

Geopolitical implications of the Russian Chinese relations within the multipolar international system

Benzatat Mohamed Seddik^{1*}

¹Constantine 03 -Salah Boubnider- University (Algeria), seddik.benzatat@univ-constantine3.dz

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Abstract:

This study aims to analyze the rise of China and Russia as major powers, which is transforming the international system towards multipolarity. Both countries are expanding their influence in their respective regions, shaping regional dynamics and challenging Western hegemony. This has implications for international relations, as China and Russia form strategic partnerships and rivalries with other major powers such as the US. Their economic strength also gives them leverage, with China being the world's largest exporter and Russia a major energy producer. Militarily, both countries pose security challenges, especially in strategically important regions such as Eastern Europe and the Asia-Pacific. Their combined rise is redistributing global power and forcing the US and the West to rethink their relationship.

The study concluded that a multipolar world leads to more complex interactions and balances between major powers. Although the rise of powers like China and Russia complicates international relations in a way that makes understanding their impact essential to the evolving global order, this will inevitably lead to providing some stability to the multipolar international system.

Keywords: China, Russia, Sino-Russian relations, Multipolar international system, Geopolitics.

*The sender author.

1. Introduction

The rise of Russia and China has been a prominent geopolitical phenomenon since the beginning of the new millennium. In particular, Russia completed its internal restructuring by the end of the first decade of the millennium and returned to the arena of regional influence, eventually becoming a global power. Meanwhile, China has succeeded in opening up to the world and achieving rapid economic development, as clearly demonstrated by the Belt and Road Initiative.

On this basis, it can be acknowledged that both powers, due to their size and influence, are essential elements in the current international system and global politics, returning to the concept of comprehensive power equation as formulated by Ray Cline. This prompts us to study the nature of relations between Russia and China and their impact on the establishment of the concept of a multipolar international system, especially in light of the declining role and influence of the United States before and during the short presidency of Donald Trump, especially in regions that have historically relied on the vital spheres of both Russia and China.

However, the main issue addressed in analyzing the details of the study lies primarily in posing the following main question: Is the rise of both China and Russia, along with their bilateral relations, the foundation of the shift towards a multipolar international order, or rather the first outcome of this transformation?

To address the central research question of the study, the analysis was structured into three sections. The first section examined key aspects of Sino-Russian rapprochement as an essential foundation for influencing the emergence of a multipolar international system. The study then proceeded to explore facets of Sino-Russian convergence in light of the polar transformation of the international system. Finally, the essay concluded with an assessment of salient constraints and impediments to further Sino-Russian entente and its implications for catalyzing multipolarity on the world stage.

2. The Converging Strategic Interests between China and Russia:

China and Russia have developed an increasingly robust strategic relationship in recent years, based on converging geopolitical, security and economic interests. In particular, this convergence is based on a shared desire to contain American influence, ensure stability on their respective borders, and promote a multipolar worldview in the face of Western hegemony.

2.1. Converging Geopolitical and Security Interests:

At the geopolitical and security level, China and Russia share common concerns that have led them to strengthen their strategic partnership. First, both countries seek to contain American influence in their spheres of influence (Baev, 2019, pp. 89-93).

Russia is wary of NATO's expansion in its immediate neighbourhood, especially the discussions surrounding Ukraine and Georgia's potential membership. China is also anxious about the strengthening of American alliances in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the Quad (US, Japan, Australia, India). The Sino-Russian rapprochement is therefore aimed at counterbalancing the American Asian pivot (Oualaalou, Springer, pp. 80-84).

Moreover, China and Russia share common borders and are concerned about stability in their immediate neighbourhood. They have, therefore, an interest in cooperating to combat terrorism, separatism and extremism, especially in the sensitive region of Xinjiang. The

strategic partnership allows them to coordinate their actions and avoid regional escalation (Scobell, Ratner, & Beckley, 2014, p. 36).

Finally, at the military level, bilateral cooperation has increased significantly in recent years through joint exercises, technology transfers and closer coordination. China is Russia's largest arms importer, as shown in the following figure:

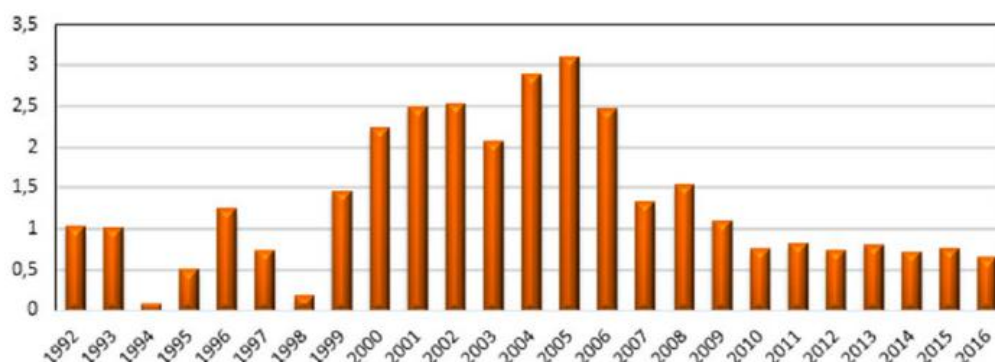


Figure 1: Russian arms sales to china (1992-2016) in billions dollars

Source: Jo Inge Bekkevold et Bobo Lo, éd., *Sino-Russian Relations in the 21st Century* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), p90.

This cooperation aims to increase the two countries' defense capabilities vis-à-vis the United States (Kirchberger, Sinjen, & Wörmer, 2022, pp. 122-134).

2.2 Complementary Economic Interests:

Economically, China and Russia have developed a strategic partnership based on complementary interests.

First, in the energy sector, Russia is a key partner for China's energy security. It is China's main supplier of oil and gas, with major pipelines such as the Power of Siberia. China is an important outlet for Russian hydrocarbons, especially in the wake of Western sanctions against Moscow (Paik, 2015, pp. 4-7).

In January 2011, Russia began exporting oil to China via the East Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, made possible by a 2009 pact that included a \$25 billion Chinese loan to Russian oil companies in exchange for 300 million tonnes of crude oil over 30 years. Within the first two months, however, the Chinese National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) was accused of underpaying \$100 million, although this was cleared up the following year. Moreover, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Moscow in 2013, Sino-Russian companies signed a further crude oil deal worth \$270 billion. Natural gas deals have proved more elusive, despite 2006 and 2009 agreements pledging a combined 68 billion cubic metres per year via alternative routes, as acute pricing disputes have thwarted the necessary pipeline development, in part due to Chinese domestic politics involving CNPC. More recently, Russian oil titan Rosneft has targeted Japanese LNG sales from Sakhalin, and independent producer Novatek has partnered with CNPC on Arctic LNG exports to bypass Gazprom's traditional export monopoly. Finally, at the 2014 Putin-Xi summit, a 30-year Sino-Russian natural gas supply pact began deliveries in 2018, following the completion of infrastructure, at undisclosed commercial secret prices.

In sum, Sino-Russian energy cooperation in the oil and gas sector has developed significantly over the past decade, with some persistent disagreements, and is now evolving

into a more diversified range of deals between different companies and supply routes, with significant geopolitical and economic implications (Bolt, 2014, pp. 52-55).

Second, the two countries are seeking to develop their trade links through infrastructure projects such as China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Corridor. These are trade routes through Russia and Central Asia to connect China with Europe (SWANSTROM, 2014, pp. 493-495). The aim of these initiatives is to boost bilateral Russian-Chinese trade. Finally, China and Russia are strengthening their financial cooperation through institutions such as the Beijing-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. The aim is to reduce their dependence on the US dollar and Western financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank (Pantucci & Lain, 2017, pp. 9-11).

2.3 A Shared Multipolar Geopolitical Vision:

Beyond their bilateral interests, China and Russia converge in their vision of a multipolar world order in which their influence would be recognized in the face of Western hegemony.

First, both countries reject the political domination and universalism of values advocated by the United States and its allies. They believe that each country should be free to choose its own political system and values (Groitzl, 2023, p. 11). They also oppose the use of force and military intervention to defend these principles, as in Iraq or Libya. China and Russia support state sovereignty and the peaceful resolution of disputes.

At the institutional level, they call for reform of the UN and Bretton Woods institutions to better reflect the weight of emerging powers such as China and to give developing countries a greater voice.

The Sino-Russian strategic partnership thus aims to create a pole of influence capable of counterbalancing the West on the international stage in the name of multipolarity. It reflects a broader convergence of views on the desired world order (Alberto & Bandeira, 2019, pp. 99-125).

In conclusion, China and Russia, in recent years, have developed a robust strategic partnership based on closely intertwined geopolitical, security and economic interests. Beyond this bilateral convergence, the two powers are committed to a multipolar world in which their voice would carry more weight in the face of Western dominance. It remains to be seen whether this strategic alliance can withstand current and future geopolitical turbulence.

3. The Sino-Russian rapprochement and the construction of a multipolar order:

An analysis of the above leads us to discuss the most significant geopolitical implications of this joint Russian-Chinese rise, which can be summarized as follows:

3.1 Impact on the international system: Both China and Russia can influence the international system by determining the foreign policy trajectories of both powers. For example, both China and Russia seek to enhance the construction of their respective spheres of influence (as a geopolitical concept), while at the same time working to reduce Western intervention in general and American intervention in particular in the international affairs of the states constituting these spheres. It is worth noting that the closer the competing Western powers come to the direct sphere of influence of either Russia or China, the more these two states resort to the concept of the "zero-sum game" in international relations. Examples of this regard are Georgia and Ukraine for Russia, or even Taiwan for China (Srinivas, 2022, pp. 48-

50). This could lead to changes in the structure of the current international system, especially if we consider the second geopolitical determinant, which is related to:

3.2 Shaping regional dynamics: The rise of Russia and China has significant implications for regional dynamics. The growing influence of both powers in their respective regions could lead to shifts in the balance of power, alliances and regional order. This could potentially challenge existing regional hegemony and affect the geopolitical interests of other major players, such as the United States and its allies. As a result, it may trigger geopolitical rivalries and realignments in various regions, further complicating the international system (Kuzmina, Larionova, & Morozov, 2022, pp. 187-194).

3.3 Impact on International Relations: As one of the main outcomes, China and Russia have a significant impact on international relations, particularly among the major powers. China's rise has altered international relations as it has become the largest trading partner for many countries worldwide, giving it significant influence in global politics, especially with the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative. This initiative has reached regions that have traditionally relied on the Western liberal concept of "strategic depth", especially as US-China relations face increasing difficulties.

The same is true for Russia, which is also expected to have a significant impact on the network of international relations, especially in terms of relations with major powers, namely the United States. According to Berezinsky, relations between Russia and the United States have deteriorated significantly in recent years, leading to direct conflicts or even what could be termed geopolitical axes. These dynamics can be observed in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, the South Caucasus and Central and Eastern Europe, which are considered vital regions (Götz & MacFarlane, 2022, pp. 69-81) or GROSSRAUM in the light of Karl Schmitt's approach.

3.4. Security and military challenges and the concept of impact on international security: Understanding the interplay of the above variables leads us to discuss the strength and influence of China and Russia on the concept of international security, particularly in regions of strategic importance. China's rise has led to a shift in the Asian region as it seeks to expand its influence in the region, including maintaining the stability of its external vital space, as exemplified by its approach to Taiwan. (Swanstrom, 2014, p. 484)

Russia also has a significant impact on international security, especially in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The Syrian conflict has increased Russia's role in the region, and the Ukrainian conflict is also an area with significant geopolitical implications (Romaniuk, 2015, pp. 115-116).

In conclusion, the joint rise of China and Russia has far-reaching implications for international relations. They influence major powers' relations, challenge the existing international order and reshape regional dynamics. Moreover, their impact extends to international security and military challenges, namely in regions of strategic importance. An understanding of these implications is crucial to comprehend the evolving international system and its impact on global politics and security.

3.5. Impact on the Global Economy:

It is impossible to discuss the geopolitical implications of the rise of Russia and China and their impact on the international system without considering economic variables, which are among the key determinants of geopolitical analysis. The economic influence of China and Russia can be examined at two levels:

First, looking at the economic indicators of both countries, China is currently the world's leading economic power, surpassing, for example, the European Union (which fell from 19.9% to 14.8%) and the United States (which also fell from 19.8% to 15.8%). China's economic level has risen to 18.8% of global GDP in purchasing power parity terms, with an estimated growth rate of 8.1% compared to China's level 20 years ago. In addition, China is the world's leading investor in renewable energy, with more than \$758 billion invested. It also holds the largest foreign exchange reserves, at \$3.22 trillion, and is the world's largest exporter, accounting for almost 30% of total global exports.

On the other hand, Russia cannot be considered as economically strong and with the same pronounced economic growth as China. However, its economic importance, particularly in terms of energy resources, cannot be ignored. Russia is one of the world's largest producers of oil, natural gas and minerals. Some sources estimate that Russia holds over 30% of the world's natural resources, with the World Bank estimating the total value of Russia's natural resources at \$75 trillion. Russia relies on energy revenues to fuel much of its growth, as it has abundant reserves of oil, natural gas and precious metals, which make up a significant portion of Russia's exports. In 2012, the oil and gas sector accounted for 16% of GDP, 52% of federal budget revenues and over 70% of total exports.

Russia is also a major energy player, with the world's largest proven natural gas reserves and the second largest oil reserves. Russia also has a large and advanced weapons industry capable of designing and manufacturing high-tech military equipment, including fifth-generation fighter jets, nuclear-powered submarines, firearms, and short- to long-range ballistic missiles. In 2013, Russia's arms exports reached a value of \$15.7 billion, making it the second largest exporter after the United States. Russian military exports include combat aircraft, air defense systems, ships and submarines (Borozna, 2022, pp. 187-190).

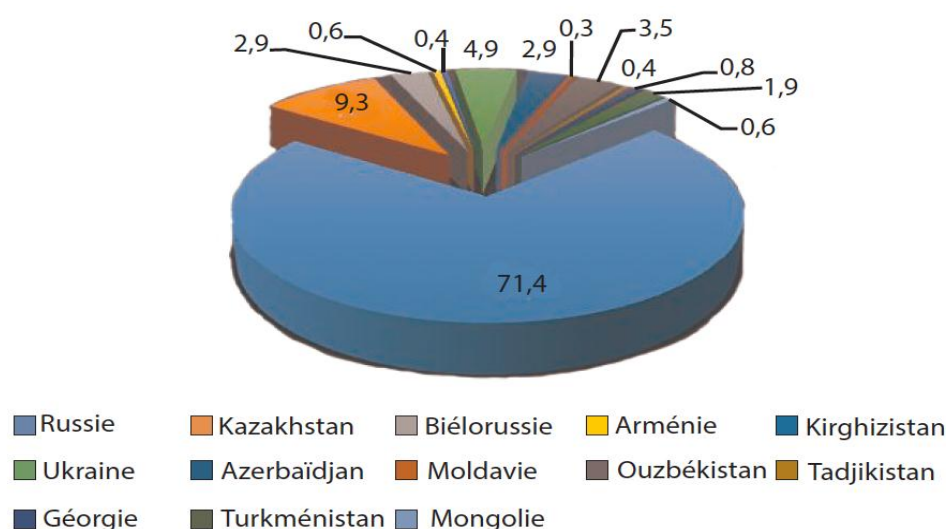
Understanding these economic variables inevitably leads to the realization that any changes in the Chinese or Russian economies will have a significant impact on the global economy. This in turn will affect the second level, which is closely linked to the impact on the global economy.

3.6. Impact on International Alliances and Partnerships and the Concept of Soft Power:

The rise of China and Russia has significant implications for international alliances and partnerships. Both China and Russia are seeking to expand their influence in the world and increase their political leverage. This is reflected in their support for other countries, especially those facing economic, political or strategic difficulties.

The American thinker and National Security Advisor during the era of President Jimmy Carter, Zbigniew Brzezinski, in his book "The Grand Chessboard" published in 1997, mentioned that the key to global influence must inevitably pass through the so-called four keys of hegemony: military, economic, technological and cultural (Zajec, 2022, pp. 146-147). Based on this, and for Russia in particular, the presence of the Eurasian Union, which has a regional mission as a priority, allows Russia to benefit from the political and economic weaknesses, especially of Eurasian neighbouring countries. This is based on the differences in the total GDP of the member or candidate countries within the enlarged Eurasian Union, as shown in the following figure:

Figure 2: The national income ratios of the Eurasian Union countries



Source : Jean-Christophe Defraigne, L'union Eurasienne : Un projet d'intégration régionale contrepoids à la chine et à l'UE, Un dessin géopolitique sans dynamique économique, revue-outre-terre, 2016/3 N° 48, p224

These economic variables will inevitably have direct political and geostrategic repercussions, given that the Eurasian Union project is a political integration project involving the former Soviet republics. This project leads to the creation of a new multilateral international bloc, capable of joining the ranks of the major global poles in our contemporary world. It is capable of forming a strong link between Europe on the one hand and the Asia-Pacific region on the other. According to Vladimir Putin, the Eurasian Union will pave the way for its member states not only for economic integration, but also to enable these countries to have a clear voice in decision-making in international forums, to establish rules for managing international competition, and to define the framework and outlines of the future. He believes that the Eurasian Union will be a complementary part of the greater European house.

We can also talk about the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which includes seven countries: Russia, Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia. Its general framework aims to ensure collective security, defend the sovereignty, independence and unity of member states, and prohibit the use of force or threats between them. It also prohibits joining other military alliances. Any aggression against one member of the group is considered an attack on the rest. The West, however, sees the CSTO as Russia's attempt to redraw the geostrategic map of Eurasia in line with its policy in the region. In other words, the organization is being transformed into a military-security alliance to help achieve Moscow's strategic goals, including dominance over the countries of the former Soviet Union. Several military exercises have been carried out among the CSTO member states, and the main tasks for 2016 have been defined, including coordinating the collective security strategy of the member states until 2025, establishing a crisis response centre within the organization, and enhancing military cooperation and coordination in counter-terrorism efforts (Cross & Bolt, 2018, pp. 110-115).

From a Chinese perspective, we can first focus on the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was established with the participation of 74 other countries, and membership in this bank was not limited to Asian or developing countries in Africa or Latin America. Prominent European countries such as the UK, Germany and Italy also sought to

join. In July 2019, the AIIB's membership reached 100 countries, and the bank's financing for some 46 projects in 18 countries amounted to about \$8.5 billion. Many developing countries rely heavily on the role of the AIIB to compete with the World Bank, which has been dominated by the United States and other Western countries since its founding in 1947 (Lanteigne, 2020, pp. 75-76). The expected loans from this

at a secondary level, which is related to the presence of the two powers under study, by shedding light on:

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is seen as a manifestation of the Russian-Chinese rapprochement. Initially, it was established as a framework for resolving border issues between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Later, the dialogue expanded to discuss Russia's and China's interests in Central Asia. Then, with the accession of Uzbekistan, it became a regional organisation, broadening the scope of discussions to include common challenges in these countries, such as terrorism, religious extremism, ethnic separatism and other common risks.

Four observer states attend the annual meetings: Iran, Mongolia, Belarus and Afghanistan. India and Pakistan have also joined the organization, making it the largest regional nuclear club in the world (KOCAMAZ, 2019, pp. 130-133).

BRICS Group:: The BRICS group consists of five countries: Russia, Brazil, China, India and South Africa. It aims to promote trade, political and cultural cooperation between its member states. Negotiations to form the group began in 2006 and the first summit was held in 2009. The BRICS countries are located on four continents, and two of them are permanent members of the UN Security Council. Together, the five countries account for 18% of the global economy.

The BRICS is an influential international organization that emerged in response to developments imposed by a unipolar system, represented by the United States and its dominance in shaping the global order. This alignment of global powers, particularly China and Russia, is seen as the formation of new power centers and the creation of new alliances with the aim of influencing the nature of the international system and altering global balances (Moore, 2022, pp. 60-62).

4. Challenges and limits of the Sino-Russian partnership:

The deepening China-Russia partnership faces challenges due to distrust, diverging interests, and economic and geopolitical power imbalances based on:

4.1. Diverging interests in some areas and regions:

The Sino-Russian partnership, which has strengthened considerably in recent years in the face of tensions with the West, is complex, with some diverging interests in specific areas and regions.

In Central Asia in particular, China and Russia have an ambiguous relationship. On the one hand, they share the goal of countering American influence in this strategic region. On the other hand, through economic and infrastructure projects within the framework of the "New Silk Roads", China is pursuing a policy of connectivity with Central Asia that competes with Moscow's traditional influence in its former near abroad.

In particular, China has invested billions of dollars in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, becoming their main trading partner. It seeks to secure its energy supplies and open up new markets for its companies there. Russia is wary of this Chinese advance into a region it considers its backyard (Peyrouse, 2016, p. 7).

In Siberia and the Russian Far East, China has also increased its economic presence in recent years, taking advantage of the considerable natural and agricultural resources and

cheap labour. Major Chinese companies have invested in logging, mining and oil extraction, as well as in the agricultural sector, raising fears on the Russian side of excessive long-term dependence.

Militarily, Russia is also wary of the rapid development of Chinese capabilities. Although the two countries demonstrate their understanding on this issue, notably through joint military exercises, Moscow remains cautious about its partner's rise.

In the Arctic, China has recently announced its ambitions, describing its Polar Silk Road as a "Silk Road on ice". It has notably invested in the Yamal gas project in Siberia and is interested in the new maritime routes opened up by climate change. Russia has a dim view of this Chinese intrusion into an Arctic region that it considers economically and militarily-strategically crucial (ALEXEEVA & LASSERRE, 2018, pp. 270-272).

Finally, the two countries diverge on certain sensitive issues in the Middle East. China takes a more neutral stance on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and maintains good relations with Saudi Arabia, Iran's main regional rival and Moscow's key partner. On Syria, Beijing is also more restrained in its support for the Assad regime (Bekkevold, 2019, pp. 149-150).

Despite these growing divergences, China and Russia maintain a strategic understanding in the face of what they perceive as American hegemonic ambitions. Their interests converge in countering Western influence and promoting a multipolar world order. But as the imbalances deepen, mutual mistrust also grows, casting doubt on the long-term viability of their partnership.

4.2 Potential long-term rivalries between the two powers:

China and Russia maintain complex relationships. Although they have recently strengthened their strategic partnership, many analysts believe that underlying tensions could lead to long-term rivalry between these two powers.

Historically, China and Russia have had a turbulent relationship. After a brief communist alliance in the 1950s, the two countries became rivals during the Cold War. China feared Soviet influence in Asia, while Russia saw China as a threat to its communist leadership. This mutual distrust led to border clashes in the 1960s. Although relations have since improved, this historical legacy has left its mark. Some analysts believe that the memory of these past tensions could resurface if the two countries' interests diverge again (Bolt & Cross, 2010, pp. 194-198).

Regional Rivalries:

Both China and Russia are seeking to expand their influence in key regions such as Central Asia and the Pacific. In Central Asia, Russia sees its influence declining as China increases its economic investment. Some fear that China will eventually replace Russia as the dominant power in the region. In the Pacific, China's rise threatens Russian interests in the Far East. Tensions could arise if China seeks to challenge Russian control over border areas or resources (Kaczmariski, 2015, pp. 31-34).

Superpower Ambitions:

Both China and Russia harbor ambitions for global superpower status. In the long term, however, the current balance of China accepting Russian leadership is unlikely to endure. As China's economy and international influence grow, it could challenge the dominant role Russia seeks to play in global affairs. This changing power dynamic could be a major source of tension (Kaczmariski, 2015, pp. 35-38).

Ideological Divergences:

Although China and Russia currently share a common desire to counter Western hegemony, their political systems and ideologies are very different. Russian nationalism under Putin contrasts with China's more pragmatic approach. If Russia were to become a liberal democracy, it could widen the ideological gap with authoritarian China. Divergences on issues such as human rights could weaken the current relationships (L0, 2020, pp. 313-314).

Energy Competition:

Both China and Russia are dependent on energy exports. But as Chinese demand rises, Russian production is falling. This could lead to tensions as China seeks to secure access to Russian resources. In addition, China is increasingly looking to Central Asia to meet its energy needs, threatening Russia's near monopoly in the region. This competition could become a source of conflict.

In sum, despite their current partnership, there are deep fault lines between China and Russia. Their diverging interests, growing asymmetry of power and ideological differences could lead to long-term tensions. However, real rivalry will depend on how each side manages these dynamics. Cautious diplomacy could prevent underlying tensions from erupting into open conflict. But if these issues are not carefully managed, they could trigger a new era of strategic competition between China and Russia (Kaczmarzski M, 2017, pp. 1361-1365).

5. Conclusion:

Finally, the rise of China and Russia as major powers on the world stage has fundamentally altered the structure of the international system, moving it towards a multipolar configuration. As political scientists David Singer and Karl Deutsch have noted, a multipolar system can provide greater stability than a bipolar or unipolar order. There are several important reasons for this:

First, the diversity of power centers in a multipolar world leads to more complex patterns of interaction and alliance formation among states. Instead of two opposing camps, there are multiple overlapping relationships and potential partnerships. This flexibility provides more opportunities for mediating tensions and resolving conflicts through diplomacy rather than direct confrontation between major powers.

Second, a multipolar order requires great powers to spread their interests and attention across multiple centers of power, rather than focusing on a single rival. This diversification of priorities provides built-in restraints against any one country decisively challenging another or escalating tensions too far. The costs of such aggression are higher in a world with many powerful poles.

Third, there is likely to be a greater diffusion of economic and military capabilities among the most influential states in a multipolar system. This rough equality of strength reinforces restraint and caution. There is a greater incentive to cooperate and compromise, as unilateral dominance is not possible for any single actor.

While the transition period as China and Russia emerge as peer competitors to the West is likely to be turbulent, an established multipolar order could provide the foundations for a stable international system. Major powers would balance and check each other, while smaller countries could benefit from the increased opportunities to forge ties with multiple partners rather than just one protector.

The optimistic theory of a peaceful multipolar balance depends heavily on all sides behaving as rational actors. There is always the risk that confrontational nationalist sentiments will gain ground and disrupt the emerging stability. Wise statecraft is needed to manage the new multi-player world and to ensure that it is rules-based, with institutions that anchor cooperation. The integration of China and Russia as responsible actors remains an uncertain process, but one that is essential for future global security.

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