukov, the military exercise was designed particularly to test the deployment of forces and the operational command and control of the new brigade-based force structure. The key is to test the "new look" Russian armed forces and prepare for the scenario of anti-piracy, counter-terrorism, or the flight of refugee following the possible collapse of North Korea.¹³⁵ In fact, the Russian government fails to articulate a clear political message and complicates the situation in the RFE. On one hand, Russia emphasizes its political objective and economic drive of regional integration with the Asia-Pacific region, as well as the desire to deepen security ties with its large neighbor China; while on the other hand, a counter-action strategy on the scale of Vostok-2010, given the force elements participating, themes pursued and operations rehearsed, points to China as the real source of Russian anxiety.¹³⁶ Short of a diplomatic readjustment to end Russia's international isolation in the Far East, Russia manifests vacillation and contradiction through its efforts seeking

¹³⁴ Roger McDermott, "'Virtual' Defense of the Russian Far East: Vostok 2010," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no: 129 (July 2010), accessed at The Jamestown Foundation, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36580&no_cache=1#.VVQCE_nF-3V; Simon Saradzhyan, "The Role of China in Russia's Military Thinking," International Relations and Security Network, May 4, 2010, http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/20129/role_of_china_in_russias_military_thinking.html.

¹³⁵ Jacob W. Kipp, "Vostok 2010 and the Very Curious Hypothetical Opponent," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no. 133 (July 2010), accessed at The Jamestown Foundation, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36610&no_cache=1#.VVOPrvnF-3U.

¹³⁶ Roger McDermott, "'Virtual' Defense of the Russian Far East: Vostok 2010," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 7, no: 129 (July 2010), accessed at The Jamestown Foundation, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36580&no_cache=1#.VVQCE_nF-3V.

economic integration with the Asia-Pacific region while simultaneously exercising deterrence against an unnamed hypothetical opponent. Therefore, this may explain the anomaly we observed in our model and result in the higher level of conflict in the region.

Moreover, as a region that is remote to Moscow and has a history of conflictual and disputed border, the RFE has witnessed how central-regional (Moscow-RFE) relations and Russia-China relations shape each other. It is not surprising to find that the RFE has a different perspective on Russia-China relations than Moscow does. At the local level, these relations are driven by pragmatic and pedestrian issues (such as crime, labor force, or ethnic Chinese presence), rather than geopolitical or strategic considerations at the national level. Since 1995, a dominant tendency in the RFE has been the strengthening of local authoritarian regimes combined with the increase in xenophobia and anti-Chinese sentiments. Because perceptions, not reality, shape popular imagination, local leaders such as Governor Nazdratenko actively played the “Chinese card” in relations with the central government, resulting in large waves of anti-Chinese sentiment among the local population.¹³⁷ Moreover, the local leaders accused Moscow of selling out to Beijing over the common border; by blaming all problems on Moscow and the Chinese, they evaded the responsibilities of corruption, misgovernment, and the economic backwardness of the region.¹³⁸ For example, Governor Nazdratenko took a vocal stand against border demarcation with China as he spoke in front of the Federation Council and initiated other public organizations against China. By successfully incorporating these anti-Chinese sentiments into his political toolbox, he rallied local support behind his authoritarian regime and comforted local Russians’ worries with his

¹³⁷ Tamara Troyakova, “A View from the Russian Far East,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 204.

¹³⁸ Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington D.C: Brookings Institution Press, 2008), 65.

“tough guy” image.¹³⁹ In short, the domestic political interest of local leaders that is not necessarily convergent to Moscow’s perspective gave rise to the escalation of conflict between Russia and China over the RFE.

Most prominent Russian Sinologists, such as Viktor Larin or Yuri Galenovitch, believe that Moscow maintains little control over the regions of the RFE, and these military exercises are likely to be Russian maneuvers to strengthen its military control of the RFE.¹⁴⁰ Although the impetus of military exercises is not yet clear as whether they are Moscow-oriented moves or the central government’s response to the RFE region, central-regional (Moscow-RFE) relations and bargaining leverages certainly play a role in the formation of disputes and the level of conflict in the RFE. Consequently, this regional factor disrupts normal Russian-Chinese interactions that best correspond to their foreign policy concepts and national interests. However, because the RFE is an exception to our case studies due to it being a Russian domestic region, its strategic limitation to the grand decision-making of Moscow corresponds to the containment of this medium level of conflict on a regional scale. Therefore, the Russian-Chinese level of conflict is still coherent to the model and the regional patterns established in Table 2 (Central Asia: “medium low”, Northeast Asia: “medium low”, and South Asia: “low”), and the maintenance of peaceful relations between the two countries is built upon the low level of conflict in these regions.

¹³⁹ Tamara Troyakova, “A View from the Russian Far East,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 219-220; Michael McFaul, “The Far Eastern Challenge to Russian Federalism,” in *Rapprochement or Rivalry? : Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia*, ed. Sherman W. Garnett (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 324.

¹⁴⁰ Viktor Larin is the Director of the Institute of Ethnography of the Far East (Vladivostok) of the Russian Academy of Sciences. He has accused local authorities of falsifying their border lines with China and has personally implicated the Governor of the Primorye Region, E. Nazdratenko. Viktor Larin, *Kitaj i Dal'nij Vostok Rossii v pervoj Polovine 90-h: Problemy regional'nogo vzaimodejstviya* (China and the Russian Far East in the first half of the 1990s: the problems of cooperation), Vladivostok, 1999. Cited in Iliyas Sarsembaev, “Russia: No Strategic Partnership with China in View,” *China Perspectives* 65, (May-June 2006), <http://chinaperspectives.revues.org/631>.

Conclusion

Russia and China's strategic partnership and their low level of conflict across their border regions would not be made possible without their convergence of interests, above all security interests in their neighboring regions. With the two-level filter and the model established in this paper, we identify four regions with strategic importance to Russia-China relations: Central Asia, the Russian Far East, Northeast Asia, and South Asia. Due to Russia and China's respective interests and power projection capability, these four regions contribute the most to the overall Russia-China relations. The two pairs of comparative case studies provide us an insight to the independent variables that we identified from literature review. Bilateral interest maximization by cooperation or conflict and common perception toward a third party both contribute to the level of conflict between Russia and China across the regions and at large. We further conclude that security interests tend to be most valued by countries in comparison with economic interests, and common perception toward a third party serves to complement this interest calculus, in the way that threat perception can offset the loss of economic interest and maintain countries' strategic convergence. Furthermore, although a domestic region can unilaterally create disputes or perceptions of conflict between two countries, strategic interest calculus (IV1) remains to be the key factor determining whether the tension is limited at the regional level or will advance to the national level. Even in a constrained environment in which a country's central-regional relations may undermine the full implementation of its foreign policy concept at heart, strategic interest calculus still sits at the center of countries' interactions and accounts for the low level of conflict between Russia and China.

This understanding to the low level of conflict between Russia and China and their strategic convergence offers several policy implications. First, it has removed the danger of war between

Russia and China under their current political regimes at least in the foreseeable future. The regional stability in Asia should be clearly understood, and the security implications of Chinese increasing military capabilities, Chinese military modernization, and Russian military reform should not be exaggerated and overestimated. Second, the West, above all the U.S., should not have a too high threat perception to the Russia-China partnership. The West should not intentionally contain either of them and risk the danger of provoking the formation of a potential anti-West alliance. Third, to Russia and China, existing multilateral organizations such as the SCO should be better utilized to minimize their false perception toward each other, especially to reduce the disruption coming from domestic factors as in the case of the RFE. A clearer Russian political message and agenda should be delivered to China about issues such as the regional integration, economic development, and military operations targeting on non-traditional security threat and the maintenance of regional stability in the large area of the RFE and in Northeast Asia.

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