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## Strategic Partnership or Alliance? Sino-Russian Relations from a Constructivist Perspective

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Ying Liu

*In this article I analyze the China-Russia strategic partnership of cooperation from a constructivist perspective. By employing Wendt's concepts and structures of identity to understand relations between China and Russia, and their relations with other countries, I seek to elucidate the drivers of the current China-Russia partnership and shed light on the reasons why, despite burgeoning ties, the two countries have not established a formal alliance. I argue that both China and Russia are in the process of reconstructing their national identities while also integrating into the international community. There exists an ideational foundation for the China-Russia strategic partnership, but divergent concepts of harmony and honor make China and Russia act differently when interacting with a third party in the international community. I argue that China and Russia are still on the way to forming a shared concept of strategic partnership. Beijing and Moscow are not likely to set an alliance arrangement against a third party in the foreseeable future. KEYWORDS: China-Russia relations, strategic partnership, national identity, constructivism.*

THE SINO-RUSSIAN RELATIONSHIP HAS BEEN A FOCUS OF INTERNATIONAL relations study for a long time. Recently, China's rapid rise and the deterioration of relations between Russia and the West have led the outside world to pay greater attention to the two countries' bilateral relations. At the same time, Sino-Russian ties have developed rapidly. Most importantly, as the two biggest developing countries in the world are completing their transformation, their foreign policies are also transitioning. Both Beijing and Moscow are becoming more active and assertive in international affairs, exercising veto power in the UN Security Council regarding critical issues and deepening their own cooperation within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS

(Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). These developments have led to a fear in international society that China will abandon its nonalignment foreign policy and that a Sino-Russian alliance against the West in the post-Cold War era will emerge.

There is an abundance of published analysis of the China-Russia relationship, the majority of which uses a realist framework to understand changes in the relationship and gives only limited attention to the role of culture and ideas, including in shaping realist power. Drawing upon the concept of identity from Alexander Wendt's constructivist theory, in this paper I analyze the concepts and structures of identities in the relations between China and Russia and their relationship with other countries. Constructivist analysis offers an additional lens through which to assess the foundation and developmental direction of the Sino-Russian relationship and helps explain why, despite the partnership relationship between the two countries, they have not yet and are not likely to forge an alliance relationship anytime soon.

This article is structured as follows: I begin by introducing the constructivist approach to defining identities in world politics. Then, I summarize and compare the concepts of identities as they apply to China and Russia's international relations. In the third section, I briefly describe the China-Russia strategic partnership, review the debates on the possibility of a Sino-Russian alliance, and analyze the identity similarities of China and Russia. In the fourth part of the article, I analyze the different ways China and Russia deal with disputes with other countries. They can find common characteristics in their "personal" (or "corporate") and "type" identities during interstate bilateral interactions but follow different paths when they encounter the Other defined in contrast to the Self. Some parts of identities cannot be activated solely by the Self on its own but are achieved in relation to Others who possess relevant "counter-identities" (Wendt 1999, 227). More concretely, China and Russia are ideationally coordinated in their bilateral interactions while divided over relations with third parties. In concluding, I summarize my arguments and clarify my assessment that the China-Russia strategic partnership will remain at its current optimal status with little possibility of transforming into an alliance in the foreseeable future.

## Identity in Wendt's Constructivist Theory

In this article I explicitly use Alexander Wendt's theoretical framework, which rests on four key concepts to understand structural change in world politics: state-actor, intersubjective interaction, identity, and interests. Wendt sees social structures as "primarily cultural rather than material phenomena" and mutually constructed with identities and interests rather than naturally given (Wendt 1999, 193). Wendt's constructivism rests on a concept of identity, which comprises four types: personal or corporate, type, role, and collective (Zehfuss 2002, 15). The first two identity types refer to "personal" or "group" actors not dependent upon perceptions of the Other. The last two, in contrast, exist only when intersubjective interactions occur (Wendt 1999, 224–233).

The first of the identity categories, personal or corporate identity, constitutes personal identity and gives states a "group Self" capability for group-level cognition. The second, type identity, refers to a social category describing such characteristics as attitudes, values, and behavioral traits. The third, role identity, in contrast, exists only in relation to the Other. A state has this sort of identity as it occupies a position in the international system and follows relevant behavioral norms. The fourth, collective identity, relates to a spectrum of identification. Identification is a cognitive process in which the Self and Other are to some extent combined, ranging from the absence of identification to identification of "the welfare of the Other as part of that of the Self" (Wendt 1999, 229).

As the "basic characteristic of states" (Jepperson, Wendt, and Katzenstein 1996, 33), identity defines national interests and can exist even before a state interacts with others (Zehfuss 2001, 321). Certainly, as Andreas Behnke (2001) observes, Wendt's hypothesis that the international system is subordinate to the state remains an area of considerable debate. Scholars who challenge Wendt's perspective contend that the international system definitely shapes states' identities and their interests. According to this view, a new global situation, such as changes in the US-China-Russia triangular relationship, will exert decisive influence

on Sino-Russian relations. However, I do not attempt a realist constructivist explanation but rather find applying Wendt's approach productive in explaining the evolving Sino-Russian relationship and its limits.

### **Identity in China's and Russia's Perspectives on Constructivist Theory and the Cultural Formation of Their Foreign Policy**

Chinese and Russian scholars share a struggle to develop their own theoretical frameworks for analyzing international relations (IR), even as they study all major IR theories originating in the West. Qin Yaqing and Andrei P. Tsygankov are representative scholars from China and Russia, respectively, who promote non-Western IR scholarship in their own countries. Each explores the relationship between national cultural traditions and diplomacy, drawing on the concept of identity. Qin proclaims that the most important task for establishing a Chinese IR school is to find the core problematic. The core is bound to be formed through finding and resolving a specific problem. The problem of how China peacefully integrates into the international system, Qin argues, will likely become the core of Chinese IR theory. There are three lines of inquiry to be researched: structures and processes of the international system, domestic structures and processes, and construction of collective identities (Qin 2005). The last of these, to some extent, is the ultimate question that Chinese scholars should think about to resolve the core problematic.

Tsygankov perceives that Russia is also trying to establish its own IR theoretical framework, identifying pluralization, Westernization, and isolationism as the main trends. But he worries about the outcomes. While both China and Russia are challenging the status of Western-centered IR, the difference is that the former has developed its own ideological "mainstream" and is on the way to establishing its own IR research theoretical framework known as the Chinese IR School while the latter "continues to be in a stage of ideological and theoretical uncertainty, which is a result of unresolved questions of national identity" (Tsygankov and Tsygankov 2004, 1).

Chinese scholars argue that national identity is the self-definition of image and characteristics based on an acknowledgment of international community, reflecting the special characteristics of a country in comparison with others (Men 2013; Qin 2003; Sun 2003). Qin hypothesizes that China's identity is undergoing a redefinition, being transformed from negative to positive, while its strategic culture and security interests are also under reconstruction. The current reconstruction of Chinese national identity has manifested in three ways in its foreign policy: first, China's diplomatic focus is to maintain a favorable international environment to the benefit of the development of its domestic economy; second, China has begun to become more active in diplomatic activities in the international arena; third, China's participation in international society and institutions strengthens its own national identity. As national identity defines the strategic orientation and security interests of a country, according to Qin, China's positive identity, therefore, leads to its constructive cooperation with international society. It also means that China is trying to integrate with the international system and act as a stable actor within the international arena (Qin 2003).

Qin contends that, distinct from dominant orientations in Western culture, the core of Chinese political culture is *he*, combining harmony, peace, and cooperation with others (Qin 2008). *He* is the essence of Chinese traditional political culture originating from Confucianism, which is reflected in the current foreign policy of China led by Xi Jinping's diplomatic theory, while its specific forms remain under transformation (Sun 2017; Yin 2011). The most important element in this tradition is the concept of relationship, including relations, process, face-saving mentality, and hypothesis of relations. Face-saving, specifically, is a combination of self- and other-identity while the management of relations is defined as dealing with complicated relations in a community by way of negotiations toward mutually beneficial cooperation and trust (Qin 2011).

It is commonly believed in China that since the Eighteenth National People's Congress in 2012, Xi Jinping has introduced some changes to China's diplomatic ideology. For instance, at the Conference on the Diplomatic Work with Neighboring Countries

in 2013 Xi did not mention “hide one’s capacities and bide one’s time,” the maxim associated with Deng Xiaoping’s foreign policy, but emphasized that China should “keep pace with the times and be more active in blueprinting diplomatic strategy and undertaking diplomatic work” (Xi 2013). This change means that Beijing’s foreign policy thinking includes the principle of a “red line” with regard to protecting national interests and seeks to be the leader rather than the follower (Gao 2017; Xu and Du 2014). These changes can explain to some extent the more assertive foreign policy of the Xi Jinping era.

Additional changes may also be found around the Nineteenth National People’s Congress held in 2017. Beijing started repairing and improving relations that had deteriorated with some countries in recent years. For instance, in 2017 India was accepted by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization as a new member. After the Doklam standoff, moreover, President Xi and Indian prime minister Narendra Modi met twice—during the Ninth BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) summit in July 2017 and Wuhan in April 2018. Xi also met with South Korean president Moon Jae-in twice, in July and December 2017, in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of establishing diplomatic relations, mitigating tensions over Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD). In November 2017, Xi met Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe, which ignited hopes for easing tensions between the two countries. During the March 2018 “two sessions” of the National People’s Congress (NPC) and the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC), Beijing promoted the need to improve relations with Tokyo in honor of the 40th anniversary of signing the China-Japan Peace and Friendship Treaty. In 2015 and 2017, Xi paid “dual status visits” to Vietnam, both as the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee and as the president of China. The Chinese media commented that the visits reflected Xi’s intention to change relations with Vietnam by strengthening connections between the two socialist parties and countries. On all the above mentioned occasions, Xi proclaimed that what China was trying to build with these countries was mutual trust on the basis of the “good neighbor” principle.

Qin deduces from the essential elements in China's culture that relationship and complementarity, respectively referring to "relationalism" and "*he*," continue to influence foreign affairs decision making even in contemporary China (Qin 2011). The reason explaining the new change since 2017 is that the new diplomatic concepts were confirmed at the Nineteenth National People's Congress and are in the process of being implemented. Xi emphasized the concepts of "major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics" and the "community of shared future" at the Congress. These concepts have been mentioned before, but this time the latter concept was written into the CPC constitution in October 2017 and incorporated twice in United Nations resolutions, respectively at the Fifty-Fifteenth Session of the Commission for Social Development (CSocd55) on the issue of African partnership in March 2017 and in two resolutions of the First Committee (Disarmament and International Security) in November 2017.

Tsygankov is the first scholar who has argued that the notion of honor is the real motive power behind Russia's foreign actions. He defines honor as the readiness of the self to preserve its dignity and its assumed commitments to the relevant social community. It has inner and outer aspects. The former refers to an individual's assessment, relating to notions of integrity or obligation to a moral community. The latter is linked to assessments by others, referring to reputation. "The concept of honor is often at the heart of how a nation expresses its historical experience and formulates a moral purpose in world politics" (Tsygankov 2012, 13–14). Russia cherishes its obligations to Slavic/Orthodox allies in the former Soviet region, but, as Tsygankov proclaims, realist theories overlook the importance of honor and obligations to cultural allies in Russia's international relations (Tsygankov 2012, 53–57).

Externally, the West plays the role of Other in defining Russia's national identity and interests. In regard to foreign policy toward the West, Russia has three options: cooperation, defensiveness, and assertiveness. All of them have brought mixed results while the last option appears to best describe the current Russian stance as it concurrently develops a good relationship with China and struggles to survive Western sanctions. According to Tsygankov's hypothesis, Russia's diplomatic posture depends



upon the recognition these various approaches meet with from the West. When external recognition is strong, whether internal confidence is weak or strong, Russia will choose to pursue a cooperative policy with the West. But when the West's external recognition is weak, the option for Moscow is either defensiveness or assertiveness (Tsygankov 2012, 52–56). Russia publicly proclaimed its abandonment of a cooperative policy with the West in 2007 when Putin denounced “the unilateral and illegitimate actions” led by US and NATO expansion into Russia's sphere of influence (Putin 2007).

In sum, in developing IR theory, China must find the core problematic to its own IR theoretical system while Russia must identify the dominant actor within its domestic theoretical content. Both issues relate to identity. In China's case, the problem is how to integrate with the international community as a new rising power while Russia has to struggle with its domestic ideological chaos and find its status in the international community as recognized by the Other. Extending Wendt's categories of identity as corporate, type, role, and collective, we can deduce that China seeks to construct a collective identity with the Other while Russia is still contending with domestic problems in terms of its role identities.

### **The Development of a Common Identity as the Foundation for the Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership**

Since 1618, China and Russia, in their various political forms, have interacted with each other. Politically and culturally, both China and Russia share authoritarian characteristics in their contemporary regimes, not to mention their common communist backgrounds. Russian scholar Aleksei Kiva argues that both Russia and China have a tradition of tyranny, which gave rise to similar behavior during the period of the Soviet Union and Mao-era China (Kiva 2015, 18–23). Confucian ideology historically undergirded autocracy in China while Russia inherited Eastern despotism from the Mongol conquest, which combined with the Russian Orthodox ideology to form an autocratic political system. Historically, both states have

many times been victims of invasions by Western powers, the memories of which serve as the backdrop of their strict resistance to interference from the outside world. They have also experienced phases of Westernization, but have resisted Americanization of their societies, although neither is opposed to globalization.

Generally speaking, China and Russia share the same “ideology of state,” which has facilitated strong state control in the political and economic transition of these two countries (Guan and Wu 2006, 403). Political-cultural similarities help China and Russia find commonalities in social structure and state regime, including collectivism and authoritarianism today (Guan 2003, 139–144; Zheng 2014). Belonging to different types of civilization, they still can find many common “mentalities” (Kiva 2015, 22). This explains why Beijing and Moscow “mutually support and respect the right to choose [their] own developmental path” (Xi 2016), as Chinese president Xi Jinping has said. Xi also observed, “Both China and Russia are standing at the significant stage of national development and rejuvenation. Our countries have the same developmental blueprint and many opportunities for local cooperation” (Xi 2018).

At the same time, from the Other identity perspective, the period between 2012 and 2014 has been particularly enabling of Sino-Russian partnership relations. This is not only because of the leadership changes in 2012 but also because both Russia’s domestic situation and its relations with the West began to worsen as a result of the deployment of the European missile defense system, the Ukraine and Syrian crises, and the annexation of Crimea. Internal and external pressures provided additional momentum to the two countries to upgrade their relationship. China and Russia have done so, consolidating the mechanism of high-level visits, deepening collaboration within the framework of the SCO and the BRICS, and expanding mutual cultural and educational exchanges. Beijing and Moscow have also sought to take their economic cooperation to a new level with the 2014 signing of a contract on a US\$400 billion gas deal (Weitz 2014).

Strikingly, Beijing and Moscow strengthened their collaborations in both regional and international affairs. They have coordinated their positions in response to various international issues, such as the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula, the Syrian issue, the

fight against terrorism, and so forth. In the past decade, China and Russia have signed ten intergovernmental joint statements, seven leaders' joint statements, and one joint statement proclaimed by the two countries' Ministries of Foreign Affairs on the North Korea issue (July 4, 2017). On June 25, 2016, China and Russia signed three joint statements: one of them directed at strengthening global strategic stability and voicing concern over the increasing number of "negative factors" affecting world stability, the other directed toward promoting the development of international law. During Xi Jinping's sixth high-level visit to Russia in July 2017, Xi emphasized that while the international situation is complex, the role of the two countries lies in protecting regional and global security rather than in stirring up the situation, implying that further upgrades to the relationship to the alliance level would bring instability rather than stability to current international dynamics.

Xi's remarks came in the context of growing debates on the possibility of forming a China-Russia alliance, which began in 2012 in China. The first public debate on this issue was organized by one of the most populist newspapers in China, *Global Times*, under the supervision of the Chinese Communist Party organ, *People's Daily*. The discourse among Chinese scholars and experts has been accompanied by theoretically lively discussions about the diplomatic transformation of China and Russia. As US-Russian relations continue to deteriorate, debate within China has only intensified.

However, the debate is imbalanced. Debate has also taken place in Russia, and numerous articles have been published there as well as in China about the idea of a Sino-Russian alliance (Drabkin 2012; "Foreign Ministry of China Responded to Proposal" 2014; Bonomareva 2013; Yan 2013; Zhang 2012). These show far less support among Russian scholars than among those in China. Supportive standpoints from the Chinese side express views such as that neither China nor Russia is a member of the Western alliance so Russia has no better ally than China; contemporary China's diplomacy should not be constrained by the outdated non-alliance policy; or the Trump administration will suppress China's rise if there is no China-Russia alliance (Yan 2013, 2017; Zhang 2012). Many articles have been published that make

this issue attractive to both the Chinese public and academia. However, they do not appear to have influenced the core of the country's foreign policy; Chinese officials have repeatedly denied that Beijing has any intention of pursuing a China-Russia alliance.

### **Harmony and Honor in China's and Russia's Foreign Policy**

An exploration of identity makes clear why an alliance between China and Russia is unlikely. Core Chinese and Russian identities of harmony and honor determine the way the two countries view the Other and shape their foreign policy. These identities and the differences between the ways they define role and collective identities are set into relief by analyzing their different approaches to resolving disputes with other countries.

#### *China's "Harmonious" Way to Solve Disputes*

The concept of harmonious diplomacy was first proposed by Chinese scholar Wang Luo in an article published in the *People's Daily* (Wang 2000). The concept gained traction during the period of Hu Jintao's regime (Hu 2005) and marked a new stage of Chinese diplomacy. If China could be said to have gone through first revolutionary and then developmental diplomacy, harmonious diplomacy marks an approach hearkening to the Chinese traditional ideal of cosmopolitanism in engaging with other states (Yu 2007). Xi Jinping has added new concepts to frame contemporary Chinese foreign policy. In October 2013, Xi proposed an approach to neighborhood diplomacy based on the principles of "amity, sincerity, mutual benefit and inclusiveness" (Xi 2013). During the Nineteenth Party Congress, Xi asserted that China would continue to promote a new type of international relations built around the concept of "community of a common future" (Xi 2017c).

Faced with issues such as the South China Sea dispute involving sovereignty, China confronts a dilemma whereby it seeks to safeguard key national interests while simultaneously practicing harmonious neighboring diplomacy (Gong 2012). With regard to its

dispute with Vietnam, Beijing at first took an assertive position to protect its national interests when its tensions with Hanoi in the South China Sea became acute; in recent years, however, it has sought to alleviate these tensions to avoid direct military conflict by setting its dispute with Vietnam within its neighboring diplomacy framework. In May 2004, the two countries had agreed to build “Two Corridors and One Ring”—the economic corridors Kunming-Laojie-Hanoi-Haiphong-Quangninh and Nanning-Langson-Hanoi-Haiphong-Quangninh, and the Beibu Gulf Economic Ring (Zone). The project has economic benefits for four Chinese provinces and five Vietnamese cities, totaling 869,000 square kilometers. In combination, projects associated with these initiatives along with the One Belt, One Road initiative helped increase bilateral China-Vietnam trade to \$100 billion in 2017 and, as predicted by both sides, appears on track to increase Vietnam’s GDP to \$200 billion by 2020. The two countries plan to promote economic flows by facilitating trade through the introduction of “one inspection at the custom clearance” on the China-Vietnam border, beginning with “two countries, one inspection” in specific zones (*South China Morning Post* 2018). In addition to these economic projects, in a signed article published by Vietnamese media, Xi reaffirmed China’s commitment to all efforts to improve bilateral relations (Xi 2017a). China and Vietnam also issued a joint communiqué toward improving the management of their maritime disputes, avoiding actions to complicate or widen them, to maintain peace in the South China Sea. These achievements boost the hope of improving China-Vietnam relations against the backdrop of territorial disputes. A quantitative study shows that although the China-Vietnam relationship had been deteriorating for a period after 2011, it has remained stable since the arbitration on the South China Sea (He 2016).

The Vietnam case illustrates China’s effort to develop harmonious diplomacy with related countries even in the face of disputes over core interests. Beijing has been involved in a series of other diplomatic activities that highlight the importance of neighboring areas since the Eighteenth Party Congress and taking the approach of “friendship first, issues later” in working to improve ties with its neighbors. Xi Jinping launched important cooperation

initiatives, including the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Twenty-First Century Maritime Silk Road, which include cooperative activities involving not only Vietnam but also the Philippines and India and other related countries with which China has differences. The Philippines has issued an inaugural 1.46 billion yuan (\$230 million) worth of panda bonds in China. Beijing also seeks to connect One Belt, One Road with the Indian Project Mausam to mitigate bilateral tensions (Chen 2015). During the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, hosted by China in 2017 in Beijing, the Chinese government furthered harmonious diplomacy by delivering a list of cooperative projects, including seventy-six items comprising more than 270 concrete results in five key areas, namely, policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people connectivity.<sup>1</sup> “China’s plan” for its new model of international relations is “to seek common ground while shelving and narrowing differences to build a new type of international relations featuring win-win cooperation” (Xi 2016).

#### *Russia’s Honor Response to Conflicts with Others*

In contrast to China’s harmonious diplomacy, the concept of honor informs Russia’s relations with the West in specific ways. In the case of the Ukraine crisis, Moscow saw Kiev as a part of its Slavic civilization. It did not wish the government in Kiev to seek deeper relations with the European Union or NATO without Russian approval. Washington’s antagonistic stance and sanctions pricked Moscow’s feelings of honor. Moscow undertook a series of actions of revenge, which escalated the deterioration of relations with Washington. It used its military to assertively intervene in the Middle East, helped the Bashar Hafez al-Assad regime throughout the conflict, and resisted UN sanctions on Syria, where Russia’s only Mediterranean Sea facility, the naval base at Tartus, is located. The Russian government listed nine US media outlets as “foreign agents,” imposed sanctions on them, and expelled US diplomats. The most serious of all the activities might be the scandal that Russia intervened in the 2016 presidential election of the United States, seen by Washington as an illegal intervention from the Russian side into its domestic political process.

Examining Russia's new foreign policy concept through a constructivist lens shows that Moscow associates different discourses with its relations with the United States, China, and European countries. With regard to the United States, Moscow affirms its willingness to develop constructive and mutually beneficial relations with Washington, assuming nonintervention in its internal affairs. The document also proclaims the common stance of Russia and China on crucial international issues and Russia's readiness to jointly respond to new challenges and threats. It defines the EU as an important trade and diplomatic partner based on laws and cooperative mechanisms. The new concept in effect differentiates attitudes toward different Others: it premises non-intervention so as to develop relations with the United States; it needs China to cooperate to stabilize its regional and global status with a strategic partnership based on mutual respect; it also sees institutions and common cultural and material development as the basis for the relationship with the EU.

The 2015 Russian National Security Strategy, containing 116 clauses, identifies major threats from the West and spells out possible solutions. Compared to the 2014 Russian Military Doctrine, the 2015 strategy is more specific in identifying external threats to Russian national security. The document publicly proclaims that the United States and its allies are hampering Russia's independent foreign policy and that the West is responsible for supporting the unconstitutional coup in Ukraine, which created military conflict close to Russian borders. It also condemns US involvement in the troubled Middle East. Some clauses state that the West seeks to put pressure on Russia by using various methods, including NATO expansion.

A consistent theme is that Russia sees US actions as evidence of US disrespect, evidenced most significantly by what it sees as illegal intervention by the United States in Moscow's internal affairs. Moscow perceives the Ukrainian conflict as a domestic problem that should be solved without US interference. US intervention evoked a feeling of humiliation in Russia because Russian "defensiveness and assertiveness were frequently products of the nation's commitments to its Slavic and Orthodox allies" and its security needs (Tsygankov 2012, 34).

These perspectives are shaping emerging new conflicts in terms of Russia's relations with the Western world. First, the same diplomatic confrontation replayed between Moscow and London over the case of spy poisoning in March 2018 and led to the mutual expulsion of diplomats. Second, Russia is not only defending its honor; its actions should also be seen as expanding its "honorable sphere." In this regard, the Arctic region is emerging as a new area of contention between the United States and Russia. In order to consolidate its western borders and Arctic territories, Russia plans to strengthen its military forces in the region. Seven military airports, closed following the collapse of the Soviet Union, have been reopened. Military bases, radar systems, and even strategic deterrent forces were activated in the area (RAND Corporation 2017).

### **The Differences in Sino-Russian Identities and the Impossibility of Alliance**

Wendt's concepts of identities applied to Chinese and Russian scholars' elaborations on core national identity enable a close look at how these identities lead Beijing and Moscow to adopt different responses to their disputes. Role identity refers to a state's status in international society while collective identity combines the Self and the Other in the structure. When encountering the Other in the construction of role and collective identities, China and Russia have different orientations. The differences in inclusive or exclusive attitudes toward the other party in constructing identity—to build harmony or protect honor—separate the two countries' approaches to foreign policy decisionmaking.

While analyzing the national identity of his own country, one contemporary Russian scholar concluded that, due to a specific historical background, Russia's society and national culture are a sort of "heterogeneous mixture" of different conflicting subjects and elements: "From the very beginning the society has been formed as military-political pattern, and religion was used as a tool for state-building. The military interests have been deciding almost all the state political actions" (Flier 2005, 242–243). Chinese political culture, on the contrary, relies heavily "upon slogans as guides



for action adhering to a much less aggressive strategic approach” (Pye and Leites 1982, 1161) and “control and accountability” (Pye and Leites 1982, 1158). This difference in the ways that national interests and mission are defined divide China and Russia in the ways that they address international affairs, a disparity that will keep China and Russia from forming an alliance in the foreseeable future.

In IR theory, the term *alliance* refers to a formal political-military agreement between two or more states for mutual support in case of war. Arnold Wolfers and Stephen Walt claim, respectively, that contemporary alliances are generally defensive in nature, providing combined action on formal or informal arrangements (Walt 1987, 12; Wolfers 1968, 269). In contemporary international political systems, an alliance is different from interstate cooperative forms in economic, social, or cultural fields, and it is critical to define the circumstances under which the treaty obligates an ally to aid a fellow member. In other words, allies need to establish common identities and interests before their relationship can move to the level of a formal alliance. China’s harmony and Russia’s honor identities create incongruities between them across multiple fields. These differences constrain the emergence of a collective identity between China and Russia. At the same time, “since the official Russian attitude toward China strongly depends on Russia’s relations with the West, especially with the United States, US policy towards Russia and China will significantly influence the future Russian-Chinese partnership” (Lukin 2001).

Despite intensive interactions in the last five years, Beijing and Moscow officially rule out the prospect of an alliance with each other. On July 27, 2017, in Finland, Putin rejected the idea of forming a military alliance with China, as did his Chinese counterpart on June 25, 2016, and November 9, 2017, in Beijing). Xi sees the foundation of the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership lying in mutual political and strategic trust, an institutionalized system of bilateral communication and cooperation, a convergence of developmental strategies (for example, convergence of One Belt, One Road and the Eurasian Economic Union), a basis of social and public support, and collaboration in regional and global affairs (Xi 2017b). Considering the history of bilateral relations, diplomats and politicians in both countries take a dim view of the

emergence of an alliance relationship. Fu Ying, former deputy foreign minister of China, published an article in *Foreign Affairs* at the beginning of 2016. She reaffirmed that China and Russia are close partners but not allies. She also denounced two commonly held opinions about China-Russia ties as either a “marriage of convenience” or an alliance. Without offering details, Fu argued that Beijing and Moscow have different diplomatic focuses and observed that the Ukraine crisis has a complicated historical and religious background (Fu 2016). Her comments affirm an understanding of Moscow’s distinct point of view but also make clear that China and Russia have different perspectives on world affairs.

## Conclusion

There is little scholarly research on China-Russia relations from a constructivist perspective. Current Sino-Russian relations are assessed by Chinese scholars as “developing against the background of transformations of economy, politics, and international system,” “the model of great power relations,” or “the cornerstone in the connection of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the Eurasian Economic Union” (Huang 2008, 30; Lei 2017, 147–148; Xing 2016, 14). In the judgment of Western scholars, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is variously an overlap of diplomatic agendas established in the late 1980s, “a marriage of convenience,” a “useful partner” relationship, or, more narrowly and pragmatically, “the result of economic sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the European Union against Russia for its military intervention in Ukraine” (Anderson 1997, 11; Ching 2016; Dasguptal 2016; Gray 2016; Shinkman 2014). Diverse interpretations of the 2015 celebrations held by the two countries in honor of the seventieth anniversary of the antifascist war victory affirmed these perspectives.

Considering that identities are potentially part of the constitutive practices of the state and the source of its actions at home and abroad (Hopf 1988), my work has sought to integrate identity theories from the writings of Chinese and Russian scholars with Wendt’s theoretical chain of culture/idea-identity-interests-action and four types of identities. China’s harmony and Russia’s honor

identities give rise to different attitudes when the subjects of identity encounter the Other. China does not exclude third parties or seek to neutralize outside influence when it tries to construct interstate relations in keeping with its harmony ideation. Russia, for its part, chooses defensive or assertive actions when its honor is damaged. Comparing China's and Russia's interactions with third parties highlights their identity differences.

Comparing the current leading political thought from China and Russia, we find nuanced similarities between Putin's "Dream of Great Power" and Xi's "China's Dream."<sup>2</sup> Both visions emphasize national rejuvenation. However, the former emphasizes "the power of state," "uniqueness," and "world leader" while the latter reiterates "intercommunity" and "inclusiveness." These characteristics also differentiate China and Russia when they deal with international affairs involving other countries.

In sum, there is still a long way ahead before China and Russia can forge a Kantian cultural identity or a friendly relationship based on "shared knowledge of each other's peaceful intentions or behavior" (Wendt 1999, 299–300), or even come to agreement on collective military-political actions. However, as external security situations and national interests change over the long run, it is possible that China and Russia will readjust their strategies (Xie 2016).

## Notes

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1. See the Belt and Road Forum website at [www.beltandroadforum.org/n100/2017/0516/c24-422.html](http://www.beltandroadforum.org/n100/2017/0516/c24-422.html).

2. Compare Putin's speeches "Russia at the Turn of Millennium" (*Nezavisimaya gazeta* (in Russian), December 30, 1999, [www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4\\_millennium.html](http://www.ng.ru/politics/1999-12-30/4_millennium.html)), "Russia: National Problem" (*Rossiyskaya gazeta*

(in Russian), January 23, 2012, <https://rg.ru/2012/01/23/nacvopros.html>), and his 2013 state of the nation address (Kremlin, December 12, 2012, [www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825](http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825)) with Xi's speeches at the headquarters of UNESCO (Xinhua News Agency, March 27, 2014, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-03/28/c\\_119982831.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2014-03/28/c_119982831.htm)) and his elaboration about "China's Dream" (Xinhua News Agency, November 29, 2016, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/29/c\\_1120016588.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/politics/2016-11/29/c_1120016588.htm)).

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