

Brian G. Carlson
Ph.D. Candidate
Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies

Finding the Right Balance: Russia-China Relations in the Age of U.S. Primacy

October 1, 2013 – June 30, 2014
Moscow, Russia

Research Abstract

The working title of my research project in Russia was “Finding the Right Balance: Russia-China Relations in the Age of U.S. Primacy.” This research was for my dissertation, in which I will attempt to apply international relations theory in order to explain and analyze China-Russia relations since the collapse of the Soviet Union, especially the extent and limitations of China-Russia cooperation to constrain U.S. foreign policy. I will open with an examination of four schools of thought in international relations theory: 1) realism, especially neorealism, 2) liberalism, especially liberal institutionalism and interdependence theory, 3) constructivism, and 4) “dynamic” theories such as hegemonic stability theory, power transition theory, and power cycle theory. I will examine these theories’ implications, paying special attention to predictions that they would make for China-Russia relations during this period. Then I will proceed to case studies in an attempt to use international relations theory to explain the relationship. The case studies will center upon three levels of China-Russia relations: global, regional, and bilateral. At each level, but especially at the global level, I will examine the extent of China-Russia cooperation to constrain U.S. foreign policy objectives. In the case studies, I will employ the method of within-case process tracing to establish causal explanations for the policies of China and Russia toward the other during the period under study.

Research Goals

My intention, as outlined in my application for the fellowship, was to spend nine months in Moscow conducting research on Russia's foreign policy toward China. As planned, I gained an affiliation with the Moscow State Institute for International Relations (MGIMO). My research goal was to gain the best possible understanding of Russian views and policies toward China by reading relevant materials in Russian, as well as by interviewing experts. I planned to study Russian views and policies toward China in the post-Soviet era, both with respect to the overall relationship and with respect to particular issues at the global, regional, and bilateral levels. Through this research, I hoped to draw conclusions about the main factors motivating Russian policy toward China, conducting case studies that would help to determine which international relations theories are most useful in explaining Russia-China relations.

In order to gain mastery of written sources in Russian, my goal was to build a comprehensive bibliography on my topic. I would begin with those sources with which I was already familiar and use footnotes in those sources to identify others. In September 2013, just before my departure for Moscow, I attended a presentation in Washington, D.C. by Gilbert Rozman, an expert on Russia-China relations. He discussed a recently published book in Russian on this topic, edited by Alexander Lukin of the Diplomatic Academy, a leading Russian expert on China. This tip was extremely useful. Immediately upon my arrival in Moscow, I began reading this book, which was not only an excellent source in its own right but also helped me identify other useful sources.

My reading of Russian sources helped me to identify leading experts whom I could interview. My objective was to interview as many experts as possible, both for the information that these interviews would yield and for the connections that they would build for current and future research. I also hoped to gain maximum familiarity with relevant Russian think tanks.

Research Activities

In June 2014, I completed my Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program in Russia. My nine months in Russia were a success, both for my research and for my language study. I made considerable progress in researching Russian perspectives on Russia-China relations. In July, I arrived in China to study Chinese perspectives.

In Moscow, I compiled an extensive bibliography of Russian writings on Russia-China relations in the post-Soviet era. The bibliography includes books, journal articles, media reports, official documents, and speeches by Russian officials. I read most of these sources while in Moscow. Upon my return to Washington, D.C. next year, I plan to visit the Library of Congress in order to read some of the sources that I did not have time to read in Moscow. I believe that the bibliography is nearly comprehensive. It includes sources that represent a broad range of Russian viewpoints on the evolving relationship with China. These sources cover issues at the global level, including the response by Russia and China to the U.S. position of global primacy; at the regional level, including issues in Central Asia and East Asia; and at the bilateral level, including such issues as military-technical cooperation and energy trade.

A few examples will indicate the type of sources that I consulted. *Russia and China: Four Centuries of Interaction*, edited by Alexander Lukin, is the book that I mentioned previously. I focused especially on the two chapters that Lukin himself wrote, which cover Russia-China relations in the post-Soviet era, which is the focus of my dissertation. *The Geopolitical Meaning of the Far East* and other writings by Mikhail Titarenko, director of the Institute of the Far East, make a forceful case for establishing close relations with China. *Russia and China in Eurasia* by Sergei Luzyanin covers a broad range of issues on which Russia and China interact, including Central Asia, Iran, and South Asia. *The Defense Industry and the Arms Trade of the People's Republic of China* by Mikhail Barabanov, Vasily Kashin, and Konstantin

Makienko is possibly the most detailed treatment of this subject available in any language. Articles published over the years in a variety of journals, especially *Problems of the Far East* and *International Affairs*, were also useful.

I also closely followed the coverage of current events in the Russian media, especially when it became apparent that the crisis in Ukraine was likely to have a significant impact on U.S.-Russia relations, as well as on Russia-China relations. I regularly read the newspapers *Kommersant* and *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, especially the latter's bimonthly section on international relations called Diplomatic Courier.

Reading all of these sources greatly improved my understanding of Russian views and policies on these issues. It also dramatically improved my reading ability in Russian. By the end of my time in Moscow, I could read much faster than at the beginning.

I also completed more than a dozen interviews with various experts on Russia-China relations. At the institution with which I was affiliated, MGIMO, I interviewed Alexei Voskressenski, a leading expert on Russia-China relations, and Yulia Nikitina, an expert on Russian foreign policy toward Central Asia. During a conference at MGIMO in April, I attended a panel discussion on issues related to China. At the Institute of the Far East, I interviewed leading China experts Mikhail Titarenko, Vladimir Portyakov, and Sergei Luzyanin. At the Carnegie Moscow Center, I met with Dmitri Trenin, a leading expert on Russian foreign policy who has written extensively on Russia-China relations, as well as Lilia Shevtsova, one of my professors from a previous period of study in Moscow. I interviewed Alexander Lukin, who as I previously mentioned was the editor of an important recent book on China-Russia relations. I also interviewed Vasily Kashin, a young expert on China who has written extensively on a variety of issues in Russia-China relations, especially military-technical cooperation. He is the

co-author of the above-mentioned book on this subject. These interviews, in addition to providing much useful and insightful information, also were an opportunity to practice my speaking skills in Russian. With each interview, I grew more confident in my ability to express myself and understand the expert's responses.

In June, I traveled to Siberia and the Russian Far East via the Trans-Siberian Railway. Along the way, I conducted additional interviews with experts in Khabarovsk and Vladivostok. These interviews provided useful perspectives from experts who live in the regions that are in closest proximity to, and therefore most acutely feel the effects of, China and its growing power. In Khabarovsk, I met with Alexander Goryunov of the Institute for Economic Research of the Far Eastern Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who offered valuable insights on the growing economic connections between the Russian Far East and Northeastern China. In Vladivostok, I interviewed Viktor Larin of the Far Eastern Division of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who has written extensively about Russia-China relations, particularly with respect to the regional implications. One of his books, *In the Shadow of the Awakened Dragon*, is an especially interesting account of recent developments in Russia-China relations, particularly the implications for Siberia and the Russian Far East. I also met with Tamara Troyakova and Artyom Lukin of the Far Eastern Federal University, which has a brand new campus that was the site of the 2012 APEC meeting.

On the last day of June, I rode a bus from Vladivostok to Harbin, China, to begin approximately 10 months of research in China. My approach to research in China is similar to the one I took in Russia. By combining what I learn here in China with the insights that I gained during my research in Russia, I hope to present a well-rounded picture of contemporary Russia-China relations, citing a wealth of sources in both languages.

Important Research Findings

My research during the coming year in China is likely to transform my understanding of Russia-China relations. For now, I can venture some tentative conclusions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent visit to China, which culminated in the signing of a 30-year, \$400 billion gas deal, offered Russia an opportunity to reduce its international isolation resulting from the crisis in Ukraine. As during previous periods of post-Cold War tension with the West, Russia aims to use its "strategic partnership" with China to gain leverage over the United States and its Western partners. Some commentators argue that the deal represents a new level of Russia-China cooperation directed against the United States. Both the terms of the gas deal and overall geopolitical trends, however, indicate that the balance of power in Russia-China relations is tilting rapidly in China's favor. As this power imbalance grows, Russia's growing dependence on China is likely to become a source of increasing concern in Moscow.

The U.S. factor clearly plays an important role in Russia-China relations. Although both countries' relations with the United States are of paramount importance, Russia and China remain dissatisfied with the existing international order. They regularly express their opposition to U.S.-led unipolarity and their desire to create a multipolar order. In recent years, both Russia and China have engaged in behavior that has unsettled their respective regions: Russia through its 2008 war in Georgia and its recent actions in Ukraine, China through its increasing assertiveness in territorial disputes in the South China and East China seas. In effect, Russia and China have poked and prodded, testing the limits of the existing order within their immediate regions and mounting limited, calculated challenges to U.S. leadership.

U.S. foreign policy is not the only driving force in Russia-China relations, however. Despite some common interests between the two, signs of discord persist, serving as reminders

of the relationship's apparent limits. For example, news reports on the gas deal suggested that its terms are highly favorable to China. During more than a decade of negotiations, China drove a hard bargain. Even before the Ukraine crisis, Russia faced a narrowing window of opportunity to enter China's market for natural gas, as China's options expanded rapidly. In 2009, China opened a gas pipeline originating in Turkmenistan and passing through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, thus breaking Russia's monopoly on Central Asian gas exports. Liquefied natural gas imports are increasingly available from the Middle East, North Africa, and Australia via maritime trade to LNG terminals in China, and potentially transported from LNG terminals in Myanmar to China by way of an overland pipeline. China also possesses potentially large domestic reserves of shale gas. The crisis in Ukraine, which is likely to spur European countries to reduce their dependence on Russian gas, merely added to the pressure on Russia to strike a deal. The protracted talks that led to the gas deal, like the similarly tortuous negotiations to build a Russia-China oil pipeline spur that opened in 2011, partly reflected Russia's concerns about becoming an energy appendage of China.

Russia's arms sales to China remained robust from the early 1990s until about 2005, when China decided to focus on its own domestic production. In the coming years, Russia may face renewed pressure to provide China with advanced weapons systems. Russia is reportedly considering sales of Su-35 fighters, S-400 air defense systems, and Amur-class submarines. Russia takes comfort knowing that China would use such systems primarily to advance its interests in the South and East China seas, but such proposed sales arouse concern among those in Russia who fear a possible future military threat from China. Russia is also concerned about Chinese copying of Russian military technology.

Signs of diverging interests are clearly apparent at the regional level. Although both Russia and China are mounting challenges to the existing order within their respective regions, neither country fully supports the actions of each other. In March, China abstained from a UN Security Council resolution that would have urged countries not to recognize the legitimacy of the referendum in Crimea that preceded Russia's annexation of the region. China agreed with Russia that the West was to blame for supporting the revolution that toppled Ukraine's government, but it feared that recognizing the referendum in Crimea could set a dangerous precedent for Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Russia has maintained strict neutrality on China's territorial disputes with its Asian neighbors, wishing to avoid involvement in potential regional conflicts.

Of greater concern from Russia's perspective is the prospect of regional rivalry with China. In Central Asia, which Russia considers its backyard, China has made impressive inroads, most dramatically by building oil and gas pipelines from former Soviet republics into Chinese territory. China's plans for an overland "New Silk Road" through Central Asia, along with a corresponding sea route, potentially threaten both Russian interests in the region and the economic vibrancy of Russia's Trans-Siberian Railroad. Russia has not raised public objections to China's growing role, largely because China has not sought to establish political and security control in the region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization also provides a forum for smoothing over potential differences. Russia's concerns could increase over time, however. Part of the rationale for Putin's Eurasian Economic Union is to counter China's presence.

In the Asia-Pacific, Russia's position remains weak, largely because its Siberian and Far Eastern regions are underdeveloped and sparsely populated. These regions could be vulnerable to economic and demographic pressure from China over the long term. Therefore, while striving to

maintain friendly relations with China, Russia has sought to strengthen its position in Asia by developing closer ties with other Asian countries. These relations could lay the groundwork for a future hedging strategy against China's rise. Russia has strengthened military-technical cooperation with Vietnam. Much to China's dismay, Russian energy companies have also engaged in joint offshore exploration with Vietnam in the South China Sea. Russia sells more-advanced weapons systems to India than to China and encourages India's involvement in organizations such as BRICS, largely as a way to dilute China's influence. Russia and Japan have recently improved ties, raising hopes for a possible settlement to their territorial dispute, though the crisis in Ukraine has put this process on hold as Japan has joined Western-led sanctions against Russia. Russia also seeks to build a gas pipeline and a railroad extension from its own territory through North Korea to South Korea. From Russia's perspective, a unified Korean peninsula could serve as a counterweight to China. Russia is far more comfortable with the U.S. security role in Asia than in Europe.

In addition to bilateral and regional tensions, global factors are also likely to limit Russia-China relations. Both countries stress that they have no desire to build an anti-Western political-military alliance. For China, an alliance would harm its crucial relationship with the United States, thus threatening the economic basis of its continued rise. For Russia, an alliance would risk making it a junior partner to an increasingly powerful and potentially threatening China. Only a complete breakdown of U.S. relations with both Russia and China simultaneously, far graver than recent tensions, could lead to a Russia-China alliance directed against the West.

The gas deal is neither a sign of a nascent Russia-China alliance, nor even primarily a response to U.S. foreign policy. Rather, it underscores China's growing power and Russia's resulting dependence on China. For now, the crisis in Ukraine and European security will

continue to dominate U.S.-Russian relations. In the coming years, however, Russia will face pressure to devote increased strategic attention to Asia, where it will find more common ground with the United States than in Europe.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Since the days of triangular diplomacy during the Cold War, the following principle has remained operative: As long as the United States avoids a simultaneous breakdown in relations with both the Soviet Union/Russia and China, the latter two are unlikely to form an anti-Western alliance. Some analysts argue that the United States is at risk of violating this principle. To be sure, U.S.-Russian relations have reached their lowest level of the post-Cold War era, while tensions in U.S.-China relations have also increased recently. Despite a recent warming in Russia-China relations, however, such an alliance is still highly unlikely. The current structure of the international system still places limits on the likely development of relations between Moscow and Beijing, as the analysis in the preceding section suggests. Both Russia and China still have more at stake in relations with the United States and the West than they do in their own bilateral relations.

The United States should seek to avoid actions that would push Russia and China into an alliance. Moreover, the United States should bear in mind that of the two countries, only China is capable of mounting a long-term challenge to U.S. primacy. If the challenge posed by China becomes more acute over time, then the United States and Russia might find common ground in responding to the challenge posed by China. The interests of the United States and Russia are far more compatible in Asia than in Europe. The possible threat that growing Chinese power poses to Russia is another factor that is likely to limit the extent of Russia-China partnership.

Fear of giving rise to a Russia-China alliance should not deter the United States from resisting Russian attempts to undermine Ukraine's sovereignty. The United States and its

European partners should not recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea or turn a blind eye toward Russian support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine. The West should seek a long-term agreement with Russia on European security, including Ukraine, but this is unlikely in the near future. For now, the West should continue to impose costs on Russia for its actions in that country.

Co-Curricular Activity

In June, I met with Christopher Kavanaugh, a U.S. diplomat posted at the embassy in Moscow, an Asian specialist who works on issues related to Russian foreign policy in Asia. Mr. Kavanaugh agreed to speak to me on the condition that his comments would not be for attribution. Therefore, I will only mention that the conversation covered a broad range of topics related to my research, including Russia-China relations, Russia's relations with other countries in Asia, and energy issues.

Conclusions

The conclusions that I have presented in this report are preliminary, and I hope to refine them during the course of my research in China. Without question, however, my time in Russia greatly expanded my understanding of Russian perspectives on these issues. I am very grateful for the opportunity that the Title VIII Combined Research and Language Training Program offered me. I am also particularly grateful to the American Councils for International Education for its skilled administration of the program.

In addition to the progress that I made in my research, the language component of the program was also a success. In Moscow, my language classes were extremely helpful in improving my reading, speaking, and listening abilities. They also increased my vocabulary and

my understanding of Russian grammar. I also sought to improve my language abilities by watching Russian television, spending time with Russian friends, and by reading Russian literature. I read some Pushkin and Chekhov and also attended plays, operas, ballets, and other stage productions based on works by these great Russian writers.

Plans for Future Research Agenda/ Presentations and Publications

In July, I arrived in China to conduct several months of research, analogous to the research that I conducted in Russia. My goal is to obtain a well-rounded picture of Russia-China relations, with equal focus on both countries. After leaving China in approximately May 2015, my plan is to return to Washington, D.C. to spend one academic year writing my dissertation, which of course is the prime focus of my research agenda.

During both the coming year in China and the following year in Washington, I plan to seek opportunities for presentations and publications. I will be happy to take advantage of any opportunities to attend conferences and identify other opportunities to present my work. Earlier this month in Shanghai, I served as the moderator for a speech by Feng Shaolei, a leading Chinese expert on Russia. I opened with a five-minute introduction offering my own views on the subject.

I will also seek opportunities to publish analysis of Russia-China relations, especially when I can peg it to news events such as official meetings between leaders of the two countries. In June, I published an analysis on the website of the Foreign Policy Institute at my own institution concerning the gas contract that Russia and China signed the previous month during Russian President Vladimir Putin's official visit to China. I plan to do more such writing in the near future.