



# **Deciphering China's Security Intentions in Northeast Asia: A View from Russia**

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With its 4,000 km border to the Russian Far East and Siberia, growing economic potential and military capabilities, rising China has been on the minds of the Russian elite for a long time – at least since the 18th century when the Romanov and Qing empires established borders. Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the new Russia has observed its once poor and backward neighbor’s accession to the global stage with mixed feelings. Some people have welcomed China’s rise. Beijing, they argued, has wisely preserved the party’s monopoly on power, while advancing market reforms, and, thus, has avoided the mistakes under Mikhail Gorbachev’s leadership during *perestroika*. A stronger PRC will be a good balance to U.S. global dominance, thus giving Russia more breathing space internationally. The mainstream, however, had a different view. Members of the new elites were enjoying the newly discovered partnership with the West and had tasted the first fruits of democracy and market capitalism. With the Communist Party’s grip on power, its towering state sector, and growing military capabilities, China was seen through Western optics with mistrust and suspicion. Fueling these fears was booming cross-border trade. It brought a measure of development to the Russian Far East, abandoned by the federal government, but at the same time was seen by many in Moscow and locally as a prelude to an influx of Chinese migrants and “yellow colonization.”

Debates on China’s broader security intentions throughout the last 20 years have evolved along these lines. The official mainstream under Vladimir Putin has heralded China’s peaceful rise and strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing, which has become increasingly anti-American (at least rhetorically) after the U.S. invasion of Iraq and “color revolutions” in the post-Soviet space. At the same time, in private, many Kremlin officials had deep suspicions about China’s security intentions in Northeast Asia, most notably in the Russian Far East. This has resulted in a two-faced approach to many practical issues. On the one hand, Moscow has sided with Beijing’s position on North Korea, was silent on any Chinese moves regarding the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, and has joined hands with Chinese voicing concerns about U.S. plans to install components of the American missile defense system in Northeast Asia. At the same time, Moscow has refrained from directly supporting China’s territorial claims in the East China Sea, was cautious about selling Russia’s most advanced weapon systems to the PLA, and has invested a significant effort in upgrading its military posture on the eastern flank.

The crisis over Ukraine—followed by European and American sanctions against Russian individuals, companies, and whole sectors of the national economy—marked a major schism between Moscow and the West. One result of growing conflict between the West and Russia was a redoubling of Moscow’s “turn to the East” (*povorot na Vostok*) policy, centered around China. The “turn to the East” has dramatically changed Russia’s strategy towards China and many underlying assumptions. It has also dramatically influenced the mainstream analysis of Chinese security intentions in Northeast Asia. The influence of this major shift in national policy, as well as policymakers’ and scholars’ perceptions of China, was felt throughout 2015.

This paper analyzes the Russian debate on China’s security intentions in 2014-2015 as a coherent period in Moscow-Beijing relations, as well as a distinctly new period in Russia’s thinking about China.<sup>1</sup> Part of the research is based on analyzing publicly available academic and policy writings on this topic in leading academic and policy journals, as well as newspapers. Another part is derived from a series of in-depth interviews with Russian scholars and policymakers conducted throughout 2014-2015. The Russian debate is explained

through the broader context of Russian-Chinese relations and Moscow's thinking about foreign policy, including comments on the quality of expertise and the role that ideology started to play in the Russian debate on foreign policy during the period under scrutiny.

## DRIVING FORCES: INTERESTS, IDEOLOGY, EXPERTISE

Before describing the contents of the Russian debate on China's intentions in Northeast Asia, three issues need to be addressed: Russia's broader interests in Northeast Asia; the role ideology plays in Russian thinking about foreign policy; and the state of Russian expertise on China and its influence on the decision-making process. These factors have significant impact on the debate.

Moscow's broader strategy in Northeast Asia is based on two pillars: 1) a search for the security of the Russian territory; and 2) an effort to create opportunities for the economic development of Siberia and the Russian Far East. Since the end of the Cold War and normalization of Sino-Russian ties, security threats for Russia in Northeast Asia have diminished significantly. Moscow's Asia policy in general and Northeast Asia policy in particular is primarily driven by economic needs. This approach has taken shape since the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, when Russia started to seek investment and trade cooperation with dynamic Asian economies more proactively. On July 2, 2010 President Dmitri Medvedev hosted a meeting in Khabarovsk on Russia's integration in the Asia-Pacific. He ordered the government to prepare a detailed program for boosting the country's position and increasing its profile in the region.<sup>2</sup> The document prepared by various government ministries and put together by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was classified. According to interviews with people familiar with the "Khabarovsk Initiatives" as the program came to be known in Russian bureaucratic slang, a major part is centered on the economy—promoting Asian investment in Siberia and the Far East and boosting exports of Russian hydrocarbons as well as high-end manufactured goods to the Asia-Pacific. The document states that Russia has an interest in a peaceful and growing Northeast Asia, but it has no detailed analysis of threats, particularly deriving from China.<sup>3</sup>

The centrality of the economic dimension in Russia's strategy in the Asia-Pacific and Northeast Asia and the secondary role of security are reflected in Putin's 2012 address to the Federal Assembly.<sup>4</sup> In 2013 he stated, the "development of Siberia and the Far East is Russia's national priority for the 21st century."<sup>5</sup> The strategic and security dimensions of Russia's policy towards Asia were not mentioned, which captures Moscow's attitude. Another marker is the Kremlin's decision not to attend the East Asian Summit at the presidential level – since Moscow was admitted to this primary venue to discuss regional security issues, it has been represented by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. It was only in 2014 that Moscow upgraded its representation to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev. At the same time the Russian president has attended all of the APEC summits (except in 2015).

One of the consequences of this approach is Moscow's reluctance to take a stance on any of the territorial disputes in Northeast Asia. A telling example is its performance at the "Shangri-La Dialogue" in Singapore. Deputy Minister of Defense Anatoly Antonov, who represented Moscow in 2014 and 2015, has not addressed any of the China-related security issues in East Asia, concentrating instead on alleged U.S. attempts to promote "color revolutions" in the

Asia-Pacific and conflict in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup> One explanation for this heard in interviews with Russian diplomats is Moscow's desire not to alienate any of its regional partners, most notably China.<sup>7</sup>

A more extensive and clearer explanation is reflected in public statements and writings of Russian experts, who have regular access to government officials and have a nuanced understanding of Moscow's official and unofficial position. One example is a report prepared by the Russian International Affairs Council, a government-sponsored think tank chaired by the former foreign minister Igor Ivanov, called "Russia's interests in Asia-Pacific: security and cooperation." The report was written by Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) scholars Victor Sumsky (former MFA official), Evgeny Kanaev, and Ekaterina Koldunova following a track 1.5 conference hosted by the Russian International Affairs Council as part of preparations for the APEC presidency of 2012. "Russia's interests cannot be fully aligned with the interests of either the U.S. or China. This is why Russia should be able to engage in adaptive maneuvering and under no circumstances form a full-fledged alliance with one of the two powerhouses."<sup>8</sup> This position, despite growing suspicions towards U.S. intentions, which are discussed separately, was still relevant in 2014-2015.<sup>9</sup>

The second factor influencing public debate on Chinese intentions in Northeast Asia, as well as government thinking on this issue, is the growing role ideology and anti-Americanism started to play in Russian intellectual life after the crisis in Ukraine. Searching for enemies outside the country and within it became an integral part of people's views, and the United States became a primary target for hatred.<sup>10</sup> This sentiment is very widespread, according to Yuri Levada Center polling data. Negative feelings towards the United States have risen from 44 percent in January 2014 to 81 percent in January 2015.<sup>11</sup> The flip-side of the "besieged fortress" mentality is the search for international friends and partners. Combined with Moscow's active efforts to establish a more robust economic partnership with China after the Ukrainian crisis and Western sanctions, this has resulted in a major shift in the way the Russian public sees China. In November 2013, just 55 percent of Russians had a positive attitude towards this eastern neighbor, while over 30 percent had a negative view. In January 2015 a dramatic change could be observed. The number of people having negative feelings toward China fell below 10 percent, while the number with positive attitudes reached an all-time high of 81 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Interviews with specialists and analysis of writings on China in 2014-2015 show a direct link between these feelings and interpretations of China's regional and international security intentions. Overall, the tone of analysis became more China-friendly and more accommodating to Beijing's position. The mainstream view is that China engages in long-term strategic competition with the United States and U.S. allies in Asia, and Russia has a vital interest in supporting China strategically by providing it a stable, strategic hinterland with pipelines and land-based supply routes. Any Chinese actions at the expense of Japan or the United States in Northeast Asia are seen positively. At the same time, the Russian expert community is more than ever inclined to blame Washington and its allies for all regional security threats, including developments around North Korea.

The most interesting development is the changing assessment of Chinese strategic intentions towards Russia. Many of the country's China-watchers in 2014 and 2015 started to cover positive aspects of the Russian-Chinese relationship while entirely downplaying the risks. Deliberate silence in public writings on negative scenarios between Moscow and Beijing can

be found even in the works of Russia's best China-hands. Important examples are the writings of Alexander Lukin, one of the leading authorities on China in Russia. In his article "Russia, China and Emerging Greater Eurasia" published in *The Asan Forum*,<sup>13</sup> the only risk mentioned in closer cooperation with China are "tough terms" that Beijing may introduce for bilateral projects. Lukin mentions "Russian fears" which need to be discussed with Chinese leadership, but does not go into detail. In contrast, Lukin's insightful piece "Nation and Military Spirit," published two years earlier in "Russia in Global Affairs,"<sup>14</sup> had a thorough analysis of growing nationalism in China, the unpredictability of Beijing's course, and possible risks for Russia.

The third important factor shaping Russia's views on Chinese policy objectives in Northeast Asia is the deplorable state of Russian expertise on contemporary China.<sup>15</sup> As other area studies after 1991, China-watching suffered a huge blow following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Lack of funds for salaries and purchase of contemporary books and journal articles, as well as for research trips, had a devastating effect. The ranks of Russian China-watchers have significantly decreased, the median age has risen, and the most dynamic and promising scholars have either left the field or emigrated (with few exceptions). Despite economic stabilization under Putin, the Russian state in all its forms—including government bodies, state-owned enterprises, the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the university system—did not pay much attention to boosting expert capacity to understand China. Private money also did not arrive: part of the explanation was a lack of significant commercial ties with China and the structure of Russian exports to the PRC, a large part supplied by just a handful of big companies. All these trends did not lead to a robust market for sinological expertise. The timing of the USSR's collapse and decline of the China-watching community caused a significant disadvantage in Moscow's capacity to understand China: just after Deng Xiaoping's "southern tour" and the re-launch of market reforms, which have transformed the PRC enormously. This was a time for dramatic changes in China's ability to project power and develop sophisticated weaponry, which was not covered extensively in Russia. It also needs to be noted that the expert community does not play an important role in crafting Russia's policy towards China.<sup>16</sup>

The state of China-watching in the government sector was better overall because of stable jobs and stable demand, but the field has also inherited the problems of the 1990s. According to in-depth interviews with officials at the MFA, the Ministry of the Economy, and the presidential administration, and former officers in the intelligence community, the problems in official China-watching are similar to those in the academic world: low salaries, a rising generation gap, and decreasing quality of analytical products. Analysis of Chinese military and security policy was also hit. For example, the GRU (Glavnoe Razvedyvatel'noe Upravlenie, the military intelligence department of the Russian chief of staff) had just one analyst to process recovered data on the Chinese air force.<sup>17</sup>

Descriptions of the state of expertise are important for understanding the quality of Russian discussions on Chinese intentions in Northeast Asia. Despite the growing significance of China both globally and vis-à-vis Russia, Moscow is burdened by poor command of the facts and developments on the ground. The number of specialists who do some sort of field research and go to China to talk about Beijing's strategy can be counted on two hands at best. The number of people who use original Chinese sources is also limited. This explains the low quantity of articles and studies of the topic in Russia in 2014-2015.



## HELICOPTER VIEW: WHAT DO THE POLICYMAKERS THINK?

Russian officials are very careful when expressing their views about China publicly. Vasily Kashin noted that there is an unofficial ban on all government employees airing negative comments on China. Public comments from Moscow on what China's grand strategy is or what Beijing's intentions in its neighborhood are simply do not exist. The public stance on these issues was aired by Putin as prime minister during his campaign for the presidency in 2012, first during an interview with the three largest TV-channels. "There is one thing I keep telling everyone who is trying to scare us by a Chinese threat, and these are mostly our Western partners. In today's world no matter how attractive the mineral resources of Eastern Siberia and the Far East are, they are not the major prize to fight for. The major battle is for global leadership, and here we don't want to compete with China. China has other competitors in this realm. Let them sort out this issue between them. For us China is a partner, a reliable partner. We see Chinese leadership and Chinese people's readiness to build a friendly neighbors relationship and to look for compromise, even on complicated issues."<sup>19</sup>

Another quote outlining Moscow's strategy can be found in Putin's article, "Russia and the Changing World," published in *Moskovskie Novosti* in February 2012.<sup>20</sup> "Chinese economic growth is not a threat, but a challenge, which has enormous potential for business cooperation." A second and more important point is, "China's behavior in the international arena does not support the idea that it seeks dominance." Third, "We have solved all the big political issues with China, including the main question – the border issue. We have built a stable framework supported by legally binding agreements. There is an unprecedented level of mutual trust between the two leaderships. This allows us and the Chinese to act as real partners, based on pragmatism and concern for each other's interests." Putin admits there are also problems, and one of the issues he mentions is tied to security: "Our commercial interests in third countries do not coincide, we are not pleased with the current trade structure and low level of mutual investment. We will watch carefully migration flows from the PRC."<sup>21</sup> Thus, only Chinese migration into Russia was officially acknowledged by Putin as a China-related security concern. In practice, however, Russia has been worried about Chinese "penetration" into the Russian Far East. In private conversations officials admit that there were informal barriers put in place for large Chinese investments. Fear of a possible territorial conflict was one reason why negotiations on new arms deals throughout the 2000s were problematic. (The other major issue was the Chinese specific understanding of intellectual property).

After the Ukrainian crisis Moscow's official tone changed. Some voices like Chairman of the State Duma Committee on Foreign Relations Alexey Pushkov assert that Russia is building an alliance with China, which is a direct response to "expansion of the Western alliance."<sup>22</sup> But most important is the change in Putin's tone: notions of possible threats or risks associated with China have entirely disappeared from his public remarks and interviews. In a May 2014 interview with leading Chinese media he called Russia-China relations a "model partnership" and stated that both countries "don't have any problems which can have a negative impact on strengthening our cooperation."<sup>23</sup> Putin also stated that Moscow and Beijing promote a "new security architecture in the Asia-Pacific," which will be based on the principles of "equality, respect for international law, indivisibility of security, nonuse of force."<sup>24</sup> His next big interview on China for the TASS and Xinhua agencies went further: Putin blamed "some countries" for their "pursuit to maintain their dominance in

international affairs by any price,”<sup>25</sup> without singling out the United States by name. “It is in these uneasy circumstances that Russia-China cooperation plays a special role for preserving and strengthening international and regional stability and security,” he asserted, mentioning regional security architecture, space, and the security of information as three major realms for cooperation.<sup>26</sup> Despite that, the Russian leadership clearly sees limits in its partnership with China. An important clarification was made by the chief of the presidential administration Sergey Ivanov while visiting China in July 2014. “We have never seen any value, and neither do our Chinese partners, in creating a formal military alliance,” he said during a meeting with Chinese Vice-Chairman Li Yuanchao.<sup>27</sup>

Russia’s real assessment of the danger that Chinese intentions in Northeast Asia may pose for Russia’s security are made even clearer by observing Moscow’s actions, not rhetoric. Arms trade is the most telling example of the dynamics in strategic calculations vis-à-vis China. After years of negotiation Russia has decided to sell the S-400 missile defense system and Su-35 fighter jets to the PLA. Beijing became the first international customer for both, which are among the most sophisticated weapon systems. The managers of Rosoboronexport do not explain the changed logic. In his interview with *Kommersant*, CEO Anatoly Isaykin just stated that the contract on the S-400 reflects “the strategic nature of our relations.” When asked whether Russian producers see risks in cooperating with Chinese, Isaykin just dropped a mysterious phrase: “When we work in Chinese interests, we also work in our interests.”<sup>28</sup> Russian military experts with close ties to the military-industrial complex and with good understanding of China explain that Moscow has become more aware of Chinese progress in indigenous innovation in arms production; thus it is trying while it can to capitalize on selling R&D and large quantities of sophisticated weapons.<sup>29</sup> The sale of the Su-35 is seen as a major success for Moscow.<sup>30</sup>

What is not stated publicly, but revealed in personal interviews, is that Moscow’s perception of the Chinese threat has also changed. As part of the general review of policy towards China and the Asia-Pacific in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Moscow has reassessed the “Chinese demographic threat” in the Far East and Siberia, concluding that the threat is exaggerated, and Beijing apparently does not have a plan to quietly move large groups of ethnic Chinese there. Combined with new information on the state of the Chinese military-industrial complex and the underlying consensus that a conventional war against China is unlikely to be won (and thus, in the highly unlikely case of an armed conflict, Russia would still be relying on its nuclear deterrent). This conclusion, as well as growing anti-Americanism across all strategic theaters, led to a change in policy. Some Russian officials dealing with China interpret Beijing’s overall strategy in Northeast Asia as shifting the military balance of power to the point it would be dangerous for the United States to interfere. Beijing will force other countries to negotiate on territorial disputes and make concessions allowing China to claim it has overcome its “century of humiliation,” while avoiding direct military conflict. This process, it is believed in Moscow, will not call the Russia-China border treaty into question, and, thus, Russia can remain a neutral observer, appealing for peace and opposing the use of force. Whether this view is widely shared in the bureaucracy is difficult to establish, as most Russian officials are reluctant to discuss Chinese strategy in Northeast Asia even in anonymous interviews.

## EXPERT DEBATE: BETWEEN “YELLOW PERIL” & “STRATEGIC ALLIANCE”

Beijing’s security intentions in Northeast Asia play a marginal role in the Russian expert debate on China. In contrast to discussions in other countries, in 2014-2015 there was just one (!) article in Russian journals addressing China’s strategy in Northeast Asia as a separate topic,<sup>31</sup> and it was written not by a prominent sinologist, but by a Ph.D student at the Institute of Far Eastern Studies (IFES). Also, in 2014 IFES published a collection of articles entitled “Northeast Asia: regional dimension of security and Russia-China cooperation,”<sup>32</sup> but few actually dealt with the Chinese strategy for Northeast Asia. This neglect can be traced to both a lack of original research and field studies (with some notable exceptions) and a tendency to analyze trends in the broader “Asia-Pacific” and not in Northeast Asia, which remains a less popular subject.

In Russia’s expert debate on Chinese intentions in Northeast Asia, three schools of thought can be identified. The alarmists, remaining from the legacy of the 1990s, see China as an aggressive rising power aiming to change the status quo in the region and globally. China’s aim is not security or international environment that favors domestic transformation, but global dominance and territorial expansion. The most obvious target for these plans is Russia; so the country should be prepared to fend off an inevitable Chinese invasion. This school, once mainstream, represents residual distrust towards China. Not having an impact in professional circles, which scorn attempts to present China as a bogeyman or threat to the Far East. One reason is that the major proponent of this school, military analyst Alexander Khramchikhin,<sup>33</sup> is not a China expert. Nevertheless, such writings attract a lot of public attention and influence public opinion, particularly that of the Russian intelligentsia in big cities.

The second and largest group, the realists (Yakov Berger, Alexander Gabuev, Igor Denisov, Ivan Zuenko, Vasily Kashin, Vladimir Portyakov, Vitaly Vorobiev), see China’s goal in Northeast Asia as attempting to acquire the status of regional major power able to fend off any invasion, as well as to become dominant in the local balance of power in the long run. Representatives of this group argue a lot on details, such as whether China has the ambition to challenge the United States as the primary security provider in Asia, as well as whether Beijing has a coherent strategy at all. Thinkers in this school would agree that China’s intentions are driven primarily by domestic concerns, its view of security is more complex than just its military posture and involves geo-economics too, and Russia should not view China as a threat, but needs to be aware of some risks.

The third school, the quasi-realists (Yuri Beloborov, Timofey Bordachev, Evgeny Kanaev, Vasily Likhachev, Anatoly Klimentko, Vladimir Petrovsky, Mikhail Titarenko),<sup>34</sup> have been present since the fall of the USSR, but now are gaining prominence and becoming closer to mainstream ideology. Representatives of this school imply a realists’ (in IR theory’s sense) approach logic to inter-state relations, but narrow China’s interests down to opposing the United States. They believe that Beijing’s policy in Northeast Asia is a reaction to U.S. attempts to limit China’s rise and maintain global dominance, and thus conflict between the two powers is immanent, and a clash is a matter of time. Chinese policy, they state, can be seen as self-defense, and Sino-American conflict is inevitable. Russia should join China in this fight, providing sophisticated weapons or even entering into a formal alliance.



Before we discuss the topics which form the core of debate in Russia in some depth, Anna Voloshina's article, "Northeast Asia in China's Contemporary Foreign Policy Strategy," deserves special attention, as this is the only Russian source attempting to explain Beijing's strategic intentions in this critical region – all other experts just touch upon different aspects of the problem in their 2014-2015 writings. Voloshina's position can be described as part of the quasi-realists' discourse influenced by the realists' writings. The starting point is a gradual shift in Beijing's foreign policy thinking, abandoning the *taoguang yanghui* mantra of Deng Xiaoping and starting to pursue a more assertive policy towards Northeast Asia, including boosting its military capabilities and developing a "red lines" diplomacy. Voloshina states that China's goals in Northeast Asia are set. "They include boosting national power, limiting other contenders' influence, and positioning itself as a guarantor of security and stability in the region."<sup>35</sup> The United States is engaged in a policy of hedging against China and limiting Beijing's options by boosting the capacity of Washington-led military alliances. In the author's views, this is proven by the announced American "rebalancing." "The rise of China, the increased military potential of the country, and its hard positions on many issues, from the point of view of Chinese politicians, are a legitimate response to external challenges and instability outside Chinese borders," Voloshina states.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, Beijing has developed a set of constructive initiatives to strengthen economic ties with its neighbors, including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and "One Belt, One Road."

The most important relationship for China in Northeast Asia is with the United States. Despite a clear understanding of hostile American intentions, "China's leadership understands the need for containing 'the competitive side' of the relationship and to avoid deepening existing contradictions with the U.S." The main reason for Chinese restraint is the volume of bilateral trade, Voloshina states. Second in importance is the relationship to Japan, where Beijing's strategy was to develop ties to Tokyo and weaken Japan's link to the U.S. This strategy has failed, as the competitive element in China-Japan ties became dominant. Washington, Voloshina asserts, has played a role too by helping to remove DPJ leaders from power and to bring in "pro-American politicians" from the LDP. On the Korean Peninsula "China tries to maintain and increase its influence, understanding that control by any other state on the peninsula creates a strategic threat." By developing bilateral relations with South Korea, China hopes to gradually weaken Seoul's alliance with the United States. "The most important goal of PRC strategy is to prevent a North Korean collapse. Beijing claims that it fears the destabilizing effect of a humanitarian crisis and significant flow of migrants. China also thinks that the ultimate U.S. goal on the Korean Peninsula is to change the DPRK regime in order to strengthen American alliances and hedge against China." One of the successes of the Chinese strategy in Northeast Asia is its relationship to Russia, which has grown stronger over the last two years. Beijing will not allow Moscow to turn China into a card for confrontation with the West, while trying to use Russia as a power to balance American supremacy. Voloshina's conclusion is that China faces a major dilemma: to behave more self-confidently and even aggressively or to hide its ambitions and concentrate on solving internal problems. Beijing understands that the gap in military capacity is too big to challenge the United States directly, but, at the same time, American policy to encircle China creates risks which cannot remain unanswered. China's major problem is its inability to formulate a concept of regional security, which could be attractive for its neighbors, and that is why Beijing should focus on "soft power." Voloshina may have no established position in the China-watching community and her work may not rely on original case studies or interviews, but her article is indicative of the mainstream consensus in the expert community.

In all other expert writings on related topics in Russia in 2014-2015, three main themes can be identified: 1) the nature of China-U.S. relations and their impact on Beijing's strategy for Northeast Asia; 2) "One Road, One Belt" as a geo-economic tool for improving China's relations with neighboring states, including in Northeast Asia; and 3) most debated, the nature of China's relations with Russia and Beijing's long-term intentions, as well as Moscow's response.

For most Russian specialists, it is China's relations with the United States that dictate Beijing's strategy for Northeast Asia. An alternative approach, which views adversarial relations with Japan as no less important for China, is not reflected in the available Russian literature – it can be heard in personal interviews.<sup>38</sup> The quasi-realists see conflict between Washington and Beijing as inevitable. In their September 2014 article for *Russia in Global Affairs*, the most prestigious Russian journal on foreign policy, Timofey Bordachev and Evgeny Kanaev of the Higher School of Economy (HSE) write, "strategic degradation of political, and later trade and economy ties between China and the United States became inevitable."<sup>39</sup> China, Bordachev and Kanaev assert, will have to look for ways if not to break through the strategic blockade in the east and southeast, but at least to compensate for its aftermath. This will lead Beijing to improve its ability to reach a compromise with Russia, particularly in Central Asia, Mongolia and North Korea.<sup>40</sup> A similar position is reflected in an article by Dmitry Novikov, one of Bordachev's graduate students from HSE. In "Non-isosceles Triangle," Novikov outlines major divisions between China and the United States, which include territorial disputes between Beijing and Washington's allies, problems of maritime security in the South China Sea and different views on economic architecture in Asia-Pacific.<sup>41</sup> China's goal is no longer creating favorable conditions for internal development, but regional leadership. This will not be accepted by the United States, which, according to Novikov, makes the conflict inevitable. Russia cannot play the role of "wise monkey sitting on a tree," and needs to support China more proactively by giving the PLA Navy access to Russian ports and supplying China with hydrocarbons from Siberia, which will offset Chinese dependency on oil and gas imported by insecure sea lanes. Helping to undermine the current equilibrium between Washington and Beijing will benefit Moscow – either the United States cedes some responsibilities to rising China and, thus, makes the regional power structure more balanced, or both countries will seek Russia's support.<sup>42</sup> In a similar approach, Vladimir Petrovsky analyzes Sino-U.S. attempts to create the regional trade and integration architecture, concluding that conflict between the two seems inevitable, and so far Beijing is winning.<sup>43</sup>

The realists view Sino-American relations in a more complicated way, taking more care about about predictions for Beijing's strategy in Northeast Asia. Analyzing the fifth generation's foreign policy, deputy director of IFES Vladimir Portyakov describes Beijing's growing assertiveness in regional conflicts as a product of "China's rise" – Chinese policymakers became more confident about their country's power and are experimenting with a more muscular foreign policy. This trend is reflected in PRC academic writings, official statements, and real actions. "In decades to come Sino-American relations will resemble a pendulum, moving from cooperation to confrontation and back."<sup>44</sup> In his comprehensive analysis of major trends in Xi Jinping's foreign policy, Igor Denisov comes to the conclusion that it will still be driven by domestic needs, but these are no longer needs of a large developing country, but of a "reviving nation." "It is no longer just about creating a favorable environment for socio-economic development of the country, but about broadening strategic opportunities for China's rise," Denisov states.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, the shift to a more proactive foreign

policy will be gradual, limited by the heritage of *taoguang yanghui* and the inertia of China's diplomatic bureaucracy. Thus, one should not expect confrontation with the United States in Northeast Asia, despite some disagreements.

A long piece by Vasily Kashin, Russia's leading analyst of Chinese military and security policy, concludes that China will be very cautious about using its newly discovered military capabilities. "Hampering others' policies of military modernization and defending firmly its positions on territorial disputes, China tries to avoid heated conflicts on this stage. For example, its presence in disputed areas is marked by unarmed Coast Guard ships, not its military fleet."<sup>46</sup> Kashin's approach is further summarized in his op-ed for *Vedomosti*, outlining the inevitability of U.S.-China dialogue on regional security challenges, including in Northeast Asia.<sup>47</sup>

A second widely discussed topic is the impact of Chinese economic diplomacy, most notably the One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative, on regional security, including Northeast Asia. The most extensive analysis has been published by Igor Denisov.<sup>48</sup> Denisov sees OBOR as the first proactive concept in China's foreign policy, which reflects China's transformation from "large power" to "great power" (translations of Chinese terms *daguo* and *qiangguo*). The initiative aims at using existing strong features of the Chinese model (expertise in infrastructure) to boost Beijing's influence in neighboring countries, which is a unique approach to mitigate security challenges. Denisov identifies a priority relevant for Northeast Asia: the attempt to create a "belt" of friendly states on China's periphery without direct conflict with the United States.<sup>49</sup> This approach is shared by Denisov's colleague at MGIMO, Ambassador Vitaly Vorobiev, who also sees OBOR as the first "big foreign policy concept" in recent Chinese history,<sup>50</sup> unlike the "public relations theories" of the Hu Jintao era, and he advocates for a stronger role of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.<sup>51</sup> Alexander Lukin notes that the OBOR concept may face challenges from China's recently discovered more assertive stance on territorial issues, and, thus, Beijing needs to recalibrate its rhetoric.<sup>52</sup> Still, Lukin, as well as many other commentators (including Bordachev, Denisov, Fedor Lukyanov and, to some extent, Gabuev) believe that coordination between OBOR and the Eurasian Economic Union can increase the level of strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing, which will affect their cooperation on regional security matters, including Northeast Asia.

The Russian debate in 2014-2015 has concentrated on the overall state of relations between Moscow and Beijing, as well as global implications. The alarmists' works (the most exemplary author is Alexander Khranchihin) depict China as an aggressive power aiming to swallow Russia's Siberia and the Far East. Khranchihin's arguments have not changed much since they were first published in the 1990s: the severity of internal problems, most notably overpopulation, lack of resources, and environmental degradation, will force China to expand beyond its borders. The empty space of Siberia is the easiest target, and Beijing, according to Khranchihin, has been preparing plans to take large chunks of Siberia for decades. One recent piece on how a Russia-China border war will develop suggests that a Chinese invasion will start with a small commando platoon overtaking Khabarovsk and then capturing half of Siberia.<sup>53</sup> Khranchihin asserts that the 2004 border treaty did not solve the territorial dispute between Russia and China, and that China is just waiting to rewrite this and other agreements.<sup>54</sup>

The quasi-realists claim that the crisis over Ukraine has marked the breaking point in Russia's relations with the West, and now Beijing is Moscow's only true ally. The most radical expression

of these views can be found in Yuri Belobrov's article, asserting that all recent U.S. activity in the Asia-Pacific can be explained by fear of China turning into an alternative global center of power and a desire to encircle it. Moscow and Beijing need to join hands to develop "a strategy of opposing the American hegemonic push" in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>55</sup> Other examples include articles in *Mezhdunarodnaia Zhizn'* by Alexander Lukin,<sup>56</sup> Vladimir Petrovsky,<sup>57</sup> Mikhail Titarenko,<sup>58</sup> and Vasily Likhachev.<sup>59</sup> Between the two extremes are the realists, who argue that China is not about to conquer Russia and this intention does not exist at all,<sup>60</sup> but that Beijing will be not doing any charity work for Moscow, and Russia should be mindful of economic and political risks, obliging it to put its "Asia pivot" eggs into different Asian baskets.<sup>61</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Russian debate about Chinese security intensions in Northeast Asia is still in its infancy. Interest in this topic is growing due to Russia's "turn to the East" policy and the rising global importance of China. It is important to note that the expert debate in open sources does not fully match the content of internal deliberations on the topic inside the Russian leadership. Disconnect between the expert community and decision-makers is a fact of life in Russia, and recent attempts to close this gap and involve experts more deeply in framing Moscow's China policy are only the first steps in the right direction. Analyzing the real content of insiders' debate needs to rely on personal interviews. This is also required to distinguish between scholars who have access to decision-makers and thus either influential or representing their interlocutors' views, or are just high-positioned scientific bureaucrats representing themselves.

For an outside observer, the Russian debate on Chinese intensions in Northeast Asia may seem of low intensity and quality. This is a reflection of both the current decision-making system in Russia, which does not empower and encourage independent expertise, and degradation of the China-watching community. The growing role of anti-Americanism as a set of personal values, which influences scholar's thinking and prevents objective analysis, is also part of the problem. In addition, Russia still lacks good studies informed by field research. The bulk of the work is concentrated on China-Russia issues, while the sinology community is unable to track important relations like China-Japan or China-Korean Peninsula. In order to overcome these shortcomings, the Russian government should invest in beefing up expert capabilities, as well as liberalizing intellectual life while maintaining its strong focus on Asia.

## ENDNOTES

1. The author wants to thank his research assistant Vita Spivak and Natalia Dobrynina, an intern with the Russia in Asia-Pacific program at Carnegie Moscow Center.
2. A transcript of the open part of the meeting is available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/8234>.
3. Interviews conducted in Moscow in December 2015.
4. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>.
5. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825>.
6. Transcripts of Antonov's remarks are available at the ministry's website: [http://function.mil.ru/news\\_page/person/more.htm?id=11932329@egNews](http://function.mil.ru/news_page/person/more.htm?id=11932329@egNews) (2014) and [http://okp.mil.ru/separated\\_commandant\\_regiment/news/more.htm?id=12037864@egNews](http://okp.mil.ru/separated_commandant_regiment/news/more.htm?id=12037864@egNews) (2015). For detailed analysis of Russia's performance at "Shangri La" in 2014 see: Alexander Gabuev, "How Russia Is Misreading Asia," <http://carnegie.ru/commentary/?fa=55776>.

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33. Anna Voloshina, "Severo-vostochnaia Aziia," pp. 11-21.
34. Alexander Lukin can be positioned as an intermediary between the realists and quasi-realists groups, as both approaches can be found in his recent works. The pre-2014 writings of Lukin can be attributed to the realists' approach.
35. Anna Voloshina, "Severo-vostochnaia Aziia," pp. 11-13.
36. Ibid., 15-21.

37. The appearance of the article in Russia's most prestigious China-watching journal can be explained by peculiarities of the academic system, in which Ph.D candidates need to publish three articles in journals approved by the Higher Attestation Commission, and those from from IFES have preferential access to the journal, which is published by the institute.
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