

# 1. Historical Background and Political Contextualization

Any analysis of recent developments in Sino-Russian relations has to devote some time to historical sources of current positions and conflicts. Lo Bobo underscores this need when he asserts that, “for both [China and Russia], the key to the rapprochement of recent years lies in their ability to transcend a dark and often tragic shared history” (Lo 2008:17). A brief analysis of this history, appropriate to the confines of this book, shall be provided in the following chapter, whereas different stages and patterns of the relationship are to be identified and relevance for the current situation to be highlighted.

According to Chen Lulu (2010:88), relations between a Chinese and a Russian state entity always took one of four patterns: oppression, alignment, resistance or normalcy. In a variant of this analysis, Yu Bin (2007:59) describes a gradual evolution from hierarchy to equality, when he gives a historical perspective to this relationship. In Yu’s terminology, hierarchy can be equated with Chen’s stages of oppression, alignment and resistance, and equality with the stage of normalcy. The following chapter will argue that relations have been asymmetrical or hierarchical up until the process of normalization in the 1980s and 1990s, only then the balance of power has shifted and a phase of equality or normalcy started to take shape. During the last few years, however, intensified through the financial crisis of 2008, the balance has started to tip again, this time in China’s favor.

## 1.1. Hierarchy – Oppression, Alignment, Resistance

### 1.1.1. *Historical Antecedents*

Going through the developments in this relationship, from the beginnings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century up until the Bolshevik Revolution, oppression emerges as the preeminent pattern according to Chen’s terminology, with Russia in a position to dictate terms (Chen 2010:88; Lo 2008:17-23; Wilson 2004:15-16; Yu 2007:59-

60). Lo, though, describes the Mongol invasion of Russian city-states in the thirteenth century as the first historical “moment” to define Sino-Russian relations. The Russians thereby being – at least in their self-perception – the first to be in the position of the oppressed. Connected with the notion of a “yellow peril” or “yellow threat”, the fear of a possible return of an oppressor from the East is introduced by Lo as Russia’s “Mongol complex”. This fear still resonates today with parts of the Russian populace, amongst whom notions of an uncivilized, culturally inferior East have proven remarkably durable (Lo 2008:18-19). Notably though, the first sustained contact between Russia and China only took place in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Russian explorers and settlers reached the outer frontier of the Chinese Empire. Delimiting respective interests led to China’s first treaty with a European country, the “Treaty of Nerchinsk” in 1689 (Wilson 2004:15; Lo 2008:20).

For a long time, the two expanding empires tended not to interfere with each other. As China’s Qing Dynasty became ever weaker though, as a result of the Opium Wars in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the relationship began to change. In nineteen unequal treaties (e.g. Treaty of Aigun 1858, Treaty of Beijing 1860, Treaty of Tarbagatai 1864) Russia extracted more than 1.5 million square kilometers of land from China (parts of northwestern Xinjiang and territories in the Amur and Ussuri river regions), thereby joining the fray of European powers carving up China in this period (Chen 2010:88; Lo 2008:21; Schmidt-Glintzer 2001:17; Wishnick 2001:192).<sup>3</sup> The Tsarist Empire took part in the military campaign against the anti-foreigner Boxer Rebellion in 1900 and secured rights to run railroads in Manchuria as well as the lease of two ports, Lu Shun (Port Arthur) and Dalian (Dairen). Through its defeat in the war against Japan in 1905, Russia lost some influence and rights in Manchuria and its expansive attitude towards China came to an end (Schmidt-Glintzer 2001:17; Wilson 2004:15-16). Nonetheless, this first period of Chinese-Russian relations cast a shadow over the relationship. It was the root of numerous border disputes – which some Russians fear are still not resolved, despite formal demarcation –, the reason for many Chinese to perceive Russia as an aggressor and hegemon, and a persistent Russian assumption of superiority. This entailed continuous mutual distrust and racial prejudices (Chen 2010:88; Lo 2008:21-23).

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3 See also: Yu 2007:60 and Wilson 2004:15, who put the number at 1.7 million square kilometers.

### 1.1.2. *Sino-Soviet Relations: Bolshevik Revolution, Honeymoon, Break Up*

As China's weakness carried on, so did the hierarchical nature of Chinese-Russian relations, the SU continuing Tsarist Russia's role as the oppressor. Despite the support for the nationalist Guomindang (in the following: GMD) and the Chinese Communist Party (in the following: CCP) – both molded along Marxist-Leninist organizational principles – and the unilateral abandonment of its extraterritorial rights in China, the SU continued to infringe upon China's sovereignty, retaining control over certain ports and railways, continuing to raise Tsarist claims and instigating the independence of Outer Mongolia in 1921 (Chen 2010:88; Lo 2008:24; Wilson 2004:16-17; Yu 2007:60).<sup>4</sup> According to Yu, "Russian/Soviet "intangible" influence on China in the 20th century was perhaps unprecedented and unparalleled by that of any other power" (Yu 2007:60). During the war against Japan, from 1937 to 1945, the SU provided financial, technical and advisory support, but after its end China felt treated as if it had been on the losing side, not only by the Western powers, but also by the SU. In China's civil war, from 1945 to 1949, Soviet help for the CCP can hardly be overestimated, still Stalin – then "General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" (in the following: GS of the CPSU) – had only reluctantly chosen this path, at first recognizing Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist government and calculating that a weak and divided China would serve Soviet interests. This reluctance and maneuvering on the Soviet side was another root for distrust between the two countries, even as the communist partners celebrated their alliance (Chen 2010:88; Lo 2008:24; Marciacq 2009:15-16; Wilson 2004:18).

The establishment of the PRC in 1949 was followed by what is often called the "Honeymoon Phase" in China-Russia relations, a phase of alignment in Chen's categories (Chen 2010:88; Yu 2007:58). Mao Zedong, Chairman of the CCP, adopted the „leaning-to-one-side“-policy, seeking security and much needed outside assistance for China's post-war reconstruction efforts by wholeheartedly joining the socialist camp and proclaiming to adopt the soviet model. The relationship thus remained hierarchical, by making the SU the "big brother" in Confucian terms (Wilson 2004: 18). The "Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance Between the USSR and the People's Republic of China"<sup>5</sup>, signed in February 1950, determined that the SU would return control over

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4 By splitting Mongolia from China to create a communist client state, the SU inflicted further territorial losses on China. Moscow also refused to return any territories acquired by the Tsarist Empire in the 19th century.

5 For the full text see: [http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1\\_60000/6/27/00011314.pdf](http://untreaty.un.org/unts/1_60000/6/27/00011314.pdf) (03.04.2011).

Manchurian railways and the ports of Dairen and Port Arthur to China, grant it enormous credits and help its industrialization efforts by transferring know-how and sending legions of technical advisors. Towards the end of the 1950s, though, cracks began to occur as Mao and the new GS of the CPSU Nikita Khrushchev grew to detest each other. The SU decided not to provide nuclear technology to the PRC, and Khrushchev was repeatedly criticized in Chinese publications as being obedient to the West and unfaithful to the principles of Marxism-Leninism (Lo 2008:25; Marciacq 2009:15-16; Wilson 2004:18-19).

In 1960 the SU abruptly withdrew all its experts from China and broke off all economic relations. This delivered a severe blow to the Chinese economy, already ailing as the “Great Leap Forward”-campaign (1958-1961) – a massive collectivization effort – collapsed. Following this “break-up“, Soviet military threats replaced strong involvement in Chinese policy decisions, relations remaining asymmetrical under new circumstances and forming the pattern of resistance in Chen’s categories (Chen 2010:88; Wilson 2004:19). As the PRC was increasingly isolated in the socialist camp and its nuclear efforts hindered, the tension between it and the SU grew exponentially. A massive troop build-up along the border and several bloody clashes ensued. Mao, worried about a possible Soviet invasion and turned to the United States (in the following: US), with President Nixon visiting China in 1972 (Cheng 2009:146; Lo 2008:26; Wilson 2004:19). The phase from 1960 to the early 1980ies can be considered the worst in Russian-Chinese relations. Prejudices on both sides were reinforced, be it that of the “yellow peril“ or that of the Russian imperialist aggressor. The expansive military build-up along the endless border with China, was one of the reasons for the SU’s eventual demise, and the image of one another as possible invading force still partly reverberates in the minds of the populace, especially in the border regions (Yu 2007:80). Many reasons have been given for the souring of ties, some listed above, but the most important one, according to Li Fenglin, China’s former ambassador to the SU, was very simple: “the substance of the issue is that the Soviet Union did not treat China on an equal footing“ (Wilson 2004:21). Given that China’s “century of humiliation“ – the time from the first Opium War in 1838 to the founding of the PRC in 1949 – had just ended, and taking into account Mao’s personal sensitivities, this was certainly unacceptable to the Chinese leadership (Lo 2008:25).

## 1.2. Equality – Normalcy

### *1.2.1. Normalization of Ties: From Brezhnev to Yeltsin*

Chen considers a stage of normalcy reached in the last years of the SU (Chen 2008:88), whereas Yu inserts a phase of “mutual adjustment in the midst of dramatic changes in their respective domestic politics (1990-1995)“, and sees normalcy attained only with the formation of the “strategic partnership“ in 1996 (Yu 2007:58). As this study has equated Yu’s stage of hierarchy with Chen’s phases of oppression, alignment and resistance, which come to an end as the phase of normalcy is reached, the question arises as to whether Yu’s stage of equality – and factual equality on the international stage, indeed – has been arrived at. While not giving an explicit date, Yu implicitly considers normalcy and equality attained at the same time (e.g. Yu 2007:58). The relationship certainly ceased to be hierarchical during these years, as Moscow’s power decreased rapidly with the end of the SU and throughout the 1990s. With Wilson it can be ascertained, that at the turn of the century at the latest, the two were at least at eye level, as “[b]y most conventional measures, Russia was weaker than China“ (Wilson 2004:37).

“(…) [T]he process of normalizing relations began with minimizing and/or neutralizing the ideology factor in bilateral relations“ (Yu 2007:63), which had exaggerated commonalities in the 1950s and differences in the 1960s and 1970s. The protracted process started in 1979 with first talks on demilitarization and the PRC ceasing to call the SU a “revisionist state“ (Wilson 2004:19) – soon after both admitted that the other side was socialist (Wishnick 2001:115). Contributing to this trend were certain changes in China’s foreign and security policy decision-making processes since the beginning of its “reform and opening“-policy in 1978. Under the PRC’s new supreme leader Deng Xiaoping the role of the military declined, while that of diplomats, foreign-policy experts and trade bureaucracies increased considerably. A new focus on economic development prompted a new direction of foreign policy, with the primary goal of creating a stable environment instrumental to economic growth (Cabestan 2009:64). This trend was reinforced when Deng retired in 1993, and Jiang Zemin became the first leader without a military background. A second trend setting in at this point – and continued after power passed to Hu Jintao in 2002 –, was an increased “number of decision-making loci“, mostly through “adding bureaucracies within certain economic agencies“ and multiplied “leading small groups“ (Cabestan 2009:65, 91-93). Nonetheless talks were

suspended again in 1979, shortly after they had begun, because of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In April 1982, then, GS of the CPSU Leonid Brezhnev called for Sino-Soviet cooperation in an historic speech in Tashkent, prompting China to list as three major obstacles: Soviet troops along the border to China, Soviet troops in Afghanistan and Vietnamese troops in Cambodia (Wilson 2004:20). After Brezhnev's death, no major progress was made under GS Andropov or GS Chernenko. In July 1986 the new GS Mikhail Gorbachev renewed Brezhnev's push with a speech in Vladivostok, marking the departure point for Sino-Soviet rapprochement, together with his visit to Beijing in May 1989 (Chen 2010:88; Lo 2008:27-28; Wilson 2004:20-21; Yu 2007:64). The SU began to withdraw troops from Afghanistan and from the Chinese border, it also pushed Vietnam to leave Cambodia. Both regimes agreed to settle their border issues – with a first agreement on the eastern part signed in 1991 and ratified one year later by the Russian and Chinese parliaments (Wishnick 2001:116, 122) –, to reduce troop levels in border regions and to no longer use force in their interactions.

Gorbachev was only able to achieve this turnaround in Soviet policy toward its neighbor “after eliminating the “anti-China“ coalition from the corridors of power in the Central Committee and the Foreign Ministry and installing a new team that viewed China's reform policies in a distinctively positive light“ (Wishnick 2001:108-109). Only at this point an equal relationship between the two major communist powers was developing, as Gorbachev strived for a new type of socialist community, not marked by Soviet leadership in ideology and international relations, but respect for different models of socialism and the sovereignty of every country over its foreign policy decisions (Wishnick 2001:113-114). Soviet officials and scholars stopped giving weight to a Chinese military threat, the relationship was de-ideologized and discussed in much more pragmatic terms (Wishnick 2001:110). This process of normalization was put to the test early on and through several developments. Gorbachev aptly avoided a first crisis after the PRC's clampdown on protests in Tiananmen Square 1989, by treating it as an internal matter not to be commented on. Soon after though, he lost control over developments, as communism ended in the countries of Eastern Europe, the SU's economy collapsed and separatist movements and the reformists under Boris Yeltsin grew stronger and stronger. The Chinese leadership made Gorbachev personally responsible for the revolutions in Eastern Europe, internally denounced him as a “traitor to communism“, but still had no choice but to support him as they preferred him to his reformist rival Yeltsin and wanted to move closer to the SU to counter an ascending US (Wilson 2004:22; Wishnick 2001:115). Military ties as well as party-to-party exchanges were established and both Premier Li Peng and GS of the CCP Jiang Zemin visited

Moscow. After the abortive coup attempt in August 1991, Yeltsin's rise was irrevocable and the dissolution of the SU followed in December. This rendered ideological uniformity between the two countries impossible and made sustained de-ideologization all the more important (Yu 2007:64).

The process of de-ideologization went “hand in hand with the return of the national interests as both the philosophical and operational principles in the 1990s. This, however, does not necessarily mean a complete switch to a Machiavellian ends-justifying-means approach. Rather, prudence and practicality are the rules of the game in the pursuit of their respective national interests“ (Yu 2007:65). Despite their mistrust towards and distaste for Yeltsin and the democrats in Russia (Wishnick 2001:122), the Chinese opted for pragmatism, treated the developments as an internal matter and swiftly recognized the RF and all other successor states of the SU on December 27, 1991 (Wilson 2004:24). Still relations were relatively cool at first, as China was still recovering from the reverberations of Tiananmen, and the Russian government turned wholeheartedly pro-Western and particularly pro-US, especially its foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev. This policy of a complete embrace of Western positions was termed “leaning-to-one-side“ by some Chinese scholars (Cheng 2009:127; Gu 2009:27), in a reference to Chinese foreign policy in the 1950s and its utter dependence on the SU. Gu Yeli judges this foreign policy shift to be the logical conclusion from the Kremlin's complete focus on domestic reconstruction, which was thought to be possible, only by imitating the Western economic model of a liberal market economy. At this point a mere extension of domestic policy, foreign policy had to be aligned with the West. Furthermore, a stable environment as well as Western aid was needed, and both the Russian leadership and its population believed in a swift entry into the league of developed nations, if this course was taken. According to Gu (2009:29), this course of foreign policy was detrimental to Sino-Russian relations, because it was again dominated by ideology, now pro-Western. This policy line lasted only about two years, though, – from late 1991 to late 1993 – and even earlier nationalist forces were pressuring Yeltsin “to formulate a “Eurasian“ alternative to Kozyrev's “Atlanticist“ foreign policy“ (Wishnick 2001:123; Norling 2007:35)<sup>6</sup>, as they saw their country disrespected by the West and economic reforms didn't deliver quick success.

Up until the beginning of its war in Chechnya in 1994, Russia kept criticizing China's human rights record (Wilson 2004:25). The new Russian liberal elite considered the Tiananmen crackdown a symbol of the communist

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6 See also: Wu 2009:120. Wu divides Russian foreign policy in the 1990s in two phases, a liberal pro-Western one under Foreign Minister Kozyrev until 1996, and a “Eurasia-centered pragmatism” under Primakov and Ivanov.

dictatorship one had just shed, but also as confirming the image of the “despotic East” (Lo 2008:28). On the other side, the Chinese leadership considered Yeltsin to be somewhat unprofessional and prone to gaffs throughout his presidency (Wilson 2004:25). Nonetheless, both countries soon agreed upon continuing on the path set by the SU and the PRC and to respect each other’s different political systems. Yeltsin confirmed the RF’s recognition of the “one-China-principle” – stating that Taiwan is an integral part of China and that the government in Beijing is China’s sole legitimate authority – after a brief flirtation with the Taiwanese (Lo 2008:30; Wilson 2004:25). Despite Moscow’s temporary foreign policy alignment with the West and its somewhat disorganized decision-making process, the Chinese leadership always kept patient and tactful, judging its interest in friendly relations with its neighbor and a stable environment for its economic rise more important (Cheng 2009:163-164).

In 1994, Russian foreign policy shifted (Cheng 2009:148-149) to what Gu calls one of a “double-headed eagle” (Gu 2009:28). The Yeltsin government, disappointed by the West, tried to rebalance its foreign policy and discovered many similarities with the PRC in positions on international issues. That year, Jiang Zemin became the first Chinese president to visit Moscow since 1957. During the visit, a “constructive partnership” was declared, on the principle of non-alignment, with increased trade and border demarcation – now of the western part – as well as cooperation in the UN Security Council in mind (Wilson 2004:27; Wishnick 2001:126-128). Problems persisted though, as regional politicians and media in the Russian Far East (in the following: RFE) wanted to amend border agreements and complained about Chinese illegal immigration. Changed visa regulations lead to less immigration, but also a sharp decline in bilateral trade from 1993 to 1994, after a steep rise in trade volume from 1991 to 1993 (Lo 2008:31-32; Norling 2007:35; Wilson 2004:28-29, 62). Early in the Yeltsin presidency, energy was already considered a promising area for economic cooperation, and Russia agreed to transfer nuclear technology to the PRC as well as to assist in the construction of two nuclear plants (Wishnick 2001:125, 131).

### *1.2.2. “Strategic Partnership” and Common Opposition to “US Unilateralism”*

In the mid-nineties both countries felt somewhat threatened or challenged by the international environment, and at the same time comforted by the other’s restraint, steady repetition of the principle of non-intervention – coming to mean



non-criticism – and support for one’s own core policy objectives. The PRC failed to intimidate the Taiwanese electorate in the presidential election of March 1996 – it had held extensive military training maneuvers in the vicinity –, and was settled with the “difficult” Lee Teng-hui (Wilson 2004:29). Russia on the other hand was strongly criticized by the West for the conduct of its war in Chechnya since 1994, and was increasingly worried about NATO expansion plans. At this point Moscow stopped criticizing China’s human rights record and reiterated its support for China’s policies on Taiwan and Tibet. The Chinese side reciprocated by supporting Russia’s Chechnya policy and criticizing NATO expansion (Lo 2008:30; Norling 2007:35-36; Wilson 2004:29; Wishnick 2001:128-129).

Additionally, the rapprochement was facilitated by the good personal relationship between Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, who had studied in Moscow and spoke fluent Russian (Lo 2008:30; Yu 2007:65). Relations had reached a point, where – although there was no official position – many in the Chinese leadership secretly favored a Yeltsin victory in the presidential elections of 1996, although his opponent was the Communist Party GS Zyuganov. Despite Yeltsin’s faults, he was believed to ensure better prospects for economic growth than his opponent, and he was „a known quantity who had proven his ability to develop relations with China on a favorable footing. In the view of many Chinese leaders, this was more important than ideological compatibility“ (Wishnick 2001:130).

Russia’s new foreign minister Yevgeny Primakov, liked by the Chinese for his background in the intelligence services (Wilson 2004:30), pushed for more regular meetings and an increased trade volume. Primakov symbolized a further departure from Russia’s alignment with the West in the early 1990s, with a new emphasis on a multipolar world order and opposition to what was perceived as US unilateralism (Gu 2009:28-29; Norling 2007:35). In Chinese eyes, Moscow thus returned to a self-determined foreign policy, and started to strive for a restored big power image (Gu 2009:28). Russia’s new assertiveness and broader foreign policy approach brought it closer to Beijing. However, what Gu, Zhou Hongbo and Huang You (Gu 2009:29; Zhou / Huang 2007:70) describe as Russia’s “great-power complex“, is considered a possible problem for future Sino-Russian relations by Chinese scholars.

The new situation provided for the upgrade of the relationship to “strategic partnership“, proclaimed at Yeltsin’s visit to Beijing in April 1996 (Wilson 2004:29-30; Wishnick 2001:128-129). The same month, the leaders of the PRC, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan met in Shanghai to discuss border demarcation and military cooperation in the border regions – this group was to become known as the “Shanghai Five“, later to evolve into the “Shanghai

Cooperation Organization“ (in the following: SCO) (Lo 2008:29-30). Russia now showed a renewed interest in CA, trying to reestablish a sphere of influence encompassing the components of the former Soviet empire, which were more or less abandoned in the early 1990s (Gu 2009:28-29; Wishnick 2001:141).

After the series of Russian policy adjustments described above, diplomatic relations were better than at any point in history. The years 1998/1999, though, saw a stagnation, caused mainly by the Ruble's collapse in April 1998, a rapid exchange of several prime ministers in Russia and both Yeltsin's bad health and erratic management of foreign policy (Lo 2008:33; Wilson 2004:32). What was very important for the nevertheless rather smooth development of relations was Beijing's pragmatic approach. It tolerated the Kremlin's dysfunctional decision-making process and “accepted that the Russian establishment would, for all sorts of historical and practical reasons, look primarily to the United States and Western Europe“ (Lo 2008:32). As long as Russia would back the PRC's positions on Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, contribute to China's border security and provide it with advanced weaponry, the Chinese leadership was willing to put up with a lot.

Concerning economic relations, the trade volume between the two was actually lower in 1998 than it had been in 1992 (Wilson 2004:33, 62). Barring arms sales – which had been steadily rising throughout the 1990s (Wishnick 2001:144-146; Yu 2007:77-79) –, bilateral trade had drastically fallen short of what the two governments had envisioned. On international political issues though, Moscow and Beijing found themselves evermore aligned<sup>7</sup>. They both heavily protested US and NATO action independent of the UN, in Iraq 1998 and in Kosovo/Serbia 1999 respectively. Further critique arose against the US's national missile defense (NMD) system and the theater missile defense (TMD) system planned in cooperation with Japan. The rationale for these systems, North Korean or other “rogue nations“ possible attacks, was rejected by the PRC and Russia, who criticized that they were not consulted, and that the “defense systems“ might be used to infringe upon their interests – eg to shelter Taiwan in a hypothetical confrontation with the PRC (Wilson 2004:34; Wishnick 2001:147-148). Wishnick likens this development to PRC-US rapprochement during the Cold War, when she writes that “much as China joined forces with the United States in the 1970s and 1980s against Soviet hegemony, today Russian and Chinese leaders are attempting to coordinate their responses to what they view as U.S. unilateralism in world affairs“ (Wishnick 2001:132). Tensions

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7 Primakov at one point even proposed an alliance between Russia, China and India, quickly rejected by the Chinese side, which claimed not to be interested in entering into an alliance with any country (Wishnick 2001:147).

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