

The Impact of Chinese National Identity on Sino-Russian Relations

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When we think of national identity as a factor in China's external relations, we normally focus on Japan or, for those bolder in their thinking, the United States. Few recently have put China's policies toward Russia in that context. After all, the Chinese and Russians are adamant that their relationship eschews ideology or any other sign of national identity in favor of pure *realpolitik*. This paper takes exception to that interpretation, arguing that it would be difficult to understand the Sino-Russian relationship without paying close heed to the identity factor, not just from the Russian side, but seen in China's views of Russia. Moreover, in the mid-2010s this factor has intensified, now favoring a closer relationship.

Vladimir Putin has made forging a new world order so much a part of his foreign policy that it is becoming ever easier to find links between his reconstruction of Russian identity and his antipathy toward the West with spillover to his embrace of China. The pursuit of a "China Dream" by Xi Jinping is often discussed in other ways: incremental territorial expansion, economic integration through "One Belt, One Road," and a new division of labor with the United States as part of a "new type of major power relations." Notably, in the South Korean coverage of Xi, as in Japanese coverage of Putin, national identity has often been overlooked, as if options are open due to balance of power logic.¹ Yet, there is no less justification for attributing Xi's foreign policy, not least with Russia, as part of a drive to realize a vision of national identity. The Sino-Russian relationship continues to strengthen in ways that make it imperative to explore its roots, keeping in mind that in the 1960s-80s the Sino-Soviet dispute was derailed by notions of identity held on both sides.² Ironically, when both parties prioritized orthodox communist ideology, they were driven to split, while "communist legacy" identities are proving conducive to close relations. Yet, if Xi's handling of national identity has been conducive to a boost in Sino-Russian ties, it can carry the seeds of troubled relations ahead if not carefully managed by the two sides. We need to leave that possibility open without allowing it to obscure the ongoing trends of the past quarter century and the reality that they have recently kept growing stronger.

The relationship between China and Russia (the Soviet Union too) has long been heavily couched in terms of national identity. This was once manifest in the jargon of communist ideology, but the elimination of that type of vocabulary did not mean that relations solely depend on realist thinking or that it is just an "axis of convenience" lacking deeper glue.³ As international observers strain for a clearer understanding of a "strategic partnership" that some now call a "quasi-alliance," it behooves us to look closely at how worldviews matter. In 2014 I studied this question from the point of view of both China and Russia.⁴ Updating that analysis with attention to Chinese national identity is timely since there have been far-reaching, new developments as Xi and Putin have become more assertive. The identity connection, as discussed later, is strengthening in this vital relationship, but Chinese insensitivity and impatience needs to be watched as a possible stumbling block.

In this analysis I apply a framework with two dimensions of national identity to Chinese views on Russia. First, the ideological dimension is introduced with emphasis on three aspects of ideology that are no longer buttressed by the old shibboleth of class struggle. Second, the vertical dimension is presented, as the core of today's identity centered on defense against "regime change" and a "color revolution." Third, a chronology of this bilateral relationship is reviewed to assess how national identity has mattered: the era of Sino-Soviet alliance; the era of the Sino-Soviet split; the 1980s search for normalization when the Soviet Union remained under communism; the 1990s effort to forge a close partnership; the critical interval before Xi became China's leader and Putin returned to the presidency with new assertiveness in 2012; and the current Putin-Xi period.

Fourth, the strength of Sino-Russian relations is examined in light of Chinese narratives about national identity. Conclusions about the implications of this approach for both U.S. and Japanese foreign policy (Trump and Abe are each striving to find ways to weaken Sino-Russian relations by concentrating on overtures to Putin) are then drawn, recognizing throughout the salience of Chinese national identity as a driving force in this bonding.

THE IDEOLOGICAL DIMENSION

Chinese and Russians too insist that there is no ideological element in their bilateral ties since the fact that one state is socialist and the other is not means that this is a relationship between states with different systems. Yet, communist ideology has changed so much in the time since traditional socialist thought prevailed in both countries (to the early or mid-80s) that we would be remiss to take these assertions at face value. Actually, quotes from Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao became rare (much more so in Russia), and class struggle was dropped as an ideological matter, but ideology can take other forms. As long as the premises of a narrative are regarded as unassailable and essential to national pride, they can be said to be part of a nation's ideology—even more so if censorship protects them.

Three aspects of China's ideological identity have far-reaching implications for relations with Russia. The aspect of socialism has positive implications. Even though Russia is not calling itself socialist and is not governed by a communist party, narratives about it serve to reinforce Chinese identity. After all, socialism is a story about the Russian Revolution and the overwhelmingly positive example of Soviet history from which China borrowed. Just conveying that narrative draws an important link with Russia that is not comparable to any other link China can establish. In repudiating aspects of socialism in the 1980s and early 1990s—limits existed, and soon there was backtracking and little amplifying—the Chinese writers about the history of socialism, under considerable censorship, took care not to denigrate much of the history of Soviet socialism.⁵ Moreover, the sharp divide over what constitutes socialism during the period of the Sino-Soviet split, when much about the Soviet Union was demonized and its foreign policy blamed no less than that of the United States, has been reversed. Blame for what went wrong in this period is centered now on the U.S. side, helping to redeem the Soviet image. Second, since Vladimir Putin replaced Boris Yeltsin, Russian glorification of Soviet history has established much more overlap with Chinese socialist historiography, and restraint in criticism of Mao and the history of Chinese communism has removed what could have been a serious thorn in relations. Whereas Soviets demonized Mao, while the entire history of the communist movement in China was blamed for the distorted track taken,⁶ and Chinese demonized Khrushchev and Brezhnev in pinpointing the post-Stalin era as a “bourgeois deviation,” historical memory with emphasis on socialism draws the two countries closer of late.⁷

Salvaging the reputation of the traditional communist periods is a common objective of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping. These are times remembered today not for class struggle and the mass murders it entailed, but for economic construction and the glorious foreign policy choices that were made (except for the relative quiet about decisions that led to the Sino-Soviet split). This is of such unassailable significance in China that designating it an ideological priority is justified. Although there is more diversity of opinion in Russian publications and less insistence on towing a narrow line when the subject of historical socialism arises, history education has shifted in a direction parallel to that of China.

The renewal of ideology in China has not received adequate attention. Intensification of education in what is now authenticated as Marxist and Maoist thought is unmistakable.⁸ This introduces not only the history of China under communist party leadership, but also the history of Russia in a mostly positive narrative despite some explanation for what led to the collapse. To the extent the collapse of the Soviet Union is blamed on Gorbachev as a traitor and the infection of Western cultural imperialism, little about Soviet policy needs to be questioned. The lessons learned in the first half of the 1990s from that failure were more conducive to reform, while those stressed of late serve more to legitimize socialism. David Shambaugh has recognized this shift, arguing that this makes reform difficult.⁹ A more ideological China in parallel with Putin's orthodoxy is boosting bilateral relations.

The second aspect of ideology is anti-imperialism or, in recent parlance, opposition to hegemonism—military, political, economic, and cultural. Russian writings have swung heavily in this direction, reviving much of the rhetoric of the Brezhnev era, while China has kept this theme alive with scarcely any hiatus since reforms began in 1978.¹⁰ Even more than in the case of writings on socialism, there is overlap. Chinese do not treat this as ideological, arguing that great power reasoning and realist thought account for their opposition to U.S. hegemonism, while they accuse the U.S. side of arousing alarm about the “China threat” as a form of anti-communist ideology, which they also dub a continuation of “Cold War mentality.” This is precisely what Russians call the same phenomenon. The language from both partners is so close to the ideological tracts in their countries decades ago that there is no good reason to call it ideology then and refrain from that label today. An overlap against imperialism plus that in favor of socialism makes for a powerful mix.

Whereas class struggle and quotations from the Marxist classics were long treated as the crux of the communist ideology, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and others raised anti-imperialism to the same pedestal. This appeared to be eclipsed with the shift to market integration into the global economy in China from 1978 and in the Soviet Union before its demise, but it was never allowed to drown out the charges against imperialism or hegemonism except in a small range of publications and for a very limited timeframe, which was compressed further in China by the backlash against the June 4 demonstrations and the sanctions that followed. It was not long before Chinese recognized close overlap in Russian thinking.¹¹

The third aspect of ideology is more divisive. It is nationally specific, called Sinocentric in China and Russocentric in Russia, and it glorifies the centrality of one's country in its historical surroundings. This poses the most serious identity challenge for the relationship. On the Russian side, it means fear of losing a predominant place in areas once part of the Soviet Union, such as Central Asia, as well as lingering sensitivity to perceived signs of “quiet expansionism” into the Russian Far East. On the Chinese side, it signifies reviving centrality over areas previously in China's tributary system as well as establishing control without contestation over minority-centered areas and maritime zones. The potential for clashes premised not just on national interest, maximizing power nearby, but on national identity, justifying the moral authority to deserve this sphere of influence, is considerable. For Russia, fear of China's intentions has, at times, been widespread, evoking emotions fanned at the time of the Sino-Soviet split. China has taken pains to quiet such concerns.

The potential for a clash between Sinocentric and Russocentric thinking has existed even as the bilateral border dispute was resolved with successive decisions in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s.

The obvious testing grounds for such a clash was the Russian Far East, where Russian “yellow peril” emotions were aroused in the 1990s—over migration and various types of economic activities—even as China’s leaders worked to minimize reasons for any identity dispute despite having for a quarter century aroused irredentism over this very area. Most recently, the potential for a clash rose as Russia established the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) including much of Central Asia as China launched the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) across the same landscape. Yet, Putin and Xi instructed all media to laud the complementarity of these projects, allowing little language to seep into public purview to suggest that the Sinocentric and Russocentric agendas are at odds. Each side is showcasing this key identity agenda with emphasis on other arenas—directing an identity gap toward the West in Ukraine or the South China Sea—not versus each other. Whether this will endure is questionable, as Russia indirectly tries to evade China’s calls for acquiescence to advancing Sinocentrism, but, so far, the situation is under control for reasons one can attribute to the weight of other dimensions of national identity and to the sleight of hand of diverting discussions of Sinocentrism and Russocentrism elsewhere. It is also relevant that Russia could be badly hurt should China retaliate over a policy shift.

For a period Mao’s charges targeting tsarist imperialism in taking China’s land sustained by the border dispute with the Soviet Union, accompanied by accusations against the illegitimacy of Soviet control in Central Asia, made Moscow the principal target of Sinocentrism. Even as this focus was greatly diminishing, there was concern through the 1990s of a national identity clash over Central Asia—now cut loose from Moscow’s sovereignty. When that was handled well enough to prevent a widening identity gap—at a time of de-emphasis on both Sinocentrism (except for Taiwan) and Russocentrism—it remained unclear if this could be sustained as the balance of economic power shifted to Beijing from Moscow at an accelerating speed. Increasingly in the 2000s it was Putin’s Russocentrism that appeared to be the foremost stumbling block to mutual trust as many Chinese proposals on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) were turned aside in fear that Central Asia would be torn from the Russian orbit. Abruptly, in the mid-2010s Xi and Putin both reinforced their country’s involvement in Central Asia and diffused the tensions by proclaiming the complementarity of their signature initiatives—the SREB and EEU. The significance of this agreement for the way the two sides define national interests has been recognized. How it alters national identity narratives is less noticed.

Mao’s decision to showcase the border dispute with Moscow in the 1960s and 1970s rather than the Taiwan issue (both were highlighted during the late 1960s but the balance was shifting toward the former even before Nixon went to China) indicated that he was more focused on widening the identity gap with Moscow than with Washington. Deng’s decision to downplay the border dispute with Moscow in the 1980s paved the way to normalization of relations and removing this problem from national consciousness, as Jiang Zemin and then Hu Jintao refocused on the Taiwan issue. The identity gaps with Washington and Moscow are constructed depending on national priorities. Even more so, this happened when Xi Jinping chose to raise tensions over the East and South China seas and to look aside as North Korea grew more aggressive—all related to demonization of the United States. When Putin decided to annex Crimea and demonize the United States over its conduct in Europe, the overlapping identity gap widening with the West proved decisive. Sinocentrism and Russocentrism were oriented away from Sino-Russian ties and arenas where they could clash toward animosity toward the United States and its allies. The forces behind this reorientation are still formidable with no fading in sight.

THE VERTICAL DIMENSION

Setting aside international relations, which could be construed as maximizing a positive balance of power, historical themes, which could be attributed to responding to images of past humiliation and injustice, and other dimensions of identity closely linked to pride in economic or political success, a focus on the vertical dimension concentrates attention on the state's control of society against potential threats, both internal and external. Keeping the communist party in power looms as a theme in Chinese writings covering at least four issues: 1) lessons from how the Russian empire and, later, the Soviet Union collapsed; 2) arguments on what the United States does to undermine regimes elsewhere; 3) specific arguments on what the United States seeks to do to undermine China as well as Russia; and 4) assertions about China's national identity and what internal forces could become a threat to its survival. Along with ideology, I argue, the vertical dimension serves to open a window on what matters most for national identity in not only opposing the West and the United States, but also finding common cause with Russia and boosting bilateral ties.

The collapse of the Soviet Union continues to resonate in China, as in Russia, as an event of earth-shaking importance, traumatic for its impact on the development of socialism as the successor to capitalism in the evolution of the globe and for the potential duplication of this outcome in China. Much of the analysis of why this happened is found in efforts to analyze what I call the vertical dimension. Coverage ranges from how the state manages ethnic minorities to issues of centralization and decentralization in managing society. The shortcomings of Soviet policies are, in some cases, traced back to the Russian empire.¹²

U.S. cultural imperialism, interference in the internal affairs of other states with the goal of undermining a regime or even a civilization, and devious use of exchanges for intellectual subversion, are all matters raised in Chinese publications. Promotion of "freedom of the press and religion" is portrayed as a threat to state-society relations. Struggle over this dimension of national identity involves the promotion of ideas that can alter the balance between the state's authority and that of civil society, including international NGOs. The danger to Russia is often associated with that to China also coming from Western ideas.

Much of the criticism of U.S. policy toward China and Russia focuses on alleged designs to undermine stability. This is not about sending armed provocateurs into the country to plot the use of violence. Rather, it is warnings against spreading ideas deemed to have the potential to prompt people to press for "human rights," to promote "democracy" that damages stability, and to organize, perhaps in cooperation with NGOs in support of the "rule of law." Actions such as these are depicted as destabilizing not just to the regime in power, but to the essence of Chinese civilization, which is equated with national identity. Communist Party legitimacy is entwined with civilizational continuity, however at odds that is with the vilification of much of that civilization during the heyday of Maoism.

Beyond the promotion of "universal values" treated as antithetical to national values, the threat identified in China comes from efforts to report on China and explain its policies in ways that the regime considers not only critical, but destabilizing. Negative reporting and the promotion of unfettered Internet access able to promote criticisms draw harsh rebukes in defense of the "vertical" dimension of national identity. Chinese sources take a similar stance against Western criticisms of Russia, as they find common cause with that nation.

Observers have been prone to treat warnings about the threat of a “color revolution” as a weak thread holding China and Russia together due only to overlapping opposition to U.S. foreign policy. They make this into a realist concern, leading to balance of power moves. Instead, it should be recognized as a partner with anti-imperialist ideology no less salient in reinforcing bilateral relations than support for democracy, human rights, and universal values is for bonding between the United States and its closest allies. Indeed, the vertical dimension of identity already was overshadowing class struggle in the Soviet Union from the 1950s and quickly came to do the same in China in the 1980s, leaving a clear legacy.

The vertical dimension has acquired greater immediacy of late due to Russian hacking to influence the U.S. presidential elections, explained as retaliation for what Putin sees as U.S. interference in Russia’s internal affairs, and to Chinese tightening of controls over all areas of information and expression with warnings against the danger of Western thought. Conveying an image of beleaguered states, whose civilization is being attacked by forces plotting to weaken existing authority, Russians and Chinese leaders have found common cause, which had eluded their predecessors in the 1960s-80s. Reconstruction of national identity around a looser ideological narrative and a more prioritized vertical dimension is the foundation of a narrower national identity gap, which is the anchor of the relationship.

A CHRONOLOGY OF BILATERAL RELATIONS

Orthodox communist ideology to which both Moscow and Beijing subscribed held the bilateral relationship together in the 1950s. Strong similarities in thinking about the vertical dimension of identity were conducive to close cooperation, even as rifts were appearing. While there were resentments over particular affronts by one country to the other, there was no open and direct mutual criticism. Yet, focusing on these dimensions we observe strains in the relationship, especially on the Chinese side. This was an era in which even minor differences in ideological interpretation aroused consternation. Stalin and then Mao had made ideology the core of national identity, revising it as a weapon in intra-party struggles. When Khrushchev chose to make fundamental changes in ideology in 1956, it threatened Mao’s legitimacy and led to a disguised ideological counterattack. Also, by challenging some core elements of the vertical dimension of identity, notably the “cult of personality,” Khrushchev had shifted the national identity terrain for Mao. By the end of the 1950s Mao had determined that the gap between the two communist giants was so serious that China had to reconstruct its national identity independently. The gap opened the way to the Sino-Soviet split, as clashing national interests grew uncontrollable.

The Sino-Soviet split was difficult to resolve in large part because of the national identity choices made by Mao. He doubled down on ideology and the vertical dimension as the core of national identity, while pushing China into more extreme positions that allowed no room for reconciling with the Soviet Union, whose identity was demonized. As much as the Soviet side was guilty of demonizing China too in ways that stymied those eager to find common ground, it was China until the end of the 1970s that so sharply defined its national identity in opposition to Soviet betrayal of socialist ideology and class struggle that even talks toward ameliorating tensions could not have any chance of success.

The decade before normalization in 1989 was a more interesting period for bilateral ties, as Chinese national identity shed much of its rigidity and responded to the changes under

Gorbachev in ways that could have led not just to normalization talks and a suspension in mutual criticisms, but also to reconciliation. From the Chinese side, what prevented this outcome? First, it was a decision to block publication of reform writings about socialist ideology beyond a small number, which largely interpreted statements by China's leaders. Reform sociology was narrowly focused, above all on economic change, without turning back to Khrushchev's reform inspirations (he remained a villain) or finding inspiration in Gorbachev's reform quest. Insistent on maintaining its ideological control over critical aspects of identity and blaming Soviet reformers for undermining the communist party and the vertical dimension of identity, China's leadership—many of whom were skeptical of Deng Xiaoping's reforms and the intentions of the two successive party secretaries Hu Yaobang and Zhao Ziyang—found the Soviet Union to be an identity challenge. After all, they were conscious of the shared challenge of breaking away from traditional socialism. It would have been easier to narrow the identity gap with a non-reformist Soviet Union if the Soviet side had merely dropped the identity obsession of just a few holdouts against China's reforms than to do so with reformers seen as more threatening to China's identity. The realist obstacles of Soviet troops in Afghanistan and Mongolia and support for the Vietnamese troops in Cambodia mattered, but not as much as many analysts have argued.

In the 1990s not only was China's national identity gap with Russia less than many think, identity overlap was drawing the two countries together more than most have suggested. It was seen in rapid mobilization by guardians of the legacy of socialist identity against "westernizers," a target shared with the Chinese. There was a strong ideological element to what was portrayed as resistance to U.S. unipolarity, given the large weight assigned to "anti-imperialism" in past doctrine. The U.S. presence in areas deemed to belong to China or Russia historically—Taiwan and Ukraine—also brought the two together in support of each other's ideological stress on a natural Sinocentric or Russocentric order. Finally, the vertical dimension was redefined in both cases as a struggle to protect a top-down system against foreign infiltration, civil society inspired from abroad, and "universal values" that threatened the power of the political elite, whether a communist party of something else. As China and Russia were tightening economic ties with the United States and its allies, they were circumspect in spelling out the full extent of their rapprochement, and many on the outside mesmerized by Russia's shedding of communism and China's enthusiasm for a market economy did not recognize how much the Sino-Russian relationship owed to the legacy of traditional communism and to the way national identities were being rebuilt.

The decisions by Putin from 2003 to greatly strengthen vertical control and from 2004 to more aggressively oppose "color revolutions" and by China's leadership from 2008 to do the same greatly raised the level of national identity consensus and fueled closer ties. The Putin era reassessed ideological themes—the verdict on Stalin, the victory in WWII, the pride in Soviet power, the justice in Cold War resistance to the West, etc.—and put great stress on the vertical dimension of Russian power—historically and at present. In turn, China was proceeding in the same direction. Chinese welcomed the negative view on the Gorbachev and Yeltsin eras in Moscow and found increasing familiarity in what they were hearing from their Russian counterparts. Although some Russian barriers to Chinese objectives—a stronger SCO, investment by China in major Russian firms, open borders between Northeast China and the Russian Far East, etc.—rankled China's leaders, the growing national identity overlap outweighed such matters.

The Xi-Putin period marks the culmination of four decades of narrowing national identity gaps following the death of Mao. Ideology is more conspicuous. Both Russocentrism and

Sinocentrism are more assertive. Anti-Western rhetoric has grown sharper. Controls have been greatly strengthened to maintain the vertical order. On this foundation, relations are closer than at any time since the 1950s without the narrow preoccupation with dogma as the core of national identity, which proved to be a time bomb for relations in that decade. Chinese did not trust Gorbachev at all, came to trust Yeltsin somewhat, and have grown to trust Putin in large part because they understand the national identity forces that drive his policies. To be sure, there remain conflicting national interests, e.g., in Central Asia, in dealing with the great powers Japan and India, and in managing some regional and global issues. Yet, China's care in preventing any of them—deferring to Russia across Central Asia and controlling movement into the Russian Far East, for example—from rising to the level of a serious identity gap accounts for the closeness of relations.

THE STRENGTH OF SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONS AND CHINESE NATIONAL IDENTITY

Chinese were confused by Gorbachev and then, briefly, by Yeltsin because not only did they find the betrayal of socialism unfathomable—seen within their own identity fetters—but the emergent national identity they encountered was inexplicable to them. Did the U.S. subversion behind Gorbachev's "treason" really have the capability of transplanting such an alien identity? Was Russia actually part of the West onto which communism had been only superficially grafted? Was the intellectual elite in a more urbanized and educated socialist state so easily turned against the system that had nurtured them? Were the ethnic minorities so obsessed with divisive identities that the socialist system was left in danger? The questions asked about the Soviet collapse resonated as challenges for communist rule in China, not easily dismissed with assurances that China's national identity is distinctive.

Reassuringly, intensified Chinese meetings with Russians from 1992 revealed that many were more influenced by the legacy of Soviet identity themes than Western ones. While a few policymakers for a short time defied this interpretation, the interlocutors meeting the Chinese came largely from communities critical of the West and defensive of the vertical identity of a state endangered by external pressure and newly unleashed centrifugal forces. Arms salesmen, academic leaders, local authorities, and enterprise heads—those in contact during the first half of the 1990s before Westernizers were swept from their positions—found common cause with the Chinese. As the siloviki came to dominate, their distrust of the West easily overshadowed their concerns about China, despite some demagogues in the Russian Far East or elsewhere. Chinese were reassured that the identity gap is narrow.

Chinese national identity may have appeared to flounder for two decades before Xi took the party secretary post, but that conclusion obscures the purposeful, top-down designs to reconstruct identity without contradicting Deng's dictum to "keep a low profile." Part of this strategy was to minimize identity gaps with Russia—to satisfy Russians that there is no "quiet expansionism" that would set off identity alarms; to show deference in the SCO on matters of identity and security, while proceeding in an unobtrusive manner in projects that served economic objectives; to censor criticisms of Russia's leadership and policies, keeping in mind the deleterious impact of repeated mutual attacks over two decades to 1982; and to do everything possible to boost a joint narrative on international affairs that would drown out potential conflicting accounts. Much as China's

narrative over 20 years drove the Sino-Soviet split to new lows, its narrative over the past 25 years has succeeded in minimizing awareness of a national identity gap. Conscious shaping of discourse can have a powerful effect, especially when Putin has enthusiastically joined in a conspiracy of silence about anything that could inflame public opinion on either side.

Management of national identity challenges has been tested in the past few years. When Xi announced the SREB, there was reportedly consternation in Russia before agreement was reached that this would be treated as an opportunity, not a danger. When Putin went into Crimea and annexed it, disregarding the sanctity of national borders, China refused to endorse the move, concerned about the ramifications for its territorial claims—notably to Taiwan. Yet, Chinese rhetoric was uncritical of Russia, while laying the blame on the West for disrupting the status quo in Ukraine, and Russia credited China with showing an understanding of the Russian position. The two sides strive to diffuse possible sources of tension and public distrust. This is proof of cooperative management of identity arousal. Recalling the legacy of the Sino-Soviet dispute and the damage it did to both countries' foreign policy and capacity to keep the target on the West, they are exercising restraint.

China and Russia have founded their post Cold War relationship on an understanding on how to keep national identities from damaging their relationship and, even more, to make them a source of support. Each side silences or marginalizes those who would raise any sensitive issue: imputing the motives of the other side, as if it has long-range ambitions to deny one's own side its rightful role, i.e., Sinocentrism or Russocentrism. Despite certain challenges, they have dug down deeper in this understanding. For Chinese at least three identity themes have contributed to relative confidence that Russia is a reliable partner. First, the debate about civilizations excludes Russia from the West, views efforts by U.S. officials and others to disseminate values as unacceptable interference so provocative to Russians that they fear their civilization is in danger, and concludes (without forthright discussion of the communist legacy on civilizational rhetoric) that Russia will remain hostile to the West. Yet, there is a counter-argument that traditional thinking in Russia is holding back its turn to the East (to China) and still keeping Sino-Russian relations from realizing their full potential. Even the Ukraine crisis has failed to quiet such reservations.

One article reports on a debate in China whether after the Ukraine crisis Russia would turn to the East. Disagreeing with many specialists, the authors argue that its center will remain in the West not only for structural reasons, but due to the limitations of traditional thinking. Yet, they see more opportunities than challenges ahead for the Sino-Russian relationship and urge China to seize the chance to deepen relations, while not becoming so optimistic it is blind to the challenges or allows these ties to damage ties to other great powers. One viewpoint is that Russia's interests in Asia are economic, while its security interests are mostly elsewhere, and security takes precedence. Another is that Russia has too little power to gain a large voice in Asia, especially relative to China's rise. Examples cited are Russia's weak leverage in ASEAN and reluctance to strengthen the SCO given fears that China is likely to benefit due to the power imbalance. Holding Russia back in its movement to the East, the article stresses, are concerns about China: expansionism in the Russian Far East to the point of occupation; imbalance in military power, leading to restraint in selling some arms; and the lingering impact of the "China threat theory." Yet, these old concerns are being overshadowed by recent developments, the authors assert, as they list ways in which relations have been drawing closer. As for challenges, they note: Russia's desire to diversify its Asian ties, pursuing states with territorial disputes

with China—Vietnam, India, Japan, and South Korea—and a desire to both have close ties to China and to balance it and prevent polarization; a quest to become the third force, as small powers try to hedge in their dealings with China and the United States with the possibility that Russia will find convenience in working with Japan, South Korea, and the United States in limiting China and developing energy ties; a goal of increasing influence in Asia that raises the possibility as it turns more to the East competition will grow with China as Russia favors the EEU; concern that a sharp shift by the United States to drop sanctions and improve ties to Russia could turn Russia away from China and back to Europe. Missing in this contrarian analysis is any sense of what is driving Russia away from the West apart from Ukraine in contrast to its stress on fear of China traditionally embedded in Russian thought.¹³ Chinese wariness of the inadequacy of Russia's shift to China, especially by those who miss the big picture of national identity, must be noted. It suggests impatience that as far as Russia has shifted, China keeps insisting on even more.

Chinese sources found Russia in 2015, when optimism about joining the SREB and EEU was reaching a high pitch, not doing enough to solidify relations. Sought was a fuller embrace of SREB, not remaining a bystander on Asia-Pacific security, stability, and also identity matters. It should not encourage those, such as India and Vietnam, striving to balance China. To do so is to fail to stand against the identity target—the United States—while assisting its balancing. This is a plea for a much closer relationship, as if there is no difference between Russia and China's national interests. While calling the relationship equal, mutually trusting, and serving mutual interests, the article sets aside the potential conflict between Sinocentrism and Russocentrism. Another article offers a reminder that Russia is not essential for the SREB, and there are many challenges to overcome before its role there is secure. While the apparent stress is on acceptance of China's economic presence beyond anything previously acceptable (a kind of Eurasian regional economic integration with a division of labor long opposed by Russia), the idea that the SREB can satisfy Russian national interests is buttressed by claims that it, as well as a much stronger SCO, would enable joint identity goals to be realized. Reforming the world order, blocking U.S. hegemonism, reinforcing the principle of non-interference in internal affairs, cooperating against color revolutions, forging a regional order opposed to a revival of Japan's militarism, and defining Russia's turn to the East in a manner China prefers, are all signs that Chinese are pressing for Sinocentrism without giving adequate thought to accommodating Russocentrism. Tensions associated with this type of thinking are bound to give Russians pause, but the alternatives remain unclear.¹⁴

Further evidence of Chinese positive expectations for Russia come from a mid-2016 poll, in which 46.8 percent expected Russia's influence in Asia to grow over the next decade and 74.1 percent trust Russia to deal responsibly with world problems.¹⁵ Over 80 percent of Chinese respondents see Russia as a very or somewhat reliable partner. Compared to the other great powers, Russia is held in high regard, a reflection of a narrow identity gap.

CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE TRUMP AND ABE OVERTURES TO PUTIN

As a businessman seen by some as ready to deal and as an advocate of close relations with Putin independent of national identity considerations, Trump appears to be taking issues such as democracy and human rights off the table. His promises to get tough on

China over trade suggest that he is focused on jobs. Yet, the potential for disruption over national identity themes should not be discounted. Trump's appointees are not realists with diplomatic background or economists with a deep understanding of commerce, but believers in particular causes with a record of dismissing balanced assessments of how to make policy decisions. The way Trump handled Taiwan in December attests to this. His impact on Sino-Russian relations may not be what many observers have anticipated.

One possible impact is removing identity from Russo-U.S. relations and, in the process, reducing Russia's responsiveness to Chinese identity appeals. Russia, presumably, would become less critical of the West, which is a major part of its ideological impetus. Spared attacks for its disregard of human rights and civil society, Russia would not feel a need to make common cause with China on the vertical dimension, one could assume. Yet, this expectation depends on three unlikely developments: 1) Trump's success in removing values from U.S. foreign policy, when his own "American first" approach and disrespect for liberal integration through economic ties and realist balancing through security ties is likely to make others even more wary of U.S. foreign policy; 2) Putin's willingness to put national identity aside in Russian foreign policy, instead of driving hard to achieve goals based on it given weakening U.S. resistance; and 3) Xi's inability to make a counter offer to Putin more favorable to his economic aspirations as well as his national identity ones.

Abe's wooing of Putin suggests the limitations of an offer based on what are assumed to be shared national interests. Conclusions drawn from the unsuccessful December 15-16 summit in Japan indicate: Japanese overestimated the pull of balancing China in Asia via closer ties to Japan; economic lures were welcome, but they only led to more demands and no sign of a breakthrough in relations; as talks progressed there was no movement on national identity issues to indicate that Russia was seeking more common ground, at odds with the experiences in bilateral talks of 1986-94 and 1996-2001; and when the Japanese side became excited by the slightest signs of improvement, the Russian side responded by driving a harder bargain. Abe-Putin personal ties have raised hopes, as Trump-Putin ties may also do, but they have not proven to be a stimulus for give-and-take negotiations. If some observers blame the lingering territorial dispute for the impasse, I disagree since the formula for resolving it once pursued by Putin is now championed by Abe to no avail.¹⁶

Two national identity dimensions—ideological and vertical—propelling Sino-Russian relations onto a higher level have grown more conspicuous in the mid-2010s. Their role, building on a quarter century of identity reconstruction as bilateral ties have improved, is increasingly emphasized by Putin and Xi. While Putin's assertive Russocentrism raises the danger for China of being turned against it, especially in case of careless handling of Central Asia, an understanding holds that this will be focused on the West just as China's rising Sinocentrism will be centered on the East. Keeping the SREB and EEU on track to be complementary rather than contradictory is no easy task—national interests could be seen as in serious conflict—but censorship has sufficed to narrow the identity gap so far.

Abe and apparently Trump too seek to wean Russia away from China, counting on moves to refocus national interests—economic agreements for the Russian Far East, security ties of a less confrontational nature in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, common interests showcased at summits as leaders speak warmly of each other, etc. To succeed requires a clear understanding of the nature and strength of the Sino-Russian bond. This is missing in

Japanese media, and it is unlikely to be present in Trump's makeshift calculations. To focus on balance-of-power reasoning and conventional conflicts of interest is to miss the essence of China's long-term strategy, Xi Jinping's recent re-enforcement of the role of national identity, and Putin's overall national identity rationale for close ties to China.

ENDNOTES

1. Just as Japanese leaders and much of the media treat Putin as a realist ready to cut a deal with Abe without regard to national identity or anything but imputed balance of power considerations with China, many South Koreans and their media have treated Xi Jinping as a realist, whose policies toward Seoul, Pyongyang, Tokyo, and Washington are limited to balance of power concerns. U.S. skepticism about how Japan is treating Putin and how many in the ROK are treating Xi is leading to divisive exchanges in DC seminars. See the bi-monthly "Washington Insights" in *The Asan Forum* in 2016 and No. 1, 2017.
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8. Elizabeth Redden, "Calls to Strengthen Ideological Education in China," *Inside Higher Ed*, December 9, 2016.
9. David Shambaugh, *China's Communist Party: Atrophy and Adaptation* (Berkeley, CA and Washington, DC: University of California Press and Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2008); David Shambaugh, *China's Future* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016).
10. David Shambaugh, *Beautiful Imperialist: China Perceives America, 1972-1990* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
11. Gilbert Rozman, "Sino-Russian Mutual Assessments," in Sherman Garnett, ed., *Rapprochement or Rivalry? Russia-China Relations in a Changing Asia* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), pp. 147-74.
12. Ethnic separatism has become the No. 1 bogeyman in Chinese writings about what can undo socialism. It also figures heavily in discussions of what brought down, first, the Russian empire and, later, the Soviet Union. One article charges that Russian policies in the late imperial period erred in handling this question. Unjust governance, readers are told, did a disservice to various nationalities. This mismanagement of the vertical order is often linked to Western interference to achieve a color revolution, in China as in Russia.
13. Wang Shuchun and Liu Sien, "Eluosi xin Yazhou zhanlue jiqi dui Zhongge guanxi de yingxiang," *Dangdai Yatai*, No. 6, 2015, pp. 82-100.
14. Zu Lichao, "Eluosi dui 21 shiji haishang sichouzhilu de zhanlue renzhi yu zhengce xuanze," *Taipingyang xuebao*, November 2015, pp. 64-72; Zhao Huirong, "Zhongge gongjian sichouzhilu jingjidai wenti tanzhe," *Eluosi Dongou Zhongya yanjiu*, December 2015, pp. 71-93.
15. The Genron NPO, "The Genron NPO Poll 2016: The Future of Northeast Asia and Public Opinions."
16. Gilbert Rozman, ed., *Japan-Russia Relations: Implications for the U.S.-Japan Alliance* (Washington, DC: Sasakawa USA, 2016); Gilbert Rozman, "Will Japan and Russia Reach a Breakthrough at the Yamaguchi Summit?" Brookings op-ed, November 2016; "Alternative Scenarios: Breakthrough in Japan-Russia Relations and Advancing Regional Security," *The Asan Forum*, Vol. 4, No. 6 (December 2016).