Short Term Policy Brief 46

Patterns of China-Russia Cooperation in Multilateral Forums

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Executive Summary

Multilateral forums vary not only in their participants but also in their purposes and the degree of constraint their decisions impose on members. This paper analyses patterns of China-Russia cooperation based on examples from three forums representing different levels of cooperation and different degrees of constraint. These forums are:

- the East Asia Summit (EAS)
- the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and
- the UN Security Council (UNSC).

Strategic competition between the US and China in the Asia-Pacific region is growing. Although Russia is often assumed to favour China, its behaviour at the EAS and in other forums in fact reveals a variable position, depending on the issue. For example, Russia has failed to support China’s demand that the Spratly and Paracel islands disputes should be resolved through bilateral negotiations between the claimants. In terms of wider strategic calculus, China and Russia once stood together in opposition to US missile defence plans. Now Russia seeks to develop missile defence jointly with the US.

The SCO is at the heart of the China-Russia relationship. Although based on shared views of world politics, the SCO shows signs of internal tension due to political differences between Russia and China and China’s superior economic performance. A notable outcome is that China has effectively broken Russia’s monopoly on transportation networks for oil and gas in Central Asia. If Russia fails to diversify its sources of growth, it risks becoming unstable in the future. However, China-Russia energy cooperation is deepening, which may help to promote regional economic integration.

Russia and China still tend to unite to defend norms of state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs. To a large extent, this is a direct reaction to assertive Western foreign policies which they interpret as expansionist. In dealing with Iran, although the UNSC as a whole recognises the seriousness of the proliferation issue, no effective action has been possible in that forum because of China-Russia cooperation watering down proposed economic sanctions and pre-empting threats of military action.

China-Russia cooperation has been even more obstructive in preventing UNSC resolutions against countries accused of repression. Under the terms of their July 2001 Treaty on Good Neighbourly Friendship and Cooperation, the two states have agreed to oppose the use of force to intervene in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Under the same treaty they have agreed to strengthen the role of the UN, and especially the responsibility of the UNSC for promoting international peace and stability. Joint adherence to the norm of non-interference reflects a fear of political instability at home and a suspicion that the West desires to foment democratic regime change worldwide.
Main Points

- China-Russia cooperation in multilateral forums is sporadic and contingent. Their actions frequently suggest different interests and failures to cooperate even when their interests converge.

- However, on the key issues of non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and human rights, neither Russia nor China is likely to move towards positions favoured by the US and EU.

- The EU should continue to emphasise positive aspects of its relationships with Russia and China, such as trade and investment and cultural exchange, while downscaling expectations in relation to the key issues mentioned above.
Background Brief: Patterns of China-Russia Cooperation in Multilateral Forums

Introduction

This paper identifies patterns of China-Russia cooperation within multilateral frameworks. Multilateralism implies coordinating national policies among three or more states. At a more substantive level, it involves coordinating behaviour on the basis of general rules applicable to all members. By adhering to such rules, states are able to pursue common goals. A discussion of China-Russia collaboration within multilateral frameworks requires consideration not just of the decisions made in multilateral forums but also a clear focus on the goals that these forums exist to promote and the degree of constraint they impose on their members.

Context

In recent years there has been a proliferation of multilateral forums involving Russia and China: in addition to the East Asia Summit (EAS), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the UN Security Council (UNSC), there are the Six Party Talks surrounding the two Koreas, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which Russia finally joined in December 2011, various efforts to build free trade areas in Asia and the Pacific, and a range of summit formats that bring together different combinations of states in the region, the major emerging markets, industrialised countries and so on. For reasons of space, this paper will concentrate on three forums, representing different levels of China-Russia cooperation, different degrees of flexibility and constraint, and different issue areas, all with significant implications for the EU. These are the EAS, the SCO, the UNSC.

The EAS is a new forum for Russia. Its foreign minister formally participated for the first time in November 2011, along with the US President. Meeting annually since 2005, the EAS was founded by the ten countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) plus China, Korea, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, with Russia attending as a guest. China showed some initial enthusiasm for a regional organisation focussed on ASEAN+China, South Korea and Japan. However, after the membership expanded to include India, China welcomed its further expansion, perhaps as a means of ensuring that the format remained relatively “powerless”. Like many other summit formats, the EAS operates by consensus and can generate resolutions of major political importance, but cannot make binding decisions. Of the three forums discussed here, the EAS has the broadest agenda and the least ability to constrain its members’ actions.

The SCO originated in 1996 as the Shanghai Five, including China, Russia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzia. It was renamed in 2001 when Uzbekistan joined. It has a military dimension focussed on “anti-terrorist” exercises, a political dimension focussed on the China-Russia relationship, and an economic dimension focussed on energy cooperation and infrastructure development. Its stated purposes include strengthening relations among the members; promoting cooperation across a broad range of policy fields; and promoting security in the region, including efforts to create a “democratic” and “just” international order. Its decisions are made by a summit of heads of government which meets yearly.
At the heart of the SCO is the China-Russia relationship, governed by the July 2001 Treaty on Good Neighbourly Friendship and Cooperation, under which the two countries have agreed to cooperate *inter alia*: in advocating strict adherence to international law, opposing use of force to intervene in the internal affairs of sovereign states, preserving global strategic balance and security, promoting nuclear disarmament and preventing proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and strengthening the role of the United Nations, especially the responsibility of the Security Council. The SCO has a mid-range ability to constrain its members’ actions. However, especially since China failed to offer political support to Russia in its war with Georgia in 2008, Russia has been trying to maximise its influence in Central Asia through organisations overlapping with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), of which China is not a member. Other problems in the relationship include allegations of espionage, the theft of weapons designs, and the time taken to secure a deal over gas exports.

The UNSC is composed of five permanent members, Russia, China, France, the UK and the US, along with ten other countries elected for two year terms by the General Assembly. Under the UN charter, the UNSC is responsible for maintaining international peace and security and member states are obliged to implement its decisions, which on substantive matters require at least nine affirmative votes including those of the permanent five. It thus has the highest level of ability to constrain its members’ actions.

**Key arguments**

**Geostrategic considerations**

China is in dispute with five of its neighbours in Southeast Asia over control of the Spratly and Paracel island groups and associated territorial waters in the South China Sea. A related issue is the US military stance in Asia more generally. The announcement by Barack Obama in November 2011 that the US would rotate 2,500 troops through Darwin, Australia, was seen as a response to escalating tension in the region. At the same time, the China-Russia strategic partnership is entering a period of flux. For example, at one time, China and Russia were united in their opposition to US missile defence plans, arguing that they would encourage a new Cold War, but Russia has since changed its tune, seeking to develop missile defences jointly with the US, and calling on China to enter into multilateral nuclear disarmament discussions. Russia fears that its own excessive nuclear stockpiles may eventually become obsolete, and has little to lose from reductions. China, by contrast, is seeking to narrow the technological gap with the US, and its nuclear capabilities are poorly understood.

At the most recent East Asia Summit in Bali in November 2011, an important issue was whether to include security topics on the agenda, including the South China Sea dispute. China, whose claims are expansive, seeks to resolve the dispute bilaterally with much weaker neighbours. The US, supported by Australia, India, the Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore, managed to secure the inclusion of the issue. Russia was among the other countries which talked about maritime

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security more generally, and only Burma and Cambodia supported China by not touching on it at all. Although Russia may seek material profit from regional rivalry, for instance by selling more submarines to Vietnam, its commercial ambitions in the region require secure and peaceful shipping lanes, as do those of the EU.

**Economic interests**

China received only six per cent of its oil from Russia in 2010\(^2\). This was before the January 2011 opening of the Chinese spur of the East Siberia Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, which should deliver 300,000 barrels per day to China and make Russia China’s third largest supplier after Saudi Arabia and Angola. However, there are question marks over Russia’s ability to deliver this amount, as East Siberia has been insufficiently explored. If East Siberia’s reserves turn out to be disappointing, China and Europe could eventually become competitors for West Siberian reserves of oil and gas. Meanwhile, a pipeline connecting Turkmen gas fields to China across Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan has recently been completed, allowing the Central Asian States to reduce their dependence on Russian pipelines.

More than 70 per cent of Russian exports to China are raw materials, while more than 50 per cent of Chinese exports to Russia are technology-based\(^3\). While China has been moving steadily up the value chain, Russia is dangerously dependent on oil and gas. China has the money and capacity to deliver needed infrastructure, and Russia has resources China needs. Their cooperation has the potential to become the core of regional integration processes. It is in the EU’s interest that these processes should succeed and that Russia as a whole should become prosperous. Chinese proposals for high-speed rail-links to Europe are an example of the type of infrastructure which may be developed as a result. In addition, as argued by Keun-Wook Paik of the Oxford Energy Institute, projects based on the exploitation of Russian energy resources can help to wean China from its dependency on coal.

**Non-proliferation and human rights**

Both China and Russia emphasise multilateralism in their foreign policy concepts, including resolving conflicts within the UNSC framework. Both also recognise Iran’s right to pursue nuclear enrichment as long as it complies with the International Atomic Energy Agency’s regulations. Western diplomats complain about the role of Russian and Chinese cooperation in “watering down” resolutions against Iran. In January 2012, China refused an appeal by the US to cooperate in implementing economic sanctions, and without Russian and Chinese support effective action under a UN mandate appears next to impossible. North Korea has set a baleful precedent. After more than a decade of fruitless negotiation and considerable expense in the form of aid to North Korea, its regime presented the world with a fait accompli with its first nuclear test in October 2006. India did the same in 1998.

China and Russia have repeatedly used a double veto against sanctions on countries accused of political repression. This includes Syria (October 2011 and February 2012), Zimbabwe (July 2008) and

\(^2\) Jakobson et al., p.26  
Myanmar (January 2007). In the case of Libya (March 2011), Resolution 1973 authorised all necessary measures to protect civilians, and Russia and China both abstained along with Brazil, India and Germany. Russian and Chinese acquiescence took consideration of Arab League support for a no-fly zone, but their attitudes to the action changed after it became clear that its purpose was to assist the rebels.

Russia and China’s double veto of the UNSC resolution on Syria on 4 February 2012 and their ‘no’ votes to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution on 16 February marked a deepening rift with the West. The vote in UNGA (137 countries in favour, 12 against, and 17 abstained) showed that Russia and China were relatively isolated from the mainstream of world opinion, along with such “anti-US” countries as Iran, North Korea, Cuba and Venezuela. While Russia and China have a shared position at the UN, their motives appear different. Although both countries endorse the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states, Russia is a long-standing ally of the Syrian regime, and has plans to build up an existing supply base for its navy in Tartus, while China’s material interests in Syria are slight. China’s main objection to the UNSC and UNGA resolutions was that these resolutions called on President Bashar al-Assad to step down, which meant taking sides in an internal dispute. Although both Russia and China sell arms to Syria, the amounts are small compared to their worldwide volumes.

The strength of China and Russia’s opposition to even political interventions in Syria reflects their shared anxiety about regime changes initiated from below --the so-called “Colour Revolutions”-- which have occurred in former Soviet countries and North Africa. Both countries share a perception that even when no foreign military intervention occurs, these kinds of regime changes have been orchestrated with the participation of Western intelligence services. Analytical commentaries on both Russian and Chinese state-run television have alleged that the situation in Syria has been deliberately stoked up in order to provide an excuse for “humanitarian” intervention. Although neither country sees this as primarily a human rights issue, they would argue that interference in other countries’ affairs in defence of human rights is unwarranted. Thus, Russia was among the 16 countries that boycotted the award ceremony for Liu Xiaobo’s Nobel peace prize in December 2010. Firm Russian support for China’s position in the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) dates from 1995 and Russia helped China to foil US attempts to reform the UNHRC in 2005. It seems likely that only a significant liberalisation of the political climate in Russia or China would change their evolutionary view of human rights as an aspiration which must be balanced against the priority of political stability.

Conclusion

Key Findings

• The China-Russia strategic partnership is entering a period of flux. For example, at one time, China and Russia stood together in opposition to US missile defence plans. Now Russia seeks to develop missile defence jointly with the US.

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China has effectively broken Russia’s monopoly on transportation networks for oil and gas in Central Asia. If Russia fails to diversify its sources of growth, it risks becoming unstable in future.

The EU, Russia and China have a shared interest in deepening China-Russia economic integration as the foundation stone of a wider economic space spanning Europe and Asia.

Although all UNSC members share common interests in pursuing non-proliferation, China-Russia cooperation has effectively thwarted effective action on this issue through the UNSC.

Similarly, in the human rights field, China and Russia are solidly against intervention in the domestic affairs of sovereign states, for reasons related to their own political stability.

Recommendations

As a power whose principal levers of influence are economic, the EU has a common interest with Russia in seeking to moderate military rivalry between the US and China. It should do so, inter alia, by encouraging China to join multilateral disarmament discussions.

The EU should encourage the development of infrastructure such as rail links connecting China and Europe, as well as projects based on the exploitation of Russian energy resources which can help to wean China from its dependency on coal.

While EU Member States should continue using the UNSC as a forum to press for coordinated action on non-proliferation, they should recognise the limits on their ability to compel cooperation from non-compliant states and seek instead to build security in their immediate environment through confidence-building measures.

In the human rights field, the EU should continue to lead the world by example and to argue the case for UN-mandated actions in defence of human rights. However, it should again recognise the limits on its own influence and it should adopt a clear set of principles regarding the circumstances in which it is prepared to intervene in the domestic affairs of other states.