Future Sino-Russian Relationship in the Asia-Pacific Region

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With the world’s political and economic focus gradually shifting to the Asia-Pacific region, for China and Russia, one located on the West Pacific and the other in the hinterland of the Eurasian continent, and also for their bilateral relations, it is inevitable for them to face completely new opportunities and challenges. It is noteworthy that the adjustment, in development strategies for both China and Russia this time, probably has more profound impacts and significance than the previous changes in past decades.

I

The reasons of raising this question lie in the following. First, both China and Russia are undergoing profound changes. In general, this historic change, to certain extent, has richer connotation and significance than “reform” or “transition” considered in previous decades. The “reform” or “transition”, which used to be talked about, refers more to transition from highly centralized planned economy and political system to a modern market, with rule of law and democracy, especially focusing on promoting changes through examples of advanced countries in Europe and the U.S. However, the changes which both countries are presently undergoing, on the one hand, still contain the above-mentioned important content. Marketization and democratization are still what people are seeking for. In addition, both countries, to different degrees, are exploring their own distinctive governance models, trying to build a strong state in search of great power dream and carrying forward their local traditions, and achieve their national rejuvenation, participating in reconstruction of international political and economic mechanisms, constructing new power relations and also undertake missions in facing challenges resulting from regional and global power transfer. The content is different from the focus of the past “reform” or “transition” in general sense.

If various conditions and objectives can be generally achieved, Sino-Russian cooperation in the Asia-Pacific is very likely to go beyond its previous depth and scale, therefore bringing great impetus to this extremely uncertain world. Thanks to their special resource endowment, unique history and distinctive culture, different strength and scale of great powers, preliminary-achieved reform and development, in addition to rich experience, in-depth thought and

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visions from setbacks and lessons in the past decades, these two countries can collaborate well with each other to bring more dynamics to the world with more diversified progress, not only with vigor in changing power pattern, but also through boosting confidence both spiritually and psychologically.

II

Almost all predictions hold that the Asia-Pacific is the fastest developing region both economically and socially in a rather long period in the current world. Because on one hand, economic powers such as the U.S., China and Japan are assembled in this region, meanwhile, there is Russia, which has the richest natural resources, the vastest territory, and the most economic potentials, in addition to a large number of energetic developing, emerging countries and regions in transition. Especially when the GDP of this region already reaches two-thirds of the world’s, while traditional powers like European and trans-Atlantic ones are still deeply immersed in financial crisis, this region surely becomes the focus of the entire world’s attention.

The Asia-Pacific region is a region with the most diversity in both development levels and governance models on the earth. Here are strong powers with traditionally viewed developed democracy and market institutions and also poor countries with rather low economic levels which still remain the same governance models as those before the Cold War. In between there are a large number of countries either closer to the former model, or those still during reform and development. In this region, we can find the widest spectrum of governance models in the world. This unique diverse process not only brings enormous variables and sufferings to this region, but also provides rich references and conditions for shaping future mature systems.

An important characteristic of the Asia-Pacific region lies in that it is a highly open area. Any country of this region often keeps different degrees of economic and trade relations with regions or countries beyond, in addition to economic ties with its neighboring countries of course. Therefore, so far the overall regional cooperation in this area still just remains a loose momentum like the APEC and accordingly it is hard to form a common market, with relatively common currency and internal trade level significantly higher than that of external trade like Europe. Particularly striking, after 2011, the Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP), greatly promoted by the U. S., is gradually forcing each Asia-Pacific country to make choices, while on the contrary, a series of local originally ongoing regional economic cooperation process is facing tough trials and challenges.

Behind the diverse governance models in Asia-Pacific is cultural and religious diversity in this region. Because, unlike Europe, there is not a dominant Christian
faith tradition influencing the whole region, but contrarily, Confucianism, Islamism, Buddhism and Christianity are mixed with each other and exert their respective influences. Corresponding to this diverse cultural pattern is the nature and geography in Asia-Pacific. Besides, this region is also diversified with barriers of oceans and mountains, much different from Europe mainly relying on its plains. A combination of environment and humanity leads to development of this region with a special naturalism, advocating harmony and gradual progress accordingly.

Under the above context, the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific is unique. Here we can find not only the two yet un-unified nations since the Cold War, namely Korea and China, but also the U.S., the only superpower so far in the world, and China, the biggest developing country, looking across the ocean; and especially besides Russia, located on the intersection of Eastern and Western civilizations, always making efforts to connect the East and the West, the South and the North as its base for survival and development. No matter how difficult the international and domestic situation is, Russia is always in pursuit of exerting its unique international impacts. In recent years, tension and twists in the Asia Pacific geopolitics, generally, have neither changed the fundamental dominance of the U.S., nor basically changed the mainstream of international cooperation since the Cold War. Nevertheless, the complex situation indicates that in this area not only exists nation states' competition for political and economic space in a traditional sense, moreover, discussion regarding future international dominance, is always against the background of diversification and development towards many directions in this region.

III

Although China and Russia, as two great powers in Asia Pacific, have different historical experiences, different domestic institutions and development levels with different influences in this region, still, their similar fates and ambitions enable them to face current difficulties and challenges side by side, push them both to learn to deal with problems due to different interests under the complex context, aiming to achieve mutual benefits through coordinative efforts.

Currently, Sino-Russian relationship is entering a new stage of development.

One of the important features of this stage is that the newly elected leaders of both countries are expected to establish sound and effective national governance in a rather long period in the future. During such a long period of strategic opportunities, elites of both nations can have an overall deployment for their construction in modernization and bilateral relations according to future long-term development requirements. It is such a rare political condition that such opportunity appeared simultaneously in both countries in their history of
politics. Governance of a great power with complex history has never been the same as that of a common country. In addition to a fair, effective and practical governance model, individual politicians will play an important role. Especially when both China and Russia, these two closely adjacent powers, are at a crucial moment for their domestic modernization and also at a critical juncture for their repositioning in the future international pattern, it is significant not only for both countries' development but also for the global configuration if leaders of both countries can communicate with each other and cooperate closely. That's also the reason why people are so glad to hear Chinese President Xi Jinping said he “got along well” with President Putin after his first visit to Russia. This is actually a very important message.

The second feature of current Sino-Russian relationship is that great changes have taken place in great power relations and China's neighboring situation. This change indicates that it is a visionary decision for China to give priority to Sino-Russian relationship. When President Xi Jinping first visited Russia, he stressed that “Russian-Chinese relations are among the most important relations in the world. They are the best relations among great powers”. This statement undoubtedly shows that Chinese choose best partners not just limited to power or wealth of a country, but instead from comprehensive consideration of various aspects including fairness, security, interests and timing. Meanwhile, the principle for China to choose partners is in order from easy to difficult, that is, to first choose countries which share more consensus and have fewer problems with China. This does not mean Sino-U.S. relationship with overall importance is not important. Neither does it mean that China does not attach importance to the E.U., its biggest trade partner. Nor does it mean that China does not consider Japan, one of its most important neighbors, as it deserves. As a matter of fact, on the basis of first promoting Sino-Russian relations, China has already started its construction process in building new types of great power relations.

The third feature of Sino-Russian relationship is that both countries' domestic politics and economy are entering a critical period of structural transition and reform. Despite different national backgrounds and institutional cultures, there are many similarities and strong complementarities between both countries at this stage, it may make both countries' modernization become an opportunity for mutually supportive cooperation process through respective “internalization”. As members of a series of important international organizations, China and Russia, although they advocate, to different extents, abiding by general international norms and standards, still they choose their own paths of modernization according to their own national conditions and interests; While China and Russia are constructing stable and sustainable political environment, inevitably they have shown their strong passion and desire in pursuing advancement in modern

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democracy and politics; Both China and Russia adhere to governance models characterized by innovation, integrity, harmony and justice, and there are even many similarities and room for them to learn in their specific policy measures. Relying on their respective advantages, as well as institutional and policy “docking” pointed out in the Sino-Russian joint statement after Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Russia3, it is very likely to promote the optimization and advancement of bilateral relations.

Feature four, the next ten years will be a critical period for China and Russia to play an important role in global governance, further participating in major international decision-making and expanding their international influences as well. At the regional level, China supports Russia’s participation in international cooperation in the Asia-Pacific, at the same time, Russia supports China to attend the Arctic Council as an observer, pushing forward their cooperation in resource exploration on continental shelf in Arctic Ocean and calling for broadening space for China’s further participation in complex affairs in the Middle East4. At the global level, remarkable progress has been made between China and Russia in the Security Council regarding Syria issues. Hence, both China and Russia are certain to make important contribution to the future international order architecture.

IV

Although objectively there are such important and beneficial opportunities for Sino-Russian relationship, still numerous difficulties exist.

First, throughout the history of the world, there has never been such comprehensive interaction and direct borders between two countries, one power like Russia, which has several ups and downs during its complex history with Christian (Orthodox) and the other like China as an oriental power and center for ancient civilization. From the Mongol Tartar occupation until the Sino-Soviet alliance, these two distant cultures could contact and blend with each other, transcending time and space on a large scale for many times in the history of several thousand years. Moreover, after experiencing extremely closely associated fates and conflict of interests and willingness, it is definitely not easy for them to tolerate mutually and still coexist. Nevertheless, memories and hardships left by this complex history could not all disappear quickly.

Second, during the 20 years since the end of the Cold War, the development of Sino-Russian relationship has been restricted by a dramatic reversal and difference of these two countries in comprehensive national strength and development levels, in addition to various inadequate preparations in ideas, system

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4V. V. Naumkin, Russia and the Greater Middle East, Russian International Affairs Council, No.9, 2013.
and materials during their exchanges, which are intertwined with contradictions in actual benefits and ideologies. Although there have already been high-level exchanges among political elites of both countries, yet their folk mutual cognition needs to be greatly improved; the complementary pattern of both countries’ interests is clear, but it has not yet been implemented in specific practical exchanges; the “spillover” and “external” problems, naturally resulting from difficult process of development and transition, similarly will lead to contradiction among new interests and concepts. Just as Dr. Sergei Karaganov, honorary chairman of the Presidium of Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, recently commented on Sino-Russian relationship, “Goodwill now prevails, but some of the old suspicions linger—and some new ones have emerged”.

Third, the international society is confronted with hitherto unknown changes. Several Western and neighboring countries are naturally suspicious about the future direction of Sino-Russian relationship, among which there are definitely some trying to differentiate and contain the bilateral relationship. When still Western countries have more skills in modern diplomacy, when still Western standards are dominant within the international academia, when still Western discourse shows advantages within the global media, especially when still the West can use “criticism of weapons” to curb “weapons of criticism” because of its power, these above-mentioned challenges will surely exist for a long time.

V

In terms of security issues in the Asia-Pacific, presently there are at least two kinds of thoughts leading to the complicated situation.

First, the geopolitical method of “balance of power” is expected to solve increasingly intensified national and regional competition, maintaining the stability of existing situation through balance of power and advantageous strategic containment. In this sense, it is reasonable that some hold the “new geopolitics” era is approaching. The problem rests with the fact that although this traditional international political method has achieved success in reality, yet every time when goals for balance of power was set, the usual result is each party does not only pursue balance, but instead seeking advantages over balance instead. In English, this kind of remainder is also commonly referred to as “balance”. Back to reality, either the U.S. “return to Asia-Pacific” or its “rebalancing strategy” in the Asia-Pacific, in general, it does not exceed the logic of “balance of power”. Such repeatedly enhanced competition in reality, seemingly aimed to achieve balance, contains infinite crisis in striving for advantages.

As to the demand for constructing regional security multilateral mechanism in the Asia-Pacific, it is clear to observe regional multilateral security concept promoted by new liberalism theory and proved by experiences in various areas. Theoretically, the growth of any power should adapt to the multilateral cooperative international environment, and only under this context can the stability of regional and international order be ensured. After the WWII, this idea has been reflected when victors carved up the once powerful Germany and restricted it through a series of international multilateral organizations. Through the Maastricht Treaty signed at the end of the Cold War, Germany “exchanged a mark for its unity”, namely, accepted its regional integration organization through giving up their economic sovereignty, in exchange for European countries’ recognition for German political unification. Undoubtedly, this European experience generalized by “new liberalism” theorists, is still a precedent worthy of considering and learning to promote regional security. To be frank, the competition, which can not be curbed by geopolitical arrangements of “balance of power”, is indeed likely to be absorbed in a kind of mature multilateral framework. However, the problem is that the Asia-Pacific geopolitical environment and Asia-Pacific countries’ growth experiences in history are quite different from those of Europe and Germany. For instance, China and Russia are not defeated countries of the WWII, meanwhile, the Asia-Pacific region also does not have political, economic and cultural conditions to immediately copy the European-style multilateral security mechanism as well.

Against this background, it is noteworthy of a series of new concepts emphasized in “Joint Statement of the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation on the Win-Win Cooperation and Deepening of the Comprehensive Strategic partnership of cooperation” signed by Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2013. First, based on mutual trust, mutual benefits and collaboration, both sides support universally equal and inseparable common and collective security, sticking to solving international conflicts and collisions through peaceful means instead of wars. Both countries are against resorting to use or threat of force and also in disfavor of subverting other countries’ lawful governments. Both advocate establishing “open, transparent, equal and inclusive cooperative security architecture” in the Asia-Pacific. This position is out of consideration of international political reality in the Asia-Pacific, obviously far beyond that only seeking its own security, also different from that means just in pursuit of “balance” and copying practices of European security paradigm. Second, facing present urgent security challenges, although in the Sino-Russian Joint Statement, no specific countries are referred to, still serious and explicit proposals have been made as to coping with Ballistic Missile Proliferation through political and diplomatic means within the framework of international law. Besides, it is indicated in the statement that the national security of some countries can not harm that of others. This attitude is a due stance not only for dealing with the issue of Korean Peninsula, but also for other hot issues in the Asia-Pacific as well.
Third, the two sides solemnly declare to support each other on such issues of core interests as territory and sovereignty, to maintain historical achievements of the WWII, especially stating to strengthen their mutual understanding, communication and support on the ABM (Anti-Ballistic Missile) issues, against a state or a group of countries’ unilateral infinite oppositions towards anti-missile weapons. This is a new common ground and cooperation field which has never been emphasized as such.\(^6\)

VI

It is a crucial historic moment for the economic cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region. On one hand, after getting rid of influences of the financial crisis, the Asia-Pacific region, in general, will become engine for the world economy, however on the other hand, due to the exclusive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (TPP) promoted by the U.S., the Asia-Pacific economy is likely to differentiate again.

Under this background, Sino-Russian economic cooperation is of special significance for the regional development scenario. First, China’s urbanization in the future over 10 years will become a great impetus for Asia-pacific development. In addition to foreign imports with a total value of 10 trillion dollars, foreign investment with a total value of 500 billion US dollars and over 400 million outbound tourists will greatly push forward the economic interaction between China and other Asia-Pacific countries. Meanwhile, great economic potentials of Russia, including its especially rich natural resources, good geographical environment and excellent humanistic education resources, are likely to be complementary with the entire region and shows great advantages.

Only from the perspective of East Asia, regardless of China, Japan, South Korea or any ASEAN country, the bottleneck for future development mainly depends on resources, environment, land and other aspects. In this regard, actually, just right in Russian Far East and the Siberia region, we can find elements where almost exist all these elements. According to the famous Russian energy entrepreneur, Vagit Alekperov, CEO of Lukoil, in his new monograph entitled “Oil of Russia: Past, Present and Future”, Russia’s current oil reserves could be used for another 36-40 years, while natural gas reserves for 75-80 years. In the next 30 years, Russia has all necessary conditions to further expand scale of oil and gas production.\(^8\)

Moreover, Russia is one of the few countries with plenty of land available for development in the world. As is known to all, in the next few years, in addition to energy resources, agricultural and food resources will become another important field to invest. Russian experts are enthuising about the almost inexhaustible supply of fresh water resources from Lake Baikal, which is almost the last large fresh water resources in current world that can be commercialized even without too much investment.

Besides, the infrastructure construction is an important aspect for the future development of the Far East and Siberia, leaving room for Sino-Russian cooperation. According to Russia's blueprint, from 2010 to 2025, the per capita housing of the Far East will increase from 19 square meters to 32 square meters, and accordingly there will be great room for housing construction. In addition to construction of other types, say, roads, bridges, airports and other infrastructure, this is indeed a field worthy of careful planning. It is necessary to make institutional arrangements in accordance with both sides' intention and long-term interests.

In any case, the development of the Far East and Siberia heatedly discussed in recent years is definitely not a project which can be launched in a short period. This is a significant issue relating to economy, politics and security, which needs to make in-depth and comprehensive special researches.

Regarding the recent hot issue as the Arctic Passage, in view of 4-5 month navigable period in the North Sea near the Pole due to warm winter, a new factor for future international economic trade pattern is appearing, opening up trade passage via going north along the sea in Northeast Asia, then into the preliminary navigable Arctic Ocean via the Bering Strait, along the Russian North Sea, and finally to the Scandinavian region. Undoubtedly, this will be of great significance for the Asia-Pacific, the Arctic, the North Europe, including the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia as well. For Russia, although it will never give up its geographical advantages in the Arctic region, still it is a rare opportunity for development of the Far East and Siberia, whether in terms of infrastructure, trade channel or development along the region. For the United States, it is also regarded as a vital market and route, especially for its output in shale gas products to Europe in the future. At the same time, it will also be an important channel for the U.S. to get itself involved in the Far East and Arctic affairs. For China, it is momentous as well for resources, trade, logistics, including improvement in strategic environment etc. After considering various factors comprehensively, it not only conforms to the current situation of centralized trend of local population and corresponding logistics but also does not need to further enter the hinterland of the Far East and Siberia, avoiding unnecessary doubts if starting infrastructure construction on several ports along the Arctic Passage and promoting large-scale multilateral
cooperation. Last but not the least, it is also beneficial to future operation of the Arctic Passage.

VII

Regarding future Sino-Russian relationship within the Asia-Pacific, there are several theoretical and strategic issues needed to be explored further in order to make related preparations.

First, economically, for Russia, such a continental country with vast territory, specific climate and traffic conditions, especially such large-scale resource development in the Far East and Siberia, Western scholars have already discussed whether it could be simply explained by general market economic theories. In recent years, widespread controversy arose after the western academia put forward the “energy curse” theory, holding that resource endowment of a nation does not necessarily lead to the failure of market economy. From the viewpoint of Sino-Russian economic cooperation, it not only can follow the general market rules for economic cooperation, but also should and could go beyond the market principle due to the particularity of Sino-Russian relationship. As a matter of fact, Sino-Russian natural gas cooperation is an example. In the context of shale gas revolution’s stirring the whole energy pattern, Russia has to pay special attention to the export market within the Asia-Pacific. At the same time, from the perspective of China, it is not necessarily possible to change fundamentally its structure in energy requirements within the next ten or even more years. Therefore, Chinese should consider not only from energy supply and demand but also more from the political situation. For example, we can accept Russia’s participation in China’s urbanization on conditions and step by step, exploring more space for interest and complementary demands in order to promote Sino-Russian energy negotiation.

Strategically speaking, Sino-Russian cooperation would be impossible without U.S. factors. Since the Cold War, Sino-U.S.-S.U trilateral relationship is an unprecedented exciting issue. Currently, this issue already faces a different background and context. At present, under global conditions, although several semi-crisis appeared in some areas, yet compared with the Cold War era, at least three changes have taken place. First, it is unnecessary to divide solely according to ideologies; second, there is not any overall military confrontation; third, there is not any overall alliance against confrontation either. The Sino-U.S.-Russian trilateral relationship, on the whole, is no longer a comprehensively confrontational relationship. Nevertheless, in terms of the global politics, balance of power is a normal case, any bilateral relationship has to consider their

influences and constraints on the third party (the “third party” is not necessarily a country, it can also refer to a group of countries). From this perspective, the interaction of this trilateral relationship is quite normal during the history of international politics. According to the present situation, the great promotion of Sino-Russian relationship is both a necessity for their cooperation and development, and inevitably a resistance against external constraints and challenges. Fortunately, while the Sino-Russian relationship is progressing, we can also witness that communication, understanding, adjustment and deepening cooperation are maintained at different levels and in different fields for both Sino-U.S. relationship and Russia-U.S. relationship. This has laid an important basis for the construction of new power relations actually. What needs to be done further is how to understand more about new trilateral relationship among great powers. Obviously, this will be a key issue for emerging power relationship. According to Dr. Kissinger, there must be a moral line for balance of power. That is also the reason why we need to enhance theoretically for traditional practice of balance of power.

Perhaps, the development of Sino-Russian relationship is also based on a judgment for the prospects of world development. In my opinion, the reason why Sino-Russian relationship can keep developing despite various domestic and global difficulties is that there exist inner logic and impetus. One of the important reasons lies in great changes and connotation of globalization, which both China and Russia are involved in. Compared with thirty years ago, globalization is no longer a trend solely promoted by the “Washington consensus” alone, but more by ideas and concepts including “Chinese dream” and Russia’s great power ambitions as well. The process of globalization is not only inspired by private sectors and market mechanisms, but also involved by far more diverse participants, especially the involvement of big enterprise groups with support from nation or government. As a result, the viewpoint, originally just oriented by liberalism, to explain the globalization is far from enough. In early 2012, the British magazine *Economist* started a discussion about “state capitalism” and obviously it is a theoretical mirror to this trend. Of course, the “state capitalism” here is already different from that of one hundred years ago and has been attached new meaning accordingly. Under this context, capital, goods, technology, and flow of personnel are also undergoing significant changes, gradually from originally solely from Western and developed areas to two-way flow between both the West and developing, transition countries and areas. Thanks to this kind of changes, Sino-Russian relationship is driven forward.

After all, the development of Sino-Russian relationship reflects changes of people’s ideas and concepts in a deeper sense, that is, the diverse development trend of the world can never be prevented. The most striking example is changes

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in the thought of American famous thinker Francis Fukuyama. As all know, at the end of the 1980s, feeling that changes were taking place in the Eastern bloc, Fukuyama predicted that there will not be any large-scale confrontation between capitalist and socialist ideologies in the future, concluding a so-called “end of history”. Thirty years later, Fukuyama again published a very important theoretical book entitled “The Origins of Political Order” which he quite values as well. In this monograph, Fukuyama seriously reflects on why the West lacks cognition towards China’s rise and according to him, he believes that an important issue is that they lack enough attention on Chinese history, especially Chinese ancient history. In this book, another important issue of Fukuyama lies in the relationship between “good governance” and democracy. In his opinion, democracy is definitely a goal which needs to be achieved, but there is not consensus regarding the relationship between democracy and “good governance”, which needs to be explored in-depth. This change shows that the profound changes of current world have made major Western theorist carefully reflect on their own conclusions twenty or thirty years ago. While it is more necessary for both China and Russia, as two related parties, to carefully summarize experiences and lessons of system transition, to think in-depth possible trends of the world's changes, daring to practise and innovate, including innovation in theoretical theory, so that the Sino-Russian cooperation can not only lay foundations for the construction of power relations in the new era but also truly contribute to people of both countries.