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A New Sino-Russian Role for the 21st Century: The Creation of a 'Greater Eurasian Community' to Challenge a Western 'Standard of Civilization'

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A New Sino-Russian Role for the 21st Century:

**The Creation of a 'Greater Eurasian Community' to Challenge a Western
'Standard of Civilization'**

Master of Arts in International Relations: Global Order in Historical Perspective
Thesis

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Abstract

This study aims at showing why Russia and China have been nurturing a closer relationship together, despite however much this antagonises the West and jeopardizes some of China and Russia's own long-term interests. A review of the Sino-Russian literature finds that short-term material concerns tend to dominate discussions about their interactions together and that discursive aspects remain marginal. An English School approach calls to attention the initial steps towards common values, interests, rules, and practices that drive Russia and China together. Through a qualitative case study of the Sino-Russian 'strategic' partnership, using congruence, document and discourse analysis, the first part of this study offers a historical perspective on the Sino-Russian interactions. These have significantly increased in intensity in recent times and a solid groundwork has been laid to also institutionalize them. Moscow and Beijing now possess ties that bind them together. The second chapter analyses the Sino-Russian narrative about how they position themselves with regard to the West. Through insights provided by the theoretical lens of the English School, this research indicates that Moscow and Beijing have been in the process of creating a non-Western international society that by some observers has been named 'The Greater Eurasian Community'. The findings of this thesis put forward the argument that China and Russia appear for a large part to have done so to attempt to adjust a Western 'standard of civilization' more towards their own preference.

Keywords: Sino-Russian relationship, English School, leaders diplomacy, non-Western international society, Greater Eurasian community, 'standard of civilization'.

Introduction

The Sino-Russian relationship has recently strengthened. The Ukraine war and the sharp decline in relations between Russia and the West that this has entailed, have led the former to turn firmly Eastward. Nowadays, the relations between Beijing and Moscow can be seen as rather amicable, as is evidenced by the statement of Russian president Vladimir Putin who has described China as Russia's 'indispensable friend' (Cox 2016, 311). Similarly, on June 8th 2018, Beijing awarded Putin with the Chinese Order of Friendship. Furthermore, both countries are ruled by autocrats with nothing even closely resembling legitimate opposition to their rule.

The similarity of these political regimes is a precondition that is likely to facilitate their interactions together. Moreover, alterations have been made to their respective constitutions to abolish the term limits of the presidency. In this way, in both countries the power is now concentrated in the hands of a small group of individuals centred around both heads of state. Because China and Russia are increasingly becoming autocratic more of the political decision-making pertains to the leaders themselves. Finally, Chinese president Xi Jinping and his Russian counterpart both profess a strong desire to claim their country's 'rightful' and 'leading' place among the family of nations (Lukyanov 2016; Foot & King 2021). This expression suggest that both men aspire to increase in international recognition of their respective countries by the international community.

Nevertheless, upon further examination, this intensification of the Sino-Russian partnership can at times seem contradictory. The ostensible friendship between Russia and China is paradoxical in view of the long-standing ambitions for both countries to gain recognition as key players in the international system. On the one hand, China has a profound economic interdependency with its two biggest trading partners which are the US and EU. Indeed, in 2020 trade between China and the EU and the US represented respectively US\$695 billion and US\$586 billion (*China Statistical Yearbook*, 2021). By comparison, this volume of trade dwarfs that between China and Russia which in 2020 reached about US\$108 billion (Adomeit 2022, 28). The apparent rapprochement with Moscow seemingly has the potential to undermine the vital economic interdependency between Beijing on the one side and the US and Europe on the other side. One might therefore wonder whether China is currently compromising its own interests.

On the other hand, Russia has always defined itself as belonging to a European civilization, which has shaped the character of the Russian state (Wishnick, 2017, 121). Therefore, the Sino-Russian rapprochement seems to be counterproductive in the creation of the right conditions to obtain the status in the international system they desire. Based on this, this study seeks to answer the following research question: **Why are China and Russia nurturing a closer relationship together, despite however much this antagonises the West and jeopardizes some of China and Russia's own long-term interests?**

There exists a research community which argues on the resemblance, convergence, and 'shared destiny' of China and Russia (Berzina-Cerenkova 2022, 1). Since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, a rising number of research publications from Western institutions and think tanks within this field have engaged in academic debates that have often embraced extreme positions (Kirchberger et al, 2022, 1; Wishnick 2017). Some scholars emphasize the pragmatic side of the relationship that eventually will be strained by regional competition (Alexeeva & Lasserre 2018), while other scholars define it as a strategic partnership that is bound to form a post-Western geopolitical constellation (Bratersky 2016). In this way, there exist a multitude of analyses that differ wildly in their assessment of the trajectory of the Sino-Russian relationship. Of the two extremes, the former view is the dominant one in the West. That is, ties between Moscow and Beijing have strengthened significantly over the last couple of years even though this relationship is bound by limitations. As can be seen in descriptions of the partnership as a 'axis/marriage of convenience' (Lo 2008; Ying 2016, 96).

Moreover, positivist approaches with a focus on decision-making that is rooted on a rational basis and which can arguably be considered to represent the mainstream, seem to be at odds with the direction that the Sino-Russian partnership will take. On the one hand, realists explain this nurturing of a closer relationship in terms of balance of power, security concerns and assertions of mutual opportunism with system-level pressures that drive China and Russia closer together (Wu 2017; Korolev 2016). On the other hand the liberalist tradition argues that the significant smaller trade volume China has with Russia in comparison to the US and EU will eventually limit the depth of cooperation between Beijing and Moscow (Nye 2015). These positivist materialist narratives enjoy a predominance

within the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship. And while they both certainly explain some short-term dynamics between these countries, they nevertheless prove insufficient to explain why the pair still seem to be going against their long-term ambition of recognition as equal partners by the Western powers. It is here that a post-positivist approach such as that of the English School can prove useful as it calls to attention the initial steps towards common values, interests, rules, and practices that drive China and Russia together.

This thesis argues that Moscow and Beijing are attempting to shape and strengthen a non-Western international society. This would alter the global order and thus adjust international society in a way to make it more receptive to Russia and China. Liselotte Odgaard explains this process as the: 'inter-state regulation of the power politics of international anarchy' (Odgaard 2017, 41). Other scholars argue that something resembling a non-Western international society: "may already be emerging in Eurasia, with Russia and China being the key drivers of this trend" (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 28). The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is a key institution in which this development between China and Russia has been taking shape. On a regional level, important steps have been undertaken by the heads of state to not dismay their counterpart. Moreover, a top-down process is being cultivated in which the Second World War is now being revised to depict it as a monumental struggle in which the Chinese and Russian people fought back-to-back against the fascist aggressors. This new version of the war now joins burgeoning economic ties and the increase of joint military drills.

The contributions this thesis brings to the field are threefold. In first instance, by employing the English School as theoretical lens, it seeks to add a post-positivist voice to the predominately materialist academic debate on the Sino-Russian relationship. When ample room is given to elements such as history, the formation of common values, interests and practices this then allows for the zero-sum game logic, often found in positivist narratives, to be circumvented. This leads to the second point in which this study will provide an alternative view on why the Sino-Russian relationship *does* work instead of the often repeated position that it will not and cannot work. The final aspect that this thesis brings to the field is more of an empirical nature, as a number of data and events will be organised along logical lines.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. The next section provides a literature review of the Sino-Russian ties that has been divided alongside International Relations (IR) theories. I will first explain the mainstream or positivist approaches and then delve into post-positivist approaches. I will develop how these approaches have considered the question about the nature of the Sino-Russian partnership and to which elements in this relationship scholars have accorded the most value in shaping and advancing it. This development will then allow me to consider the methodology used to explain the chosen data set used to answer the research question.

The third section is devoted to the case study. I will closely examine the manner in which Russia and China have been attempting to create a non-Western international society and the process of the institutionalization of these interactions. This examination will then be followed by a discourse analysis of the Sino-Russian narrative into the way that Beijing and Moscow have to some extent incorporated a Western lexicon in order to justify their actions towards the international community. In the fourth and final section I will analyse and discuss these results in their context and provide the conclusion of this research.

Now, let us turn towards the literature review that has been divided alongside the mainstream IR theories.

Literature Review: Short-term material concerns tend to dominate discussions of the Sino-Russian interactions; discursive aspects remain marginal

With the fall of the Berlin wall and the ensuing disintegration of the Soviet Union, Sino-Russian academic discussion shifted away from the Cold-War paradigm. The historical epoch succeeding it came to be known as the unipolar moment of the US (Krauthammer 1990). It was within this renewed theoretical framework that the Sino-Russian relations literature now emphasized the study of the growing ties between the two countries, orienting their analyses and studies on the question of whether the relationship between these two nations could best be understood as the development of a sustainable strategic alliance or more of two temporary partners. The latter is best exemplified by the idea that the pair form an axis of convenience (Lo 2008). In more recent times, the intriguing question of whether Xi's China and Putin's Russia will ever form an official alliance has spawned an extensive literature of its own (Baev 2020; Ying 2016; Lukin 2022).

Within the academic literature there are opposing views on the resemblance, convergence and the commonly shared goals of China and Russia. For conceptual reasons I have divided the main strains of IR theory in this literature review along two broad lines. Along the first line are the realist and liberalist positions with their offshoots because both of these intellectual traditions uphold a positivist outlook in the pursuit and creation of knowledge. Whilst their initial assumptions might differ greatly, both agree that there is one knowable reality that governs the conduct of international relations. Furthermore, both are also rooted in a rationalist way of thinking. They concur with one another that actors make their decisions on a rational basis (Bryman 2012, 27-28).

In the second line I include constructivism and the English School as they have an epistemology that is more in line with interpretivism. It rejects the notion that the social sciences should be conducted in the same manner as the natural sciences (Bryman 2012, 30). In this way, there is more attention paid to the influence of history when trying to make sense of the present. For a large part these approaches are concerned with discursive processes and the construction of intersubjective meaning. However, the English School occupies a rather ambiguous position as it has been classified by some as nothing more than a 'soft' variant of realism. Other scholars have dismissed it as a premature version of

constructivism (Buzan 2014a, 25). There exists a noteworthy linkage and interplay between constructivism and the core concepts of international society and world society that come out of the English School toolbox (Buzan 2001, 483). That said, the main concern of the English School is to gain a deeper understanding of the interactions with which states can create justice and order that goes beyond the state level.

Positivist and rationalist approaches

Realism and structural realism

Within the Sino-Russian literature there is a predominance of materialist narratives, specifically the (neo-) realist strain of IR focused around geopolitical analyses of the relationship (Waltz 1990; Wu 2017; Korolev & Portyakov 2019). Arguably, these approaches comprise the mainstream view of the literature and are therefore a logical starting point for my analysis. Indeed, scholars writing in the realist tradition of IR strongly tend to centre around balance of power theories, great power politics and relative gains. A clear pattern for the realist tradition can be discerned in which military considerations trump economic ones in setting a country's national security agenda (Bekkevold 2022, 42). In this way, the realist tradition is primarily focused upon the distribution of power as well as the inherent need of great powers to bring about a balance of power, comprising as an ultimate objective that no party must fear a sudden show of force by another party. Finally, two key concepts in this line of thought are those of balancing and bandwagoning, both of which are closely interwoven with the paramount notion of the balance of power. The former refers to the idea that several actors could bundle their strength to face a stronger foe, while the latter refers to the action of a weaker actor bundling powers with the more powerful actor for its own security and safety (Wang 2019, 31).

In the Sino-Russian scholarly debate this position might be attributed to scholars such as the American Princeton University professor Gilbert Rozman and Chinese Tsinghua University professor Yan Xuetong. Both authors have put forward the argument that China has shown a great deal of self-restraint in the management of its relationship with Russia. For example, when the two countries are compared to one another economically, demographically and militarily it becomes quite clear that China is far more powerful than Russia. Even so, the argument is made that leaders in Beijing appear to restrain chauvinistic nationalism so as

not to degrade Russia to the role of junior partner (Yan 2014; Rozman 2014a). Therefore, according to this line of reasoning, some scholars perceive the dynamics between the two as something that strongly resembles with the notion of the pair balancing together to offset the influence of the US and its allies on their immediate regional surroundings (Odgaard 2017, 41; Krickovic 2017). Their shared interest at counterbalancing the hegemonic tendencies of the US and its allies is perceived as a driving factor that brings Beijing and Moscow closer together.

Structural realists such as Alexander Korolev and Jo Inge Bekkevold build further upon this line of reasoning. Structural realism marks a clear distinction between 'system-level forces' and 'the unit and regional levels' (Korolev 2016a, 375). It corresponds to a classical realism approach according to which at a system-level China and Russia are, to a considerable degree, forced together due to the dominance that the US exerts in global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or the World Trade Organization (WTO). However, on a regional or bilateral basis it points to a visible pattern of cooperation going hand in hand with competition on specific issue areas between the two countries (Charap et al 2017). Indeed, Bekkevold makes an insightful claim on his view of the Sino-Russian ties when he states that: "China no longer sees Russia as a rival. This is not the result of friendly ties, shared values, or growing economic cooperation, but an outcome of the dramatic shift in the balance of power between them" (Bekkevold 2022, 54). Therefore, from this point of view there exists a real possibility in the near future in which Russia would decide to seek regional allies with whom to balance against China's rapidly growing might. In this line of thinking, the fundamentals of the Sino-Russian partnership are perceived as rather fragile.

Liberal institutionalism

Some influential scholars' work is rooted in the theory of liberal institutionalism, centred around rational choice and absolute gains as main focuses. This school of thought attributes great importance to international cooperation between states which it sees as desirable and durable. In this way, the likelihood of interstate competition or outright conflict is reduced (Keohane & Nye 1973). In a 2015 article Joseph Nye plainly dismisses the possibility of a Sino-Russian alliance from ever materialising. A core argument here is that the intensity and

volume of trade and cooperation between China and Russia pails before that which the former enjoys with Europe or the US. Furthermore, this camp points to the 'significant bilateral trade imbalance' between Russia and China in favour of the latter (Nye 2015). This is an imbalance that is bound to grow ever wider, which will eventually put great pressure on the careful management and cultivation of a closer partnership between China and Russia.

Such economic arguments can also be found within the upper echelons of the Chinese foreign policy establishment. For example, Fu Ying, a Chinese politician and diplomat, while serving as the chairperson of the National People's Congress Foreign Affairs Committee, wrote in 2016 an influential article in the journal *Foreign Affairs*. The article was tellingly subtitled *How China sees Russia: Beijing and Moscow are Close, but Not Allies*. In the article she attests that the Sino-Russian growing ties can under no circumstances be understood as a 'Marriage of Convenience' as some would have it, nor as an 'anti-US, anti-Western alliance,' but must instead be seen as a 'stable strategic partnership' (Ying 2016, 96). Focusing on the importance of trade and mutual interdependency, Ying strongly argues in favour of win-win cooperation between Moscow and Beijing.

Finally, this line of reasoning delves into the exact composition of the bilateral trade, stressing that Russia has found itself in a position that will deteriorate over time. Alexeeva and Lasserre point to the fact that while Moscow once traded some high value commodities at the beginning of this century such as machines and industrial equipment, this now has all but evaporated from the trade balance. Instead the Sino-Russian trade balance is tilting increasingly in favour of Beijing insofar as China now receives enormous number of raw materials and bio-fuels which it then uses to support its economic boom, selling manufactured goods to Russia in return. In this way, as Alexeeva and Lasserre would have it: 'So as far as trade is concerned, Russia can only claim to be a junior partner that needs China, and one that China can fairly easily dispense with' (Alexeeva & Lasserre 2018, 72). Indeed, they note that China's rapidly growing economic influence has resulted in feeding Russian fears of developing into China's raw-materials appendage. Therefore, this school of thought also seems to perceive the fundamentals of the Sino-Russian partnership as strained.

Post-positivist or Reflexivist Approaches

Constructivism

Scholars who approach the Sino-Russian strategic partnership of cooperation from a constructivist perspective assert that significant aspects of it are formed by ideational elements. Constructivism focuses on identities and the interests of actors, both of which it sees as socially constructed and changeable. Alexander Wendt, for example, perceives social structures as “primarily cultural rather than material phenomena” (Wendt 1999, 193). As such, this tradition does accord weight towards the role that history plays in the formation of present-day developments. It does so with strong deterministic tendencies. In other words: the past weighs heavily on the shoulders of the decisionmakers today.

Moreover, this school of thought points towards the trend that China and Russia are in the process of developing a common identity which will serve as the foundation for a more integrated and closer Sino-Russian strategic partnership (Ying 2018, 341). It is true that today both countries do share some common characteristics as they are ruled by autocratic regimes and have common communist backgrounds. As Wishnick points out, the ultimate objective for the creation of shared norms is threefold. Namely, it would: “support the development of a sense of common identity, encourage joint action, and constrain individual action” (Wishnick 2017, 116). These developments can to a significant degree be observed today by the increases in joint Sino-Russian military exercises, the closer cooperation in multilateral forums such as the SCO and the careful management by leaders in both countries to maintain neutrality on issues that are considered as sensitive for the other party, such as Ukraine or Taiwan.

Nevertheless, by exploring the identities of both countries, constructivists like Wishnick and Lui underline the fact that despite the growing rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow, the possibility of an alliance forming between them is unlikely to nil. For instance Putin’s pattern of interventionism, exemplified first in his seizure of Crimea in 2014, followed by his actions in Syria and more recently his invasion of Ukraine, has posed some serious policy dilemmas for Beijing (Wishnick 2017, 121). Particularly in light of the fact that the Chinese are strong supporters of the principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries and the principle of territorial integrity. Furthermore, as Wishnick

and Lui also point out, the outcome of the geographical location of the Russian state across two continents has been a long struggle with identity issues for Russian policymakers and thinkers. Since Russia has always defined itself as belonging to European civilization, this has also affected the character of the Russian state (Wishnick 2017, 122). For constructivists it is therefore highly probable that this historic identification with Europe will be an important obstacle towards Sino-Russian cooperation in the future.

English School

The English School contributes a theoretical lens through which to study the Sino-Russian partnership that is focused on understanding the common values, interests, rules, practices and interactions that drive Russia and China together. Indeed, the conceptual tools the English School provides to the field of IR are the interplay between the international system, international society and world society. The idea of international society serves as flagship in the English School approach. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson's classic definition of international society is: 'a group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements' (Bull & Watson 1984, 1). In this way, an important feature of international society is its membership which is comprised of sovereign states. The agents are diplomatic and foreign-policy elite who act on behalf of their state (Dunne et al. 2021, 140). Moreover, the state occupies a leading role within English School theory. In stark contrast to neorealism, which stresses that the units are submissive to system structure, English School theory proposes that in fact this functions the other way round: it is the units that together create international society. The dominant units in the system have a larger influence on international society and consequently it tends to reflect their national disposition (Buzan 2001, 487).

Liselotte Odgaard builds upon the work of Bull in her analysis of the Sino-Russian ties. In line with the English School theoretical framework, she advances the argument that since the anarchical nature of international society is a given, this will one way or another lead to what she calls an 'inter-state regulation of the power politics of international anarchy'

(Odgaard 2017, 41). This implies that all states, particularly great powers, will always seek to maximize their political, economic, cultural and militarily heft around the world. Odgaard provides a study in which she applies an English School take on the congruity of Chinese and Russian point of views relating to the use of force, legitimacy, and international institutions as a way of assessing the robustness of the Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia. Her wider assessment concludes that the result of a closer Sino-Russian security cooperation in Central Asia will allow China to redirect more attention to its principal competitor in the Pacific region, which is of course the US (Odgaard 2017, 54). Thus, great powers will enter into inter-state agreements to advance their own interests. Indeed, scholars such as Alexander Lukin and Dmitry Novikov observe that something resembling a non-Western international society: 'may already be emerging in Eurasia, with Russia and China being the key drivers of this trend' (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 28).

To conclude, positivist materialist narratives tend to dominate the Sino-Russian academic debate that has significantly increased in intensity since the Russian invasion of Ukraine on the 24th of February 2022. On the one hand, realists tend hardly to take into account the role of history, according as they do paramount importance to the notions of power and survival in an anarchic world with the balance of power as an almost omnipotent force hovering above it (Buzan 2014a, 29). On the other hand, the liberal tradition tends to place a strong emphasis on economic interdependency and win-win cooperation. Both explanations provide some short-term elements with which to explain the apparent rapprochement between Beijing and Moscow, but seem insufficient in explaining why these nations seem to be going against their long-term interests. With China on the one hand that has a great economic interdependency with the US and EU, and Russia on the other hand that has always identified itself with an European civilization. Short-term material concerns tend to dominate discussions of the Sino-Russian interactions; discursive aspects remain marginal. Wishnick rightly point out that: 'English School perspectives are rarely found in analysis of the Sino-Russian partnership' (Wishnick 2018, 357). This theoretical approach is useful as it calls to attention the initial steps towards common values, interests, rules, and practices that drive Russia and China together.

Methodology

This section aims to specify the different methods used in order to conduct the research about the elements that drive Russia and China closer together. After clarifying the theoretical framework and the precise methods applied, I will elaborate on which data is used, why, and from which sources they have been gathered as well as the limitations they present.

Positivist approaches, with their focus on interests and material conditions provide an insufficient answer in solving the apparent paradox of Sino-Russian rapprochement in light of their long-standing ambitions for recognition as key players in the international system. History is often overlooked or treated as fixed or irrelevant in positivist analyses, which can be considered the mainstream. The more historical approach of the English School offers a fruitful entry point into unravelling and comprehending the 'normative structure and practices of international society' (Buzan 2001, 483). Therefore, in complementarity to these mainstream approaches, a post-positivist voice such as the English School is needed. This theoretical framework emphasizes international society in a dynamic way through interactions that alter the global order. That states exist within an international society that is being actively created through interactions, informed by common values and interests, is a core pillar of the English School approach (Dunne et al. 2021, 139).

States can be part of an international system without being members of a shared international society. There may very well be frequent and regular contact and communications, diplomatic exchanges and agreements on topics such as trade, borders and alliances. Nevertheless, these elements alone do not display a form of collaboration that can be qualified in the terms of 'international society.' A crucial feature for this to materialize is some sense of common interest or values that give substance and a serious prospect of durability or even permanence to the exchanges that take place. Indeed, as Hedley Bull notes, there must be a shared understanding of the rules which lay down how the interaction proceeds, but also 'an attempt of the parties concerned to co-operate in institutions in whose survival they have a stake' (Bull 1977, 14). Thus, I will draw on the English School, as it calls to attention the practices of generating a society. This will allow us to see the implementations that drive China and Russia together as they work systematically

to create the basic groundworks for a new political constellation in their immediate surroundings, thereby altering the global order.

In the first part of the case-study, inspired by Bull's definition of an international society, a congruence analysis will be applied as a methodological tool in order to establish that Russia and China have had a long-term collaboration in creating a non-Western regional international society. Generally speaking, this method is used to structure a narrative of a historical process. This type of narrative case study 'can contextualize the steps of the causal process in ways that make the entire process visible rather than leaving it fragmented into analytical stages' (Büthe 2002, 486). Furthermore, a congruence analysis can be applied through the lens of a singular theory. Indeed, as Blatter and Haverland state: 'One can formulate the propositions that constitute a theory, deduce concrete predictions, and compare the propositions and predictions with the empirical observations' (Blatter & Haverland 2012, 161). This will be done in combination with document analysis which "is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents – both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material" (Bowen 2007, 27). This implies that a wide variety of documents such as newspapers, official statements and speeches, can be studied for meaning and empirical knowledge.

This is then followed up by the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) which will be used in the second part of the analysis with as goal to comprehend the Sino-Russian reaction towards criticisms they receive from the West. But also that Moscow and Beijing are indeed looking to be integrated in the global Western order as they actually borrow the language of justification of the West. CDA is a good working method for the empirical investigation of discourse as an appearance of social practice (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002). As there are many distinct techniques to conduct CDA, a specific one most suitable to this endeavour must be chosen. Therefore, in this study Fairclough's view on the matter will be applied. A central tenet of his method is that discourse is both constitutive and constituted. By which he means that in first instance discourse can be understood as a social practice that affects social relations, knowledge creation and the way how people perceive themselves. But perhaps more importantly, he also suggests that social practices and structures can make a significant impact in shaping the discourse itself. Lastly, Fairclough puts forward the argument that in order to be more pertinent a social or cultural theory

should be integrated in the analysis (Jørgensen & Phillips 2002, 86). This serves as a backdrop with which to assess the broader background from which the discourse emanates. In this sense, the discourse analysis will be anchored within elements from Gerrit Gong's work on the concept of 'the standard of civilization'. This will highlight the most important and related components of the Sino-Russian narrative well. Indeed, short-term material aspects mostly tend to dominate the discussion of the Sino-Russian interactions; discursive aspects remain marginal. The English School approach allows for the 'sense of language' and the 'elements of discourse' to occupy an important place in its methodology (Buzan 2014a, 36).

The data used for this research comes broadly from three separate sources. In first instance official statements stemming from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs are examined. These are the principal institutions for states to communicate their official positions on specific matters to the rest of the world. Moreover, official speeches made by high ranking officials have also been analysed for empirical knowledge. Secondly, newspaper articles have also been used to gain the necessary background information. Lastly, official treaties such as the February 4th joint statement have been included in the analysis.

Finally, there are some limitations to this research. Firstly, this study is based on English-language sources. Thus, I am reliant upon viable academic secondary sources. Since I rely primarily upon translations it may be possible that crucial elements have been mistranslated or that some important details got lost in the process from speech to writing the translation. Secondly, as only one theory has been introduced with which to conduct the congruence analysis there exists a real danger of researcher bias when it comes to the chosen data collection. The temptation can arise to only search and include empirical information that supports the theory. Finally, it is crucial to be aware of the deficiencies of discourse analysis as a qualitative method. For a large part due as a result of it relying on interpretation by a single researcher, it cannot be treated objective and the researcher bias must be taken into consideration.

Analysis

The analysis is divided into two parts. The first part offers a historical perspective on the Sino-Russian interactions. We will see that these have significantly increased in intensity in recent times and that a solid groundwork has been laid to also institutionalize them. In short, they now possess ties that bind them together. The second part aims to delve deeper into the Sino-Russian narrative about how they position themselves with regard to the West. More precisely, it will analyse the Sino-Russian response to the various criticisms levied at them by the Western world.

Ties That Bind

In this section a congruence analysis will be applied to establish that in recent times China and Russia have formed between them a form of partnership that, according to the thought of the English School, can be categorized as something resembling a non-Western international society. Following Bull's definition¹, a crucial feature for this to materialize is a serious prospect of durability or even permanence to the exchanges that take place. Furthermore, another element would be a clear attempt of the parties concerned to invest in the creation of institutional arrangements in whose survival they have a stake. Thus, according to this logic, the prediction could be made that if China and Russia are indeed a non-Western international society together, the empirical evidence should show that the Sino-Russian interactions have increased in intensity, that these interactions have been institutionalized and that they have established common rules for the conduct of their relations through dialogue and consent.

¹ 'A group of states (or, more generally, a group of independent political communities) which not merely form a system, in the sense that the behaviour of each is a necessary factor in the calculations of the others, but also have established by dialogue and consent common rules and institutions for the conduct of their relations, and recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements.'

The 2001 Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation

In 1996, the Chinese and Russian states both emphasized the importance of their 'strategic cooperative partnership'. These ambitions were enshrined in the *Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation*, signed on July 16, 2001 in Moscow, by Putin and his Chinese counterpart Jiang Zemin. In this treaty, Putin and Jiang bundled their resolve to advance a new world order that they saw as just. This vision was captured in the rule 'friends forever, enemies never' (Cimek 2021, 139). It was to bind the two giants closer for a period of 20 years and was comprised of 25 articles. In it deep concerns were voiced by both sides about a 'new world order dominated by the United States and its European allies' (Tyler 2001). It also initiated a process in which there were to be regular meetings between high-level officials, who would on a frequent basis sign agreements between both governments (Bolt & Cross 2010, 192). This agreement seems to show an eager willingness on the side of both governments to intensify their interactions with one another and to reach a consensus on how to proceed with the conduct of their relations.

Moreover, the timing of the treaty is also telling as its signing occurred one week before Putin was to meet the American President Bush in Italy for a summit meeting. In an interview that took place just moments after the signing of the treaty Putin told an Italian newspaper that: "When NATO enlarges, division doesn't disappear, it simply moves toward our borders" (Rauch 2001). This strongly suggests that Putin also used the treaty as a possible leverage against what for him must have looked like NATO encroachment.

Finally, on June 28th, 2021, Russia and China adopted a joint statement marking the 20th anniversary of the Sino-Russian treaty and announced its prolongation for a period of five years. The treaty has proven to be an important cornerstone for the contemporary Sino-Russian relations and some have labelled it as the "document of the century" (Babaev 2022). During a video meeting that Putin and Xi held to celebrate the occasion the latter said:

"Under the guidance of the China-Russia Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness and Friendly Cooperation, the two countries will continue to make concerted efforts and firmly move forward despite difficulties and obstacles ahead. The treaty is a vivid example of fostering a new type of international relations and building a community with a shared future for humanity" (Qingqing & Xin 2021).

In that sense, it can be said that by prolonging the treaty both leaders have recognised their common interest in maintaining the contents of the document so as to continue to guide Sino-Russian interactions.

Leaders diplomacy and the Joint Commemoration of the Second World War

2012 marked the year in which Vladimir Putin was reinstalled as president of Russia and Xi Jinping became his Chinese counterpart. It was the start of a conscious effort by both men of what has been termed *leaders diplomacy* (Bērzina-Cerenkova 2022, 5). Careful attention was devoted to the mutual development of ‘warm’ feelings between the two leaders, as can be underlined by the fact that they met 31 times during the period of 2013-2019 (Wang 2019, 32)—an average of five times a year, which surely ranks among the highest number of times heads of states have met. This led Alexander Gabuev to depict the personal relationship between the two as ‘soul mates’ (Gabuev 2016, 4-5). Moreover, in 2017 Putin awarded Xi with the highest order of Russia, known as the Order of St. Andrew the Apostle the First-called. Xi then returned the honour to Putin the year after when he presented the first Friendship Medal of the People’s Republic of China and described him as his ‘best friend’ and ‘confidant’ (Lei 2018).

These examples illustrate the significant amount of time and energy that Putin and Xi have consecrated in order to maintain good working relations. They have even acknowledged so much in their official joint statement upon the extension of the *Treaty on Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation* in 2021. It states:

“The Parties will continue to use leaders' diplomacy which plays a leading role in ensuring a progressive deepening of the bilateral strategic partnership, including mutual visits, meetings on the margins of international forums, and other contacts between Heads of State” (Bērzina-Cerenkova 2022, 5).

It is worth bearing in mind that in autocratic countries much of the political decision making is determined by the leader himself. Therefore, good working relations between autocratic leaders should also translate into good working arrangements between their respective countries. For a large part because autocratic leaders can exert a great amount of top-down influence on their domestic political system.

Another development that has intensified in the last few years has been the cultivation of a joint historical narrative about these countries' respective roles in the Second World War. This conscious effort predates Putin and Xi. Indeed, Rozman points out that throughout the 1990s and 2000s China and Russia underwent a consequential top-down effort in creating an identity overlap of its peoples. Something that has been understated, if not overlooked by Western observers (Rozman 2014b). For the Russian people the Second World War was the Great Patriotic War against Nazi fascism and for the Chinese people the War of Resistance against Japanese imperialism. For both nations the events that occurred in this historical period still shape today the way they perceive themselves and remains one of the pillars of their distinctive national identity formation (Korolev & Portyakov 2019, 57).

Putin and Xi have continued and intensified the cultivation of a romanticized historical picture, in which the Russian and Chinese people have fought back-to-back with one another against the fascist invaders. Xi even attended the 70th annual May 9 Victory Parade in a highly symbolic visit to Moscow in 2015. This laid robust foundations for an established procedure in which China was all too eager to continue to have a Chinese delegation and military troops take part to the annual display. Indeed, they acknowledge what is seen by them as: 'Russia's respect to the history and its firm determination to defend the historical truth' (Bērzina-Cerenkova 2022, 6). A truth that they together seek to protect against 'Western conspiracy' that wishes to diminish or downplay the importance of China's and Russia's role in the Second World War (Korolev & Portyakov 2019, 59). This clearly falls within the trend of the Kremlin and the Zhongnanhai slowly inching towards the adaptation, through dialogue and consent, of some common rules and institutionalization of their interactions when the Second World War is commemorated.

A Significant Increase in Sino-Russian Interactions

Russia is richly endowed with numerous natural resources, many of which can be found in the Russian Far East (Dittmer 2001, 407), a extensive province that for the last few decades has received insufficient economic investments desperately needed for its development. However, Moscow does not have the necessary capital and technology to delve and extricate these materials as well as the required infrastructure to acquire entry upon the international markets (Bolt & Cross 2018, 46). Given this economic landscape on the Russian

side, China therefore embodies a desirable complementarity to a significant degree for a number of reasons. First of all, the latter has an unquenchable thirst for raw materials and energy. Secondly, China possess a great amount of capital which it is willing to invest abroad. Lastly, the Chinese workforce does retain the appropriate skill set for the construction of large-scale infrastructure projects (Gabuev 2019, 46). Both countries appear to acknowledge this economic complementarity as can be observed by the fact that in 1990 bilateral trade was US\$ 5 billion (Ying 2016, 98), in 2021 this had reached an all-time high of US\$ 147 billion (Lo 2022, 8), a clear indication that the economic interactions between both countries have strongly increased in recent times.

The energy sector has received by far the greatest number of incentives for closer cooperation (Bekkevold & Lo 2018, 301). Indeed, an often-mentioned agreement, signed in 2014, is the construction of a direct pipeline with an annual quota of 38 billion cubic meters of natural Russian gas for the period 2018-48 (Ying 2016, 98). It is true that for a long time, both sides did not see eye to eye with one another when it came to establishing the price to be paid for the gas. However, the Russian side ultimately gave in to the pressure of the economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation imposed upon the Russian state by the West in response to the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Alexeeva & Lasserre 2018, 74-5). Consequently, there now exists a Sino-Russian interest in maintaining these energy-related arrangements.

Moreover, over the last few years the Sino-Russian partnership has also advanced towards some henceforth uncharted waters, namely, joining hands for military drills. This first occurred in 2015, attracting the attention of the international community, as China and Russia held their drills in the Mediterranean, a geographical area that is generally considered as a field of operations that belongs to NATO. Some analysts saw the overall strategic objective from these exercises to be to limit the influence of the United States in the Middle East region (Bekkevold & Lo 2018, 143). Moreover, this was not the only naval military exercise that was held in a contested area. In September 2016, Russia and China held such military drills in the South China Sea. For eight consecutive days the countries engaged in reef seizure manoeuvres and antisubmarine operations, which were undoubtedly simulations directed at potential American strategic positions and interests.

The commanding naval commander, Wang Hai, stated that the purpose of these operations was to counter 'common security threats' (Wishnick 2018, 369), another example of how Russia and China have created security arrangements through dialogue and common consent, that have bound the two countries closer together.

The SCO as A Place for Dialogue for the Harmonious Integration of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Silk Road Economic Belt

Around the time that the United States, along the 'coalition of the willing' started the global war on terror and the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq that followed in its wake, the announcement of a deeper political and economic cooperation in the SCO was made. The SCO, serving in Central Asia as the main institutional framework for Sino-Russian cooperation (Huasheng 2015, 116), became fully operative on 19 September 2003 and has been a major assembly in Central-Asia for strategic cooperation and competition management between the signatories since that time. With a rather broad political agenda it has made the task of fighting the 'three evils' of terrorism, separatism, and extremism one of its core pillars. Over time it has taken on a more important role as a forum for regional dialogue, despite an initial slow start due to the serious concerns harboured primarily by Russia with China's growing economic potential (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 35).

In 2010 the Kremlin unilaterally launched an initiative to regain a firmer footing in Central Asia in the form of the Customs Union. Russia wields a very significant amount of influence in the region as it has for a long time been part of the former Soviet Union, only gaining nominal independence with the latter dissolution. The Customs Union was renamed in 2015 the Eurasian Economic Union and includes Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan. In addition, Moscow had also previously set up the Collective Security Treaty Organization. With these two institutional frameworks in place, covering the security and economic dimensions, Russia positioned itself for the institutionalization of its leadership position as source of security and economic growth in what it still considers to be its sphere of influence (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 35).

In 2013, the President of China, while in Kazakhstan, proposed what is today the well-known Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Widely viewed as the political brainchild of Xi, it

encompasses a vast geographical area that stretches from China in the East to Iran in the West, and Sri Lanka in the South to Eastern Europe in the North. The decision by the Chinese leadership to announce this gigantic project in Kazakhstan is telling. Namely, this ambitious project stands or falls according to the accessibility to the crucial region of Central-Asia (Huasheng 2015, 116), an area, as mentioned above, the Kremlin traditionally sees as its sphere of influence. This principal geo-economic initiative from China has several distinct objectives. The official goal is to develop transport and logistical infrastructure along land and sea routes. However, analysts have pointed out that this goal also contains some political ambitions as through these enormous construction projects Beijing hopes to create a China friendly non-hostile neighbourhood (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 35).

On May 8th 2015, during the highly symbolic visit of Xi to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Great Patriotic War in Moscow, the two heads of state agreed to 'make efforts to connect the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Economic Union.' This gave rise to a widespread of regional initiatives, through the SCO, and local ones to foster the integration of the formidable regional projects of the two powers (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 28). The term of a 'Greater Eurasian community' has been coined to encapsulate this effort at creating a single geo-economic and institutional space, a vision also explicitly supported by both Putin and Xi in 2016 and 2019 respectively. (Lukin & Novikov 2021, 29). Both leaders have worked diligently so as not to agonize their counterpart and as it seems they have managed to reconcile their conflicting interests. Indeed, the first steps have been taken, through dialogue and consent, to integrate their regional initiatives. Through the mechanisms of the SCO, both countries appear very much to recognize their common interest in maintaining these arrangements.

Conclusion

In summary, the congruence analysis in this section has shown that the interactions between Russia and China have increased in volume in recent times. Furthermore, through a conscious effort known as *leaders diplomacy* Xi and Putin have managed to establish, through dialogue and consent, common rules for the conduct of relations between their respective countries. Finally, in their shared neighbourhood of Central-Asia the Sino-Russian interactions have been institutionalized through the mechanisms of the SCO. When these

features are taken together it becomes possible in English School thinking to talk of the emergence of a political constellation that could be seen as a non-Western international society. The term for this geo-economic and institutional space has been dubbed the 'Greater Eurasian Community' by some observers.

The Sino-Russian Response to Criticisms from the West

As I have shown in the previous chapter, Russia and China are in the process of laying down the foundations of a non-Western international society. Over the past few years, tensions with the West have risen considerably as both countries have become more assertive on the world stage. The most prominent issues that have laid bare this tension include, among others, the freedom of navigation in the South Chinese Sea, human rights abuses in Xinxiang or the Russian annexation of Crimea and more recently Putin's 'special military operation' in Ukraine. The West accuses the pair of not abiding by core principles such as being a responsible stakeholder in the global order, respecting human rights and the territorial integrity of a sovereign country. These accusations have, in turn, provoked a counter-response from Moscow and Beijing, explicitly accusing the US and its allies of hegemonic tendencies in tampering with the internal affairs of other states and ultimately of trying to keep Russia and China down.

The logic of these dynamics finds resonance with Gong's work on the qualities states in the 19th and 20th century needed to possess in order to be included in a Western international society, developed in his seminal book *The Standard of 'civilization' in International Society* (Gong 1984). At the time, these qualities were laid down by the dominant European powers. Within the English School literature the notion of the 'standard of civilization' occupies a central position. It should also be noted that the inverted commas are applied to emphasize that this notion is not an objective benchmark. It alludes to a construct in a relationship between two or several parties. Throughout history it has predominately been applied by a dominant party towards a weaker party. However, it does not bear some intrinsic truth (Buzan 2014b, 578). In his work Gong defines it as follows: 'Generally speaking, a standard of civilization is an expression of the assumptions, tacit and explicit, used to distinguish those that belong to a particular society from those that do not' (Gong 1984, 3). He identifies four main arguments that are put forward about the normative structure of the 'standard of civilization.'

Firstly, Gong places the concept within the wider conception of the global transformation that occurred most visibly during the second half of the 19th century. This 'global transformation' refers in the English School literature to a process which has remade the 'basic structure of international order' (Buzan & Lawson 2015, 1). It encompasses a gigantic

shift in power that materialized from Asia, particularly China, towards primarily West-European states.

Secondly, the principal force that drove this development was the Industrial Revolution that originated in Great Britain. States that had industrialized could enhance their productivity exponentially and so also their power projection. Thus, for the first time in history, a truly global international system came into existence. Thirdly, this system was centred around a European core which possessed its own distinct international society and was surrounded by an outer periphery which was forced to accommodate itself to this new reality; non-European nations were almost always deemed to lack the necessary qualities to be seen as a 'civilized' nation, which would then provide the European empires with a viable reason to conquer, dismantle or reform such a state. The Chinese state underwent such a demeaning procedure under the Qin dynasty. This historical episode is still very vivid in China's contemporary historical consciousness and is recollected as 'the century of humiliation'. Moreover, Gong makes the captivating consideration that modern-day Western insistence on the almost-sanctified status of human rights with its preoccupation about life, liberty and property, bears close resemblance to the 'standard of civilization', and might be understood as a modern continuation, or restoration, of it (Gong 1984, 90-3). This means that non-Western countries have in general perceived the international human rights regime as being too Western-dominated and that local traditions and considerations on the matter have not been properly taken into account. Finally, the 'standard of civilization' might then best be visualized as an entrance to what can be considered as a European international society. Above all, Russia and China have condemned the idea of them having to fully accommodate to a Western 'standard of civilization' and shaped their narrative around several key arguments.

First, China and Russia have responded to criticisms against them of their increasingly autocratic tendencies. Both governments fervently deny this type of categorisation and define themselves as democracies. Sino-Russian narrative states for example, through the February 4th joint statement, that:

“The sides note that Russia and China as world powers with rich cultural and historical heritage have long-standing traditions of democracy, which rely on thousand-years of experience of development, broad popular support and consideration of the needs and interests of citizens” (Xi Jinping & V. Putin 2022, 2).

China and Russia further emphasize that no country or group of countries can lay claim to the definition of what exactly a democracy is. Indeed, as they remark: ‘There is no one-size-fits-all template to guide countries in establishing democracy’ (Xi Jinping & V. Putin 2022, 2). They reject the idea that any country or group of countries can lay claim to a monopoly on the definition of what it entails to be a democratic country. Indeed, the implication is made that each state is free to choose their own manner in the implementation of democracy. In that sense, both countries work diligently together in their narrative to counteract the way in which the West has overall dictated the requirements a nation had to possess to be considered as a democracy. That Russia and China define themselves as democracies illustrates well how the pair cooperate to resist any form of a Western ‘standard of civilization’ that might be forced upon them.

Secondly, China and Russia have made it explicit to the rest of the world that they can count on the support of each other. This can be observed by the fact that in the February 4th joint statement both sides emphasise that the friendship between their respective states knows ‘no limits’ and that there are no ‘forbidden’ areas of cooperation. They assert that the relationship between Beijing and Moscow is ‘superior’ to the alliances that have been formed in the Cold War period. They reaffirm that their partnership is not aimed against any third party nor that it is affected by the changing circumstances in the international environment (Xi Jinping & V. Putin 2022, 10). Furthermore, the dynamic of them lending support to one another can clearly be observed in the United Nations Security Council as Beijing has refused to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and has made no reference to Putin’s ‘special military operation’ as an invasion or war. The Chinese narrative even shifted blame by stating that Putin had no other choice than to do what he did due to the provocation levied at him by Washington and NATO (Al Jazeera 2022a). The Chinese position has remained steadfast and robust for a lengthy period of time as on October 27th, 2022, Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi held a phone call with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov and expressed to him that China will continue to firmly support

Russian President Vladimir Putin's government to help lead the Russian people to 'overcome difficulties, eliminate disturbances, realize the strategic goals of development, and further establish Russia on the international stage' (Yi 2022a). Two months later, on December 25th, Yi continued to reaffirm the two states mutual support for one another. He said: 'Over the past year, China and Russia have firmly supported each other in upholding respective core interests, and our political and strategic mutual trust has been further consolidated' (Yi 2022b). Both sides also expressed a willingness to deepen the exchanges between representatives of both governments at all levels. These examples show that both sides realize that by joining hands they have a much better power projection outwards.

Thirdly, they accuse the US and its allies of possessing hegemonic tendencies which stands in stark contrast to their own non-intervention posture. Beijing and Moscow lament what they label as 'closed bloc structures' that are reminiscent of the Cold War era. But perhaps more crucially, it is the first time for China that within such a joint statement a clear-cut criticism has been formulated against NATO. They state: 'The sides oppose further enlargement of NATO and call on the North Atlantic Alliance to abandon its ideologized cold war approaches, to respect the sovereignty, security and interests of other countries, the diversity of their civilizational, cultural and historical backgrounds, and to exercise a fair and objective attitude towards the peaceful development of other States' (Xi Jinping & V. Putin 2022, 5-6).

In this way, Beijing seems to align itself with Moscow on their mutual position against NATO. At his speech in which Putin declared his 'special military operation' he explicitly stated how he understood the current global situation. He explained that with the demise of the USSR a new balance of power had to be found. However, the existing international rules and norms that had been adopted after the Second World War 'began to get in the way of the self-proclaimed winner of the Cold War.' In this speech he elaborated upon the fact that the US is a 'system-forming power' and dismisses its allies as mere 'satellites [who] not only dutifully agree, sing along to its music, but also copy its behaviour, and enthusiastically accept the rules they are offered' (Al Jazeera 2022b). This leads Putin to the conclusion that the West is formed in the image of the US and that all of it is an 'empire of lies.' This

narrative falls well within the idea of a Western bloc centred around the US which attempts to impose its 'standard of civilization' on the rest of the world.

Finally, the Sino-Russian narrative advances the claim that they have garnered the support of a significant amount of the international community. This argument is closely related to the previously mentioned point, mainly as China and Russia lay blame at the feet of the Western bloc who, according to them 'advocate unilateral approaches' in resolving points of contention in the international system. The Western bloc does so by interfering in 'the internal affairs of other states' thereby obstructing their economic and social development 'against the opposition from the international community' (Xi Jinping & V. Putin 2022, 1).

This strongly argues in favour of a pluralistic approach to the conduct of international relations. According to this view, issues such as human rights should be examined through the prism of each country individually and in accordance with their own unique circumstance. Indeed, in a speech held at the Symposium on the International Situation and China's Foreign Relations Chinese Foreign Minister Yi attested that 'the false narrative of "democracy versus authoritarianism"' had been revealed and that its sole purpose was 'to stoke confrontation between countries, divide the international community, and interfere in other countries' internal affairs in the name of so-called "democracy"' (Yi 2022b).

Furthermore, he strongly advocated for a multipolar world order and stressed that 'China and Russia have stood in solidarity with other countries' (Yi 2022b) to achieve that goal. This then seems to point to the fact that China and Russia are in the process of a charm offence aimed at those countries that do not belong to the Western bloc. They do so by offering a revised vision of how to conduct international relations between states. They also seem to acknowledge that this is what most other states desire.

Conclusion

All four key arguments from the Sino-Russian narrative that have been defined here have a certain connection with Gong's insights on the notion of the 'standard of civilization.' The analysis of the Sino-Russian narrative has demonstrated that the pair clearly reject the idea that the West alone can lay claim to the monopoly on the definition of what a democracy is. Russia and China support one another in confronting the West who, in their eyes, continues

to attempt to impose their version of a 'standard of civilization' on the rest of the world under the leadership of the US, an undesirable outcome for most countries who also do not wish for such an infringement upon their sovereignty.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that although there is a clear confrontation between a Western narrative and a Sino-Russian narrative, the Sino-Russian narrative makes use of a lexicon that could for some essential parts be considered as *Western* inspired. This comes across in the fact that *because* China and Russia consider themselves to be democracies, this might imply an acceptance of the current global order insofar as they are not building an alternative order. It might be argued that together they are trying to position themselves better in the existing order and make it more receptive to them. In a certain sense, the Sino-Russian narrative tries to adjust the 'standard of civilization' more towards their own preference.

Conclusion

This study has sought to indicate why China and Russia have been nurturing a closer relationship, despite however much this antagonises the West and jeopardizes some of China and Russia's own long-term interests. The Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014 and, more recently, the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24th, 2022, have generated an extensive amount of renewed scholarly attention towards the Sino-Russian 'strategic' partnership. In the academic literature on the subject material narratives are dominant and discursive aspects remain marginal. This study hopes to have contributed towards a more nuanced understanding of the latter.

The first part of the analysis traced the significant increase in ties between Moscow and Beijing in recent times. Several elements seem to indicate that both countries have recognized common interests and seem determined to maintain and strengthen their interactions together. This has been illustrated by the 2001 Sino-Russian *Treaty for Good Neighbourliness, Friendship, and Cooperation* and its prolongation. The contents of this treaty have guided the Sino-Russian interactions up to today. This was then reinforced by the apparent 'warm' personal relationship between Putin and Xi in a diplomatic approach that has been termed by some observers as *leaders diplomacy*. It involves, among others, a top-down approach towards the cultivation a shared historical narrative about the Second World War. Furthermore, China and Russia, having already enjoyed burgeoning economic ties and have now joined hands for military drills. Finally, they have created institutional arrangements of their regional initiatives within the workings of the SCO. With all these elements combined it becomes possible, according to English School thinking, to speak of the emergence of a non-Western international society. Some scholars have named this 'the Community of Greater Eurasia.'

The Second part of the analysis provided a discourse analysis anchored in Gerrit Gong's work on the 'standard of civilization' in order to identify some key arguments within the Sino-Russian narrative in which they dismiss the notion of these countries needing to adapt to a Western 'standard of civilization.' An examination of the February 4th joint statement, official press releases, speeches from officials from the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and from President Putin himself demonstrate that Beijing and Moscow share a common

perception of excessive Western pressure on their domestic political systems. This pressure is particularly embodied in the Western practice of advocating universal norms and values such as democracy and *human rights*. Gong has made the pertinent observation that the western notion of 'human rights' can be seen as a modern-day continuation of the 'standard of civilization.' I have argued in this thesis that Russia and China support one another in confronting the West who, in these countries' eyes, continues to attempt to impose their version of a 'standard of civilization' on the rest of the world, something that Moscow and Beijing surely perceive as an infringement upon their sovereignty.

In the light of these findings, the Sino-Russian partnership strongly resembles an alliance, but without the crucial mutual defence clause: both regimes still maintain autonomous strategic flexibility. In this way, the current Sino-Russian partnership seems principally driven by common interests, rather than shared values. Nonetheless, the English School calls to attention to the initial steps towards common values, interests, rules, and practices that have driven China and Russia together. Sharing a pluralist interpretation of world order, they have worked diligently in tandem to create the basic groundwork for a new political constellation. Moreover, the Sino-Russian narrative incorporates a terminology that, for some analysts, contains crucial parts they consider to be *Western* influenced. That Russia and China define themselves as democracies is a clear example of this. This strongly seems to suggest that Beijing and Moscow do not repudiate the ongoing world order as they are not in the process of constructing an alternative one. However, as this study has argued, Beijing and Moscow are nurturing a closer relationship as they shift a Western dominated 'standard of civilization' more towards their own preference so that it becomes more receptive to them.

To conclude, a clear limitation of this research is that it draws heavily on sources that are written in English. It would have been worthwhile if Russian or Chinese documents could have been included in the study. That said, a possible side-effect of this might have been for some essential elements and details of texts to have lost their full meaning or become distorted in the translation. A second limitation of this study resides in the fact that the documents used are derived from sources available for the public. This sort of information could provide an incomplete understanding of the underlying motivations that drive the

behaviour of state actors. The meetings and discussions behind closed doors are often not publicly disclosed. Thus, by relying exclusively on publicly disclosed documents there is a real risk of not including vital information. For example, I have no access to any of the inner workings of the SCO nor the prospect to conduct interviews with people who do. This flaw could possibly be mitigated by in-depth interviews with state officials who have been present in important meetings. The insertion of such additional resource material could provide more specific information which would allow me to address more specialized research questions. Access to these resources could provide a future avenue for additional research on the subject.

Another possible area of research is an attentive examination of the developments taking place in the region of Central-Asia. This could prove to become an important steppingstone between Russia and China in their objective of managing their differences and the inevitable competition that will rise between them. Therefore, an integrated understanding of the procedures that underpin their interactions within the SCO are worthy of scholarly pursuit. In conclusion, when the current geopolitical tensions are taken into consideration, the Sino-Russian relationship will undoubtedly remain a main interest for the general public as well as an important subject in the academical literature.

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