

THEORY AND HISTORY OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS: SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS

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Rezumat: Acest articol se referă la regiunea Asiei de Nord-Est văzută prin prisma istoriei internaționale și a teoriei echilibrului puterii. Două studii de caz privind relațiile sino-ruse constituie partea empirică a studiului: primul privește ruperea relațiilor sino-sovietice în timpul Războiului Rece; iar, al doilea, construirea parteneriatului strategic în perioada post-Război Rece, lipsit de componenta unei alianțe politico-militare. Aceste examinări empirice confirmă devierea de la comportamentul de echilibru al puterii. Concluzia principală este că teoria relațiilor internaționale ar trebui să se bazeze mai mult pe studiile istorice pentru a întări capacitatea de deslușire a proceselor de politică internațională.

Abstract: The article deals with the Northeast Asian region seen through the lenses of international history and balance of power theory. Two case studies about Sino-Russian relations are employed: first, the break up between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China during the Cold War times; and second, the formation of a strategic partnership between the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China in post-Cold War times that fell short of a political-military alliance. These empirical examinations confirm a deviation from the balance of power behavior. The main conclusion is that theories of international relations should rely more on international history in order to improve explanatory power and to make sense of processes of international politics.

Keywords: balance of power, North-East Asia, Sino-Russian relations, Sino-Soviet conflict, Sino-Russian partnership, regional security, international history, theories of international relations. Introduction (font Times New Roman, bold, size 12; line spacing options: 12 points before and 6 points after the paragraph).

Introduction

International dynamics in East Asia are described in international relations literature through the lenses of power politics persistence and security competition among actor states¹. A general look on the last two centuries, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries' history, shows that the perceptions of political-military threats have been a constant feature of the region. The penetration of Western power and

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¹ John J. Mearsheimer (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, pp. 372-377.

its strategic culture in East Asia by the middle of the nineteenth century has been translated through power rivalry among the great powers. The British, Russian and Japanese Empires have been the major competitors within the context of the Chinese power's decline followed by collapse.

After a moment of turbulence characterized by the Japanese bid for dominance and the British decline in the region, the aftermath of the Second World War brought in central stage the competition between Soviet Russia and the United States. The American-Russian rivalry has been characterized by the diffusion of the Cold War and the bipolar structural world order in all regional settings including East Asia. Yet, the general picture of the world power struggle between the two superpowers, which overlaps every regional setting, has been distorted in East Asia with the beginning of the 1960s Soviet–Chinese wrecked relations². This trend unfolded as a tri-polar competition among Soviet Union, communist China and the United States till the end of the Cold War.

The Cold War ending accelerated the outcome of general tendencies in the region: the decline of Russia's influence in parallel with the growing power of China that inversed their status from the Cold War times. The United States maintained its military presence and security commitments in relations with Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, which are translated as a reassurance of the status quo against the rising Chinese power. The American presence in East Asia is thus seen as playing a role of an “external balancer” or “offshore balancer”, similar to that played by United Kingdom for the European continent in the nineteenth century³. In parallel, the Chinese-Russian relations have shifted from open rivalry to a steady rapprochement in the form of a so-called “strategic partnership”. The North Korean nuclear issue, the China-Taiwan tensions and the maintenance of the “Japanese threat” rhetoric in China or both Koreas complete the picture of the complex security environment that characterizes East Asia.

For the international relations literature, reading the East Asian relations in terms of power politics persistence comes at ease, in particular for the realist strand of international studies⁴. East Asia represents a central instance in the debate that followed the end of Cold War, playing as a central argument regarding the continuation of power politics in international affairs. Because the Cold War

² Barry Buzan and Ole Waever (2003) *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 128-185.

³ Mearsheimer, *op. cit.*, pp. 236-37.

⁴ On realism in IR theory see Charles W. Kegley Jr. (2009) *World Politics: Trend and Transformation*, 12th Edition, Boston: Cengage Learning; Stephen Walt (2005) “The Enduring Relevance of the Realist Tradition” in Ira Katznelson and Helen V. Milner (eds) *Political science: the state of the discipline*, New York, Washington: Norton, American Political Science Association, pp.17-23.

conclusion meant the break of power rivalry that engulfed the whole world, the projection of future world politics includes the possibility of a world characterized by enhanced interdependence and even integration that would take out of the picture security competition among actor-states. Western Europe and North America, or taken together as a whole Euro-Atlantic area, can shift the view of international affairs towards a world in which the prospect of war is taken out of the picture and replaced with a dense institutional framework of cooperation⁵. Yet, the dynamics in East Asia keep open questions regarding its future: will it transcend the rivalry and threat perceptions towards a zone of peace, or will it be the arena of enhanced struggle for security and dominance? The general current picture is mixed: on one hand there are persistent political-military defense pacts and threat perceptions that go beyond the post-Cold War times and, on the other hand, there is growing evidence of enhanced political dialog and economic interdependence.

The realist school of international relations tends to outline that political military issues will not only persist in East Asia but will heighten. Although the Chinese rhetoric on its foreign affairs pivots on concepts such as “peaceful rise” building a “harmonious world”, and “peaceful development”, the realist argument states that China is going to assert its objective as a regional and even global superpower status when domestic modernization will be accomplished⁶.

The realist thinking rests on the assumption that the regular consequence of the anarchical structure of international politics is the balance of power relations among actor-states⁷. Competing powers enhance their own military power and seek external political-military alliances in order to oppose the growing threats posed by their rivals. Geographic proximity, offensive capabilities and perceived

⁵ Thomas Risse (2002) “U.S. Power in a Liberal Security Community” in John G. Ikenberry (ed.) *America Unrivaled. The Future of Balance of Power*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press.

⁶ See the debate on this issue in Zbigniew Brzezinski and John J. Mearsheimer (2005) “Clash of the Titans” *Foreign Policy*, vol. 146, Jan/Feb 2005, pp. 46-50; G. John Ikenberry (2008) “The Rise of China and the Future of the West. Can liberal System Survive?” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 87(1), pp. 44-60.

⁷ On balance of power see Henry Kissinger (2002) *Diplomația*, București: BicAll, pp. 58-88; Edward V. Gulick (1955) *Europe's classical Balance of Power*, New York: Norton; Hans J. Morgenthau (2007) *Politica între națiuni*, București: Polirom, pp.203-243; Kenneth Waltz (2006) *Teoria politicii internaționale*, București: Polirom, pp.147-81. For the academic debate on balance of power in the post-Cold War times see John G. Ikenberry (ed.) (2002) *America Unrivaled. The Future of Balance of Power*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; T.V Paul, J. J. Wirtz and M. Fortmann (eds) (2004), *Balance of Power: Theory and Practice in the 21st Century*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press. See also J.S. Nye, Jr. (1997) *Understanding International Conflict*, New York: Longman, pp.12-68; Kegley, *op. cit.* pp. 457- 484.

intentions are considered central variables for understanding why states choose to balance⁸. As regards the small or weak states that are caught in the midst of major power competition, they are constrained by two choices: to balance against the most threatening power seeking thus alliances with other powers; or to accommodate the threatening power through a military alliance. The former choice is named bandwagoning. Although it is not a general agreed stance, most of the literature on the balance of power tends to confirm a preference for balancing rather than for bandwagoning⁹.

While it is impossible to neglect that security competition is present in East Asia, the main argument of this article is that the balancing logic fails to entirely explain threat perception formation. I rely here on two empirical cases, which confirm that key players of Northeast Asian region departed from the balance of power behavior. Both cases look upon Russian-Chinese relations: first, the derail of Sino-Soviet alliance at the end of 1950s and beginning of 1960s that generated an open rivalry and a short border military conflict; and second, the rapprochement between Russian Federation and China in the 1990s and 2000s that produced a strategic partnership, which, however, falls short of a political-military alliance. Although in both stances Moscow and Beijing had in common certain threat perceptions, they failed to commit to an enduring and strong defense pact, as the balance of power theory would expect.

The general result of this evaluation is that the balance of power theory should draw profoundly on the interplay between domestic threat perception formation and the external security environment in which states operate. Actor-states might be constrained by the general context of the regional power structure, respectively the distribution of hard power capabilities. However, the internal dynamics of security agenda construction is rather of paramount importance because actor-states are not responding mechanically to their external context, but rather based on the manner in which they perceive existential threats. The setting of a security and defense agenda represents a subjective process. Thus, the balance of power should be replaced by the balance of threat that, on its behalf, should be further refined on the grounds of securitization process analysis¹⁰. From this point of

⁸ I draw here on the balance of threat theory that refines the neo-realist version of balance of power. Stephen Walt's theory of balance of threat confirms that states tend to form political-military alliances as reactions to the distribution of threats in the international system. See Stephen Walt (1987) *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; and (1988) "Testing Theories of Alliance Formation. The Case of Southwest Asia", *International Organization*, vol.4(2), pp. 275-316.

⁹ See Walt (1988) *op. cit.*

¹⁰ On securitization see Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Jaap de Wilde (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

view, international history studies have the potential to better enlighten the theory of balance based on historical contextualization and strategic culture. History studies are more than empirical tools for international relations paradigms. International history can play its full role of complementarily with the theories of international politics in order to enhance their explanatory power and to complete the international studies that is to make sense of world politics of the past and the present.

Distrust and enmity in the history of Russian–Chinese relations

In 1946 the well-known diplomat and historian George Kennan was reporting from the American Embassy in Moscow that “at bottom of Kremlin’s neurotic view of world affairs is traditional and instinctive Russian sense of insecurity. Originally, this was insecurity of a peaceful agricultural people trying to live on vast exposed plain in neighborhood of fierce nomadic peoples”¹¹. Kennan’s argument was that Russians have an entrenched anxiety in their collective psyche in relation with the outside world that originates from the Mongol domination era in Russia’s history, known as the “Tatar yoke” (thirteenth-fifteenth centuries). Extending Kennan’s evaluation, it is worth to mention that within the collective beliefs of Russian society there is a sort of overlapping between Mongols and Chinese, mixing up this view in a sort of “yellow threat” that constantly floats in Russian social collective imaginary¹².

Of course that employing the image of otherness should not be exploited exaggeratedly in the analyses over bilateral relations between Russia and China. It is known that the geographical and civilizational distances produce strong stereotypes that distort heavily the “real” image of the other. The importance of using the civilizational differences here rests on showing that the first encounter between the two nations, Russian and Chinese, in the nineteenth century, was from the start influenced by deep distrust and animosity. This has had the role of enhancing an expected conflict between an expanding periphery, on the side of Russian Empire, and a retreating periphery on the side of Qing dynasty’s China. The setting of Russian Far East (RFE) has been done on the expenses of China’s rapid decline in the second part of the nineteenth century. The enlargement of

¹¹ George Kennan (1946) “The Long Telegram” published in *U.S. Department of State, Foreign Relations of the United States: Eastern Europe; The Soviet Union*, vol. VI, 1946 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1969), pp. 696-709.

¹² Bobo Lo (2008) *Axis of Convenience. Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics*, London, Washington: Chatham House, Brookings Institution Press, pp.17-21.

Russian territory in East Asia till the Pacific Ocean and the Sea of Japan coincided with what is called in China's history as the "humiliating century"¹³. Not only that China lost wars with Western powers or post-Meiji Restoration Japan, and experienced losses of sovereignty, but most of its territorial losses have been in its northern periphery counting to around one million and a half square kilometers generated by the so called "unequal treaties" of Aigun (1858), Peking (1860) and Tarbagatai (1864) between Chinese Qing Empire and Tsarist Russia. Further, the Russian army participated within the intervention of Western powers against the Boxer Rebellion giving the opportunity for Russia to gain new strategic positions in Manchuria, respectively Lushun (Port Arthur) and Dalian ports¹⁴.

The evolution of bilateral Sino-Russian relations in the first half of the twentieth century was marked by the affirmation of Russia as a territorial-physical Northeast Asian power and by the resurrection of the nationalist movement in China. It is important to notice that the turmoil in Russia and the Bolshevik power takeover produced two causal links with Chinese developments. First, the Chinese national movement developed a communist branch that came under the Moscow dominance. The Chinese communists turned against the Chinese nationalist known as Kuomintang, unleashing a civil war that lasted, with some suspensions, till 1949.¹⁵ Yet, the ties between the Russian communists and their Chinese counterparts had not been free of mistrust and frictions. The reassertion of Soviet Russian authority over the territorial possessions of former Tsarist Russia, including here the Northeast Asian possessions, enhanced the perception of both Chinese nationalists and communists over the Soviet determination to continue the Russian conduct of "imperialism" in the region¹⁶.

¹³ "The humiliating century" is a Chinese national historical concept which refers to the period stretching from the First Opium War in 1840s till the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949.

¹⁴ William R. Keylor, (2001) *The Twentieth-Century World. An International History*, Fourth Edition, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.12-16. Lo, *op.cit.*, pp. 21-23. The "unequal treaties" refer to the agreements signed by weak Chinese empire during Qing dynasty with Western powers and post-Meiji Restoration Japan in which the Chinese part confirmed concessions of sovereignty and territorial losses. China lost in favor of Russia Outer Manchuria and the Amur River territories. See also Dong Wang (2003) "The Discourse of Unequal Treaties in modern China", *Pacific Affairs*, vol. 76(3), pp.399-425.

¹⁵ After 1949, Kuomintang retreated to Taiwan and tried to keep the nominal international representation of China under the name of Republic of China. In 1971 Taiwan has lost the United Nations seat in favor of the People's Republic of China (PRC).

¹⁶ Keylor, *op. cit.*, p. 349; Peter Calvocoressi (2000) *Politica mondială după 1945*, București: All, pp. 104-105. The reassertion of Soviet power in Central Asia and Siberia included the installation of a puppet regime in Mongolia and border military conflicts between the Soviet Army and Kuomintang in 1929.

And second, during the decline of Russian power produced by the defeat in the First World War and the civil war, Japan reflected to the prospects of expansion in Northeast Asia. Japanese forces initiated the conquest of Manchuria in 1931 where a puppet regime was installed and continued further interventions and annexations in China in 1937. On the Manchurian-Soviet border Japanese forces confronted Soviet forces in several incidents and battles.

For the Chinese communists, led by Mao Zedong, the Soviet conduct in Northeast Asia created an ambiguous perception. On one side, they relied on Soviet assistance and advice, playing the role of subordinates within the communist international organization (Comintern); on the other side, they realized that Moscow could sacrifice the relations with them for the sake of gaining advantages against Japanese expansion. That was confirmed by Stalin's support for Kuomintang and his insistence towards the Chinese communists to forge an alliance with Kuomintang against Japanese forces in China. Even when the Red Army moved against Japan in Manchuria (The Strategic Offensive Operation), very late, at the end of the Second World War, Soviet Union signed agreements with Kuomintang.¹⁷ The general image at the end of the Second World War in East Asia was that Soviet Union's main objective consisted in enhancing its positions in China and further in Korean Peninsula in parallel with keeping a weak and divided China. Because the support towards Chinese communist seemed to be secondary when the Red Army pushed its units in Northeast Asia, the backdrop of relations between Soviet Union and Chinese communists was vulnerable and, on the long run, influenced negatively the future relations between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC).

Sino-soviet relations towards the fratricide conflict

Seen from the perspective of a long-term distrust in Sino-Russian relations, the Chinese communist victory in 1949 marked a turning point in the history of bilateral relations. The golden opportunity for a real and enduring alliance between Russia and China was generated by both, an ideological communist affinity and a general international context in which the Cold War started with full steam¹⁸.

¹⁷ Calvocoressi, *op.cit.*, pp. 108-110.

¹⁸ On Sino-Soviet relations from alliance to rivalry see Jean-Baptiste Duroselle and André Kaspi (2006) *Istoria relațiilor internaționale 1948-până în zilele noastre*, vol. II, București: Editura Științelor sociale și politice, pp.193-194; Calvocoressi, *op.cit.*, pp. 117-123; Keylor, *op.cit.*, pp. 351-365; Buzan and Waever, *op.cit.*, pp. 140-160; Lo, *op.cit.* pp. 23-27.

The report between Soviet and Chinese communists was one between the “older and younger brother”. Mao Zedong was ready to put aside the controversial aspects of Russian-Chinese border issues or the ambiguous role that Moscow played during the civil war. Beijing confirmed the absolute authority of the Soviet communist party. The legendary figure of Stalin within the world communist movement and the Red Army astonishing victory against Axis forces followed by the expansion of communist regimes in Europe played a key psychological role. In the end PRC could not but accept to be a junior partner in a strong alliance with Soviet Union (USSR). It was at that time a feeling among communist around the world, shared enthusiastically by Mao Zedong, that the Soviets can lead the communist movement towards the victory against the capitalist countries. In parallel, Chinese communists had great expectations regarding the perspective of the Soviet assistance for rebuilding their country following a communist industrialization pattern.

Moreover, the grand confrontation between the communist and capitalist systems was overlapping with the PRC particular interests over the wish to conclude the political and territorial unification of China under a communist rule, by delivering the final strike against Kuomintang who retreated on the Taiwan (Formosa) Island. Since the United States decided to back up Kuomintang, PRC identified Washington as its main foe. Thus PRC focused its security interests on the perceived threat posed by the United States on both its political establishment and territorial unity.

The stated “unbreakable friendship” between Soviet Union and PRC in early 1950s has been translated into the Soviet direct and important assistance in terms of economic, technical and military support. Soviet technical advisers poured into China in order to help the construction of Chinese industrial capacity¹⁹. Moscow added strong diplomatic support at the newly United Nations Organization in order to replace the seat held by Chinese nationalists with PRC. An important signal towards the departure from the “Tsarist imperialist” approach was made by Moscow when decided to pull out its naval base from Port Arthur (Lushun) and to transfer all the shares from joint stock Soviet-Chinese companies to Beijing. On the front against the United States, the PRC brought its direct military involvement when, in agreement and coordination with Moscow, sent around one million “volunteers” to fight against the American army in the Korean Peninsula War²⁰. It is surprising that, against all odds, the “unbreakable friendship” has not survived the decade during which was set-up. The perception of the ”monolith

¹⁹ In 1950 Stalin and Mao signed the Treaty of Friendship and Mutual Assistance that was followed by other agreements that extended the economic soviet assistance for PRC.

²⁰ Basically those one million Chinese soldiers fought in Korea with Soviet made weaponry.

communist” solidarity was taken for granted in Western countries. Yet, by the end of 1950s the relations between Khrushchev’s USSR and Mao’s PRC were on the way of breaking up. As the strong alliance was the effect of a mix of ideological and geopolitical reasons, so was the split between Soviet Union and PRC.

In doctrinaire terms, Mao resented against the de-Stalinization process pursued by Khrushchev’s regime starting with the Soviet Union Communist Party Congress in 1956. In addition, the Chinese communist party began to react feverishly to the idea of “peaceful coexistence” that was perceived as incongruous to the orthodox Leninist litany of the inexorable clash between the communist and capitalist worlds. For Mao it was crucial to maintain the ideal of a world communist bloc that struggles to win the war against the capitalist coalition. Beginning with early 1960s, the bitter ideological polemic between Chinese and Soviets was official within the communist movement. In 1960, at the third congress of the Romanian communist party and then at the world communist parties conference, the Chinese part openly chided the Soviets on the basis that they have betrayed the communist ideals. Beijing reacted vehemently also when Soviet missiles have been pulled out from Cuba in 1962, claiming publicly that this was a shameful retreat.

For the part of geopolitical reasons, Beijing began to show unrest towards the diplomatic dialog that Khrushchev was pursuing with Western countries. That meant, first of all, that the PRC would not be backed up in its endeavor to defeat the Kuomintang regime in Taiwan. That fear was enhanced by the tense military context at the Taiwan straits that exploded in the direct confrontation between the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and Taiwanese forces (in 1954 and 1958 in clashes over the small islands of Quemoy and Matsu, which lay between Taiwan Island and mainland China). In addition, PRC met with uneasiness the Soviet support for non-aligned states like Egypt or India. Not only that this was diminishing the concept of “communist bloc”, but also Beijing realized with irritation that the Soviet assistance towards non-aligned countries was greater than the assistance offered to PRC. Most important was the controversy around the transfer of Soviet military equipment to India in the context of Sino-Indian border disputes (in 1959 and 1960). While Moscow stated its absolute neutrality towards India-China conflict, Beijing, on its part, condemned openly the Soviet arms transfer to India.

The drifting apart between the two sides translated in practical terms with the hasty termination of Soviet economic and technical assistance in 1960 (around 1400 soviet advisers have been pulled out leaving thus important industrial projects suspended) . The strategic-military cooperation was also put on halt especially after the project of an integrated nuclear Soviet-Chinese structure on PRC territory failed. It was evident that the Soviet-Chinese interests drifted apart badly when Soviet Union, the United States and Great Britain signed the Limited

Nuclear Test Ban Treaty giving thus another reason for PRC to react publicly, stating that it has the right to build its own nuclear capability.

In this context the old Russian-Chinese historical animosities resurfaced and the Chinese official statements regarding the Russian annexation of its northern territories came on short notice. This impacted with the failure to conclude an agreement for border demarcation in 1964 followed by the amassment of military units on both sides of the border. The tension climaxed with a short and intense Sino-Soviet military confrontation on the Ussury River in 1969²¹.

Although the military confrontation was limited and shortly halted, the prospects of a general military confrontation remained. In this context the negative historical bilateral perceptions between Russians and Chinese have been resurrected. On the Russian side, the image of the “yellow invasion” on its territory corresponded with the Chinese resentment over its unjust territorial losses from nineteenth century. The two warring parts have even contemplated the possibility of nuclear strikes. The conflict made clear in the end that the communist solidarity was just a myth and that, besides the communist-capitalist world struggle, it was added a secondary internal rivalry within the communist camp.

From strategic competition to strategic partnership

Roughly, the last two decades of Cold War dynamics in Asia have witnessed a threefold security competition among USSR, PRC and the United States, generating a geopolitical puzzle of pairs-rivals: PRC-USSR, USSR-US and US-PRC. It should be noticed that within these parallel competitions, the PRC was by far the weaker side. The Chinese PLC could stand neither against Soviet Red Army nor against American army. The only conviction on which Beijing could count was that the United States and Soviet Union would not make an alliance. Overwhelmed by two strategic challenges, PRC opted in the end to move towards opening the relations with the United States. Although the meeting between Mao and the American president Nixon in Beijing (1972) produced a limited result and was far from setting up an alliance, it had the meaning of signaling to Moscow that PRC had room for maneuvering against Soviet Union and that Sino-American

²¹ The main and most intense battle on the Ussuri River was at Zhenbao (Damaskii) Island. See details in Yang Kuisong (2000) "The Sino-Soviet Border Clash of 1969: From Zhenbao Island to Sino-American Rapprochement", *Cold War History*, vol. 1(1), pp. 21-52.

security cooperation might be feasible in the event of Soviet attack²².

For Soviet Union, the Chinese defection proved to be appalling not only because its supremacy in the communist bloc was seriously challenged, but also because it could not take full advantage from the disastrous defeat of Americans in the Vietnam War. The Sino-Soviet rivalry became costly when the Soviet strategists realized that the counter-containment against Americans had to be doubled with counter-containment against PRC. While important Soviet military capabilities had to be stocked on its Siberian and Far Eastern border, the Soviets had to contemplate on a web of anti-Chinese military alliances in Asia. The result has been that Sino-Soviet rivalry spilled in Asia and the two sides begun to tensely maneuver in search for bilateral alliances. Beijing sought to enhance relations with Pakistan, not so successful though, while Soviet Union strengthened relations with India²³. Yet, the tensest Sino-Soviet power confrontation has been in Indochina where PRC tried unsuccessfully to stop Soviet-backed Vietnam to take control over Cambodia. This resulted even with a short Chinese military intervention in Vietnam that proved ineffectively.

The 1980s witnessed a steady defuse of tensions within Sino-Soviet relations, which was followed in the post-Cold War epoch by a pragmatically re-orientation of relations from normalization and security-confidence building to close cooperation and strategic partnership. The first sign of openness in the direction of normalization was made by the last president of Soviet Union, Gorbachev, who stated in a speech in Vladivostok from 1986 that his country wants to re-launch relations with China based on good neighborhood relations, friendship and economic cooperation²⁴. This resulted two years later with Gorbachev's visit to Beijing. After an interlude caused by the end of the Cold War and USSR disintegration, it was the turn of Russian Federation's president Yeltsin to turn his attention towards resuming bilateral relations with China.

The two decades that followed Cold War end have shown an impressive turn of Sino-Russian relations from strategic rivals to strategic partners. Part to this

²² See Kissinger, *op.cit.*, pp.612-37; Kissinger, who was the national security advisor of President Nixon, has negotiated the rapprochement between the US and PRC. His approach on this issue is that the US-PRC rapprochement meant the formation of the balance of power in the US-USSR-PRC trilateral security relations.

²³ Pakistan could not afford to confront Soviet Union because of the conflict with India. Regarding Soviet-Indian relations, "The Treaty of Peace, Friendship and Cooperation", in 1971, included weak defense commitments such as the consultation in the event of either being subject to an attack or threat. For details see also Ashok Kapur (1972) "Indo-Soviet Treaty and the Emerging Asian Balance", *Asian Survey*, vol. 12(6), pp.463-474.

²⁴ Lo, *op.cit.*, pp.27-29.

process has been the result of the role played by Russian and Chinese leaders who identified and pursued those common interests based on which cooperation between the two sides could be enhanced (Russian presidents Yeltsin and Putin, and PRC presidents Jiang and Hu). Another part of the openness between Beijing and Moscow was played by the general context in which the two countries developed. For PRC it is important to mention that it embarked from 1978 on a process of modernization and transition to market economy, under the influence of (the de facto leader of PRC) Deng Xiaoping²⁵. On the side of Russia the changes have been dramatically marked by the dissolution of Soviet Union followed by a tumultuous political and economical transition. With the Soviet Union out of picture so was its influence and security presence in the East Asian region. That meant first of all that besides the border issues, in the beginning of 1990s Moscow and Beijing could not perceive any ideological or strategic rivalry between them.

All these changes provided Moscow and Beijing with the opportunity to build up mutual confidence at their borders and to look up for areas where cooperation can generate mutual gains. In the 1990s the process of border delimitation was followed by the Agreement for Strengthening Mutual Military Confidence in the Border Region. Basically this agreement that was extended to a multilateral format with former soviet states Kazakhstan, Kirgizstan, and Tajikistan (the Shanghai Treaty or Shanghai 5) establishes that all heavy weaponry and armored units have to be redeployed at a distance of 100 km from the border²⁶. Mutual security trust building in Central Asia and Far East has enhanced also the prospects of economic cooperation between China and Russia. The intensity of joint Sino-Russian rhetoric, from “constructive partnership” to “strategic partnership” and to “forever good and friendship relations”, showed that the two sides wanted to lift the level of cooperation beyond the insufficiencies that have been characteristic of the exchanges in the beginning of 1990s.

It is not the purpose of this article to examine the details of Sino-Russian cooperation, but it is worth mentioning here that although in the beginning of warming relations the results had limited and below expectations results, the bilateral relations have been substantiated in time. One central result is that

²⁵About the Chinese transition towards “liberalized authoritarianism” and “market socialism” see Doak Barnett (1986) “Ten Years After Mao”, *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 65(1), pp. 37-65.

²⁶Sean L. Yom (2002) “Power Politics in Central Asia”, *Harvard Asia Quarterly* vol. 6(4); Karlra Prajakti and Siddharth Saxena (2007) “Shanghai Treaty Organization and the Prospects for Development in Eurasia Region”, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, vol. 6(2), p.95-99; Ariel Pablo Sznajder (2006) “China’s Shanghai Cooperation Organization Strategy”, *Journal of International Policy Solutions*, vol. 5, spring 2006, School of International Studies and Pacific Studies, University of California.

Russian Federation and PRC have consolidated an environment of stability in Central Asia and along their borders. The Shanghai 5 updated in 2001 to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and on the bilateral side Russians and Chinese officials expanded the agreements of cooperation on economic and commercial ties, the fight against terrorism, transborder criminality and illegal migration. There has been also noteworthy cooperation in the military field in terms of Russian exports of high technological weaponry that is crucial for PLA modernization, and joint military exercises²⁷.

One notable success on improving regional and transborder relations was the way Moscow and Beijing defused local anxieties generated by Chinese migration in the Russian Far East (RFE). Two variables merged in this direction: on one hand it was the economic and demographic catastrophic decline of RFE after the Cold War in parallel with the phenomenon of Chinese labor migration in the region and the economic growth of the Chinese border areas. Although there were Russian domestic actors, mainly from the local political elites in RFE, who have securitized strongly on the “Chinese invasion” threat, Kremlin has managed to calm down this threat scenario construction, while Beijing kept a low profile restraining any public retaliation in relation with allegations from the Russian side²⁸.

The closeness between Russia and China is explained by the convergence of a number of interests raging from regional to wide international issues. Combating secessionist movements within their territory is one aspect²⁹. On a broader picture, Russia and China have pursued a common rhetoric on condemning Western “double standards” in the context of international humanitarian interventions triggered by gross violations of human rights. This was translated in a notable coordination between Russian and Chinese diplomacy at the UN Security Council on Balkans wars. North Korea, Iraq, and Iran have been added to the international dossiers in which the two states identified as a key objective to guard the concept of absolute national sovereignty and to contain international intervention or interferences.

The general vision on how the world order should be seems to be another point of convergence. Moscow and Beijing have criticized the “American hegemony” and

²⁷ Lo, *op.cit.*, pp. 38-56 and pp. 79-81; Ariel Cohen (2001) *The Russia-China Friendship and Cooperation Treaty: A Strategic Shift in Eurasia?*, The Heritage Foundation. Available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/BG1459.cfm>.

²⁸ Lo, *op.cit.*, pp. 59-63.

²⁹ Russian Federation has been challenged by a tough Chechen separatism in Northern Caucasus (the wars of 1994-95 and 1999-2000), while PRC has to manage the risk of secessionist tensions in Tibet and Xinjiang.

have stated their wish for a multi-polar world order. This perception is connected with the securitization process and the tendencies that have defined the two countries external security agendas in the post-Cold War epoch:

For Russia the political-military circles have constantly found irritant the eastwards enlargement of NATO. Especially the movement of the three Baltic States towards NATO was considered a very critical issue for Moscow because these states have belonged to the Soviet Union³⁰. The so-called sphere of influence or privileged interest has been a constant reference point in the security discourse of Moscow meaning that in its immediate neighborhood, the former Soviet space, no interference of any kind should take place and that Russian interest should have preeminence. That kind of securitization went hand in hand with the “great power syndrome” that informed Russia’s long-term objective of returning to a global power status, which plays a crucial role to maintain the world balance of power.

For China the recurrent themes of securitization focus on the territorial reunification with Taiwan, the suspicion over the re-militarization of Japanese power, and to maritime territorial disputes in the South China Sea. The American hegemony and the requirement to counterweight it represent another recurring point of reflection within the Chinese military and scholarly community³¹. A general assumption is that the hegemonic power is unfair and that history proves the inexorable logic of hegemonic fall triggered by the process of balance of power. The external security discourse of PRC is however far from the hysterical perception of encirclement and imminent external invasion from 1950s or 1960s. The anti-American rhetoric and the “one China” maximal priority against any Taiwanese intention for *de jure* independence are balanced by the rhetoric of openness, peaceful rise and constructive international engagement.³²

Although PRC and Russia after the Cold War have managed to build closeness, to construct border and regional security, and to bring cooperation on higher level, defining their relation in terms of a strong strategic partnership, the political-

³⁰ Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) *Managing NATO Enlargement*, Special Report, United States Institute of Peace; JL Black (1999) “Russia and NATO Expansion Eastwards: Red-Lining the Baltic States” *International Journal*, vol. 54(2), pp. 249-266. See also BBC (10 February 2007) “Putin’s speech: Back to Cold War”, available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6350847.stm>.

³¹ David Shambaugh (2000) “China’s Military Views the World: Ambivalent Security”, *International Security*, vol. 24(3), pp. 52-79.

³² The idea of a responsible and nonthreatening rise of China as a global power became part of the Chinese foreign affairs vocabulary in early 2000s. The concept is attributed to Zheng Bijan former vice principal of the Central Party School. See details in Robert L. Suettinger (2004) “The Rise and Descent of «Peaceful Rise»”, *China Leadership Monitor*, vol. 12, Hoover Institution, Stanford University.

military cooperation is less significant. The most striking element, especially after noticing the convergence of security recurring concerns on both sides, is the absence of a mutual defense clause that would elevate the bilateral relations to a political-military alliance. This confirms that the strong partnership might be an appearance and the interests on committing to a defense-security arrangement, on both sides to be missing.

Concluding remarks: The balance of power and the East Asian history

This article reconsiders a key tenet of the realist line of thought in international security studies, respectively the paradigm of balance of power that is designed to explain how the recurrence of security competition among actor-states takes place. Although the component of power and capabilities distribution within the international structure was central for the balance of power theory, other ensuing refinements and inquires reveal that states do not balance against power *per se* or against the most powerful state, but against perceived threats or against the most threatening state.

The balance of threat theory can explain how power rivalry and military conflicts developed in East Asia beginning with the imperialist era of Western power expansion in this region in the nineteenth century. The interplay between competition for domination, expansion and balancing behavior has been the distinctiveness of European modern world that stretched to all other regions during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century³³. East Asia has not made an exception from this trend. Meiji-Restoration Japan chose to modernize its domestic institutions and pursued the objective of becoming a European style great power. The Chinese Empire, which was the civilizational center and the recurring systemic hegemon in the East Asian region, collapsed, leaving thus a huge space for expansion and balance among Western powers and Japan.

Yet the balance behavior experienced an unexpected derail in Northeast Asia with the occasion of Sino-Soviet conflict during the Cold War epoch. Since then the region has remained in a state of disequilibrium. The balance of threat theory would expect the Soviet Union and PRC to maintain a political-military coalition based on the convergence of external threat perceptions. The result was that after

³³ Robert Cooper (2002) "The Post-Modern State and World Order" in Mark Leonard (ed.) *Re-ordering the world: The long-term implications of September 11*, London: Foreign Policy Centre, pp.10-11. Barry Buzan and Richard Little (2000) *International Systems in World History. Remaking the Study of International Relations*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

less than ten years of alliance, the Sino-Soviet relations began to crumble followed by abrupt rivalry, military conflict and strategic competition. Some form of weak balancing occurred with the Sino-American rapprochement in 1972, although there has been no strong agreement that would stand as a PRC - US security cooperation against Soviet Union. Moreover the PRC continued to perceive the US as a security threat and as the principal impediment to territorial reunification. Neither balance nor bandwagoning can explain the security choices of PRC to engage in strategic competition and rivalry with two superpowers (at least from 1964 to 1972), especially in the context in which China was an underdeveloped and backward country highly ruined by Mao's Cultural Revolution experience.

The impact on theoretical ground is that the balance of threat paradigm should go beyond explaining why states choose to form alliances but should also point up why they fail to set up alliances although there are converging external threat perceptions. In this context international history can highlight the historical context in which parallel domestic processes of securitization take place and one of them becomes dominant³⁴.

For the Sino-Soviet split, PRC domestic securitization represents the key for understanding this shift since PRC was the one who opted to depart from the "communist monolith" coalition. On the backdrop of diverging geopolitical interests such as the Soviet Union intention to flirt with the idea of "peaceful coexistence" with capitalist states or to nurse relations with non-aligned states, the PRC decision makers started to put more emphasis on ideological divergence from Moscow, on Marxist-Leninist grounds. PRC developed a competing more radical branch of Marxism-Leninism that produced a split within the world communist movement. Paradoxically, the ideological factor that initially has bound the Sino-Soviet "unbreakable friendship" has developed in the opposite direction being the trigger of rivalry relations.

This internal securitization on ideological divergence was informed by Mao's general vision on PRC, which should have emerged as a leading communist country and a pole of attraction for the world communist movement. Even from the 1930s on, when Mao took effective control over the Communist Chinese Party, he started to sustain a different interpretation of Marxism-Leninism that would be the Chinese communist brand. Thus, PRC status was meant to be at least on equal footing with USSR and, anyway, to be maintained on a junior position in relation with USSR. The outcome of Sino-Soviet split was a twofold competition: geopolitical and ideological. The evidence that a nuclear agreement between

³⁴On securitization see Buzan, Waever and de Wilde, *op.cit*, pp.21-48.

Soviet Union and PRC failed in late 1950s and that PRC entered in the nuclear club against superpowers' interests, stated in the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, shows the ambition of Mao's China to elevate rapidly the country's status to a global power. This should be considered also in relation with the domestic dynamics represented by the Great Leap Forward or the Cultural Revolution experiments that were meant to transform radically and swiftly the PRC.

Summing up, the Sino-Soviet convergence of external threats was overrun by a competing securitization process within PRC, mainly thought by Mao, who had as reference objects the absolute necessity to rapidly gain political and ideological independence from Moscow and to consolidate PRC status to the rank of leadership within the world communist movement.

The second empirical study is centered on the process of Sino-Russian rapprochement that followed the termination of Cold War. It has been identified here a pragmatic and instrumental consensus building on regional security, development of economic ties, arms transfers and joint military exercises, even the successful diffusion of a potential interregional border tension. The ascent of bilateral relations to a strategic partnership raises challenging question regarding how Chinese and Russian decision-makers understand the nature of partnership.

Keeping in mind that the concept of "partnership" has become overused in current international relations, the Sino-Russian partnership seems to be based on converging political rhetoric. The criticism on American hegemony and the vision of a multipolar balance of power order are part of both parties' international affairs vocabulary. This also corresponds to threat perception circulated by military-political establishments of the two states. However, the Sino-Russian partnership suffers from an important limit that is the lack of a common defense agreement. Simpler put, Russia and China do not engage in balancing conduct and thus the balance of threat does not take place in Northeast Asia.

It should be noted that concerning the development of Sino-Russian relations in the last two decades, the recent historical interpretation is much more open to speculations. That is not an impediment to reflect on a broad scholarly debate within regional Asian studies and also within international relations theory on how to decode Russia's and China's standing and behavior in current international politics³⁵. Two hypotheses can be employed in order to give an answer to this puzzle. Both rely on the general assumption that the level of perceived threats is

³⁵For instance, the nature and interpretation of China's peaceful rise and the reflection on what to expect after PRC will become a developed, industrialized and knowledge oriented economy are very vivid within international relations studies. As the literature on this subject is vast, I confine to the references to Brzezinski and Mearsheimer (2005), *op.cit.* and Ikenberry (2008), *op.cit.*

so lessened that neither Russia nor China would be pushed towards a full-fledged political-military coalition against the “American hegemony”.

The *first* hypothesis refers to the “cordial entente” (cordial agreement), which is a historical based scenario. In the beginning of the twentieth century two pairs of bilateral agreements – between France and Great Britain, respectively Russia and Great Britain – fulfilled the objective to defuse bilateral divergences and to enhance cooperation. These agreements have been the transitory stage that smoothed the establishment of a trilateral entente that counterbalanced Germany in Europe³⁶. Correspondingly, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership could be decoded as a cordial entente that prepares the milieu for a future strong counterbalancing alliance. Furthermore, the actual transitory stage can be identified as a soft balancing behavior meaning that Russia - China partnership is formed against a potential, yet not actual, threatening US hegemony. As long as the US performs like an “offshore balancer”, which restrains its unilateral exercise of power, the Sino-Russian partnership would continue to be based on soft means (e.g., cooperation within international institutions, joint statements, ad-hoc joint military exercises, and high tech weaponry transfers) short of a formal alliance agreement³⁷.

And the *second* hypothesis refers to the Sino-Russian partnership as a “tactical convenience” agreement that is based on a number of limited common interests³⁸. In this scenario the two sides have never been interested in raising their relations to a higher level and there is no further space to extend the current areas of cooperation, including here a political-military alliance. The fervent discourse on partnership and the emergence of like-mindedness regarding the systemic order is thus an appearance built on mere rhetoric without the instrumental expected outcome. A growing evident asymmetry of power between Russia and China represents the main impediment for deepening ties. While Moscow focuses on its re-emergence to the recognized status of global influential power, the rapid

³⁶ The British-French cordial entente managed the bilateral divisive colonial issues, while the Russian-British cordial entente settled the bilateral controversial matters on Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. Kissinger, *op.cit.*, 142-172.

³⁷ Stephen Walt (2002) “Keeping the World “Off Balance”: Self Restraint and US Foreign Policy” in John G. Ikenberry (ed.) *America Unrivaled. The Future of Balance of Power*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press; T.V Paul (2005) “Soft Balancing in the Age of US Primacy” *International Security*, vol. 30(1), pp.46-71. For the critical assessment of the theory of soft balance see Kier A. Lieber and Gerard Alexander (2005) “Waiting for Balancing. Why the World Isn’t Pushing Back”, *International Security*, vol. 30(1), pp. 125-138.

³⁸ Jennifer Anderson (1997) *The Limits of Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, Institute for Strategic Studies; Lo, *op.cit.*, pp.38-56.

development of PRC shows that, in the long run, Russian standing within an alliance would be in the secondary place, not on equal footing. The domestic trajectories that Russia and PRC took after the Cold War show a reversing direction: on one hand, the structural persisting weaknesses for Russia, in terms ranging from military and economic infrastructure to demography; and on the other hand, the rapidly growing economy of China that increases correspondingly its leverage in global affairs. It is thus conceivable that PRC might not be interested to raise the bilateral ties in the direction of a military coalition, while the Russian Federation feels increasingly threatened by the prospects of being a junior partner in a military coalition³⁹.

Northeast Asian history represents an intriguing challenge for the paradigms of international relations. The dysfunction of balancing mechanisms starting with the Sino-Soviet split and not recovered even in the context of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership confirm that the balance of power theory is unsound. States choose to form alliances in order to counterbalance the perceived accrual of threats posed by other states. While the balance of threat paradigm is a better substitute, it should be further revised based on historical contextualized empirical cases. The international history illustrates cases that include the exit from a balance of threat scenario, and where the convergence of threat perceptions does not accumulate sufficiently in order to generate/uphold an alliance.

³⁹ In addition the transborder issues represent a latent tension that has the potential to resurface. The RFE remains highly underdeveloped as a forgotten periphery, while economically dependent on China's Eastern provinces. For details see Lo, *op.cit.* pp.56-68.

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