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The Role of International Organisations in the Russia-China Relationship

Abstract

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have certain international relations principles in common. They are committed to a multipolar rather than a US-dominated unipolar world dominated. The Russian President Vladimir Putin said in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference: "In the modern world the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible" (Dokumentika, 2012). Chinese President Xi Jinping during his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2016 pointed out that "the movement towards a multipolar world became an irresistible trend of the history" (Russia Today, 2015). Linked with their preference for a multipolar world is a desire to make and maintain close economic and/or security relationships with a wide variety of states, which includes interaction within the United Nations, the Group of Twenty, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the BRICS countries and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (Russian.news.cn, 2014).

Keywords

international, relations, multipolar, common, principles, organisations

Viewpoint:

The Role of International Organisations in the Russia-China Relationship¹

By Polina Campbell²

The Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China have certain international relations principles in common. They are committed to a multipolar rather than a US-dominated unipolar world dominated. The Russian President Vladimir Putin said in 2007 at the Munich Security Conference: "In the modern world the unipolar model is not only unacceptable but also impossible" (Dokumentika, 2012). Chinese President Xi Jinping during his speech at the UN General Assembly in September 2016 pointed out that "the movement towards a multipolar world became an irresistible trend of the history" (Russia Today, 2015). Linked with their preference for a multipolar world is a desire to make and maintain close economic and/or security relationships with a wide variety of states, which includes interaction within the United Nations, the Group of Twenty, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the BRICS countries and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (Russian.news.cn, 2014). They also have a strong commitment to traditional Westphalian sovereignty and regard Western doctrines of humanitarian interventions to be riddled with double standards and selective self-serving morality. In the Moscow joint statement of the Heads of State of Russia and China on 16 July 2001 it was stressed that "Russia and China will make joint efforts to strengthen the leading role of the UN and its Security Council in world affairs and counter attempts to undermine the fundamental norms of the international law with the help of concepts such as 'humanitarian intervention' and 'limited sovereignty'" (Fyodorov, 2005). These common principles, as well as mutual self-interest make them natural partners in international organisations.

¹ The views in *The Culture Mandala* are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views, position or policies of the *Centre for East-West Cultural and Economic Studies*. Bearing in mind the controversial debates now occurring in International Relations and East-West studies, the editors publish diverse, critical and dissenting views so long as these meet ethical and academic criteria.

² Polina Campbell is a Masters graduate in International Relations and a PhD Candidate at Bond University with a special interest in Sino-Russian affairs.

The focus in this short article is not on traditional international organisations that were associated with the West during the Cold War and are now associated with a still recognisably unipolar world dominated by the US (for example, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the International Monetary Fund). Rather, the focus is on relatively new international organisations which were to a large extent established because of initiatives taken by Russia and China, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS – comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. There is a thread running through the literature that argues that alternative structures to the IMF and NATO are emerging in the form of these new international organisations (Ball & Johnson, 2014; Dudeley & Montmarquette, 2015; Fielden, 2013; Jingjie, 2014).

As members of the Permanent Five (P5) on the UN Security Council, Russia and China play an important role counterbalancing the US and its allies. While this great power politics attracts considerable attention in the global media there are other international organisations where Russia and China have highly significant partnerships. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation is an institution of growing importance even though it receives little attention in the western media. The SCO was founded in 2001 and grew out of the Shanghai Five organisation, which was established in 1996 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the resolution of the territorial disputes between China and other members of the group (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). The origins of the border dispute resolution that instigated SCO stretch further back than this. Attempts at negotiations between the Soviet Union and China during the 1960s were unsuccessful following the Sino-Soviet split in 1960. Indeed this decade ended with the 1969 Sino-Soviet border conflict. It is worth noting that while there have been limited military conflicts over border issues, there has never been general war between Russia and China as occurred in the two world wars. With the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 much of the heat went out of the continuing Sino-Soviet split. By 1989 the process of rapprochement had been fulfilled and the split ended.

The breadth of the SCO extends well beyond China and a number of the constituent states of the former Soviet Union. There are a large number of states that have observer status (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia). Also the SCO has decided to admit Pakistan and India as full members. When assessing its geopolitical significance it is important to note that SCO is not a military alliance like NATO. Rather, when it comes to security matters, the SCO has a history of placing a strong emphasis on international cooperation in counter-terrorism. Combating politically motivated violence has remained among the most prominent of international security issues in the 21st Century. “The Shanghai Convention on Combating

Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism” was adopted by the SCO on the 15 June 2001. Over the years China has become increasingly concerned about ISIS and similar international jihadist groups influencing ethnic groups within China to rebel. Concern about international terrorism is also shared by Russian policy analysts. “A key task is to strengthen the structures inside the SCO mechanism related to anti-terror activities, including (operation of) anti-terror centers and security services, and exchange of information between member states,” Azhdar Kurtov, chief editor of the *National Strategy Issues* journal and an expert at the Russian Institute for Strategic studies, told Xinhua in a recent interview (Xinhua, 2015). The Russian and Chinese governments, like those of many other nations, recognize the imperative to increase the flow of intelligence across international borders to combat terrorism.

Through the efforts of Russia and China at the 5th BRICS Summit, held on the 27 March 2013 in Durban, the New Development Bank was established. While development banks attract limited attention from the global media, they have the capacity to improve the lives of the world’s poor. One of the core reasons for its creation is that BRICS countries repeatedly criticized the World Bank and the IMF for inadequate representation of their members in the process of decision-making in these international organisations. The New Development Bank mainly focuses on infrastructure projects in the BRICS countries. This summit meeting also established a pool of foreign exchange reserves for this new bank (and hence the idea that it is an IMF competitor). The start-up capital of the New Development Bank amounted to \$100 billion, and it is expected to grow over time (Kireev, 2014).

By way of a concluding comment, it is important not to think of the quest for a multipolar world simply as an extension of the Cold War where the Soviet Union attempted to ensure its national security by surpassing the United States in military capability. In this current era the US has primacy in terms of military power. However, this is irrelevant to the major global security concerns. Transnational terrorist and environmental threats are not responsive to nuclear deterrence or arms races. International organisations are a key mechanism when it comes to dealing with these problems. Russia and China are both active participants in traditional organisations and, as discussed above, have played a key role in establishing new organisations. It would be misleading to simply apply traditional Realist School thinking³ and conclude that Russia-China cooperation in international organisations is a marriage-of-convenience purely motivated by a desire to compete with the US for global

³ Realism in International Relations theory takes various forms but all emphasise the role of states (especially great powers), national interests and security in shaping a competitive international system that is prone to conflict (see Morgenthau 1985; Mearsheimer 2006; Miller 2010).

and regional influence. With issues such as terrorism, the environment and the international economy there are mutual gains that can be achieved through cooperation rather than rivalry. New institutions such as the New Development Bank and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank have the potential to improve the standard of living in low-income countries and hence make the world not only fairer, but also more secure and peaceful.

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