



THREE SCHOOLS OF RUSSIAN THOUGHT AMID GROWING ASYMMETRY WITH CHINA: PART 1

BY GILBERT ROZMAN

*Gilbert Rozman (grozman@princeton.edu) is the Emeritus Musgrave Professor of Sociology, Princeton University, and served as editor-in-chief of *The Asan Forum* from 2013 to 2025. He has written about the role of history and national identities in bilateral relations involving China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea.*

When Vladimir Putin met Xi Jinping on May 19-20, there were claims of bilateral ties at an “unprecedented high” and close partnership in “multipolarity.” While the shared criticisms of the United States were genuine, the reality, as seen in Russia, is more complicated. This two-part posting traces three schools of Russian thought toward China across two stages.

Under censorship, writings on China often convey concerns indirectly or incompletely. The official policy line, apart from heady days in the 1990s, is not contradicted. Yet when things do not go as expected, explanations are needed. They open a window on serious concerns.

Debates in Russia over China over half a century have played an underappreciated role in the [Grand Strategic Triangle](#) of Moscow-Beijing-Washington. Attention has centered on the policy decisions of Moscow leaders: Brezhnev, Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin. Censorship left the debates impacting or dissenting from those decisions in the shadows. Delving into writings about China, however, offers clues on the existence of three schools of thought. Reflecting on these writings up to 2018-19, I [trace their evolution](#), noting fragmentation of the dominant school into three factions in the early 2010s, as asymmetry was raising anxieties.

In the decade from Mao’s death in 1976 to Gorbachev’s “New Thinking” in 1986, [hardliners prevailed](#), opposing concessions toward China and warning of “Maoism without Mao.” They strove to maintain traditional communism, seeing the Sino-Soviet split as

foundational. A [reformist, second school](#) sought to break away from recent stagnation in the Brezhnev era through improved relations with the United States and the West. If their voices remained muted, they reflected the popular sentiment that Russia was part of Europe and would gain materially if it dropped the “Iron Curtain.” The third school, including a few dissenting China experts, sought normalization of ties to China, reordering the “Grand Strategic Triangle.” As the hardline school lost its clout, those who favored turning to the West, rather than China, had the advantage.

The decade of leaning to the West saw reformers ascendant, as the hardliners abruptly felt imperiled. Gorbachev and Yeltsin until 1996 favored the reformers and the Atlanticists. In an abrupt about-face, [the bulk of the hardline school switched](#) to supporting improved ties to China at the expense of joining the European community. Most striking was the rise of a third school, wary of both the West and China, but intent on balancing the two by building closer ties to China and gaining leverage in an ideal Grand Strategic Triangle. They premised their strategy on the assumption that China was weak and would cater to Russian interests. The combination of ardent [China boosters and willing China balancers](#) was gaining ground.

The Yeltsin-Putin transition saw more continuity in China policy than is usually recognized. Led by Primakov as foreign minister and prime minister, the balancers cemented their hold on China policy, boosting ties quickly. The Westernizers lost ground no less rapidly, given the backlash against the decade of reform orientation. Rising abruptly was the third school, discerning in China the salvation of the communist experiment. By 2007, when Putin gave his Munich speech, the downfall of the pro-West school was in full swing, while [concern about China remained subdued](#), leaving the other two schools dominant within Moscow.

In the decade from 2006-2016, the equilibrium was impacted by the [most maneuvering ever](#), to find the right balance in the Grand Strategic Triangle. The ambivalence of this period showed in the increasing tilt toward China, especially once Putin declared his “[Turn to the East](#),” and the intensified warnings against the costs of an asymmetric relationship. Weakest of the three schools was the pro-West, pro-reform camp. Losing ground also was the idea of China as a model since Russia was doing better. Most interesting

were the balancers, now fragmenting in their reasons for wariness toward China but mostly seeking closer relations. In 2016-19, Moscow [doubled down](#) on its attachment to Beijing despite ongoing wariness.

The late 2010s saw unprecedented moves to address wariness without resolution of the balancers' dilemma. The pro-West school was crushed, forced into total silence. Strong advocacy of alliance with China failed to boom. The balancers faced more censorship, but their three orientations found additional resonance. The vicissitudes of the balancers over a critical period provides evidence of the [continued importance](#) of the debates over China.

The power aggrandizement school

Power aggrandizement refers to the drive in the Grand Strategic Triangle or Eurasia for sole leadership at the expense of the shared power on which Russia has premised multipolarity. Russian wariness about [this Chinese inclination](#) predates 2016, particularly centered on Central Asia. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) appeared to manage China's encroachment into Central Asia, but tensions arose over different agendas and whether Russia could sustain a division of labor limiting China to economic and "anti-terrorist" interests. In 2010, intent on preempting China's advances there, Russia got Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to agree to join the Eurasian Customs Union, in 2015 renamed the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This failed to deter China, however, which in 2013 designated the Silk Road Economic Belt (SERB), soon to become part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). If Putin and Xi smoothed over this rivalry in 2014, [Russian wariness was clearly not allayed](#).

On regional matters Russia strove to assert its influence in four directions in 2016-19, in each case [struggling to coordinate with a more assertive China](#). It filled the vacuum when Xi and Kim Jong Un were at loggerheads in 2014 only to find a need to acquiesce to China in 2017 when Xi agreed to tougher UN Security Council sanctions to curry favor with Trump. In the wake of the Trump-Kim summits, Moscow followed Beijing's lead more. As Xi enveloped Southeast Asia in the BRI, Putin insisted on making ASEAN a vital portion of his Greater Eurasian Partnership, to which Xi mainly paid lip service. Most alarming was [the China-India border skirmish of 2020](#), after Moscow had pressed for India's entry into the SCO and focused more on the troika of Russia-China-India as a key to multipolarity. Beijing appeared to prioritize its own power aggrandizement. [Central Asia's loss](#) was most feared.

The economic domination school

Economic domination raises concern for relegating Russia to an unequal division of labor or even to vulnerable dependence. [Unfair trade is a prevailing concern](#). China's expansion of its economic presence may mean squeezing Russia's sphere of influence. This concern is even more acute than fear of China's power aggrandizement in Russian publications. It was visible in the late 1990s [alarm over the "yellow peril" migration](#) takeover of the Russian Far East through Chinese businesses. By the early 2010s, the focus had shifted to trade in Russian energy and natural resources for Chinese industrial exports, seen as unbalanced. In 2014 the Putin-Xi agreement to ["dock" their economies](#) promised to solve this dilemma. Optimism did not last long. High hopes faded; economic ties in 2015 proved disappointing.

Hopes were dashed for "docking" the two economies through major Chinese investments in Russia, transportation infrastructure solidifying Russia's role in transshipments between China and Europe, and close economic cooperation in Central Asia. As Sino-Russian trade boomed in the late 2010s, Russians were troubled by projects never realized or investment conditioned on Chinese labor and materials. The economic asymmetry kept widening. Interpreting China's economic behavior, some [hinted at wariness](#) over its real intentions.

The Sinocentric revanchism school

Most worrisome, albeit denied open articulation, is the fear that an emboldened China is intent on extending "wolf warrior" assertiveness to Russia, along with revived territorial pretensions and [arrogant manifestations of national identity](#) at Russia's expense. How do we know that this alarm was spreading in Russia? First, [writings on history](#) pointed to the [museum exhibits](#) inaccessible to foreigners that allegedly rekindle territorial claims after China had agreed on a final border demarcation. Second, when authors cited extreme remarks by China's "wolf warrior" diplomats, some warned that [Russia may not be exempt](#).

Calls for boosting trust refer at times to situations where Chinese have acted arrogantly.

After World War II, Japanese and West Europeans at the time resented US insensitivity or even bullying, but until Trump, at least, they did not worry about US national identity impacting their sovereignty. Shared support for human rights and the international liberal order served to bolster trust. Moscow and Beijing [lack a reassuring, joint identity](#). Personal contacts are too superficial to build deep soft power bonds. The legacy of the Sino-Soviet split has been suppressed mainly by summits and censorship, not non-government organizations forging trust. Abruptly, Russians have discovered that Chinese are the "big brothers." Both sides make [glorified history the crux of their identity](#), leaving their past wounds still rather raw.

Conclusion

Sino-Russian relations have strengthened since the 1990s, driven largely by shared views of the Grand Strategic Triangle, expansive economic complementarity, and national identity obsessions with the threat of US thinking about democracy, human rights, and the liberal international order. All these preoccupations remain strong. In the 2006-2016 flux regarding bilateral relations, progress was made in managing differences over regionalism, realizing joint economic objectives, and narrowing the national identity gap. New claims of tighter cooperation rang true, even more so at decade's end, but wariness was only exacerbated.

Solidarity over national identity along with censorship caused the pro-West school to fade as growing pride and asymmetry undercut the communist alignment camp. That left three balancing approaches, each with concerns about an unequal relationship. These mounted in the late 2010s, driving Russians to wonder how their country could alleviate its concerns. Putin redoubled praise for the relationship, but more was needed to quiet the balancers.

The Pilot commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged. Please write to rob@pacforum.org for more information on how to contribute.