

**TOWSON UNIVERSITY**  
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**Constructivism in Unlikely Places:  
How National Identity Influences Chinese and Russian Behavior  
in Areas of Core Interest and the Sino-Russian Relationship**

**by**

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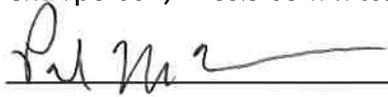
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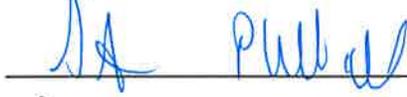


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*Abstract*

**Constructivism in Unlikely Places:  
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**Louis John Ciotola Jr.**

While realism provides an explanation for the nature of international relations within an anarchic arena, it sometimes falls short in explaining and predicting state behavior, including the foreign policy behavior of states with leadership of a realist orientation within their areas of core interest. Realism holds power as its key variable, proclaiming that states behave in ways so as to maximize their material capabilities in order to survive in an anarchic international setting. There is an additional variable, however, that must also be considered in order to effectively understand the foreign policy behavior of states with realist-oriented leadership. That variable, emphasized by the constructivist school of international relations, is national self-identity. Through the examples of China and Russia, it is the purpose of this work to reinforce the value identity contributes alongside material capability both for explaining and predicting the foreign policy behavior of states with leadership of a realist inclination.

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## Chapter One

While realism provides an explanation for the nature of international relations within an anarchic arena, it sometimes falls short in explaining and predicting state behavior, including the foreign policy behavior of states with leadership of a realist orientation within their areas of core interest. Realism holds power as its key variable, proclaiming that states and great powers alike behave in ways so as to maximize their material capabilities in order to survive in an anarchic international setting. There is an additional variable, however, that must also be considered in order to effectively understand the foreign policy behavior of states with realist-oriented leadership. That variable, emphasized by the constructivist school of international relations, is national self-identity. Through the examples of China and Russia, it is the purpose of this work to reinforce the value identity contributes alongside material capability both for explaining and predicting the foreign policy behavior of states with leadership of a realist inclination. China and Russia possess long historical memories that emphasize both a tradition of superiority as well as national humiliation. As a consequence, assertive behavior within areas of core interest as the primary means to vindicate their great power status both at home and abroad is necessary in order for their respective regimes to maintain ruling legitimacy. Thus, the Chinese and Russian identities, much more than power alone, determine their aggressive postures and inability to compromise within their areas of core interest. The decisions a state makes, even a realist state, are not always rational in the sense that the material ends justify the material means. Understanding why states act as they do is fundamental for creating a more stable and therefore safer international environment.

## Introduction

The primary objective of the following work is to establish that both realist and constructivist theories of international relations are needed to fully understand the foreign policy behavior of states with realist-oriented leadership within their areas of core interest. Realist theory provides the most basic understanding. Relying exclusively on power, realism portrays the rudimentary motivations of these states, that being the pursuit of relative parity with international rivals by balancing against power in order to obtain the security necessary to survive within the anarchical international arena. A core interest can best be defined as an issue that a state maintains as fundamental to its national interest in which it has little or no desire to compromise. In realist terms, areas of core interest are places in which balancing can and must be achieved. The material and security benefits that they offer are why states designate them as core interests. In short, a key objective of states with realist-oriented leadership is to increase their power within their areas of core interest.

The necessity of utilizing identity as an independent variable for explaining and predicting foreign policy behavior is challenged by realist scholars who contend that material power is the only determining variable. Hans Morgenthau writes that the pursuit of national interest is the primary objective of a state and that national interest is defined in terms of power, which is in turn defined by material capability.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, fellow realist John Mearsheimer argues that the primary goal of the state is to maximize its

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<sup>1</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "Six Principles of Political Realism," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 8.

power as a means to ensure its own survival.<sup>2</sup> While constructivists do not dispute that the pursuit of power is a fundamental objective of states, they argue that it is not the only determining variable, objective, or interest.

While realism provides a basic understanding, it falls short in providing a complete understanding. Crucially, it does not fully explain motivation, which informs behavior. Why do some states, including those with realist leadership, practice core interest diplomacy and thus knowingly create a situation in which they are unable to compromise? Where does the sense of nationalism originate that is needed by realist leaders to pursue such interests? Why do states feel their security is threatened in their areas of core interest by certain other states? Finally, why do some states with realist leadership defy realist logic by failing to cooperatively balance against a mutually perceived hegemon? In order to answer these questions, national identity as defined through the theory of constructivism must be inserted into the equation.

Simply put, constructivism provides context. Constructivism shows that, unlike in realist theory, not all states behave the same. Situations beyond those that relate solely to power matter a great deal. Identity is the context each state gives itself and others within the international arena. The state consequently acts in accordance with that identity as identity, alongside material power capability, creates national interest. Identity is the historic and cultural narrative of a state. It differs from state to state contrary to realism, which holds all states to have a single, rigid identity. Power is the means by which a state pursues its already existing interests. As Ted Hopf explains,

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<sup>2</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 51.

there is a great power identity and certain norms are particular to that identity, but that identity runs parallel to and is informed by each individual state's specific national identity so that while there are similar trends in behavior, no two great powers behave alike.<sup>3</sup> As will be seen, this is extremely evident with China and Russia. Furthermore, threat perception, or the degree to which a state feels endangered by another, is also informed by national identity.

Exactly what is identity? "In a social sense," explains James Fearon, "identity refers to a social category, a set of persons marked by a label and distinguished by rules deciding membership and characteristic features or attributes."<sup>4</sup> Here, social is key, for while there exists both personal and social identity, it is social identity upon which constructivist theory rests. Gerald Chan offers up that identity constitutes the substance of being while Hopf writes simply that it tells you who you are and who others are.<sup>5</sup> Michael Wearing writes, "The concept of social identity helps us self-consciously realize that society is intricately involved in shaping our being and our identity." It is constructed by social interactions, meaning connectedness and communication with others, and forms the society we live in. There is no single identity. Identities are continuously contested and molded. Some are accepted, others rejected, and still others left in the void of uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> Identity or social categories run deep, bound together with its members' sense of pride and helping to distinguish who we are as individuals.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations" *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998), 176.

<sup>4</sup> James Fearon, "What Is Identity (As We Use the Word)?" (draft, Stanford University, 1999), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Gerald Chan, "Capturing China's International Identity: Social Evolution and Its Missing Links," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 262; Hopf, 175.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Wearing, *Social Identity* (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2011), vii-ix.

<sup>7</sup> Fearon, "What Is Identity?" 15-16.

National identity then is the common understanding of a collective self.<sup>8</sup> It is a “type” identity, writes Fearon, or a label applied to persons who share or are thought to share characteristics such as appearance, behavior traits, beliefs, attitudes, values, skills, knowledge, and experience that come together to form the nation.<sup>9</sup> The bond between its members is socially constructed as those members will never come in direct contact but must rely on communication to convey their ideas. It is built upon history, myths, symbols, language, and shared cultural norms that provide meaning, purpose, and self-worth, are distinguished through comparison to others in the world, and cannot be fully explained by material incentives.<sup>10</sup> Through national identity it can thus be understood that states are social actors, a result of the discourse of the individuals that make them up, with their own unique social rules.<sup>11</sup>

Identity, argues Hopf, is necessary in international politics in order to create some level of predictability and order and avoid a chaos more dangerous than anarchy.<sup>12</sup> Constructivism shows that the character of international life is determined by the belief and expectations states have about each other, which is largely based on identity.<sup>13</sup> But constructivism cannot totally replace realism, warns Ji Young Choi, because solid and well-defined interests formed by their rational cost/benefit analysis can lead actors to, at

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<sup>8</sup> Ji Young Choi, “Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations,” *International Politics* 52, no. 1 (2015), 114.

<sup>9</sup> Fearon, “What Is Identity?” 17.

<sup>10</sup> Kevin Coe and Rico Neumann, “International Identity in Theory and Practice: The Case of the Modern American Presidency,” *Communication Monographs* 78, no. 2 (June 2011), 141-142; Choi, 114.

<sup>11</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, “Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security,” in *The Cultural of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 23.

<sup>12</sup> Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism,” 174-175.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” *International Security* 20, 1 (Summer 1995), 20.

least temporarily, forsake their normative values and identity.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, argues Fearon, if identity is socially constructed there must be some rationality involved, as sometimes actors do not follow norms.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, realism lacks the ability to predict massive structural international change or fully explain why two states such as China and Russia, both with realist-oriented leadership, feel threatened and are motivated to act as they do within their areas of core interest, as sovereignty for example, so important to both states, changes from one historical and cultural context to another.<sup>16</sup> But, reminds Alexander Wendt, realists can make the claim that states are balancing against power in nearly every situation short of national suicide, meaning essentially that their theory is strong.<sup>17</sup> Constructivism is thus best utilized as a complement to realism when realism falls short in its explanatory ability, which consequently is the general objective of the work below.

### **Objective and Methodology**

Accordingly, the following work comes down in support of constructivism in that it stresses and demonstrates the necessity of incorporating identity as a variable when attempting to understand the foreign policy behavior of states. It will show that while material capability is necessary for defining the interests and thus foreign policy behavior of states with realist-oriented leadership, identity is also fundamental for doing so. While the pursuit of power is a major objective, it is, as Choi writes, just a means to achieving

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<sup>14</sup> Choi, "Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations," 111.

<sup>15</sup> Fearon, "What Is Identity?" 31.

<sup>16</sup> Katzenstein, *The Cultural of National Security*, 3; Christian Reus-Smith, "Reading History through Constructivist Eyes," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 37, no. 2 (December 2008), 406.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 17-18.

an interest, not the actual interest itself, which is informed by identity.<sup>18</sup> Material structures, in the words of Christian Rues-Smit, instead serve to define the “outer limits of feasibility” by constraining some actions and enabling others.<sup>19</sup> Because of this, realist theory alone fails to account for some of the behavior of specific states that appear to operate exclusively on realist terms in specific situations involving what they consider to be core interests. Those core interests are not simply issues or geographical areas viewed as a place in which to expand material power capability, but also as intrinsically valuable to the national psyche. Demonstrating the importance of identity as an independent variable for understanding foreign policy behavior alongside power will help enable analysts to better predict the behavior of even the seemingly most realist of states, which is essentially the contribution of this work.

In order to do so, the following work will utilize three case studies involving China and Russia, two states that by all outward appearances have in recent times been vigorously practicing realist doctrine. Particularly, the first two case studies will show how China’s and Russia’s unique national self-identities dictate their respective behaviors in the South China Sea and the Russian ‘Near Abroad’ or post-Soviet space. More precisely, they will show that while realism may take the predominant (though by no means exclusive) role in explaining why a strong state with realist-minded leadership deems an issue or area to be a core interest, identity determines its behavior therein, that being an aggressive posture and an unwillingness to compromise. Concurrently, a common thread will be revealed, that being a shared historical memory of greatness and

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<sup>18</sup> Choi, “Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations,” 118; Rues-Smit, ““Reading History through Constructivist Eyes,” 398.

<sup>19</sup> Rues-Smit, “Reading History through Constructivist Eyes,” 406.

humiliation, which plays a pivotal role in determining why their specific identities trigger a specific behavior, as well as a need to maintain regime legitimacy. A third case study will demonstrate the importance of identity in understanding the dynamic between two realist states by incorporating it as a variable within the context of Sino-Russian relations. More specifically, it will show that identity plays a role in preventing two realist-minded states from compromising on material-related concerns in order to cooperatively balance against a hegemonic threat in accordance with the predictions of realist theory. The remainder of this chapter will touch on the literature related to these topics, discussing first the theoretical followed by that which relates directly to China and Russia. Lastly, it will introduce the three case studies that are utilized to demonstrate the value of constructivist theory alongside that of realism.

Methodologically, the study below is a qualitative case study approach. It analyzes data consisting primarily of historical events and trends, recent events, including changes in pattern and tempo, and internal and external perspectives regarding those same events. All three studies first incorporate power as the sole variable in order to understand the realist explanation for each state's behavior within their core interest. They then insert the constructivist variable of identity into the equation in order to create a fuller picture and help answer questions like those above that are either left unanswered by power or leave unconvincing answers. The behavior of a state is thus the dependent variable. The independent realist variable is power. Power can in turn be subdivided into material capability such as natural resources and wealth that can be transformed into military strength. The constructivist independent variable is identity. Identity can further be subdivided into those variables of which it is composed including current relative

power, history, culture, and the national mood, all of which forge nationalism and shape threat perception.

China and Russia have been chosen to demonstrate the compatibility of constructivism and realism as they are two established or aspiring great powers that are actively challenging the perceived hegemony of the United States within their areas of core interest, as realist theory predicts. The choice of China and Russia as case studies is based on six key criteria. Firstly, both China and Russia are large, territorially expansive, and technologically competent countries with the ability to challenge American military power on a regional scale, thus illustrating their status as potential regional poles or great powers. While realist theory can certainly be applied to all established or aspiring world powers, at the present moment in history these two states are clearly in a more advanced stage of balancing in accordance with the realist model. Secondly, both China and Russia have realist-oriented leadership and are states that continue to make headlines for their “assertive” behavior within an area of core interest. Thirdly, China and Russia, unlike other possible regional poles such as the European Union, India, or Brazil, are not currently American allies and are in fact more often than not at odds with the United States and the liberal order in general. As non-liberal states, they consequently both feel they have reason to fear American power. Fourthly, China and Russia, while pursuing a similar long-term realist objective of balancing, are doing so by means that are by some measures quite opposite, making them ideal candidates for testing the value of constructivist theory. Fifthly, China and Russia are neighbors that share and actively discuss their identical objective of a multipolar world order. The importance of the independent variables can consequently be tested on their relations with each other to

reinforce the significance of those variables beyond their core interests. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, both China and Russia have long and rich histories as politically independent and relevant states within the international arena that share a historical memory of superiority and humiliation, making them ideal for demonstrating the potency of not only identity, but a specific type of identity in developing interest, nationalism, and threat perception.

## **Literature Review**

### **Realist Theory**

Generally speaking, realists view the international arena as anarchic, that is, as a collection of competing states working to achieve their own interests amid the absence of a higher authority maintaining order and balance between them. As a consequence, the ultimate goal of all states is to ensure their own survival and security, with the best means of doing so being the maximization of power. Power is consequently the sole variable determining behavior. For classical realists, this Machiavellian international situation is quite literally the natural order of things. Hans Morgenthau writes that the pursuit of national interest is the primary objective of a state and that national interest is defined in terms of power. Politics is governed by objective laws, which are rooted in human nature. Though morality exists and creates tension, it cannot be allowed to interfere with successful political action. Rather it is prudence, or the weighing of alternative actions, that is the supreme virtue of the state.<sup>20</sup> Morgenthau thus provides an important starting point by which to evaluate China and Russia within the South China Sea and ‘Near Abroad,’ as well as in their relations with each other. Power certainly plays a

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<sup>20</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, “Six Principles of Political Realism,” 7-8, 11.

fundamental role in determining foreign policy behavior in each case, but it is limited in its inability to incorporate context, lumping all states and situations together as being virtually identical.

Jonathan Kirshner emphasizes that the acquisition of power is key in classical realism, making it distinct from structural realism, which focuses on security. It is the change of relative power over time, he writes, rather than the static distribution of absolute power that is most important. Incorporating that theory into the modern world, Kirshner believes that the United States has good reason to fear China, but would be better served to accommodate rather than resist its rise, as resistance is much more likely to create hostility and spark a bid for East Asian regional hegemony.<sup>21</sup> The examples of China and Russia demonstrate clearly the importance of relative power. While there is considerable doubt regarding the status of American absolute power, the rise of China and to a lesser extent the partial recovery of Russia certainly reduce America's relative power, enabling China and Russia to be more assertive when it comes to their core interests. The means to pursuing their respective interests, which this work contends are shaped by identity as well as power, is thus established.

Whereas classical realists focus on power, neorealists, also known as structural realists, focus on security. Neorealist scholars are divided on whether a state should seek to guarantee its security in the anarchic international arena by active or passive means. John Mearsheimer chooses the former, stressing that the primary goal of the state is to maximize its power as the means to ensuring its survival. That being the case, the ultimate objective of the state is to achieve hegemony, or the maximization of relative

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, 1 (March 2012), 56, 58, 70-71.

power, which is based on the distribution of material capabilities.<sup>22</sup> The idea of hegemony is fundamental for Mearsheimer. All great powers, he writes, seek regional hegemony, including China in the modern era. The already ongoing competition for regional hegemony in East Asia between the United States and China will most certainly foster increasing tensions with little reason to hold out hope that either will be benign.<sup>23</sup> China's actions in the South China Sea certainly strike as being in concert with the pursuit of hegemony while in the case of Russia in the 'Near Abroad' it is almost unquestionable. As Mearsheimer predicts, both countries certainly utilize active means by which to maximize their power within their areas of core interest and, as he warns, the risk of war exists. The attainment of hegemony in those regions would most certainly bolster the security of both states and in this sense plays an important role in determining their foreign policies. But Mearsheimer's calculations relating only to power leave out those critical motivations for their hegemonic intentions related to identity that explains why China (and Russia) feel threatened enough to desire it.

Robert Gilpin developed an entire theory around the idea of maximizing power to ensure security known as hegemonic war theory. According to Gilpin, the international system is cyclical. Change is only induced when a rising power, following a rational cost/benefit analysis, successfully challenges an increasingly stressed hegemonic power for supremacy, typically through open warfare. He sees no reason to believe that this cycle will not continue into the future.<sup>24</sup> Regionally, Gilpin's theory plays out regarding

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<sup>22</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power, 52-54.

<sup>23</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010), 387-389.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 9-11, 15.

China and Russia in their respective areas of core interest, though as yet neither has attempted a physical conflict. Both have acted based on calculations that the gains override any losses incurred and have thus far behaved moderately, at least by Gilpin's standards. But neither country has in any way challenged either America's regional hegemony in the Western hemisphere or position as the only true global power making it very possible that neither has any intention of repeating the cycle beyond a regional level.

While offensive neorealists believe that great powers aggressively pursue regional if not global hegemony in order to guarantee their security, their defensive counterparts believe states pursue the same objective through balancing power or bandwagoning. Stephen Walt provides a basic explanation for why states choose to either balance against or bandwagon with a hegemon, writing that states choose bandwagoning when security is scarce and balancing when security is prevalent. Balancing, he concludes, is generally the safer option because it ultimately provides more security, as the alternative would be to take the risk of relying on the hegemon's continued benevolence while allowing it to grow even stronger. Walt furthermore argues that the choice of strategy is not entirely based on power, but also threat perception.<sup>25</sup> Walt's key arguments are borne out through China and Russia, both of which have clearly chosen to balance rather than bandwagon against the perceived hegemon. Neither feels that they can rely on Washington's continued benevolence and, being strong states, both feel they have the greatest to gain through balancing.<sup>26</sup> Walt's analysis, however, as it does not take into account identity, falls short in fully explaining China's and Russia's regional interests and the root causes

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<sup>25</sup> Stephen Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 96, 98-99.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 100.

of their threat perceptions that prompt the desire to balance, as well as why they fail to cooperatively balance even though his conditions regarding power and threat perception are present.

Walt's conclusion is influenced by the earlier work of Paul Kennedy who, through an exhaustive survey of great powers over a five hundred year span, demonstrated repeatedly how balancing is triggered when a powerful state threatens to acquire regional hegemony. He consequently predicts a recurrence of that pattern as power, measured in economic strength, productive capacity, and financial competence, gradually shifts from West to East.<sup>27</sup> Robert Art agrees with Walt's balance of threat theory, using it to argue that China will not seek to balance the United States in the foreseeable future, at least not physically, because of a mutually low threat to either's security.<sup>28</sup> Kennedy's definition of what constitutes power is particularly relevant, as China's economic explosion and Russia's economic recovery on the back of its energy exports have been the primary way by which to measure their rise and hence their means of obtaining regional hegemony. Art's conclusion that China will not seek to balance against the United States because the threat to security is low is certainly correct on a global scale, but has recently been challenged on a regional level by China's activities in the South China Sea. There, because of the danger that the US poses to China's economic security and that China poses to American security guarantees to its local allies, the mutual threat to security is much more elevated.

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 21, 439.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, 3 (Fall 2010), 359-362.

Kenneth Waltz predicts how balance of power through defensive neorealist theory will play out in the future. Though the world is unipolar, he writes, this has not altered the anarchic nature of the international system, which will allow for future balancing triggered by American behavior that is dictated by its preponderance of power.<sup>29</sup> Many Chinese and Russian arguments for multipolarity indeed center on their perceptions of American behavior, specifically Washington's tendency to infringe upon issues of national sovereignty. Regional balancing is occurring partly due to those perceptions. Whether or not this will lead to true multipolarity remains to be seen, but there has as yet been no substantial Chinese and Russian effort to cooperatively balance. For the time being, attempts at balancing will be independently pursued, which can be explained by Sino-Russian threat perception as generated by identity.

Fellow defensive neorealist Robert Jervis partly agrees with Waltz, arguing that the United States is currently the world's only pole and behaves as realism predicts – in a self-interested manner in which self-preservation is the primary objective, with no evidence that its behavior is supported by either liberal or constructivist views. But on Waltz's second point Jervis diverges, believing that no single state, including China or Russia, is in a position to balance against American power.<sup>30</sup> At least in terms of East Asia, Robert Ross sides with Waltz over Jervis, asserting that region to be a model for how balancing works, as China emerges as a regional balancer in the wake of relative American decline and the region's secondary states seek to accommodate China's rise. But China, he insists, is not a regional hegemon; rather East Asia is currently witnessing

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<sup>29</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, 1 (Summer 2000), 28-37.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Jervis, "Unipolarity: A Structural Perspective," *World Politics* 61, 1 (January 2009), 196.

a regional bipolarity between China and the United States, which he envisages will endure well into the foreseeable future.<sup>31</sup> America's unipolar behavior, Jervis argues, has included elements of realism, for example its 'pivot to Asia', which is almost certainly in part an effort to contain the rise of China. While not discounting this, Ross nevertheless asserts that balancing is occurring and a bipolarity emerging in East Asia where the US supplies security and China economic prosperity. Neither scholar, however, includes identity, which supplements power by explaining why China and Russia would seek to balance rather than simply leaving the debate at whether or not balancing is possible.

The third major branch of realism, neoclassical realism, can best be considered a combination of classical realism and defensive neorealism. As Randall Schweller states in his historically-oriented study of the phenomenon of underbalancing, the basic points of neorealism hold true, but the theory is too simplistic, as it fails to explain variations in the behaviors of different states when presented with similar conditions. Like Walt, Schweller emphasizes the concept that states balance to threat as well as power. More importantly, he introduces domestic variables into the equation, deducing that a state will balance or fail to balance based on criteria of elite consensus (agreement a threat exists), elite cohesion (lack of internal division), societal cohesion (is it a threat to all members of the society?), and the level of government vulnerability (ability to detect and mobilize against a threat). Whether a state chooses to balance or pass the buck, he argues, is determined by domestic political factors rather than structural-systemic ones.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, 3 (July-September 2006), 361-366.

<sup>32</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 9, 11-12.

As regards the immediate future, Schweller believes that because of the size of the world's rival powers, balancing will give way to free-riding, supporting, or balancing the current liberal international order, as economic realities and internal growth now trump imperial temptations. While once a very real phenomenon, Gilpin's cycle of hegemonic war is essentially over, though it will not be replaced by a peaceful acceptance of the current order. Instead, it will be replaced by what he refers to as a state of entropy in which new rules and arrangements are simply piled onto old ones.<sup>33</sup> As will be shown, domestic variables are certainly critical and all four above factors come into play regarding the Chinese and Russian decisions to balance within their areas of core interest. What Schweller lacks is the variable of identity in order to better understand the nature and impact of his four critical factors.

### **Constructivist Theory**

Constructivism became a prominent theory of international relations at the end of the Cold War when realism, then the dominant theory among scholars, failed to explain the seismic structural changes that came with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bipolar international order. Suddenly, as state identity became more complicated in many parts of the world, writes Ji Young Choi, realist perspectives on norms seemed "too thin" and international actors "under-socialized."<sup>34</sup> Not only had drastic change occurred, but it occurred in a way that challenged realist notions that power is the only relevant variable in international relations, that is, without a major war between powerful states. Change, explains Christian Rues-Smit, beyond simply the incremental, was back on the

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<sup>33</sup> Randall Schweller, "Emerging Powers in an Age of Disorder," *Global Governance* 17, 3 (July-September 2011), 286-287.

<sup>34</sup> Choi, "Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations," 113-114.

international relations agenda.<sup>35</sup> It was no longer sufficient to say that every state has a static identity and behaves in the same way. Instead, there are elements particular to each state that play a role in determining its foreign policy behavior, the meaning of which needing explaining rather than just the actions themselves.<sup>36</sup> Constructivists thus set out to examine the social structures of states and trace how they conditioned one another over time to create an identity.<sup>37</sup> Those structures determine how actors comprehend both their material environment and their roles and identities within it, which in turn helps create interests that influence behavior.<sup>38</sup>

Constructivists, according to Choi, take an ideational or social-psychological approach to international phenomena rather than the materialistic and behavioral-individualistic of the realist.<sup>39</sup> They do not challenge the realist notion of an anarchic international arena. Instead, they argue that the meaning of anarchy is socially constructed, challenging the idea that the actors within that arena are driven only by material power considerations. As such, the social world is created by interacting actors.<sup>40</sup> “Constructivism is a structuralist approach,” argues Alexander Wendt, “because it emphasizes emergent powers of social structures,” rather than reducing those structures to individuals.<sup>41</sup> Those social structures are built from a collection of shared knowledge and practices, as well as material resources, rather than from pure power alone. In other

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<sup>35</sup> Reus-Smith, “Reading History through Constructivist Eyes,” 396.

<sup>36</sup> Joan DeBardeleben, “Applying Constructivism to Understanding EU-Russian Relations,” *International Politics* 49, no. 4 (March 2012), 424.

<sup>37</sup> Reus-Smit, “Reading History through Constructivist Eyes,” 397.

<sup>38</sup> J.J. Suh, Peter J. Katzenstein, and Allen Carlson, *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9.

<sup>39</sup> Choi, “Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations,” 113.

<sup>40</sup> Charlotte Epstein, “Who Speaks? Discourse, the Subject and the Study of Identity in International Politics,” *European Journal of International Relations* 17, no. 2 (June 2011), 329.

<sup>41</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 1.

words, within the international arena, identity and context matter because they inform the national interest while power alone is insufficient in its explanatory ability.<sup>42</sup>

Furthermore the identities and interests of actors are constructed by that shared knowledge and those practices rather than endowed by nature.<sup>43</sup> “Material structures are given meaning only by the social context through which they are interpreted,” adds Jeffrey T. Checkel.<sup>44</sup> “Ideational structures determine how actors perceive, construct, and reproduce the institutional and material structures they inhabit as well as their roles and identities within them.” That being the case, constructivism examines the processes of socialization that cause the creation and transformation of identities, looking to identify social structures and agents of change.<sup>45</sup> In other words, as Joan DeBardeleben succinctly puts it, constructivists focus on the meaning of behavior rather than simply explaining the action.<sup>46</sup>

Through identity, writes Michael Wearing, constructivism argues that self-interested actors in fact possess an actual self.<sup>47</sup> For constructivists, identity is the key independent variable for explaining state behavior. The constructed identity of an actor gives meaning to the material structures and creates the interests of that actor. Understanding how interests are developed is an important component of understanding behavior.<sup>48</sup> The idea of identity being constructed is at the very core of the theory.

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<sup>42</sup> Alexander Wendt, “Constructing International Politics,” 78.

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 1.

<sup>44</sup> Jeffrey T. Checkel, “The Constructivist Turn in International Relations,” *World Politics* 50, no. 2 (January 1998), 326.

<sup>45</sup> J.J. Suh, Peter Katzenstein, and Allen Carlson, *Rethinking Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 9; Rues-Smit, “Reading History through Constructivist Eyes,” 397.

<sup>46</sup> DeBardeleben, “Applying Constructivism to Understanding EU-Russian Relations,” 424.

<sup>47</sup> Wearing, *Social Identity*, 329.

<sup>48</sup> Rues-Smit, “Reading History through Constructivist Eyes,” 406.

Identity is not natural. It is manufactured and cannot be separated from the social structure from which it is constituted nor is it within the power of any individual to change.<sup>49</sup> Framing power as the sole determining variable, writes Ted Hopf, is to assume that over time the state has only one eternal meaning. Constructivism, by contrast, maintains that the meaning or identity of a state is fluid, changing based on both internal and external circumstances. By arguing that all states have a priori interests, he disputes, realism denies that interests are a product of social practices. There is in effect no such thing as pre-given interests.<sup>50</sup>

Alexander Wendt writes that national identity is socially constructed through “an evolutionary mechanism involving transmission of determinants of behavior from individual to individual and thus from generation to generation by social learning and imitation.” Imitation is the process of following the example of those deemed prestigious or successful in society, for instance explaining the spread of Confucian values in China and the importance those value hold today. Critically, imitation can occur as quickly as success can be demonstrated, often within a single generation, which explains sudden and significant structural changes, like those seen at the close of the Cold War. Social learning, on the other hand, as Wendt describes it, is when identities and their corresponding interests are learned and reinforced in response to treatment by ‘Others’ in a process in which actors come to see themselves as a reflection of how they think those ‘Others’ appraise them.<sup>51</sup> Put more simply, identity develops by identifying those outside the group. To be part of a “we”, Wendt writes, “is a social or collective identity that

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<sup>49</sup> Wearing, *Social Identity*, 330; Fearon, “What Is Identity?” 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism,” 176.

<sup>51</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 324-327.

gives actors an interest in the preservation of their culture.” The welfare of the group is an end unto itself. When culture is threatened, he continues, well-socialized actors instinctively defend it.<sup>52</sup> That essentially constitutes the driving interest of the state, forged by the state’s unique identity, which determines its norms and behavior. Zheng Wang further contributes that actors create identities through comparisons of current situations and past experience, demonstrating the fundamental importance of historical myths and traditions in identity formation and hence nationalism.<sup>53</sup> But identity is subjective, meaning it is not a constant and can vary over time as a result of how every generation interprets its history.

Constructivism explains state behavior through the norms and interests intrinsic to specific national identities. Identity, writes Ted Hopf, implies a state’s preferences and consequent actions, which is to say its interests. Likewise, missing interests too are a product of constructed social practices and structure. In other words, context matters. A particular state with a particular identity will likely behave in a particular way, enlightening analysts to its behavior and allowing some degree of predictability. Even having an identity as a great power, continues Hopf, implies a specific set of interests, though it should be noted that a great power identity does not rest exclusively on material power, but also, as is the case with China and Russia, historical tradition, and, more critically, runs parallel to other, more unique national identities, meaning that though great powers have some similar tendencies they will not behave identically.<sup>54</sup>

Correspondingly, identity creates norms, or the collective expectations of proper behavior

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<sup>52</sup> Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, 337.

<sup>53</sup> Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 24-26.

<sup>54</sup> Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism,” 175-176.

for an actor with a given identity.<sup>55</sup> Social norms, James Fearon explains, are a standard of conduct attached to or associated with membership to a certain social category.<sup>56</sup> In this way, identity sets the boundaries for socially acceptable behavior rather than directly causing state action.<sup>57</sup> But norms do not only regulate behavior. In a kind of circular pattern, they also shape the identity from which they emerge.<sup>58</sup>

Constructivism and realism appear to blur when political actors utilize national identity for their own self-interests, exploiting identity to craft norms and interests on their own in order to encourage nationalistic spirit as a means to gain mass support and legitimacy for purposes of material gain. But, as Peter J. Katzenstein stresses, interests constructed through social interaction do not exist to be “discovered” by self-interested rational actors.<sup>59</sup> Those interests already existed, providing the political actor with a means, but in no way diminishing the fact the pre-existing interests were already influential within society. Rather, rationalists co-opt identity strategically to further self-interest.<sup>60</sup> In other words, historical narrative as well as material circumstances creates identity, which in turn creates interests that rational actors pursue by exploiting identity to create nationalistic fervor. That process can be seen in China, where the regime in Beijing actively promotes and even glorifies the traditions of past cultural dominance of East Asia and the ‘Century of Humiliation’, and Russia, where the Kremlin cites the country’s historic role as a unique yet besieged and unaccepted European country with a duty to help those of a similar culture around its periphery. In both cases, the objective is

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<sup>55</sup> Katzenstein, *The Cultural of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Fearon, “What Is Identity?” 27.

<sup>57</sup> Takeshi Uemura, “Understanding Chinese Foreign Relations: A Cultural Constructivist Approach,” *International Studies Perspective* 16, no. 3 (August 2015), 347.

<sup>58</sup> Checkel, “The Constructivist Turn in International Relations,” 327-328.

<sup>59</sup> Katzenstein, *The Cultural of National Security*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid*, 2-3, 17.

to maintain the legitimacy necessary to pursue realist ends. Those identities were not created or discovered by the rational leadership in either capital. The identities and norms already existed, forging the interests through which the rational actor could gain legitimacy. This concept is vastly contrary to realism, which argues that every state has a single identity with a pre-determined interest to pursue material power.

The acquired identities of states, on which behavior and actions are based, is formed through collective meanings that arise out of interaction, which consists of a series of signaling, interpretation, and responses over the course of time. The realist idea that states are predisposed towards security dilemmas, Wendt insists, is not natural to anarchy. Simply put, realism cannot explain why states feel threatened by some states but not others when power capabilities are generally equal or the greater threat is posed by the weaker state.<sup>61</sup> Wendt's idea that material capabilities acquire meaning through shared knowledge explains threat perception. As Jeffrey T. Checkel writes, constructivists hold material structures to only have meaning through the social context through which they are interpreted. It is, to use his example, why the United States is not afraid of British nuclear weapons.<sup>62</sup> Put another way, the respective material power of China, Russia, and the US, as the case studies below will show in support of Wendt and Checkel, means nothing to the other states without the belief that said power is likely to be utilized against them, which, as Wendt continues, is based on their interpretation of their interactions.

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<sup>61</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2009), 62-66.

<sup>62</sup> Checkel, "The Constructivist Turn in International Relations," 326.

Ted Hopf likewise asserts that though states are identified by self-interest, they possess identities that are highly variable and thus have a wide array of choices, though those choices are structurally constrained by norms and practices that set basic boundaries for socially viable behavior within a given identity.<sup>63</sup> In order to predict state behavior, it is necessary to understand history, culture, norms, institutions, and social practices, all of which create identity, which in turn helps to construct interests and influences behavior. Interests are not automatic, but rather manufactured through identity. Like Wendt, actors develop their relationships and understandings of each other through norms and practices.<sup>64</sup>

Hopf clarifies the principles of constructivist theory through a comparison with its rival realist and liberal perspectives. In doing so, he demonstrates, as Wendt had earlier claimed, that realists have acknowledged constructivist ideas in the past, but declined to incorporate them into realist theory. One key example of this is the idea of balancing against threat, the importance of which Stephen Walt recognized but did not connect to national identity as does Hopf. According to Hopf, it is extremely difficult to change global politics, but when balancing does occur, it occurs against threat rather than power, which is a product of identity.<sup>65</sup> That has certainly been the case as regards China in the South China Sea and Russia in the 'Near Abroad', but is perhaps most obvious in Central Asia where China and Russia balance much more against the threat of each other rather than the greater power of the United States, thus also proving the difficulty in altering global politics. Furthermore, Hopf emphasizes that the identity of a state is theorized

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<sup>63</sup> Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 177; Uemura, "Understanding Chinese Foreign Relations," 347.

<sup>64</sup> Ted Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 173-176.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 173, 176-177, 187.

within historical context, which is a crucial point for understanding why China and Russia, though both realist states with great power ambitions, behave as they do within their core interests and in regards to each other.<sup>66</sup>

In his argument that America's unipolar moment, while it briefly existed, was fully constrained by its own liberal international order, Jeffrey Legro offers some insights into American foreign policy and how Washington might react to a China or a Russia. What a hegemon wants, he writes, is distinct from and not reducible to power. The American approach to the international order is instead based on pre-existing ideas, alternative concepts, and results. In other words, it is based on America's national self-identity. He argues that Washington's strategy of preventing any one power from attaining regional hegemony was built on its own eroding international ambition rather than the opposite.<sup>67</sup> That overall strategy certainly explains the localized containment strategies utilized against China and Russia. Legro's theory regarding power also applies to other possible hegemons, showing that power, while important, does not fully explain interests or behavior. Russia provides an excellent example. Though its power is not nearly as great as that of the US and until recently was waning (and may be again), its international aspirations, rooted as they are in its historical identity, remain ambitions, much unlike those in America which, as Legro describes, failed to keep pace with its growth in power.<sup>68</sup>

Although politically significant motives of social actions are broader and more diverse than realists allow for, Ji Young Choi warns that constructivism cannot

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 175.

<sup>67</sup> Jeffrey W. Legro, "The Mix That Makes Unipolarity: Hegemonic Purpose and the International Constraints," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, 2 (June 2011), 187-192.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 187.

completely supplant realism. Solid and well-defined interests formed by cost/benefit analysis, he argues, can often lead actors to deviate from their normative values and identities.<sup>69</sup> The following work accepts that argument by working to supplement realism rather than replace it. But it also supports Choi when he adds that realist perspectives are too narrow and its actors are under-socialized. Identities are not fixed. They serve as independent variables rather than mere intervening variables.<sup>70</sup> Material power is one variable that generates interest and influences foreign policy and behavior. Identity, and its associated norms and interests, is another. As such, identity is needed to explain those questions about state behavior for which realism has no clear answer.

### **China and the South China Sea**

The existing literature regarding recent Chinese behavior in the South China Sea and elsewhere is very much divided between realists who believe Chinese actions are a reflection of power perceptions and the desire for increased material capability and constructivists who find it to be a reflection of the Chinese national self-identity. Of the two, the realist camp remains larger as it is indeed nearly impossible to ignore China's explosive economic growth, its need to maintain that growth, the material value of the South China Sea, and Beijing's perceived weakness of the United States. The primary debate between realists is whether or not China is pursuing regional hegemony or has more global ambitions.

Christopher Layne takes a localized view, arguing that while China and Russia cannot contend with the United States globally, they can and will take advantage of a relative

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<sup>69</sup> Choi, "Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations." 110-111.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 114.

American decline on a regional level, which he believes could be the beginning of an effort to balance. China, he argues, will seek hegemony in East Asia and become more assertive as its power increases. The United States is not all-powerful, allowing China space to grow relatively and press forward in its areas of core interest like the South China Sea. The true challenge to the US, he states, is not any one power balancing globally, but many doing so regionally.<sup>71</sup> In a follow-up piece, Layne cites the rise of new powers and the “Great Recession” as proof positive that American hegemony has given way to a multipolar world. China, he argues, is already a great power, attempting to take full advantage of a perceived American decline, at least on a regional scale.<sup>72</sup> Layne’s work accurately portrays the importance of relative power and cost/benefit analysis in foreign policy calculations. He also explains a key realist motivation for China’s behavior in the South China Sea, that being opportunism in exploiting what appears to be a local power void. But, as with other realist works, it lacks the context necessary for understanding the full picture. While China is indeed becoming more assertive in the face of waning American power, Layne’s argument cannot explain the motivation to fill that void in such an aggressive manner as opposed to a more multilateral diplomatic approach. In order to understand why China continues to vigorously and abrasively press its local claims, its national identity, from which its interests are created, must be explored.

Robert Kaplan demonstrates that China is gradually gaining the upper hand in East Asia through his analysis of the current crisis over the South China Sea, where he

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<sup>71</sup> Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Exit: Beyond Pax Americana,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, 2 (June 2011), 152-155.

<sup>72</sup> Christopher Layne, “This Time It’s Real: The End of Unipolarity and ‘Pax Americana’,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56, 1 (March 2012), 203-206.

considers China's rise to be perfectly natural. Regardless of its government, he argues, China will pursue regional hegemony, motivated as it is by the power and security available through control of the South China Sea.<sup>73</sup> Like Kaplan, Michael Yahuda sees Chinese balancing in the South China Sea as natural due to realist calculations of power, especially concerns over trade route security.<sup>74</sup> Meanwhile, Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley focus specifically on American efforts to counterbalance or even contain China through the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia,' which Beijing believes to be an indication that Washington is becoming increasingly desperate as it feels the region is slipping from its grasp, thus confirming American vulnerability to balancing on at least a regional level.<sup>75</sup> Kaplan stresses power alone. Yahuda adds elements of identity, correctly surmising that nationalism in China has increased with the sense that the balance of power is shifting while Glaser and Billingsley incorporate material threat as generated by the 'pivot to Asia.'<sup>76</sup> Neither, however, examines nationalism or threat perception beyond the surface level, taking these variables to be an offshoot of a growth in power rather than a manifestation of China's historic identity. As with all realists, they argue that power is an end unto itself rather than an identity-driven means to an end.

Kai He and Huiyun Feng argue that China has become more assertive and must redefine its foreign policy due to its growing strength. That assertiveness has shown itself most prevalently through core interest diplomacy in which Beijing draws a line in the sand within which it is unwilling to cooperate with the international community at

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<sup>73</sup> Robert Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), 9-11, 24.

<sup>74</sup> Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, 81 (January 2013), 448-449.

<sup>75</sup> Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, "US-China Relations: US Pivot to Asia Leaves China Off Balance," *Comparative Connections* 12, 3 (2012), 29-32.

<sup>76</sup> Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness," 446; Glaser and Billingsley, "US-China Relations," 32.

large. According to He and Feng, China has no territorial interests beyond its core interests, though those core interests like the South China Sea have now transcended its traditional boundaries, which they fear could prove a step too far. In order to avoid conflict, China must be realistic about what it designates as a core interest while the United States must respect China's inevitable rise by avoiding hostile containment policies.<sup>77</sup> For He and Feng, Chinese identity as a great power is at the forefront of its actions in the South China Sea. China's expansion is natural and Beijing almost certainly considers Washington's persistence in refusing to recognize the changes in East Asia provocative. Though as constructivist Ted Hopf argues great power identity is important because it comes with a specific set of interests and expectations, it is not the only identity at play.<sup>78</sup> By omitting China's historic identity, He and Feng do not fully explain why it would prove far too humiliating and thus nearly impossible for China to back down in the South China Sea.

Like Robert Ross, Feng Liu sees no hegemony in East Asia as peace and stability are maintained there symbiotically by both American security guarantees and Chinese economic benefits. He nevertheless portrays the potential for a gradual regional power struggle of balancing and counterbalancing, challenging American liberal ideas that security can be based on American hegemony, economic interdependence, or common ideals and institutions.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, David Shambaugh portrays China to be at odds with America's desire to expand the liberal international order in East Asia, causing the

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<sup>77</sup> Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "Debating China's Assertiveness: Taking China's Power and Interests Seriously," *International Politics* 49, no. 5 (2012), 634-637, 640-642.

<sup>78</sup> Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 176.

<sup>79</sup> Feng Liu, "China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order," *Issues & Studies* 49, 1 (March 2013), 100-104, 107.

competitive element between the two countries to grow much faster than the cooperative element.<sup>80</sup> He is seconded by Ashley Tellis, who emphasizes America's relative decline, the importance of perception, and the short-comings of interdependence as a behavioral constraint.<sup>81</sup> These scholars utilize identity alongside power to forge a deeper understanding of the general dynamics of East Asian politics, particularly the relationship between China and the United States. They emphasize how power and threat perception create tension while for Shambaugh and Tellis identity makes that tension not only inevitable, but likely to increase. Central for Liu and Tellis is the tension created through the economic situation, in which China slowly gains leverage while US interests are increasingly threatened, while Shambaugh focuses on an inability to communicate interests.<sup>82</sup> As with He and Feng, however, these scholars examine Chinese identity exclusively through a great power lens, which is insufficient, for example, for explaining China's opposition to the expansion of the liberal order in East Asia, a phenomena that presents more of a cultural threat than the obvious political threat related to power.

Camilla Sørensen demonstrates what she believes to be the advantages of neoclassical realism in the tradition of Randall Schweller by presenting a proposal for analyzing Chinese foreign policy through a neoclassical framework using domestic variables, which she argues enriches the analysis. Chinese foreign policy, she contends, is dictated by the domestic concerns of economic growth and the rising nationalistic expectations of the population. Being in a state of transition, China consequently wields

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<sup>80</sup> David Shambaugh, "Tangled Titans: Conceptualizing the US-China Relationship," in *Tangled Titans: The United States and China*, ed. David Shambaugh (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 4-5.

<sup>81</sup> Ashley L. Tellis, "US-China Relations in a Realist World," in *Tangled Titans: The United States and China*, ed. David Shambaugh (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 75-82.

<sup>82</sup> Liu, "China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order," 122-125; Tellis, "US-China Relations in a Realist World," 91; Shambaugh, "Tangled Titans," 21.

a confused foreign policy that to Western eyes often appears aggressive. Specifically, Sørensen interjects that ideological legitimacy in China has been replaced by performance legitimacy. The regime in Beijing must meet the domestic needs endemic to a rapidly growing and changing country in order to maintain power, thus providing the main context for foreign policy decisions.<sup>83</sup> Ning Liao explains this phenomenon most precisely when he writes that a government, when lacking procedural legitimacy (being democratically elected), must rely on performance factors in order to maintain acceptance by the people over which it governs. Basically, the government must demonstrate a sufficient benefit to having imposed itself upon the population.<sup>84</sup> Sørensen's insight provides a key ingredient to the strategy of "peaceful rise/development", showing political power to be dependent on the increase of relative national power, thus indicating a key realist motivation for China's assertiveness within the South China Sea. But that seemingly realist motivation is one that is very much blurred with the constructivist variable of identity as the expectations of the population are wedded with the country's identity as an historic great power and thus nationalistically charged.

Those domestic needs are one of the reasons Amitai Etzioni sides with those in the United States he calls "engagers" who consider China peaceful and lacking of any ambition to balance American power. Beijing's critical internal problems are its primary concern. Etzioni challenges those he refers to as "adversarians" who focus on China's capabilities rather than its intentions. Power, he argues, does not necessarily translate

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<sup>83</sup> Camilla T.N. Sørensen, "Is China Becoming More Aggressive? A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Asian Perspectives* 37, 3 (July-September 2013), 364, 376

<sup>84</sup> Ning Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory: Chinese Nationalism as Constraint on Beijing's Foreign Policy Making," *Asian Politics and Policy* 5, no. 4 (October 2013), 546.

into conflict. Whatever signs of aggression China has shown in the South China Sea have been trumped by where it has cooperated with the liberal international order.<sup>85</sup>

Keeping with the theme of a relatively benign China, constructivist Alastair Iain Johnston disputes the entire idea that it even has an assertive foreign policy at all with the exception of a very few number of specific cases. While the media goes to great lengths to emphasize Chinese “assertiveness,” he contends, little is mentioned regarding the numerous areas of Chinese cooperation with the West. A consistent use of ahistorical analysis has ignored comparisons with past events, as well as similar events in other countries. Through his own detailed analysis, Johnston shows that all previously cited motivations for Chinese assertiveness lack evidence for support.<sup>86</sup> Björn Jerdén supports Johnston with a similar piece, concentrating on a comparison of Chinese policy actions and reactions over the last two decades. Foreign policy change, he disputes, means that a state reacts differently to the same input, something that is not borne out by the evidence he provides.<sup>87</sup> For Johnston and Jerdén, China is, for the most part, amenable to and constrained by the liberal order. While both analysts’ evidence is indeed thorough and appears to effectively discount the phenomenon of an increase in Chinese assertiveness generally speaking, they fail to differentiate between regular and core interest foreign policy. An area of core interest is where a state has decided to stake its reputation, based on its historic and cultural identity, both internally and externally. Within the South China Sea, a new region of core interest, there has most certainly been an increase in

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<sup>85</sup> Amitai Etzioni, “China: Making An Adversary,” *International Politics* 48, 6 (2011), 650-655.

<sup>86</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security* 37, 4 (Spring 2013), 7-9, 32-34.

<sup>87</sup> Björn Jerdén, “The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought Into It,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, 1 (Spring 2014), 51.

assertive behavior. It may not be an official foreign policy change because the input, most notably the threat posed by the United States with the ‘pivot to Asia’ is different, but it is an increase in assertive behavior nonetheless. A deeper examination of Chinese identity reveals that Beijing, as Johnston and Björn note successfully, is not looking to be more assertive generally speaking, but, as they by contrast fail to note, is willing to be so where a core interest, and hence the very essence of their existence, is at stake.

Through their examination of the attitudes of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA), Yawei Liu and Justine Zheng Ren show just how important national identity is as a variable that determines the creation of foreign policy behavior. The PLA, more independent from civilian control than ever before, is trending towards military assertiveness and hostility towards the United States, which they deduce has had an impact on the recent decision-making of the Chinese government.<sup>88</sup> Suisheng Zhao takes Liu’s and Ren’s theme of nationalism within the PLA and expands it to Chinese society as a whole, arguing that there has been a recent merger of the state nationalism of an increasingly confident government with the popular nationalism of the population. As a result, popular nationalism now exerts huge pressure on the government to conduct a foreign policy that reflects China’s new found strength, particularly in defense of sovereign rights and core interests. More acutely, Beijing must act in accordance with this nationalism in the South China Sea to divert attention from problems caused by its explosive growth.<sup>89</sup> The above literature demonstrates the often times blurred boundary between realism and constructivism, as here nationalism can be explained both by pure

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<sup>88</sup> Yawei Liu and Justine Zheng Ren, “An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat: The United States According to PLA Officers,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, 3 (November, 2013), 255-256, 264.

<sup>89</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, 82 (2013), 536-537; 546.

power capabilities as well as historic and cultural identity. They therefore stand as proof that both theories contribute valuable insights into the behavior of states, but neither can stand convincingly alone.

Ning Liao takes this idea of nationalism being a constraint on Chinese foreign policy and puts it within a clearly constructivist framework when he writes that China's paradoxical image on foreign relations must be attributed to the cleavage between its rationalist leadership and a mandate of identity-constitutive norms that are highly relevant to the internal legitimation of the regime. Internal legitimacy, or "maintaining the belief that the existing political institution is the most appropriate one for society," is Liao's most important ingredient for the success of "peaceful rise/development." The regime in Beijing plays a role as the rejuvenator of China's historical status and uses the country's humiliating past to justify its behavior as a great power.<sup>90</sup> This analysis is consistent with Peter Katzenstein in that identity can be co-opted for realist purposes but not discovered by the rationalist elite.<sup>91</sup>

If China is indeed behaving as a realist would predict, it is because realpolitik is strategic-culturally rooted, argues Alastair Johnston. Strategic culture is, he writes, "a system of symbols that embody assumptions about what the security problem is and how best to deal with it." Johnston analyzes China's *Seven Military Classics* to demonstrate that China has always accepted zero-sum conflict as a constant in interstate affair and an effective way to deal with security issues. The Western stereotype of a China that utilizes virtue to exact voluntary submission in the Confucian tradition is in actuality an idealization that is symbolic for the purposes of enhancing legitimacy, differentiating

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<sup>90</sup> Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory," 544-546.

<sup>91</sup> Katzenstein, *The Cultural of National Security*, 2-3, 17.

“out” groups, and masking more coercive strategies. Essentially, realist behavior is rooted in China’s national identity, which Johnston tests through an analysis of Ming Dynasty foreign policy.<sup>92</sup> Constructivist in all but name, Johnston’s work shows that China’s assertive behavior in the South China Sea is not only a means to satisfy its invoked identity, but also a reflection of that identity itself. Simply put, China is not realist by nature; it is realist by tradition and so behaves accordingly.

Zi Zhongyun presents the common theme of Chinese historic identity being torn between the legacies of two thousand years of cultural dominance in East Asia followed by one hundred years of humiliation at the hands of the Western world, mixing a sense of superiority with that of inferiority that make the Chinese extremely sensitive to perceived international inequalities.<sup>93</sup> For the Chinese, writes William A. Callahan, humiliation is the path to rejuvenation. As such, China’s humiliation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries is celebrated and reinforced within its education system and general culture as a motivation for greatness, emphasizing the theme of “sovereignty lost, territory dismembered, and China humiliated.” More powerful than communism or nationalism based on material capacity, this tradition, combined with ideas on sovereignty alien to the Western world, explains China’s need to be assertive in areas of core interest like the South China Sea, as international goals are not merely materialistic but social and symbolic.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), x, 39, 61, 100, 167-170, 215.

<sup>93</sup> Zi Zhongyun, “The Clash of Ideas: Ideology and Sino-US Relations,” in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004), 227-228.

<sup>94</sup> William A. Callahan, *The Pesoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 11, 16-17, 96-97.

In his analysis of China's behavior in regards to its neighbors, something critically relevant to the South China Sea dispute, Alex Littlefield incorporates the Confucian aspect of China's national identity into the equation along with the country's historic position as the cultural center of East Asia and in this way establishes that China's primary purpose is the establishment of a cultural hegemony. Most important is the hierarchical element in Confucianism, emphasizing a system of interaction between clear superiors and inferiors, a doctrine many in the West confuse with realist ideas of the more powerful dominating the less powerful, as in the Western-invented tradition of the Chinese "tribute system" and in contrast to the liberal mantra of a democratic peace.<sup>95</sup> China consequently resents the interference of the United States, a relative newcomer to the region, and refuses to consider multilateral negotiations regarding its core regional interests.

It has indeed been, states Gerald Chan, the Chinese purpose since 1949 to never again be bullied. Now that it has the material means to fulfill that purpose, it will assert itself to those ends. That historically-based aspect of China's identity has remained consistent, though many other aspects of China's identity are considerably more fluid, including its current economic and political identity, fluctuating as it does between developing, rising, and revolutionary. Regarding a pursuit of hegemony, writes Chan, China has been compared exclusively to Western nations (including a Japan that strived to be Western) that do not share its vision of a "harmonious world" of multipolar peace absent the forceful spread of ideology or values. But China does seek greater status based on an international recognition of the cultural value of its ancient civilization and,

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<sup>95</sup>Alex Littlefield, "State Behavior and Regional Identity: The Case of China and East Asia," *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 12, no. 2 (December 2012), 53-56.

as regards its own regional core interests, will not bend to outsiders such as the United States who seek to disrupt its slice of the “harmonious world.”<sup>96</sup>

### **Russia and the ‘Near Abroad’**

As with China, the existing literature regarding Russia and the former Soviet Republics once controlled by Moscow is split between the realist and constructivist perspectives. Also as before, the realists loom larger, aided by recent events of aggression such as the invasions of Ukraine and Georgia, Russia’s reliance on energy exports, and the figure of Vladimir Putin, a man that seems to symbolize realist thinking in all its glory. Not surprisingly, realists argue that Russia is pursuing regional hegemony strictly for purposes of power as would any state in its position. Constructivists, by contrast, believe that pursuit of hegemony to be unique to Russia as dictated by its national identity.

Parag Khanna, in his argument that the world is now multipolar with the exception of American military power, does not put Russian power on par with the United States and China. While Khanna sites Russia’s rapid growth and rich natural resources, he discounts the country’s identity as a great power due to its failure to diversify its economy and rampant corruption.<sup>97</sup> Khanna, however, in focusing on Russia’s material motivations, underestimates its determination to maintain a great power identity, for despite these very real shortcomings, Russia continues to make its presence felt, doing more to bolster the idea of itself as a great power than diminish it, even if it cannot compete with the US and China economically.

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<sup>96</sup> Chan, “Capturing China’s International Identity,” 265, 271-274.

<sup>97</sup> Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008), 11-14.

Thomas Ambrosio uses Russia's ever-changing self-view within the international system to explain its history of moving between bandwagon state and balancing state since the end of the Cold War. Beginning in the early years of the new century, Russia pushed for a multipolar world order as a counter to American interventionism and as a reaction to domestic pressure, as well as to satisfy its historic view of itself as a great power, but still demonstrated a willingness to bandwagon when the benefits of doing so outweighed the cost of resisting United States power. This realist approach to foreign policy, as Ambrosio shows, is thus only partially dictated by variables outside of security and material capability and is in fact more attributable to its self-perceived identity as a great power.<sup>98</sup> Moscow's calculations, so apparently realist on the surface, are driven by the need to restore its historic status, which motivates it to balance relatively against the US, something it simply does not have the capacity to do. This need for international recognition as a great power resounds equally heavily with Jeffrey Mankoff when he argues that the country must demonstrate unequivocally that it can defend its sphere of influence over the old Soviet space in order to be taken seriously as able to play an international role equivalent to that of the US.<sup>99</sup> Both analysts illustrate how Russia's strategy and behavior in the 'Near Abroad' and elsewhere is dictated by its self-perceived identity. Rather than behave simply to balance against power, as realists claim, Moscow must live up to its historic reputation as a great power, which is at least equally as important as gaining in relative power and is a viable identity that comes with its own set

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<sup>98</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence: Russia's Quest for Multipolarity* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 30-39; 51-67; 78-94; 117, 120, 131-139, 153-155.

<sup>99</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 12.

of norms.<sup>100</sup> Relative power, writes Mankoff, is only one factor in foreign policy. A state's identity within the international system provides the intellectual framework.<sup>101</sup>

In a piece rather conciliatory to Vladimir Putin, Andrei Tsygankov draws the same conclusion, as well as emphasizing that Russian attempts to balance against the United States are based on threat more than power, as the West has taken several actions over the course of the last two decades to exacerbate Russian insecurities.<sup>102</sup> In a second work, Tsygankov goes into great depth to explain what he calls a Russian identity crisis. That crisis, which weighs heavily on Moscow's foreign policy, is centered on the Russian identity as relates to Europe, specifically if it is a purely European country, a Eurasian country, or a European country with a unique status. All three identities, based on historical narrative, have at one time dominated perspectives in the Kremlin. Currently, with the support of Putin, the third perspective, that of Russia as essentially European but with extra-European characteristics, dominates thinking and explains Russian behavior in the 'Near Abroad.' This 'Euro-East' perspective, writes Tsygankov, frames Russia as being in a unique position to understand the situations of the post-Soviet states and to provide the collective goods of security, sovereignty, and stability, which Putin sees as the promotion of European values. Putin does not seek territory but rather to help cultural compatriots through stability, Tsygankov adds.<sup>103</sup> Certainly the recent Russian annexation of the Crimea casts doubt upon this assertion, even if it is challenged by the relative restraint in Georgia. That, however, does not discount Tsygankov's civilizational

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<sup>100</sup> Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 176.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>102</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Russia's International Assertiveness: What Does It Mean for the West?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, 2 (March-April 2008), 38-39, 49, 51.

<sup>103</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea: "West", "Eurasia", and "Euro-East" in Russia's Foreign Policy," *Geopolitics* 12, no. 3 (July 2007), 376-377, 385-386.

approach or the effect of Russia's very real struggle to solidify its national identity on its foreign policy behavior.

Iver B. Neumann provides a background to Russia's identity as relates to Europe, which, with the exception of the Eurasianists, is internally considered the most important aspect of its overall identity. The most fundamental trend in Russia's relationship with Europe was the country's unceasing endeavor to meld culturally with its European neighbors right up until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. That effort, however, never came to fruition as Russia, though armed with a great deal of material power, lacked the social mores to be fully recognized by Western Europe as one of its own.<sup>104</sup> With the rise of the westward-looking Atlanticists immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, that trend was renewed with equally dismal results, leaving Russia resentful and wary of its neighbors. That wariness, writes Joan DeBardeleben, is exacerbated by the European Union's expansion and its own uncertain identity, composed of many states with many different historical narratives, a number of which foster a deep suspicion of Russia. While it is true that Russia appears realist, she argues, its national interests, in the tradition of constructivism, are strongly influenced by value-based assumptions relating to the meaning of sovereignty and its Eurasian and European identities.<sup>105</sup>

Zbigniew Brzezinski, though a prominent realist, nevertheless focuses on identity to illustrate the importance of the 'Near Abroad' in defining Russia. There is in Russia a large amount of nostalgia for its great power past while the 'Near Abroad,' especially Ukraine, directly represents that past and is the key to restoring imperial power. He

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<sup>104</sup> Iver B. Neumann, "Russia's Standing as a Great Power, 1494-1815," in *Russia's European Choice* ed. Ted Hopf (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 13-29.

<sup>105</sup> DeBardeleben, "Applying Constructivism to Understanding EU-Russian Relations," 421-422, 428.

consequently refers to Ukraine as a geopolitical pivot, a country so important to Russia historically, culturally, and ethnically that it is willing to challenge Western encroachments there even in the face of a high cost to itself.<sup>106</sup> A realist scholar first, however, in a later work Brzezinski leans more heavily on power, citing the material gains to be had in Ukraine and the rest of the ‘Near Abroad,’ including industrial, military, and resource assets.<sup>107</sup> Brzezinski’s work is especially valuable for its insights into Russia’s identity changes and dilemmas, including the idea that it is too powerful to consider itself a normal European state, but too weak to dominate Europe. Remaining a powerful Eurasian empire and avoiding a purely Asiatic existence (a circumstance it cannot accept, which offers insight into its opinion of China) depends dramatically on its grip on the European countries of the ‘Near Abroad.’ He also highlights the Russian historical self-identity as the defender of pan-Slavism, an element that elevates ethnic imperatives beyond simply defending Russian minorities.<sup>108</sup> These critical elements regarding Russia’s identity create a greater understanding for why Moscow would challenge American or Western power despite an unfavorable cost/benefit analysis.

Internal forces are often cited as an explanation for Russia’s behavior in the international arena. George Kuchinsky claims that Russia’s annexation of the Crimea and interference in Eastern Ukraine is inspired by internal politics, primarily Vladimir Putin’s necessity to appear politically strong amid a general trend of power erosion and

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<sup>106</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Geopolitical Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 46, 88-89, 109.

<sup>107</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 91, 94-95.

<sup>108</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 138; Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 46, 89.

dissenting voices, most notably among business elite.<sup>109</sup> He is seconded on this by Matthew Luxmoore, who also believes Russian foreign policy is a function of the need to maintain domestic stability and political legitimacy, creating what he dubs “defensive imperialism.”<sup>110</sup> Once again, works like Kuchinsky’s and Luxmoore’s that emphasize stability and legitimacy as a result of nationalism blur the line between realism and constructivism. While Putin’s co-opting of nationalism in order to maintain his regime strikes as realist in nature, that nationalism, as Peter Katzenstein would maintain, was created by historic identity.<sup>111</sup> Luxmoore sites historical status as a great power and the phenomenon of the Russian diaspora as the primary components of the nationalism that influence the Kremlin’s behavior in the ‘Near Abroad’ while keeping in mind realist motivations as well, particularly the region’s impact on energy exportation, thus accurately showing how both theories complement each other.<sup>112</sup>

Roy Allison takes issue with Luxmoore’s emphasis on the Russian diaspora, arguing that it has next to no influence on the Kremlin’s decision-making in the ‘Near Abroad,’ citing Moscow’s lack of priority regarding the issue in the early 1990s. That “priority”, he argues, has only emerged during Putin’s third term as president. Instead, Russian activities in the region are based on the prospects for material gain, especially militarily within the Black Sea.<sup>113</sup> But Allison’s analysis ignores the tensions surrounding Russian minorities in the Baltic States during the early 1990s. It also fails to

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<sup>109</sup> George Kuchinsky, “Russia: Shifting Political Frontiers,” *Comparative Strategy* 33, 3 (2014), 262, 270.

<sup>110</sup> Mathew Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism: The Evolution of Russia’s Regional Foreign Policy,” *International Journal on World Peace* 31, 2 (June 2014), 76-77, 82-84, 94, 103.

<sup>111</sup> Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, 2-3, 17.

<sup>112</sup> Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 78-79, 89.

<sup>113</sup> Roy Allison, “Russian ‘deniable intervention’ in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules,” *International Affairs* 90, no. 6 (November 2014), 1277, 1283-1284.

consider the possibility that the emphasis on the diaspora increased alongside Russian material capability because the Kremlin now had a means to address what was an already existent identity-related national interest. Nevertheless, Allison's insights into the realist perspective add a necessary dimension and explain the material context of Russia's gamble to be recognized as a great power.

Yury Fedorov attributes historical forces to be a large part of the explanation behind Russia's behavior towards Eastern Europe, particularly Western military and cultural aggression combined with a tradition of security through expansion. Like many others, he explains that Russia feels that it cannot be considered a great power unless it re-creates a sphere of influence over its immediate neighborhood. The Kremlin's primary strategy for doing so, he writes, is through economic dominance and undermining Western security guarantees.<sup>114</sup> Correspondingly, Ria Laenen posits that all of Russian foreign policy since the end of the Cold War has been driven by historical forces. Putin has only changed the level of intensity. She too believes that Russia's national interests are a product of social interactions that are dependent on a great power identity, which demands the re-constitution of a geographical sphere of influence.<sup>115</sup> Meanwhile, Hanna Smith argues that great power identity, historical insecurities, and domestic pressure must be weighed equally as they all combine to constrain internal politics, which in turn causes Russia to lash out internationally.<sup>116</sup> Fedorov, Laenen, and

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<sup>114</sup> Yury E. Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy Toward Central and Eastern Europe," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, 3 (September 2013), 315-316; 320-323.

<sup>115</sup> Ria Laenen, "Russian 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad" in *Russia and Its Near Neighbours*, ed. Maria Requel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 25, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Hanna Smith, "Domestic Influence of Russian Foreign Policy: Status, Interests and Ressentiment," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbours*, ed. Maria Requel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 40, 43, 47, 59.

Smith all emphasize national identity as molded by history to be the prime motivator behind Russia's behavior in the 'Near Abroad'. They find the region's historic link to Russian identity, including the threat perceptions interwoven within it, to dominate Moscow's regional foreign policy. While not discounting a desire for increased material capability, they relegate it as secondary in importance.

### **Sino-Russian Relations**

Scholars disagree as to the extent China and Russia, two countries that in recent years have joined together to denounce American global hegemony and the unipolar world order, are actively working to cooperatively balance against the power of the United States. According to realist balance of power theory, Beijing and Moscow should work together towards that aim and though the multipolar rhetoric is there, the mutual effort has proven lackluster at best. While most scholars focus on the realist reasons for this revolving around material power competition, an strong case can also be made that the Chinese and Russian identities, both in respect to their historical narratives and great power status, enhance their threat perceptions and disregard of each other, inhibiting the trust necessary for such a massive endeavor.

For James MacHaffie, there is evidence that China and Russia are working together to balance American global hegemony and forge a multipolar world in the realist tradition. Contrary to most scholars, he views Russia and China to be in a condition of near-alliance, citing mutual goals, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the threat of American interventionism as the basis for that assessment. Though he recognizes that tensions exist between the two countries, he believes those tensions to be minor in

comparison to their tensions with the United States.<sup>117</sup> Vladimir Portyakov is another who places deep significance on Sino-Russian efforts to cooperatively balance, arguing that the Sino-Russian dialogue regarding multipolarity has been conducted on the highest levels and incorporated into both countries' national security strategies.<sup>118</sup> While scholars like MacHaffie and Portyakov accurately note Chinese and Russian motivations to cooperatively balance, they underestimate the much more potent competitive elements between the two countries, not to mention how their identities and subsequent threat perceptions intensify that competition, ultimately leaving an incomplete and one-sided analysis.

Contrary to analysts such as MacHaffie and Portyakov, Bobo Lo views the Sino-Russian relationship to be one purely of convenience. While Russia, he explains, considers China to be nothing more than an energy market to be used as leverage against the West in pursuit of its great power recognition, China views Russia as an export market to help fuel its economic growth. For Lo, internal variables, specifically national identity and the desperate need to maintain rapid growth, prove far more instrumental in dictating behavior than relative power considerations, which would call for the two countries to work much more closely and efficiently to balance the United States. While, as realists would predict, the resources of Eurasia play a large role in preventing the two countries from cooperatively balancing against the US, it is the differing nature of their assertiveness emanating from their national identities as well as Russia's acute threat perception regarding its rising neighbor that play the lead role. While Russia, he writes,

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<sup>117</sup> James MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 10, 2/3 (Summer/Fall 2011), 22-23, 30-31.

<sup>118</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, "A Multipolar World As Seen by Russia and China: International Challenges," *Far Eastern Affairs* 38, 3 (July-September 2010), 1-2.

maintains an expansionary character clinging to great power aspirations, Chinese assertiveness is directed only towards ensuring growth.<sup>119</sup> Lo's analysis provides a balance between the realist and constructivist interpretations of Sino-Russian relations, creating a rich illustration of the present and enabling an educated prediction for the future. Neither the material nor the identity and threat aspects are lost in his arguments regarding multipolarity, trade, Central Asia, and the Russian Far East, though identity for him is limited primarily to great power identity rather than historical narrative. He refers to their relationship as an axis of convenience, but it is a convenience that has the appearance of living on borrowed time.

While China and Russia often work to show an outward front of unity in the face of American hegemony and the interferences of the liberal international order, on a deeper level the relationship is tense, and even sometimes hostile as both a realist and a constructivist might predict. Gordon Chang, for instance, shows how the realist balance of power approach and partnership has been effective in barring Western influence in their respective regions, primarily Central Asia, but also examines the tensions that lie beneath the surface, especially an unbalanced economic relationship and the troubled situation in the Russian Far East, which affects their relationship regardless of American power. Chang employs both power and identity as his variables in explaining why there has been a failure to cooperatively balance, citing both competition for material resources and Chinese and Russian national visions.<sup>120</sup> Meanwhile, balance of threat in the Sino-Russian relationship (or perhaps lack thereof) takes center stage over identity for

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<sup>119</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (London: Chatham House, 2008), 3-4; 6-7; 54; 95-96; 140.

<sup>120</sup> Gordon G. Chang, "China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States," *World Affairs* 76, 6 (March/April 2014), 18-20; 23.

Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovic, who argue that Chinese and Russian security fears focus more on each other than the more powerful United States. Like Chang, Yeung and Bjelakovic include pure power capabilities, especially the competition for oil and natural gas in Central Asia. In their analysis, Sino-Russian relations are characterized by paranoia and mistrust not simply based on power, but also the belief that their many intimate conflicting issues in combination with their mutually perceived extreme identities could very well trigger the use of that power against the other.<sup>121</sup> Incomplete on their own, a combination of Chang's use of identity with Yeung and Bjelakovic's use of threat perception would demonstrate constructivism's explanatory value if the link between the two variables was established.

Simon Serfaty argues that no single power or even coalition could feasibly balance American power on a global scale. Instead, China and Russia will remain regional powers that are occasionally tempted to utilize gunboat diplomacy to assert themselves over their smaller neighbors, but are in no way looking to contest the primacy of the United States. They are, he continues, concerned about each other's power as much as that of the United States, complicating any efforts to cooperatively balance. Serfaty accurately portrays the realist reasons why any Sino-Russian coalition fails to materialize as well as Russia's power-related threat perception of China, especially in its Far East. Their periodic alignments, as he argues, will for the immediate future remain temporary and for purposes of tactical convenience.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>121</sup> Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership: Views from Beijing and Moscow," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23, 2 (2010), 255-256, 258-260, 265, 269-270, 273-277.

<sup>122</sup> Simon Serfaty, "Moving Into a Post-Western World" *Washington Quarterly* 34, 2 (Spring 2011), 12, 18-19.

Maria Freire and Carmen Mendes explain that the Sino-Russian relationship is essentially negative, as it is based more on self-interest than shared interests. Both China and Russia possess foreign policies rooted in their particular domestic interests, leading to two vastly different international approaches, including efforts meant to contain each other rather than forge any sort of alliance in order to balance American power. While realism argues that China and Russia should balance, they are instead more threatened by each other and fearful of a renewed rivalry.<sup>123</sup> Not only do China and Russia have vastly different approaches towards multipolarity, insists Susan Turner, they do not even share a common vision of what multipolarity actually means. The terms to their agreements on multipolarity are left undefined as each pursue their own independent strategy for its achievement, China's being economically oriented while Russia's placing a greater emphasis on hard power.<sup>124</sup>

Lowell Dittmer delves into constructivist ideas regarding the value of identity as he places China's and Russia's historic antipathy for each other at the root of their inability to cooperatively balance against the United States. Russia's history of aggression towards China far surpasses that of the US. Only China's post-Tiananmen ostracism and Russia's economic meltdown, he writes, could bring them together, leading

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<sup>123</sup> Maria Raquel Freire and Carmen Amado Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship: Forging Strategic Partnership?" *Journal of Chinese Affairs* 38, 2 (2009), 29-31; 35; 38-39.

<sup>124</sup> Susan Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspective* 33, 1 (2009), 170, 174.

to the prediction that as both countries recover their partnership will suffer. Besides endorsing multipolarity, neither shares much in common.<sup>125</sup>

### **Progression**

There are by all means power calculations that contribute tremendously to China's foreign policy and behavior within the South China Sea. As chapter two will show, power certainly plays a large role in determining Chinese interest in the region, which for all intents and purposes it has dubbed a core interest. But the material capabilities and security Beijing seeks to obtain is not the full story, nor do tactical considerations regarding power entirely explain its behavior. Realism can explain why China would desire the South China Sea, that being for resources and sea lane security that would enhance its power. It can also explain the methodical strategy and timing China utilizes, engineered to prevent American counter-balancing and take advantage of perceived American weakness. But realism does not explain why China feels it must be aggressive in order to meet its goals within its new core interest, nor does it fully explain why it feels its security is in jeopardy in the first place. Constructivism and identity can fill that gap. As a great power, China, like other great powers, has a particular set of interests. Just as the American involvement in Vietnam served as a model for what great powers do, that being intervention rather than appeasement, argues Ted Hopf, so too does Chinese behavior in the South China Sea.<sup>126</sup> It is therefore unthinkable for China to act in a way not befitting of its perceived status. Equally as fundamental are qualities unique to China, particularly its tradition of celebrating national humiliation and the perception

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<sup>125</sup> Lowell Dittmer, "Ghost of the Strategic Triangle: The Sino-Russian Partnership," in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004), 207, 211, 220-227.

<sup>126</sup> Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 176.

of its neighbors as peripheral states, both generated through centuries of dominating East Asia. With its sense of pride from its long tradition of universality and superiority having been damaged by a ‘Century of Humiliation’, China is unwilling to compromise on its core interests, including to the United States, which actively participated in causing that humiliation.<sup>127</sup> Instead, China feels it must rejuvenate itself by facing those that humiliated it, using its victimhood and traumatic memory as moral justification for its assertive behavior.<sup>128</sup> There are other states that gain within their core interests without resorting to aggressive behavior, both with and without substantial power over their neighbors, but the Chinese identity, both unique and as a great power, explains why China must act differently in the South China Sea rather than choose multilateral diplomacy and cooperation to attain its objectives. Though its leadership may be rationalist, now that it has co-opted the Chinese identity, it must live up to the norms and interests of that identity or face a crisis in legitimacy.

Similarly, realism does not entirely explain Russian behavior in the region it considers its ‘Near Abroad’. Chapter three will demonstrate, as in the case of China, power calculations explain a great deal. Power, for example, explains motivation to be driven by material capability and security, that being for instance the industrial potential of Eastern Ukraine, the naval base of Sevastopol, and the idea of the ‘Near Abroad’ serving as a buffer zone against NATO expansion. Realism can also explain Russia’s timing, taking full advantage as it has against an unprepared West in order to gain while the opportunity presents itself. But, like China, what realism has difficulty explaining is

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<sup>127</sup> Choi, “Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations,” 118.

<sup>128</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 544.

why Russia feels it must act in the aggressive manner that it does, for instance in the pursuit a buffer zone to protect its borders with the democratic European Union.

A self-perceived identity as a great power again comes into play, as Russia feels it must act in a manner befitting of a great power in reaction to events right on its doorstep. Equally important, however, is Russia's unique national self-identity as a great power that is both European yet distinct from Europe given its massive Eurasian presence and historic role on both continents.<sup>129</sup> That identity, as Zbigniew Brzezinski contends, is predicated on Russian domination of the 'Near Abroad', especially Ukraine, where, coincidentally enough, international tensions have been highest.<sup>130</sup> Its historical narrative also informs, being a history of tension between civilized Europe and a semi-Asiatic Russia always struggling to fit in and be recognized.<sup>131</sup> As Joan DeBardeleben writes, the expansion of the EU keeps Russian identity formation on shifting ground, as many of its new members are suspicious of Russia while their own various identities complicate matters further.<sup>132</sup> Viewed in this light, Russia's apprehension of the West, particularly the expansion of the NATO alliance, becomes clearer. Furthermore, identity explains Russia's seemingly erratic behavior in the 'Near Abroad', ranging from cooperation to interventionism since the founding of the Russian Federation. That behavior can only be accurately explained by the aforementioned shifting ground of Russian identity formation, going from Western, to Eurasian, to its current "Euro-East" variation, which calls for a more assertive approach to the 'Near Abroad' in an effort to vindicate feelings of superiority and overcome past humiliations. Here, Russia's recent revival in strength

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<sup>129</sup> Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea," 382.

<sup>130</sup> Brzezinski, *the Grand Chessboard*, 46, 88-89.

<sup>131</sup> Neumann, "Russia's Standing as a Great Power, 1494-1815," 24-30.

<sup>132</sup> DeBardeleben, "Applying Constructivism to Understanding EU-Russian Relations," 421.

provides only the means, not the interest. As in China, the regime in the Kremlin must meet those identity-informed interests or risk losing its legitimacy to rule.

Finally, chapter four shows that realism also does not always fully explain the relationship between two states with realist-oriented leadership. By examining the Sino-Russian effort to cooperatively balance against the United States, the work below will show that while power provides part of the understanding for their failure to do so, identity again complements to show why realist obstacles are difficult to overcome. As always, power and material capability play a role. The mutual desire for material power in Central Asia and the Russian Far East, most notably oil and natural gas reserves, creates competition between the two powers that helps prevent them from cooperatively pursuing their objectives of challenging American hegemony and establishing a multipolar world order. The desire for security also partly explains their strained relationship, predominantly showing why one massive state would hesitate to enhance the material capabilities of another massive state located directly on its border. But realism does not fully explain why China and Russia would view each other as enough of a potential threat to curtail cooperation against the undisputed hegemon. National self-identity aids in understanding why it is difficult for China and Russia in particular to overcome realist obstacles. Just as China's history of humiliation affects its relationship with the United States, so too does it with Russia, a country that even more forcefully participated in that humiliation by taking advantage of China's former weakness in order to expand into East Asia.<sup>133</sup> At the same time, Moscow continuously acts in ways that undermine China's vision of sovereignty. Meanwhile, given China's rise and now

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<sup>133</sup> Dittmer, "Ghost of the Strategic Triangle," 207.

superior strength, Russia, identifying more with Europe than Asia and nostalgic of its Cold War superiority over China, is loath to the prospect of a role reversal in which it is the junior partner to an Asiatic ally, especially as it suspects it of subverting its own identity in Siberia.<sup>134</sup> At the same time, China's and Russia's opposing geopolitical strategies, while realist-driven on the surface, are in fact at least partially rooted in their unique identities, both national and as a great power. Although the United States is the state with the most material capability, China and Russia nevertheless look upon each other as the greater threat, being two great powers that have demonstrated a willingness to act as they feel a great power should in the face of the liberal order while having historical narratives that exacerbate mutual animosity.

Again, the objective of the following three case studies is to demonstrate the value of national identity as a complement to power in explaining the foreign policy behavior of great powers with realist-oriented leadership within their areas of core interest as well as relationship to each other. Realism is a strong theory that can explain a great deal. Living as we are in a material world, it is nearly impossible to not see the material motivation inherent in nearly every state-level decision. But power does not always leave a satisfying answer, especially when motivations appear to defy realist logic. In order to explain why states act aggressively and feel threatened in specific situations, constructivist theory is better equipped to supply an answer. To repeat the introduction, the decisions a state makes, even a realist state, are not always rational in the sense that the material ends justify the material means. Understanding why states act as they do is

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<sup>134</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 18, 21, 24.

fundamental for creating a more stable and therefore safer international environment.

The following work hopes to exhibit an effective way that goal can be accomplished.

## Chapter Two

### China and the South China Sea

Realist international relations theory holds that power is the determining variable for how a state behaves within the international system. The pursuit of power, it dictates, shapes a state's trajectory, predestining it to attempt to increase its strength relative to its rivals. But, as will be shown in the case study below involving China in the South China Sea, realism is limited in its ability to explain the foreign policy behavior of powerful states within their areas of core interest, including those that have leadership with a realist-oriented world view. While realism does a great deal to create an understanding of the material motivations for why China would be interested in the South China Sea and its methodical strategy therein, it fails to adequately explain why China would take the step of making it a core interest from which it cannot retreat rather than simply pursue its realist objectives there more subtly, a step which in turn dictates its stubborn behavior thereafter in assertively dominating and protecting that interest. More succinctly, power does not sufficiently explain the nature of a core interest through the Chinese perspective, which provides the reason China feels it must fear and challenge the United States in the region and cannot accept multilateral negotiations or militarily back down, especially to a Western power.

Constructivist theory picks up where realism leaves off; creating a fuller picture of what motivates China's foreign policy behavior within a core interest area such as the South China Sea. Contrary to realism, China is not exclusively identified by a static interest in expanding its power. Like all states, it has a unique national identity, consisting most importantly of a collective historical myth of hegemony, humiliation, and

rejuvenation mixed with hierarchical Confucian values and feelings of cultural superiority. When that national identity is inserted into the equation as an independent variable along with its identity as a great power, a more accurate understanding of Chinese core interest diplomacy and its consequent threat perceptions and behavior in the South China Sea emerges. In this way, identity complements power, permitting a better comprehension of the Chinese perspective and an increased ability to predict future trends.

The case study below will examine Chinese foreign policy behavior in the South China Sea, first through the realist then the constructivist perspective. It will begin with an assessment of the current situation in the South China Sea for contextual background purposes then proceed to the respective theoretical perspectives in turn. The study will then turn to Beijing's power-related motivations for its policy in the South China Sea, consisting of material, security, and economic concerns, which realists argue is the explanation for China's behavior. Following this, it will explain the identity-related reasons for why Beijing treats the South China Sea as a core interest and why, in order to maintain the legitimacy of its regime, it can now no longer afford to display any weakness therein, emphasizing the effect of the collective Chinese history and culture in influencing nationalist aspirations and threat perceptions. In the process, the case study will show why realism is inadequate for understanding China's assertive behavior in the area, primarily because anything less would risk a loss of the regime's legitimacy to rule. There must be another significant independent variable at play that informs a more ingrained national interest and explains these discrepancies in realist theory. That variable is identity.

## The Situation in the South China Sea

With the exception of Taiwan, nowhere has Chinese external behavior appeared more assertive than within the South China Sea. But there are some important differences between the nature of the tensions over those two places that highlight how the South China Sea is a new and particularly modern issue. Taiwan is an issue revolving entirely around sovereignty. China considers the island part of its historic sovereign territory, a perspective that is unlikely to change any time soon regardless of events in China, Taiwan, the Asia-Pacific region, or the world. The South China Sea, on the other hand, represents something more complex. Though directly adjacent to China geographically, it has not historically been a Chinese core interest. The realities of the modern world and modern China have only recently created the realist motivations for the country to adopt for it that elite and contentious status. A microcosm of the intricacies of 21<sup>st</sup> Century global geography, the South China Sea is a place where traditional ideas of nationalism and national sovereignty merge with globalization while the contradictory trends of economic interdependence and territorial conflict collide.<sup>135</sup>

But there is also a key similarity. In order to continue its growth as a great power, China feels that it must come to dominate the South China Sea. But, as with Taiwan, now that it has made the decision to pursue that aim and claim the sea as a core interest, Beijing must remain aggressively committed to its objective, as it has become a nationalistically charged goal tied together with its national identity. But China is not alone in an isolated setting. Many of its neighbors also lay claim to portions of the sea. At the same time, Chinese expansion has alarmed the United States. Should Beijing

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<sup>135</sup> Feng Liu, "China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order," *Issues & Studies* 49, no. 1 (March 2013), 100-101.

continue in its current trajectory and either Washington or one of China's neighbors refuse to budge, a conflict may be inevitable. Because China's unique national identity determines its foreign policy behavior within areas of core interest that is a very real possibility.

### **Chinese "Assertive" Behavior in the South China Sea**

China has made its maritime claims over the South China Sea abundantly clear. Known as the nine-dash line or "cow's tongue" due to its elongated shape, the Chinese claim extends south far below the seas parallel to the mainland through the heart of the South China Sea, engulfing the entirety of the Spratly Islands as far as the coast of Malaysia and east to the Philippines.<sup>136</sup> The "cow's tongue", as it lies far outside Chinese territorial waters as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS) is consequently extremely contentious.<sup>137</sup> In order to add historic national legitimacy and thus strengthen its claims, China cites its alleged discovery of the Spratly Islands during the Han Dynasty in the Second Century BC though, as Michael Yahuda interjects, Beijing provides no explanation for why its historic claims trump the numerous other historic claims of its neighbors.<sup>138</sup> Meanwhile, China demands that the other claimants seek its permission to explore for oil within their own exclusive economic zones (EEZ), a stipulation it does not conversely require of itself.<sup>139</sup> It also has extended annual fishing bans on foreign vessels, pressured foreign companies, restricted peacetime

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<sup>136</sup> Robert Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* (New York: Random House, 2014), 11.

<sup>137</sup> Michael Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 81 (January 2013), 447.

<sup>138</sup> Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 41-42; Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness," 457.

<sup>139</sup> Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness," 451.

vessels, and warned its neighbors against conducting military exercises.<sup>140</sup> At the same time, it provocatively escorts its own fishing vessels with armed ships and conducts numerous exercises throughout disputed areas.<sup>141</sup>

Consistent with other core interests, China has been stubborn in how it presses its claims in the South China Sea by refusing all offers of international mediation. Beijing is only open to discussing its maritime claims in the South China Sea bilaterally, insisting that international institutions have no authority to pass judgment on Chinese sovereignty. It therefore rejects all offers of arbitration or adjudication by the International Court of Justice at The Hague or even within the framework of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).<sup>142</sup> “Foreign intervention,” cautioned a spokesman from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “will not help settle the issue (sovereignty) but will complicate it instead and is not conducive to peace, stability, and development of the region.” Former Premier Wen Jiabao reinforced that sentiment with a similar statement at an ASEAN summit soon after.<sup>143</sup>

Beijing is especially hostile to any American interference on the issue.<sup>144</sup> Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiechi provided a typical over-reaction to American interjection by responding to Hillary Clinton’s assertion at the July 2010 ASEAN Regional Forum that maritime claims should be based on continental shelves as “virtually an attack on

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<sup>140</sup> Björn Jerdén, “The Assertive China Narrative: Why It Is Wrong and How So Many Still Bought Into It,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2014), 75; Amitai Etzioni, “China: Making An Adversary,” *International Politics* 48, no. 6 (2011), 653.

<sup>141</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited: The Strident Turn,” *Journal of Contemporary China* 22, no. 82 (2013), 547.

<sup>142</sup> Yahuda, “China’s New Assertiveness,” 449-451.

<sup>143</sup> Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “US-China Relations: US Pivot to Asia Leaves China Off Balance,” *Comparative Connections* 12, no. 3 (2012), 31.

<sup>144</sup> Yahuda, “China’s New Assertiveness,” 449.

China.”<sup>145</sup> Beijing has accordingly warned the nations of Southeast Asia to avoid coordinating with outside powers in regards to their territorial disputes with China, meaning implicitly the United States.<sup>146</sup> American desires to mediate the various territorial disputes rest upon their desire for freedom of the seas in the extremely vital South China Sea. In order to thwart those efforts, China has proposed a maritime cooperation fund with the ASEAN countries, signaling both its pacific intentions and that an American presence is not necessary to keep the area open to trade.<sup>147</sup> Upon being questioned about American efforts to influence events in the South China Sea, Major General Luo Yuan quipped that the United States should instead, “get its own house in order.”<sup>148</sup>

But China cannot physically hold onto its claims in the South China Sea with any degree of certainty or permanence. American naval and air superiority in the waters off East Asia currently prevent any such ambitions from becoming reality. It also deters China from escalating relatively minor incidents into full blown wars with its smaller neighbors. While American power in East Asia rests on its naval strength, Chinese power rests on its land forces. Consequently, it is at sea where China’s interests are contested and where it wishes to balance against American power. Currently, argues Robert Ross, China can only balance in those places accessible to land forces, such as the Korean Peninsula, but is hoping to gradually alter the situation by focusing on key strategies and technologies that many believe could undermine America’s ability to

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<sup>145</sup> Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, 62.

<sup>146</sup> Thomas J. Christensen, “The Advantages of an Assertive China: Responding to Beijing’s Abrasive Diplomacy,” *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 2 (March/April 2011), 54-67.

<sup>147</sup> Gerald Chan, “The Rise of Multipolarity, the Reshaping of Order: China in a Brave New World?” *International Journal of Chinese Studies* 4, no. 1 (April 2013), 9.

<sup>148</sup> Glaser and Billingsley, “US-China Relations,” 32.

guarantee regional security.<sup>149</sup> Accordingly, China has largely pursued a strategy of anti-access and area-denial (AA/AD), which would threaten American surface fleets and even regional land bases. The primary purpose of AA/AD, Ashley Tellis explains, is to prevent Taiwanese secession, but it is also being expanded into the wider Pacific, especially within the South China Sea.<sup>150</sup> China's main submarine installation, for example, is on Hainan Island, where by 2020 it hopes to have nearly 80 subs in commission.<sup>151</sup> China cannot openly defeat American air and naval forces in the waters off East Asia with air and naval forces of its own, but with AA/AD it could severely elevate the cost to any American force that approaches the Chinese mainland, thus undermining American obligations to its allies and strengthening its own claims in the region.<sup>152</sup> It is the Chinese desire, the Pentagon believes, to continuously expand the zone in which it can endanger its adversaries, especially through its improving missile technology.<sup>153</sup>

Recently, however, many fear that China is beginning to move away from a purely AA/AD approach in the South China Sea, most notably indicated by land reclamations within the Spratly Islands and a concurrent increase in naval power. During the course of the last two years, China has expanded the size of its islands by some 2,000

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<sup>149</sup> Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (July-September 2006), 368.

<sup>150</sup> Ashley L. Tellis, "US-China Relations in a Realist World," in *Tangled Titans: The United States and China*, edited by David Shambaugh (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2013), 88.

<sup>151</sup> Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 14, 43.

<sup>152</sup> Tellis, "US-China Relations in a Realist World," 89; Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 26-27.

<sup>153</sup> Simon Denyer, "Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as 'national interests' grow," *msn.com*, last modified June 16, 2015, <http://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/chinese-military-sets-course-to-expand-global-reach-as-%e2%80%99national-interests%e2%80%99-grow/ar-BBkgNeQ?ocid=iehp>.

acres.<sup>154</sup> According to the Chinese Foreign Ministry, those reclamations, which consist of dredging reefs in order to construct artificial land, are for purposes of search and rescue, disaster relief, and environmental protection. But considering the facilities China is placing on those islands, including at least one airstrip and an airborne early warning radar system, Washington is skeptical.<sup>155</sup> Those facilities could easily be used as a means to expand the Chinese reach further into the Pacific or at the very least impose air and naval restriction in the immediate region.<sup>156</sup>

In fact, despite its assertions of peaceful intent, Beijing has not denied the possible military implications of the land reclamations. It has clearly stated as recently as May 2015 that it intends to extend its global military reach in order to protect its economic interests and defend its territorial claims at sea, especially against the “meddling” of the United States. While the Chinese State Council announced plans to increase its naval defenses for purposes of “international security cooperation,” it also made clear that there is a specifically Chinese interest involved as well. In the words of Senior Colonel Wang Jin, “China has made it a strategic goal to become a maritime power...Offshore-waters defense alone can no longer provide an effective defense of the country’s maritime interests.”<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Steven Jiang, “Chinese official: U.S. has ulterior motives over South China Sea,” *CNN.com*, last modified June 16, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/26/asia/china-south-china-sea-dispute/>.

<sup>155</sup> Sui-Lee Wee, “China says about to finish some land reclamations in South China Sea,” *Reuters*, last modified June 16, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/china-says-finish-land-reclamation-south-china-sea-030731439.html>.

<sup>156</sup> “Rift Grows over South China Sea as Japan Joins US-Australia Military Exercises,” *Reuters*, last modified June 16, 2015, <http://www.newsweek.com/south-china-sea-rift-grows-japan-joins-us-australian-military-exercise-335519>.

<sup>157</sup> Denyer, “Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as ‘national interests’ grow.”

In conjunction with the land reclamations, China has augmented its naval hardware, which appears to be progressively of an offensive nature. The refitting of an old Soviet aircraft carrier purchased from Ukraine that is now equipped with multiple warheads caused an immense stir in the region. Beijing has said that it hopes to construct more carriers by 2020.<sup>158</sup> Along with the carrier, China has also recently deployed guided-missile warships complete with supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles. The United States Office of Naval Intelligence admitted, “Major qualitative improvements are occurring within naval aviation and the submarine force, which are increasingly capable of striking targets hundreds of miles from the Chinese mainland...it is emerging as a well-equipped and competent force.”<sup>159</sup>

China’s behavior and buildup in the South China Sea has increasingly placed it at odds with those of its neighbors that have their own claims to portions of the sea. Despite the numerous Chinese declarations of good neighborliness, over the course of the last decade there have been a number of incidents in which China has quite contradictorily physically asserted its claims. In May of 2011, for example, a Vietnamese oil exploration mission resulted in a Chinese show of force off the Vietnamese coast that prompted popular protests in Vietnam. Even more menacing was a standoff between a Chinese and a Filipino fleet in April 2012 that took place a mere 130 miles off the coast of the Philippines, which began with the attempted arrest of an illegal Chinese fishing

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<sup>158</sup> Christina Silva, “China Prepares For War? Chinese Aircraft Carrier, Fighter Jets Conduct Navy Drills Amid Rising South Sea Tensions,” *International Business Times*, last modified June 17, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/china-prepares-war-chinese-aircraft-carrier-fighter-jets-conduct-navy-drills-amid-1964361>.

<sup>159</sup> Bill Gertz, “U.S. warns of giant Chinese naval buildup: ‘Major qualitative improvements,’” *The Washington Times*, last modified June 17, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/apr/11/giant-chinese-naval-buildup-occurring-office-naval/>.

expedition at Huangyan Island. When the Philippines protested the aggressive Chinese posture, Beijing replied with sanctions. Inevitably, the Philippines backed down while the Chinese fleet remained in force.<sup>160</sup>

The recent land reclamations, which the United States do not recognize as Chinese territory and contends to be a means by which China can bully its neighbors, have escalated tensions still further.<sup>161</sup> While Vietnam claims twenty-one islands and the Philippines eight and both have stationed military forces on a number of those islands as well as increased their surface areas, neither can seriously challenge Chinese power nor have they constructed islands at the Chinese rate.<sup>162</sup> The Philippines feel especially threatened and has vowed to fight for the territory it believes to be its own. Condescending comments such as that by Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying that “China will not bully small countries, but small countries must not ceaselessly and willfully make trouble,” have hardly served to help calm matters.<sup>163</sup>

But heightened tensions within the South China Sea are not only caused by China’s behavior. A recent American re-emphasis on Asia dubbed the ‘pivot to Asia’ made in the context of the shift in the global balance of power eastward has also caused tensions to rise.<sup>164</sup> Many scholars agree that any American hegemony that may have once existed in East Asia is now long gone or, as Artyom Lukin argues, is at most an

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<sup>160</sup> Zhao, “Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited,” 548-550.

<sup>161</sup> Simon Denyer, “Tensions rise between Washington and Beijing over man-made islands,” *Washington Post*, last modified June 16, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/tensions-rise-between-washington-and-beijing-over-man-made-islands/2015/05/13/e88b5de6-f8bd-11e4-a47c-e56f4db884ed\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/tensions-rise-between-washington-and-beijing-over-man-made-islands/2015/05/13/e88b5de6-f8bd-11e4-a47c-e56f4db884ed_story.html).

<sup>162</sup> William Johnson, “The South China Sea Conflict: What’s It All About?” *Business Today*, last modified June 16, 2015, <http://businesstoday.intoday.in/story/south-china-sea-conflict-what-it-all-about/1/220624.html>.

<sup>163</sup> Denyer, “Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as ‘national interests’ grow.”

<sup>164</sup> Liu, “China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order,” 126.

incomplete hegemony as the United States does not have the acceptance of all the key regional players.<sup>165</sup> The US is not an absolute power, says Feng Liu. Its position will decline in the context of China's rise, especially in the wake of the recent financial crisis. Consequently, he convincingly argues, East Asian security is not provided by the United States alone, but rather by American military power and Chinese economic benefits, which are increasing as the US shows less willingness to sustain and strengthen the supply of regional public goods and a larger desire to obtain its own benefits.<sup>166</sup> Now, with the growing strength and influence of China, the United States is practicing its own version of assertive behavior as it tries to salvage its own stake in the region. Meanwhile, those nations that feel threatened by China's rise are attempting to balance by strengthening their ties with the US, which serves to increase Washington's motivation to protect them against China in the South China Sea and elsewhere. Though the US claims to not take sides on issues of sovereignty, it clearly is opposed to Chinese expansion.<sup>167</sup> It is inevitable, writes Ashley Tellis, that China will attempt to drive a wedge between the US and the other regional states.<sup>168</sup> Furthermore, and perhaps most critically, it has long been part of Washington's global grand strategy to prevent any one power from dominating its local region in order to protect its own global preeminence.<sup>169</sup> In East Asia, China appears to be a serious long term threat in that regard. When the dispute

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<sup>165</sup> Artyom Lukin, "Russia and the Balance of Power in Northeast Asia," *Pacific Focus* 27, no. 2 (August 2012), 155.

<sup>166</sup> Liu, "China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order," 104, 118, 122-123.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid*, 116.

<sup>168</sup> Tellis, "US-China Relations in a Realist World," 92.

<sup>169</sup> Jeffrey Legro, "The Mix That Makes Unipolarity: Hegemonic Purpose and International Constraints," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 2 (June 2011), 187-188; David P. Calleo, *Follies of Power: America's Unipolar Fantasy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 50.

over the South China Sea is placed within the context of the general US-China rivalry, the situation becomes ever more combustible.

### **How dangerous is the situation?**

While the realist prospect of acquiring power based on resources and security tempts China into the South China Sea, as will be explored below it is the identity-driven idea that, as a rapidly growing power with an historic great power tradition in East Asia, the country has a right to the sea and an obligation towards its people to resist foreign intrusion and establish a predominance over its inferior neighbors that drives its behavior therein. China consequently must appease those internal nationalistic urges through what many scholars have deemed “assertive” behavior, such as seen in the examples above regarding its large claims and military standoffs with other claimants. Failure to do so or an appearance of weakness could cause a serious loss of domestic legitimacy for the regime in Beijing.

China’s self-identification as an emerging great power and the center of East Asia has manifested itself in a number of ways, but before assessing whether or not Chinese behavior in the South China Sea has been assertive, it is important to define exactly what assertive means, something that many scholars and media that use the phrase fail to do. There is, as Alastair Johnston points out, no consensus in international relations literature on its meaning in foreign policy.<sup>170</sup> Björn Jerdén is one of the few who attempts a definition, calling it the tendency to achieve goals and resolve common problems

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<sup>170</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, “How New and Assertive Is China’s New Assertiveness?” *International Security* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2013), 9.

involving the United States and its allies by confrontational means.<sup>171</sup> Johnston adds that an increasing assertiveness implies the increasing of the costs of actions for those in opposition to the assertive country.<sup>172</sup> It should further be added that assertive behavior has often been implied as any behavior that earns condemnation by the general liberal international order, which typically includes the United States. For the purposes of this work, external assertive behavior will thus be defined as foreign policy initiatives that garner condemnation from and risks confrontation with the US, either directly or through states with which it is friendly.

As described in the section above, China's assertiveness has certainly been made clear in the South China Sea, where, like Taiwan and Tibet, it has recently begun to practice core interest diplomacy in which a line in the sand is drawn (in this case a nine-dash line) and it refuses to treat the issue within that line as an international affair up for mediation or debate.<sup>173</sup> There are a number of scholars, however, who hold that the alleged increase in assertive Chinese behavior is only a myth. Among them is Johnston, who argues that claims of assertion are typically examples of ahistoricism, or the assumption that trends and events are new and different without having ever examined the past or made any effort to examine how other countries act in similar situations over similar issues.<sup>174</sup> Scholars such as Johnston, Jerdén, and Amitai Etzioni are correct to point out that, with few exceptions, Chinese behavior has not suddenly become more

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<sup>171</sup> Jerdén, "The Assertive China Narrative," 49.

<sup>172</sup> Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" 10.

<sup>173</sup> Kai He and Huiyun Feng, "Debating China's Assertiveness: Taking China's Power and Interests Seriously," *International Politics* 49, no. 5 (2012), 640.

<sup>174</sup> Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" 33-34.

assertive in the past seven years.<sup>175</sup> Most of the issues and Chinese reactions to those issues are the same as they have been since the conclusion of the Cold War. There is no identifiable threshold of power that China or any other state will reach that will lead it to completely alter its behavior so suddenly. For a country that approaches balancing as measured as does China its degree of assertiveness can only be expected to increase parallel to the pace of its power relative to the United States. But while it may be disputed whether or not Chinese assertiveness is a new phenomenon generally speaking, its assertive behavior in the South China Sea is more arguably a relatively recent development. Here, China's self-identification as an emerging power and the need for the regime to maintain its legitimacy by rejuvenating the Chinese national identity have taken on a life of their own in a particularly new and modern way.

One thing that is certain, however, is that the South China Sea has taken on a vastly increased importance within Chinese foreign policy and for the country as a whole. Chinese media references to sovereignty issues nearly all revolve around the South China Sea, an almost amazing fact given the continued situation regarding Taiwan.<sup>176</sup> The sea has even become an agenda within the Chinese education system, which helps inform the wider public of China's sovereign rights.<sup>177</sup> While a number of scholars, including Johnston, posit that there is no hard evidence that China has ever stated the South China Sea to be a non-negotiable core issue like Taiwan or Tibet, it has not made a strong effort to deny the claim either and has more recently displayed the opposite standpoint through

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<sup>175</sup> Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" 7-9, 14, 16-17, 22, 30-32; Jerdén, 54, 60-61, 71; Etzioni, 654-655. Throughout these pages, Johnston, Jerdén, and Etzioni argue against the individual instances typically cited as examples of a new Chinese assertiveness in foreign policy.

<sup>176</sup> Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" 13.

<sup>177</sup> Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," 454.

its land reclamations. In August 2013, the *Beijing Review* denied a core interest status for the whole sea, but at the same time ambiguously made that claim over certain islands.<sup>178</sup> There is little doubt that Johnston's contention that the lack of effort springs from a fear of a nationalistic backlash.<sup>179</sup> So critical is the Chinese identity in crafting its interests that even denying that an issue is a core interest once the public has already adopted it as such would be disastrous for the regime. Regardless, as He Kai and Huiyun Feng warn, a Chinese adoption of core interest diplomacy over the South China Sea would be particularly dangerous, as doing so would make any dispute over its claims a grounds for war, a not implausible prospect given the sudden escalation of tensions and numerous over-lapping claims of its southern neighbors.<sup>180</sup>

The Obama administration, meanwhile, has certainly become frustrated by China's behavior in the South China Sea, especially the land reclamations in the Spratlys, and has pledged to increase its military presence there.<sup>181</sup> But it has been extremely difficult for the United States to find ways of sending a force to the area as a mean to demonstrate that it does not recognize Chinese claims without risking an escalation that could lead to conflict, an option Washington finds itself forced towards as Beijing continues to ignore its objections. China has in fact warned the United States to steer clear as, according to Hua Chunying, "the freedom [of navigation] does not mean that

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<sup>178</sup> Gerald Chan, "Capturing China's International Identity: Social Evolution and Its Missing Links," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 7, no. 2 (Summer 2014), 272.

<sup>179</sup> Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" 18.

<sup>180</sup> He and Feng, "Debating China's Assertiveness," 641.

<sup>181</sup> Jiang, "Chinese official: U.S. has ulterior motives over South China Sea."

foreign military vessels and aircraft can enter one country's territorial waters and airspace at will."<sup>182</sup>

Although on the surface it appears very unlikely that in the nuclear age the United States and China would ever go to war over a handful of islands in the South China Sea, that possibility has in fact become increasingly realistic. The quest for power alone would probably not tempt China into an armed conflict with superior American forces simply because the power to be gained is negligible and in the end Beijing would almost certainly lose relative to its opponent. But the defense of a core interest as informed by identity may make a war much more palatable. While identity-fueled nationalism could cause China to stumble into a war amid mounting escalations that quickly spin out of control, its identity-driven threat perception of the US could have the same effect, making a preemptive war feel necessary in order to avoid certain defeat in the future. It is therefore imperative to understand how the Chinese identity plays a role in the South China Sea in order to work to thwart catastrophe.

### **The Realist Perspective**

Simply put, realists believe that through its actions in the South China Sea, China is doing what any other great power would do – attempting to maximize its power while protecting its economic and security interests. More accurately, in the tradition of historian Paul Kennedy, it is striving to balance the power of the current major power and the only one that has a truly global reach, the United States. Kennedy writes that all significant shifts in the world's military-power balances have followed alterations in productive balances and that the risings and fallings of the great powers are confirmed by

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<sup>182</sup> Denyer, "Tensions rise between Washington and Beijing over man-made islands."

wars in which victory has always gone to the side with greater material resources.<sup>183</sup> It is therefore only natural that China would continue to pursue increased power in a place that has much to materially offer like the South China Sea so as to put itself in a position to challenge American strength, possibly even through armed conflict. According to many realists, China's actions in fact betray the objective of becoming the hegemonic power of East Asia, just as the US has done in the Western Hemisphere. As Robert Gilpin explains, the modern objectives of states are to control larger slices of the world system so as to influence the behavior of others and the global economy.<sup>184</sup> While many like Jonathan Kirshner believe it would be suicidal for China to pursue such a goal, it cannot be discounted as China's ultimate objective.<sup>185</sup>

### **Material and Security Motivations**

Since the end of the Maoist era, the Chinese leadership has utilized realism to guide its foreign policy. The objective of acquiring power as dictated by realist theory certainly plays a large role in understanding China's motives in the South China Sea. For classical realists, the South China Sea represents an example of the expansion of the self-definition of interests that naturally corresponds with rising power. In other words, China must be viewed with apprehension, as its ambition will increase alongside its capabilities.<sup>186</sup> Rich in natural resources and controlling the sea lanes to Northeast Asia,

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<sup>183</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 432, 439.

<sup>184</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 23-24.

<sup>185</sup> Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (March 2012), 64.

<sup>186</sup> Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism," 54, 58.

the South China Sea would most certainly provide a boost in material power to China or any other country that successfully dominates the area.

Realism is most valuable in explaining why China or other regional countries would wish to have a strong influence over the South China Sea, as the pursuit of pure material power and security does a great deal to explain the lure of the South China Sea as opposed to other nearby regions. Whether a burgeoning great power like China or one of its smaller neighboring states like Vietnam, Malaysia, or the Philippines, a stake in the South China Sea would prove beneficial in an economic and material sense. Containing over seven million barrels of proven oil reserves as well as 900 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, the South China Sea would be a valuable prize for any nation that can manage or otherwise acquire a means of extracting that energy, even if the yields are unlikely to transform them into an energy exporter. For the smaller nations, even a fraction of such an acquisition could provide a stimulus to its economy. For China on the other hand, which consumes 10% of the world's oil and 20% of its total energy, the reserves of the South China Sea may only increase its power marginally, but will nevertheless assist in sustaining its existing power by bolstering the country's continued economic explosion, which, as will be discussed below, is a critical consideration in all Chinese foreign policy decisions.<sup>187</sup>

But there is a second physical characteristic of the South China Sea that proves more important to China than its smaller neighbors – geographic location. Half of the world's annual merchant fleet passes through the four straits leading into the South China Sea, the straits of Malacca, Sunda, Lombok, and Makassar, making the area a chokepoint

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<sup>187</sup> Kaplan, *Asia's Cauldron*, 10, 171.

extremely relevant to the modern global economy. The majority of energy bound for East Asia, especially Northeast Asia, passes through those straits and into the South China Sea, including 80% of Chinese oil imports.<sup>188</sup> It can consequently be well understood why the South China Sea factors into Chinese thinking in a realist sense. Complete control of the sea, which could only realistically be accomplished by a large state, would increase power in two significant ways. First, it would provide China with security, as it would not have to worry about being cut-off from vital imports so close to its own shore. Certainly from the realist perspective of weighing pure power capabilities that potential is a real fear. Chinese scholar Li Xiguang, for example, reflected such anxiety when he suggested in somewhat exaggerated fashion that American attempts to improve relations with Burma were for the purpose of cutting off an energy land route to China, thus forcing it to rely more heavily on the South China Sea, which the United States could then blockade at will.<sup>189</sup> As Michael Yahuda accordingly notes, with the expansion of global trade comes the concern over trade route security, giving China a reason to extend its interests into adjacent seas and supply lines.<sup>190</sup> “With the growth of China’s national interests,” said Senior Colonel Zhang Yuguo, “the security of our overseas energy and resources, strategic lines of communication and safety of our overseas institutions, personnel and assets have become prominent issues.”<sup>191</sup>

Second, controlling the South China Sea would give China leverage over its two most powerful regional rivals, Japan and South Korea, as it would possess the ability to threaten their trade route security. Leverage over Japan would be particularly valuable,

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid, 9.

<sup>189</sup> Glaser and Billingsley, “US-China Relations,” 32.

<sup>190</sup> Yahuda, “China’s New Assertiveness in the South China Sea,” 449.

<sup>191</sup> Denyer, “Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as ‘national interests’ grow.”

as Japan, by far China's strongest local challenger, has been encouraged by the United States to pursue a more assertive foreign policy, both regionally and internationally.<sup>192</sup> Should there ever be a power vacuum created through an American exit of the region it is Japan, argues Rex Li, which would pose the most likely competition for regional hegemony.<sup>193</sup> Here, United States interests are directly challenged as Japan and South Korea are American allies and the US serves as the guarantor of their oil from the Middle East. Any disruption to the economic openness of the Asia-Pacific would endanger regional prosperity and Washington's relations with its friends and allies, a prospect that makes China's expansion in the South China Sea directly harmful to the United States.<sup>194</sup>

### **Motivated by a Fear of Instability**

Beijing also has other, more personal reasons for pursuing its interests in the South China Sea that relate to power, namely political power. Its aggressive foreign policy is partially utilized to divert attention away from the social problems endemic to China's exceedingly rapid growth.<sup>195</sup> China has not only turned its foreign policy toward the South China Sea for practical realist reasons of material power and, as will be seen, treated it as a core interest to help satiate its unique national identity and identity as an emerging great power, but also as a defensive mechanism to prevent internal instability. There is a very real threat within China that failure to acquire the means to sustain its growth could have dire consequences for both the regime and the country.

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<sup>192</sup> Liu, "China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order," 115.

<sup>193</sup> Rex Li, "Security Challenge of an Ascendant China: Great Power Emergence and International Stability," in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004), 26.

<sup>194</sup> Robert Art, "The United States and the Rise of China: Implications for the Long Haul," *Political Science Quarterly* 125, no. 3 (Fall 2010), 380-381.

<sup>195</sup> Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited," 546.

Beijing has for many decades used nationalism to ensure domestic stability, but now, with Chinese society having more room for activism and mobilization, it is becoming increasingly difficult to control that nationalism, as will be discussed in greater detail below. While nationalism is employed to draw attention away from internal problems, it can also serve to highlight the leadership's failures.<sup>196</sup> Nationalist criticism may provide a path to unifying various protests against the regime, which are largely generated by conditions within China that could be at least partly eased through the physical benefits accrued by dominating the South China Sea.<sup>197</sup> There has indeed been a rise in "mass incidents" indicating a society in turmoil.<sup>198</sup> Many analysts fear that China's explosive economic growth, while a phenomenal boon in the short-term, could prove disastrous in the long-term should the country fail to deal adequately with the domestic social, economic, and political tensions that naturally arise from rapid change. China's leadership is well aware and heavily influenced by such a prospect, including within its foreign policy.<sup>199</sup> In order to deal with these changes, particularly a rising standard of living and the popular demands associated with it, China must continue its monumental economic growth. The resources of the South China Sea, as well as the protection of the area's vital shipping lanes, would go a long way towards securing that objective.

The majority of analysts agree that the most important concern for the regime in Beijing is remaining in power. The preservation of social stability is consequently vastly

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<sup>196</sup> Camilla T.N. Sørensen, "Is China Becoming More Aggressive? A Neoclassical Realist Analysis," *Asian Perspectives* 37, no. 3 (July-September 2013), 364-377.

<sup>197</sup> Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," 54-67.

<sup>198</sup> Barbara Onnis, "Has China Plans for World Domination?" *Comparative Civilizations Review* 68 (Spring 2013), 58.

<sup>199</sup> Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited," 537.

more imperative than any other issue, including international concerns.<sup>200</sup> With hints of possible in-fighting among the next generation of the regime's leadership, Chinese fears may have recently become even more acute.<sup>201</sup> In this way, China's stance over the South China Sea can be viewed in zero sum terms. In other words, in order to do what it can to ensure massive growth and stability, which would in turn ensure the regime's power, it must deliver on the physical benefits associated with the South China Sea for both the population and an increasingly independent military, hence explaining Beijing's assertive behavior in the region. But Beijing must also be cautious. Acting too aggressively could trigger a counter-balancing effort by the United States or its allies that could cost China everything.

### **A Strategy to Protect Economic Growth**

In late 2003, the Chair of the China Reform Forum and Executive Vice President of the CPC Central Party School, Zheng Bijian, proposed a general foreign policy for China that he coined "peaceful rise." It was, as Barbara Onnis emphasizes, Beijing's attempt to avoid counter-balancing in East Asia by assuring its neighbors and the United States that China's rise is an opportunity rather than a danger.<sup>202</sup> In this way, realism explains the methodical strategy by which China pursues its objectives regarding the South China Sea. Beijing understands that it must pursue its objectives in the South China Sea and elsewhere in order to avoid an economic slowdown or stagnation. But it also understands that if it pursues those objectives too aggressively it could trigger an international backlash that defeats the purpose or, in the pursuit of its regional goals,

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<sup>200</sup> Onnis, "Has China Plans for World Domination?" 59.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid*, 58.

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

adopt policies that cause it to fatally fall off course. As the neoclassical realist Randall Schweller wrote, a state's decision on whether to balance against threats is based on domestic political factors.<sup>203</sup> In the case of China in the South China Sea, its decision on whether to attempt to aggressively balance American power in the region is based on the possible effect that such a strategy would have on the country's growth and stability, and hence the future of the regime. Beijing must as a consequence walk lightly as the economic risk of over-asserting itself is perceived to be very high. In fact, Beijing is so concerned about international reaction, especially that of the United States, that it substituted the term "peaceful rise" for the more benevolent sounding "peaceful development."<sup>204</sup>

China has likewise adopted the strategy of "peaceful rise/development" for the South China Sea where it believes a steady, methodical pace of progress and balancing is most prudent. While China views itself as an emerging great power, it also believes time is on its side. It would be counter-productive to overly-assert itself before such efforts could realistically bear successful results. In other words, it chooses to wait until there is a greater degree of power parity between itself and the United States, which it believes will eventually occur. In the meantime, it will pursue its goals in the South China Sea as it must, but do so only to the extent at which it can avoid an American reaction that would reverse its current gains.

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<sup>203</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>204</sup> Fareed Zakaria, *The Post-American World, Release 2.0* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 119; Susan Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009), 169.

The most imposing physical threat to China related to the South China Sea is the possibility of its vital sea lanes ever being held captive by the dominant maritime strength of the United States. While that threat, recently re-manifested in President Obama's 'pivot to Asia,' generates a significant reason to act assertively within the South China sea, it also compels China to act more prudently therein. Unlike on the Asian mainland, where an American strike would be costly for the attacker, the sheer American air and naval power in the Pacific would allow Washington to deliver a crippling blow to the Chinese at a relatively low cost to itself. Even setting military action aside, any economic retaliation against China would be detrimental to Beijing, even if it proves costly to the United States as well. Should either occur, the economic slowdown and domestic instability that the regime fears so greatly could very likely become an unavoidable reality as a result.

There are a number of means by which China pursues "peaceful rise/development" that influence its strategy in the South China Sea. Firstly, China is very keen to avoid a costly arms race which, similar to triggering a physical American reaction, would be counter-productive to its need to continue its rapid economic expansion. Beijing took serious note of the calamity that occurred in the Soviet Union following Moscow's decision to engage in an expensive arms race with Washington and has no interest in going down that same road, including even the expansion and modernization of its nuclear weaponry.<sup>205</sup> The Soviet example consequently provides another clear vindication for an AA/AD strategy in the South China Sea, as it is relatively

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<sup>205</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Global Power to the East* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008), 82.

cost efficient. Although China has increased its military budget as of late, it still does not approach that of the United States.<sup>206</sup>

Another means by which China practices “peaceful rise/development” that is clearly manifested within the South China Sea is to accomplish as much as possible while attempting to fly under the radar. China is certainly exuding a great deal of patience relative to most historic powers with potential hegemonic ambitions and feels time is on its side. Realists John Mearsheimer and Christopher Layne suggest that this is simply a means of bidding time in order to eventually establish that hegemony in East Asia.<sup>207</sup> Such fears have drawn the country a degree of negative attention, undercutting its frequent multipolar rhetoric.<sup>208</sup> In an attempt to deflect international attention, China has attempted to humbly frame itself as a developing country, talking down its tremendous economic success and in the process providing a national self-identity for global consumption that, as will be seen below, is contrary to that it truly possesses internally.<sup>209</sup> Self-deprecation has even become official policy. At the same Party conference in 2009 that recognized a change in the global balance of power, officials also emphasized the utilization of soft power over hard in order to maintain a low profile.<sup>210</sup>

Speaking at a forum organized by the China Institute of International Studies (CIIS), Assistant Foreign Minister Le Yucheng reiterated the contrarian image that

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<sup>206</sup> Megha Rajagopalan, “China defense budget rise to defy slowing economy,” *Reuters*, last modified June 20, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/03/04/us-china-parliament-defence-idUSKBNOM009120150304>.

<sup>207</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia,” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (2010), 389; Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Exit: Beyond Pax Americana,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 2 (June 2011), 152.

<sup>208</sup> Turner, “Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order,” 169; Barthélémy Courmont, “Promoting Multilateralism or Searching for a New Hegemony: A Chinese Vision of Multipolarity,” *Pacific Focus* 27, no. 2 (August 2012), 193.

<sup>209</sup> Layne, “The Unipolar Exit,” 152.

<sup>210</sup> Yahuda, “China’s New Assertiveness in the South China Sea,” 447.

Beijing wishes to provide to the rest of the world saying, “China is the second largest economy but not the second strongest economy. China is unable to fully play the role as a major country.”<sup>211</sup> Le’s words are revealing. As discussed above, playing down China’s growing strength and emerging power status is a means to help avoid a counter-balance, which as Onnis notes is a huge factor in Chinese strategic thinking.<sup>212</sup> But, as many analysts contend, it is also an excuse through which China can avoid international responsibilities expected by the liberal international order. As Camilla Sørensen emphasizes, China is caught in the difficult position of having to contend with increasing international pressure to act as a responsible stakeholder while having to meet the growing expectations of its people.<sup>213</sup> For Beijing, the success of China’s rise largely rests on its continued ability to spend its resources on only its own core interests, which accordingly is the third important means to ensure the success of “peaceful rise/development”.<sup>214</sup>

### **Does China Have Hegemonic Ambitions?**

The Chinese recognition of their rise in power is, as realist theory suggests, viewed in relative terms - that is in relation to the other major powers in the global arena, most importantly the United States. According to realist theory, a state will always desire more power, but states are only concerned about their power relative to others rather than massing absolute power. Without reference to those competitors within the arena that could threaten their survival, absolute power is all but meaningless.<sup>215</sup> According to

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<sup>211</sup> Onnis, “Has China Plans for World Domination?” 57.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid*, 63.

<sup>213</sup> Sørensen, “Is China Becoming More Aggressive?” 365.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid*, 373.

<sup>215</sup> Mearsheimer, “Anarchy and the Struggle for Power,” in *International Politics: Enduring*

Christopher Layne, China is aware that the balance of global power is shifting away from the US towards East Asia.<sup>216</sup> Beijing has considered that trend inevitable since 2001 and it was in fact one of the main themes of the Party's Central Work Conference on Foreign Affairs in July 2009, where the delegation cited the growth of China's GDP in comparison to that of the US and their comparative handling of the global financial crisis as evidence of the shift. President Obama's visit later that year, in which he requested assistance in combating global issues, served to further emphasize American weakness and Chinese strength.<sup>217</sup> Coming right on the heels of the global financial crisis of 2008, which many blamed on an increasingly dysfunctional West, such events did a great deal to foster Chinese popular nationalism. The Chinese leadership could scarcely fail to note how the Western economies dangled close to the edge while its own quickly recovered.<sup>218</sup>

Is China seeking to take advantage of this situation? A number of scholars believe that the developments in the South China Sea are symptomatic of a rising power striving to acquire regional hegemony. Among them is offensive realist John Mearsheimer, who argues that China recognizes that the best way to rival the United States is to become the regional hegemon of East Asia, similar to America's accomplishment in its own hemisphere. Mearsheimer even envisions a future Chinese version of the Monroe Doctrine, in which the United States is kicked completely out of the Asia-Pacific region.<sup>219</sup> Another is Robert Kaplan, who argues that China will pursue regional hegemony regardless of the type of government that wields power in Beijing,

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*Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 54.

<sup>216</sup> Layne, "The Unipolar Exit," 160.

<sup>217</sup> Gilbert Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought Toward Asia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 110; Yahuda, 447.

<sup>218</sup> Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited," 543, 545.

<sup>219</sup> Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm: China's Challenge to US Power in Asia, 389.

writing that China will push the Americans out of East Asia just as the United States did to the Europeans in the Americas.<sup>220</sup> Naturally, China has been quick to deny any ambition to “seek hegemony or divide up spheres of influence.”<sup>221</sup> What is almost assured, however, is that, as realism would predict, China’s timing is driven by its perceptions of an American decline and, despite the ‘pivot to Asia’, lack of willpower to resist Chinese encroachments on the other side of the world.<sup>222</sup>

Whether or not scholars such as Mearsheimer and Kaplan are correct in their assessment of the long-term historical trend remains to be seen. Above it has been demonstrated that realism can explain China’s motivations for increased involvement in the South China Sea as well as its general strategy and timing therein. All of this, according to realists, indicates that China, as a rising power, is acting as other rising powers have in the past in seeking to balance against the current hegemon by becoming a hegemon in its own region. The South China Sea, realists would thus explain, is simply the next logical step in that pursuit, making the most sense right now because of the material, security, and economic benefits and concerns associated with it.

While there is little doubt that realism’s explanation that the pursuit of power accurately portrays China’s motivations in making the South China Sea an interest, what it does not satisfactorily explain is why it would do so knowing that core interest diplomacy is a zero sum game and challenges the whole premise of “peaceful rise/development.” The material resources of the South China Sea, though apparent, are not extensive or easily accessible, making them hardly worth the trouble of securing in

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<sup>220</sup> Kaplan, *Asia’s Cauldron*, 24, 44.

<sup>221</sup> Denyer, “Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as ‘national interests’ grow”

<sup>222</sup> Rozman, *Chinese Strategic Thought Toward Asia*, 115.

the face of possible confrontation. Furthermore, if the United States desired to cut off Chinese sea routes, it could easily do so in the Indian Ocean, making Chinese domination of the South China Sea a moot point in that regard. In the same vein, the US could supply its allies Japan and Korea, though at a great cost, by traveling around the South China Sea, rendering any Chinese attempt to squeeze its rivals ineffective. Naturally, Beijing understands in a very realist sense that the capabilities of the US allows it to easily thwart any such designs, yet it continues to assert itself aggressively in the South China Sea regardless. Realism argues that China does not fear that the US has the strength or willpower to resist its activities, meaning Beijing's efforts are pure opportunism. Realists also argue that as long as it maintains a cautious "peaceful rise/development" strategy it has less chance of facing a counter-balancing backlash. But none of this explains why the regime feels it must take the extreme step of making the South China Sea a core interest comparable to Taiwan from which it knows there is no turning back rather than simply pursue its aims there in a less obvious manner. Furthermore, realism fails to adequately explain the nature of a core interest from the Chinese perspective and why the regime rightfully fears a loss of legitimacy should it soften its approach in the South China Sea. In order to predict whether or not China is seeking regional hegemony or merely has limited aims in the region, as well as predict its foreign policy in general, it is necessary to fill in this explanatory gap. For that, identity as an independent variable must be introduced.

### **The Role of Identity**

Although it has not officially deemed the South China Sea to be a core interest, China has, as evidenced above, certainly created that perception both internally and internationally. Given that to be the case, whereas Beijing may have previously been able to utilize a more measured and diplomatic approach to achieve its local objectives, it now must demonstrate its strength and national will much more assertively and cannot, without risking the loss of its legitimacy to rule, back down to the verbal or physical protestations of its neighbors or the United States. It may indeed move gradually and cautiously within the South China Sea as realism would predict in order to attempt to avoid counter-balancing, but should that counter-balancing occur, however unlikely, it will be difficult if not impossible for China to retreat, even in the face of an unfavorable cost/benefit analysis.

The reason for this lies in the nature of a core interest itself. As a core interest, the South China Sea now represents the honor and pride of the nation as informed by its historical narrative and culture. The regime in Beijing consciously adopted the South China Sea as a core interest in order to incite a nationalistic spirit at home that would allow it to maintain national unity in the face of problems associated with its explosive economic growth, pursue realist objectives to help sustain that growth, and, as will be seen, live up to the norms and interests of the identity it champions. Now that it has done so, it must continue to live up to popular expectations or norms for how the country should behave regarding that core interest through physical action or risk a loss of ruling legitimacy. But domination of the South China Sea is not an interest in and of itself. Instead it is a manifestation of an interest that already existed as informed by the Chinese

unique national identity to once again become the most influential power in East Asia, a role China does not view as identical to the Western concept of hegemony. As constructivist scholar Peter J. Katzenstein would argue, the regime in Beijing co-opted the Chinese historical and cultural narrative, but it did not “discover” it or its associated interests and norms.<sup>223</sup> Consequently, identity matters greatly and is why constructivism provides a complementary explanation to realism for China’s behavior in the South China Sea.

The following section will discuss the important role of China’s identity as an independent variable determining its foreign policy behavior in the South China Sea, specifically why Beijing must be stubbornly assertive now that it has all but officially adopted the region as a core interest. First, it will uncover China’s unique national identity itself, explaining its historical and cultural narratives, specifically noting its history in relation to East Asia and the West and the role Confucianism plays in regards to its neighbors. It will then discuss China’s identity as a great power, which is informed by both its national identity and power capabilities and, as Ted Hopf argues, comes with its own set of interests and norms.<sup>224</sup> Concurrently, it will show how Chinese identity informs threat perception, which plays a vital role in understanding why the South China Sea is an ideal place to defend national integrity. Finally, the section will conclude by discussing the explanation behind China’s behavior in the South China Sea itself, that

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<sup>223</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, “Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security,” in *The Cultural of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>224</sup> Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998), 176.

being the need to assert itself in order to meet identity-driven nationalistic expectations or risk losing the legitimacy to rule.

### **The Chinese National Identity**

China's unique national identity is shaped by a three-part historical narrative of superiority, humiliation, and rejuvenation. The first phase, which forges China's traditional role in a regional sense, consists of the period between Chinese unification in the third century B.C.E. until roughly the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when Western nations came to impose themselves forcefully upon China. It is dominated by the idea of Sinocentrism, which is the Chinese self-perception of itself within the international system characterized by Chinese universality and superiority as the political and, more importantly, cultural center of East Asia.<sup>225</sup> For two thousand years, explains Zi Zhongyun, China considered itself the center of the world, an understandable sentiment as, with the very temporary exception of the Mongol Empire, no other entity in East Asia every approached China's size, power, or cultural influence. As a consequence of the longevity and richness of their culture, continues Zhongyun, the Han Chinese considered themselves racially superior to the peoples living along China's periphery, which can be considered everywhere outside of China. Han China in fact literally viewed those peoples as barbarians. So superior was the Chinese culture that all barbarians, including the aforementioned Mongols, inevitably assimilated into it. The reverse, by contrast, was completely unheard of.<sup>226</sup> To this day China continues to refer to its neighbors as "periphery countries" (*zhoubian guojia*), exhibiting what Suisheng Zhao calls a cultural

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<sup>225</sup> Ji Young Choi, "Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations," *International Politics* 52, no. 1 (2015), 118.

<sup>226</sup> Zi Zhongyun, "The Clash of Ideas: Ideology and Sino-US Relations," in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004), 227-228.

complacency in the sense that China still takes its position as the center of East Asia for granted.<sup>227</sup>

The cultural imprint of this long period cannot be over-emphasized. Contrary to Western ideas, argues William Callahan, China does not view sovereignty as something equal everywhere within a set political boundary. Instead, it has traditionally viewed sovereignty in cultural terms as strongest in the Han Chinese center and gradually fading into the periphery. “Where” China exists, he contends, is consequently fluid, something no doubt confusing to most Western minds.<sup>228</sup> Such an idea is critical in that it offers an insight into how China views and responds to its neighbors.

An essential part of that Chinese culture that continues to influence how China views East Asia and thus behaves in the South China Sea is Confucianism. Confucianism, writes Alex Littlefield, is a commonality between East Asian communities. “Confucian thought and ideas about communitarianism are a basis of Asian values and a perspective that is alternative to Western individualistic liberal values. It is an alternative conceptualization of an East Asian international order contrary to the hegemonic ambition and liberal mantra of democratic peace” of the West. It also promotes a strict hierarchy of superiors and inferiors, a doctrine that no doubt appears brutally realist from a Western perspective. In fact, the West coined a phrase for it – the “tribute system.” But the Chinese, argues Littlefield, did not view its international relations as a system, but instead as a proper Confucian hierarchy no different than internal Chinese society. It is, as he says, more akin to a big brother relationship. “This

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<sup>227</sup> Suisheng Zhao, “The Making of China’s Periphery Policy,” in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* ed. Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004), 256-257.

<sup>228</sup> William A. Callahan, *The Pesoptimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 94, 96-99.

Sinocentric order was not just glorious for all involved,” wrote Ye Zicheng of Beijing University, “but benefited all as well.”<sup>229</sup> In this way, Chinese ambitions in East Asia can be viewed as something different than the Western concept of hegemony. Despite the principals of the liberal international order, an order it had no part in creating, China views sovereignty and relations with its neighbors as more hierarchical. Given this historical and cultural context, alongside China’s size and economic growth, it is no wonder Beijing resents the interferences of the United States, a relative newcomer to the region and, in all likelihood, a power that will not remain in the long term.<sup>230</sup> The idea, for example, of negotiating with its neighbors in a multilateral setting is subsequently disagreeable at best and insulting at worst.

Realists could note that because of its assertive behavior China actually acts contrary to its identity in the South China Sea and elsewhere, basing their claim off another aspect of Confucianism, that being the use of virtue rather than force to make an opponent voluntarily submit. But that “accommodationist” aspect of Confucianism, argues Alastair Johnston, is merely symbolic, meant to add legitimacy to a much more coercive and aggressive strategy as advocated by the ancient *Seven Military Classics*. Contrary to Western assumptions, those classics, argues Johnston, reveal that what appears to be a Chinese realpolitik indeed exists though it is not a natural or static identity as depicted by Western realist scholars, but rather a strategic culture rooted within the Chinese historic identity itself. The Confucian model is in actuality an ideal that embodies only non-violent approaches to security. Once force is employed, however, the Chinese utilize a

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<sup>229</sup> Alex Littlefield, “State Behavior and Regional Identity: The Case of China and East Asia,” *Asia-Pacific Social Science Review* 12, no. 2 (December 2012), 53-56.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid*, 51.

much different structure.<sup>231</sup> Certainly, China's long history of near uninterrupted East Asian supremacy informed such a strategic culture since there was rarely any need to compromise with its far weaker neighbors.

That would change dramatically with the second and pivotal part of the Chinese historical narrative beginning with the First Opium War in the 1840s and ends in 1949 with the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War, which frames China's view of the modern international arena. This is the officially dubbed 'Century of Humiliation' when technologically advanced foreign powers from the West (including a Japan that strived to be Western) imposed their will on China through invasion and territorial division.<sup>232</sup> Shocked when the Europeans failed to assimilate into Chinese cultural as other barbarians had, China was instead humiliated.<sup>233</sup> That humiliation plays a dominant role in defining the current Chinese identity and is a tremendous influence on its foreign policy behavior. It also plays a role in framing threat perception as the United States, though perhaps more benevolent than the European powers and Japan at the time, likewise participated in China's degradation.

The third phase of the Chinese historical narrative is largely a reaction to the 'Century of Humiliation,' as the communist regime took on the role of rejuvenator and vowed that China, as Gerald Chan phrases it, would never again be bullied.<sup>234</sup> It was at this time that China adopted the idea of the 'Century of Humiliation' as an institution and

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<sup>231</sup> Alastair Iain Johnston, *Cultural Realism: Strategic Culture and Grand Strategy in Chinese History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), x, 100, 118-119, 120, 167-170.

<sup>232</sup> Ning Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory: Chinese Nationalism as Constraint on Beijing's Foreign Policy Making," *Asian Politics and Policy* 5, no. 4 (October 2013), 547.

<sup>233</sup> Zhongyun, "The Clash of Ideas: Ideology and Sino-US Relations," 228.

<sup>234</sup> Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory," 547; Chan, "Capturing China's International Identity," 272.

began celebrating it as a path to national renewal, which the regime emphasized as profoundly as its communist ideology.<sup>235</sup> That trend accelerated following the disasters of the Maoist Era as China's power began to increase until, by the arrival of the post-Tiananmen period, nationalism had overshadowed communism.<sup>236</sup> The idea of humiliation permeates Chinese culture now more than ever, most notably within its education system. Textbooks instruct children at an early age, teaching them first China's glorious history then its humiliation, being sure to emphasize the outsider's role in that humiliation as opposed to any possible internal causes.<sup>237</sup>

“An historical memory of humiliation,” writes Zheng Wang, “can empower a people as they view themselves to be a progeny of a long line of survivors.”<sup>238</sup> From an historical perspective, there is a popular belief in China that its decline and humiliation by Western powers in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was an anomaly based on China's position throughout most of recorded history as the world's most powerful state.<sup>239</sup> China, writes Zbigniew Brzezinski, is motivated by the cultural aspect of that humiliation due to its ingrained sense of cultural superiority created through centuries as the center of East Asia.<sup>240</sup> With its pride wounded and its national psyche mixed between feelings of superiority and inferiority, China looks to regain its previous position in East Asia. Sensitive as to whether or not it is being treated as an equal as a result of its humiliation,

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<sup>235</sup> Choi, “Rationality, Norms, and Identity in International Relations,” 118.

<sup>236</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 548.

<sup>237</sup> Callahan, *The Pesoptimist Nation*, 12-16.

<sup>238</sup> Zheng Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 27.

<sup>239</sup> Onnis, “Has China Plans for World Domination?” 60.

<sup>240</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Implications* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 15.

it consequently has little interest in being a small player in a world organized behind a Western historical narrative.<sup>241</sup>

### **China as a Great Power**

Together with increased material capability, the above historical narrative informs China's identity as a natural great power. In the view of many realists, China is already acting the part of a great power by causing destabilization, converting economic power into military strength and power projection capabilities, and seeking to dominate its region. Nowhere is that more evident than the South China Sea. Using the idea of victimhood based on its period of humiliation, the regime in Beijing justifies its great power status and behavior on moral grounds.<sup>242</sup> In conjunction with China's self-identification as an emerging great power, it preaches a doctrine of global multipolarity in which the international arena is composed of a collection of great powers rather than being dominated by a single one, with itself being one of those powers. Since the early 1990s, a consensus of Chinese leaders and scholars has adopted multipolarity as the ideal paradigm. Former Premier Jiang Zemin predicted in July 1995 that, "the modern world was going toward a multipolar structure and the epoch when one or two powers or groups of great powers determined world affairs and the destinies of other states has passed never to return."<sup>243</sup> China likewise emphasizes an idea of a "harmonious world" characterized by multipolar peace and an absence of hegemonic attempts to spread values or ideology by force. In a truly multipolar world, it would have more influence in

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<sup>241</sup> Zhongyun, "The Clash of Ideas: Ideology and Sino-US Relations," 228; Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, 36.

<sup>242</sup> Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory," 544; Callahan, 13.

<sup>243</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, "A Multipolar World As Seen by Russia and China: International Challenges," *Far Eastern Affairs* 38, no. 3 (July-September 2010), 1.

creating the international order rather than being compelled to match Western ideals. Instead its own input, drawn from thousands of years of civilizational experience, would play an equal part in crafting that order.<sup>244</sup> Currently, however, China views the world as being in what it refers to as a *yichao duoqiang* structure composed of one superpower (the United States) and four big powers (Japan, Russia, the EU, and China).<sup>245</sup> As Barthélémy Courmont writes, Beijing uses multipolarity to support its interests, beginning with improved bilateral relations and mechanisms to increase its power on a regional level, most recently within the South China Sea. It supports only those multilateral institutions that serve those purposes and avoids those that would force it into taking on increased global responsibilities.<sup>246</sup>

Given China's meteoric economic rise over the past several decades, it is near impossible for even China sceptics to deny the country's emerging great power status, if not recognize it as an actual established great power, which, as Robert Ross defines, is a state that can contend in a war with any other in the international arena.<sup>247</sup> The Chinese government, military, and population certainly recognize its rise, though Beijing is often times quick to deny it for certain geostrategic reasons.<sup>248</sup> That identity as an emerging great power along with the associated belief that the global balance of power is shifting and the increasing reinforcement of the idea of humiliation has caused the heightened sense of nationalism within many segments of Chinese society that many scholars posit

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<sup>244</sup> Chan, "Capturing China's International Identity," 274.

<sup>245</sup> Onnis, "Has China Plans for World Dominations?" 62.

<sup>246</sup> Courmont, "Promoting Multilateralism or Searching for a New Hegemony," 189.

<sup>247</sup> Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China," 357.

<sup>248</sup> Layne, "The Unipolar Exit," 152.

to be behind China's assertive behavior in the South China Sea and elsewhere.<sup>249</sup> It may even cause many within China to exaggerate the country's own power, add He Kai and Huiyun Feng.<sup>250</sup>

The Chinese military, known as the People's Liberation Army or PLA, has largely adopted the identification as a great power, helping to fuel nationalism and vehemently supporting claims of national sovereignty including within the South China Sea. Unlike in previous decades, the Chinese leadership no longer consists of military strongmen like Mao that control both the military and political leadership. Instead, the military enjoys a much greater degree of independence, which its educated and empowered elite are willing to use to delve into political affairs. As a result, write Yawei Liu and Justine Ren, the Chinese military is not unconditionally compliant to the leadership, meaning Beijing must use all its resources to keep the PLA in check.<sup>251</sup> Correspondingly, Beijing must also maintain a relatively conciliatory posture toward the PLA, including its more nationalistic elements such as men like Senior Colonel Liu Mingfu, who publically proclaimed that the new century will belong to China.<sup>252</sup> Then there are those who are even more aggressive, such as Colonel Dai Xu, who advised the government in Beijing to demonstrate its power by killing one of America's "three running dogs," meaning Vietnam, the Philippines, or Japan and the aforementioned Luo Yuan, who demanded war with the Philippines to establish China's sovereign rights over the South China

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<sup>249</sup> He and Feng, "Debating China's Assertiveness," 634; Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," 446.

<sup>250</sup> He and Feng, "Debating China's Assertiveness," 634.

<sup>251</sup> Yawei Liu and Justine Zheng Ren, "An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat: The United States According to PLA Officers," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 86 (November 2013), 256, 263-264.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*, 257.

Sea.<sup>253</sup> PLA leaders like Liu and Dai have no problems with inciting tensions in order to acquire what they want, which is typically new weapons and funding.<sup>254</sup> While scholars such as Johnston are correct to point out that many of the more aggressive comments made by officers within the PLA are not official statements and have only increased because the public space for nationalist comments within China has grown, it is exactly that growth in the public space and Beijing's inability to suppress it that is important.<sup>255</sup> Regardless of whether or not such PLA opinions are new, the fact that its various nationalistically-charged views are now more accessible to the public forces Beijing to take them into greater account, which ultimately influences the government's foreign policy.

### **The Constructivist Role in Threat Perception**

China's threat perception is informed by its great power identity, which, in combination with material strength, is informed by its historical narrative. Threat perception is determined, as Alexander Wendt stresses, by international social relationships of which material capability is only one aspect. Shared knowledge and practices are equally important. Material capabilities, he writes, only acquire meaning for action through shared knowledge.<sup>256</sup> While the United States is materially dominant in the Asia-Pacific region, including the South China Sea, and also has the appearance of

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<sup>253</sup> Liu and Ren, "An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat," 257-258; Zhao, "Foreign Policy Implications of Chinese Nationalism Revisited," 549-550. It is interesting to note that two of the three are rival claimants within the South China Sea, one of which, Vietnam, is not even an American ally. Perhaps establishing an American connection to Vietnam is a means by which the PLA can justify more assertive actions against its southern neighbor.

<sup>254</sup> Liu and Ren, "An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat," 271.

<sup>255</sup> Johnston, "How New and Assertive Is China's New Assertiveness?" 43.

<sup>256</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20, no. 1 (Summer 1995), 73.

attempting to contain China through its 'pivot to Asia' policy, those factors only matter most because of the differences between China and the US that create an already existing underlying tension. On an historic level, the US has long demonstrated a tendency to interfere in East Asian politics even prior to its superpower days, which included participation in the nationally celebrated humiliation of China. The fundamental difference relevant to the South China Sea specifically centers on how the two countries believe international disputes should be settled. While China prefers bilateral negotiations that do not infringe on national sovereignty, the US desires that territorial disputes be settled internationally based on the rules of the liberal world order.<sup>257</sup> China consequently fears that a country such as the United States, desiring as it does to expand the liberal order, is particular prone to interfere with its core national interests. It is, according to David Shambaugh, an area of steadily increasing tension.<sup>258</sup> That understanding both compels China to seek to balance in the South China Sea in order to protect its interests, but also to do so carefully in order to avoid the US feeling obligated to act in an effort to safeguard the integrity of liberal international law in a way that would prove detrimental to China's rise. Social threats are thus constructed rather than natural. The decisions made by China in the South China Sea, as Wendt would argue, are based on the probabilities produced by the interaction between China and the United States, not on just any imagined possibility or worst-case scenario.<sup>259</sup>

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<sup>257</sup> Glaser and Billingsley, "US-China Relations," 29.

<sup>258</sup> Shambaugh, "Tangled Titans," 21.

<sup>259</sup> Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 65.

That being said, there exists a real concern in Beijing that a declining and fearful United States will actively seek to disrupt China's rise.<sup>260</sup> As Stephen Walt and Ted Hopf write, the decision of whether or not to balance is not solely based on power capabilities, but more accurately on the threat that those capabilities will be utilized.<sup>261</sup> Many within China believe those capabilities are currently being utilized, concluding that Washington's 'pivot to Asia,' in which the US pledged to increase its focus on East Asia as a result of that region's indisputable rise in economic and political prominence, is designed to contain China in order to slow its rise.<sup>262</sup> There is little doubt that China's growing strength and assertive behavior is the most important motivation for the 'pivot'.<sup>263</sup> Understanding this, Lieutenant General Ran Haiquan described the American policy as a cause of security complications.<sup>264</sup> According to the Chinese Defense Ministry, American decisions such as the one to deploy marines to Darwin, Australia do "not help to enhance mutual trust and cooperation between countries in the region, and could ultimately harm the common interests of all concerned."<sup>265</sup> As recently as May 2015, Beijing expressed its official concern over such American "rebalancing strategies."<sup>266</sup> One Chinese admiral even went so far as to describe the American Navy as a man with a criminal record "wondering just outside the gate of the family home."<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>260</sup> Yahuda, "China's New Assertiveness in the South China Sea," 448; Chan, "The Rise of Multipolarity," 5.

<sup>261</sup> Stephen Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 98; Hopf, 186.

<sup>262</sup> Christensen, "The Advantages of an Assertive China," 54-67.

<sup>263</sup> Liu, "China, the United States, and the East Asian Security Order," 127.

<sup>264</sup> Liu and Ren, "An Emerging Consensus on the US Threat," 258.

<sup>265</sup> Glaser and Billingsley, "US-China Relations," 30.

<sup>266</sup> Denyer, "Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as 'national interests' grow"

<sup>267</sup> Mearsheimer, "The Gathering Storm," 386.

American policy-makers continually stress that the ‘pivot to Asia’ is not an attempt to contain China, but simply to advance American interests, but when it includes such elements as an expansion of military deployments, freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which is a multilateral free trade agreement that excludes China because of its extremely high standards, it is difficult for Beijing to conclude otherwise.<sup>268</sup> The renewed American activity in the Pacific seems to fall right into line with the identity China has assigned to the United States within the broader scope of the international arena, which greatly impacts its perceived level of threat perception. As Aaron Friedberg writes, China sees the United States as a crusading liberal quasi-imperialist power seeking to impose its worldview on everyone.<sup>269</sup> Indeed, at its most benevolent, the United States is a satisfied power, seeking to maintain the status quo of the international system it has constructed.<sup>270</sup>

### **The Relationship of Identity, Legitimacy, and Foreign Policy Behavior**

Growing assertiveness, writes Fareed Zakaria, is a function of an increase in national pride emanating from growing wealth and strength. Expanding economic fortunes incite nationalism and foster demands for respect and recognition, both from the national government and the population.<sup>271</sup> While very true, that national pride of which he speaks already existed. Growing wealth and strength may reinforce that pride, but

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<sup>268</sup> Billingsley and Glaser, “US-China Relations,” 29-30; Mearsheimer, “The Gathering Storm,” 285.

<sup>269</sup> Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in East Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 45.

<sup>270</sup> Charles Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: US Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 206.

<sup>271</sup> Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, 5, 34-35.

more significantly it provides the means to defend that pride. Chinese goals, argues William Callahan, are not merely materialistic, but social and symbolic as well. It is international status that is the primary objective. Whether or not those goals are met is measured less by material gains and more in terms of the level of international respect.<sup>272</sup>

As Zheng Wang writes about China, “Political leaders often use historical memory to bolster their own legitimacy, promote their own interests, encourage nationalistic spirit, and mobilize mass support for social conflicts.”<sup>273</sup> Since taking power in November 2012, Premier Xi Jinping has promoted “national rejuvenation” in order to reverse China’s humiliation. It is time, he said, to realize the “Chinese dream.” That dream is the restoration of China’s position of prominence in East Asia. To be economically recognized, notes Ning Liao, is insufficient if China is still treated as a social pariah despite its cultural superiority.<sup>274</sup> Here explains the usefulness and power of a core interest beyond other state objectives. It places that interest within the context of the country’s identity, which stirs nationalism and boosts the regime internally. In essence, it raises the stakes until the idea of compromise is unacceptable.

Once the national identity is co-opted, the ruling elite must meet the standards of its associated norms and interests. As Peter Katzenstein writes, state interests are not “discovered” by self-interested, rational actors. Those interests are constructed through social interaction. Actors only utilize culture and identity, they do not create it.<sup>275</sup> The regime in Beijing consequently must meet the interests of the identity it has harnessed, something that calls for a careful balance as it has the potential to disrupt “peaceful

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<sup>272</sup> Callahan, *The Pesoptimist Nation*, 11-12.

<sup>273</sup> Wang, *Never Forget National Humiliation*, 26.

<sup>274</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 549-551.

<sup>275</sup> Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, 2, 17.

rise/development,” causing the regime to sometimes act regarding foreign policy as it would have otherwise preferred. Ning Liao writes, “China’s paradoxical image on foreign relations can be attributed to an inconsistency between rationalist government decision-making in conducting pragmatic diplomacy and the mandate of identity-constitutive social norms highly relevant to internal legitimation of an authoritarian regime.” In other words, it has to get things done while keeping a low profile.<sup>276</sup> Now that the South China Sea has the full attention of the public, the regime must meet the norms related to its national and great power identities therein or risk losing its legitimacy, which as Johnston notes includes an aggressive posture.<sup>277</sup> It is a difficult task. As noted above, the strategy of “peaceful rise/development” has not gone smoothly within the South China Sea as the United States and the other regional players are clearly suspicious of Beijing’s intentions and counter-balancing in the form of the American ‘pivot to Asia’ has already commenced.

Ning Liao defines legitimacy as “maintaining the belief that the existing political institutions are the most appropriate ones for society.”<sup>278</sup> As Camilla Sørensen writes, it is domestic developments within China that provide the main context for Beijing’s decisions on foreign policy and security.<sup>279</sup> As the country undergoes massive internal changes and modernization, it is crucial to maintain domestic legitimacy, which is rooted in meeting the expectations of a popularly-perceived more powerful China that now has the means to restore its historical legacy.<sup>280</sup> This is especially crucial because the regime

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<sup>276</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory 544,” 553.

<sup>277</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 61.

<sup>278</sup> Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory,” 546.

<sup>279</sup> Sørensen, “Is China Becoming More Aggressive?” 364.

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid*, 365, 371.

in Beijing lacks procedural legitimacy, having taken power without being elected.<sup>281</sup> The state, Sørensen writes, is both distinct from and an agent of society. Its leaders require public support or consent to conduct foreign policy.<sup>282</sup> The old ideological legitimacy of communism is gone and has since been replaced by performance legitimacy. In other words, whereas China had previously needed only to meet a politically-charged ideal, it now must continuously grow economically while delivering stability and prosperity, as that is the expectation of a population that identifies its country as a great power worthy of high international status and influence. Prosperity includes dealing with such issues as high income inequality, corruption, and environmental deterioration. Meeting its popular expectations creates a need for China to guarantee access to energy and natural resources in order to sustain the economic growth necessary to meet its prosperity objectives and thus maintain legitimacy and stability. In this way, national self-identity and popular nationalism have a direct and potent impact on foreign policy. They not only pull China toward the South China Sea, but compel it to declare its sovereign rights over the region.<sup>283</sup>

But performance does not exclusively mean economic growth and prosperity. It also relates to meeting the historic and cultural expectations of rejuvenation rooted in China's national identity. To appease the public at home and express its new position within the global arena, China relies partly on intimations of national sovereignty over the South China Sea; sovereignty being an issue with which it is particularly sensitive given China's historical narrative of a 'Century of Humiliation' and the perceived

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<sup>281</sup> Liao, "Presentist or Cultural Memory," 546.

<sup>282</sup> Sørensen, "Is China Becoming More Aggressive?" 371.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid*, 376-378.

Western interference over Taiwan and Tibet. The geostrategic significance of the South China Sea makes it an obvious choice to treat as a core interest through which the regime can strengthen itself politically, but that is not the only factor. Another important factor is that within the South China Sea, China's hierarchical international perspective is challenged by the other claimants with the support of the United States, a Western power that once participated in its humiliation. It is, writes Callahan, an historic tradition in China that the country is saved by expelling barbarians. Strength in the face of foreign provocation is especially valued.<sup>284</sup> Standing up to the US is thus a particularly effective means to enhance ruling legitimacy by serving the national identity.

Communism once served to keep China inspired and motivated. Without communism, China needs nationalism, as Zakaria succinctly put it.<sup>285</sup> Although China is quick to downplay the growth of nationalistic literature, such literature is increasing, even if it does not yet reflect general public sentiment or the official view of the leadership.<sup>286</sup> The recent warning by the state-owned tabloid the *Global Times* that Washington risked war if it interfered in the land reclamations, for example, was not an official statement, but does reflect the changing Chinese mood and Beijing's lack of effort to suppress it.<sup>287</sup> "If the United States' bottom line is that China has to halt its activities, then a U.S.-China war is inevitable in the South China Sea," the piece bombastically exhorted.<sup>288</sup>

According to Suisheng Zhao, Beijing is growing increasingly reluctant to attempt to control such popular nationalism and much more willing to follow its calls for a

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<sup>284</sup> Callahan, *The Pesoptimist Nation*, 23, 27.

<sup>285</sup> Zakaria, *The Post-American World*, 135.

<sup>286</sup> Onnis, "Has China Plans for World Domination?" 66.

<sup>287</sup> Denyer, "Chinese military sets course to expand global reach as 'national interests' grow."

<sup>288</sup> "China state paper warns of war over South China Sea unless U.S. backs down," *Reuters*, last modified June 16, 2015, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/05/25/southchinasea-china-usa-idINKBN00A07N20150525>.

confrontation with the West, especially in valuable places such as the South China Sea. Even Xi Jinping said himself in January 2013, “We will never sacrifice our core interests.” A few months later he pledged to “enhance the nation’s capacity in safeguarding maritime rights and interests, and resolutely safeguard the nation’s rights and interests.”<sup>289</sup>

To summarize, the relationship between identity, legitimacy, and foreign policy behavior is clear. The regime in Beijing has co-opted the country’s national identity, celebrating past superiority and humiliation and branding itself the national rejuvenator of China’s historic position, in order to boost its own standing internally within China, something that is especially necessary given the country’s increased power, the waning of communism’s ideological potency, and the problems associated with rapid economic growth. But the regime did not create that identity, it merely borrowed and reinforced it, meaning it cannot forge its own norms and interests but must meet the norms and interests already pre-associated with the national identity. In order to do so, the regime creates core interests, or nationalistically charged issues from which it cannot retreat. The South China Sea serves as a particularly valuable region to treat as a core interest because of the material and security implications inherent therein, but it is also compelled to do so because it is a place where its smaller neighbors pose a challenge that disrupts the hierarchically paradigm and where the United States, an outside intruder and direct representation of China’s past humiliation, seeks to contain its rise. Consequently, the Chinese national identity determines its behavior within the South China Sea, forcing it to act assertively and resist the provocations of its neighbors and the US. Now that the

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<sup>289</sup> Chan, “Capturing China’s International Identity,” 271.

South China Sea is a core interest, the regime must demonstrate strength or it risks dishonoring the national identity and suffering a loss of its legitimacy to rule.

### **Conclusion**

Constructivism cannot by any means replace realism. Constructivism instead complements it, filling in the gaps where power fails to provide a satisfactory answer in explaining foreign policy behavior. Realism indeed explains a great deal regarding China's situation in the South China Sea. It essentially explains to a large extent why the South China Sea in particular is a prime candidate to be designated as a core interest. The sea's power-related benefits, including material resources and trade route security, increase the capabilities of the state and help alleviate its economic needs. Realism also explains Beijing's timing, choosing to act when it does as it feels the United States has neither the strength nor the willpower to resist. Finally, realism explains China's strategy, that of methodical progression in an effort to avoid counter-balancing from the United States or a coalition of its neighbors.

But realism does not explain why China has decided to treat the South China Sea as a core interest rather than simply behave like it is any other interest in the tradition of "peaceful rise/development." If power is the only determining factor behind foreign policy behavior, why does Beijing not strictly follow a rationalist strategy within the South China Sea? Why must it be so obvious and assertive? There must be another determining variable at play.

Having whipped up nationalism through the historical narrative of superiority, humiliation, and rejuvenation, the regime must meet the norms and interests associated

with the identity it has invoked. Those norms and interests include dominating its much smaller neighbors such as the Philippines and Vietnam and resisting the encroachments of a foreign power, especially the United States, which once took part in China's humiliation. These interests converge in the South China Sea, making the region a core interest almost by default. But there is a problem. The regime is not free to act in a completely rationalist manner. "Peaceful rise/development" has been compromised in the South China Sea where the United States has 'pivoted' to the region and supports the sea's smaller claimants in a counter-balancing effort. If power was the only determining variable, the rational elite in Beijing would take these events as the signal to slow their approach and perhaps wait for a better opportunity, but this is not the case. If anything, with the recent land reclamations, China has become only more resolved. Again, identity explains what power cannot. Because of its need to meet the norms and interests associated with the collective national identity that it has promoted so vigorously, Beijing must not display weakness in the face of inferior nations and a foreign threat associated with its past humiliation. But not only is an aggressive or coercive strategy within the South China Sea necessary for reasons of legitimacy, it is also an element within the Chinese identity itself.<sup>290</sup>

All of this raises an interesting final question. If China feels that the strength and will of the United States is weakening, why does it not abandon its methodical strategy altogether and take advantage of the current situation? Ted Hopf wrote that just as interests are a product of social practices and structure, so too are missing interests.<sup>291</sup> Perhaps it is true, as Gerald Chan suggests, that unlike the Western powers of both the

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<sup>290</sup> Johnston, *Cultural Realism*, 61.

<sup>291</sup> Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism," 176.

past and the present with which it has been compared, China has no hegemonic ambitions.<sup>292</sup> In order to understand what China really wants, the analyst must instead examine its unique national identity rather than simply assume that like all states it is driven by nature simply to pursue power. Perhaps hegemony, at least in the Western sense, is a missing interest, meaning the South China Sea is not in fact the place where China will begin its domination of East Asia, but rather where history and culture demand that it reassert itself and restore its lost and rightful honor.

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<sup>292</sup> Chan, "Capturing China's International Identity," 273.

## Chapter Three

### Russia and the 'Near Abroad'

The previous case study established that national identity complements power when it comes to explaining the behavior of a state with realist-oriented leadership within its area of core interest through the example of China in the South China Sea. The same is true of Russia regarding its areas of core interest within the post-Soviet space known intimately as the 'Near Abroad'. Russian foreign policy behavior has certainly had a realist flavor since the rise of Vladimir Putin, particularly in Ukraine and Georgia. Russian energy embargos, assassinations, support for separatist movements, invasions, and even annexations have seriously elevated regional tensions between Moscow, its neighbors, and the West. Without a doubt, realist considerations of power explain the Russian behavior to a large extent, providing motivations concerning material power, state security, and regime security. As with China, realism can also explain Russian opportunism and strategy. But as before there are several gaps in realism's explanatory ability. While realism explains why a state like Russia would desire to physically dominate its immediate region, it does not fully explain why Russia must treat the area as a core interest within which it cannot back down even in the face of unfavorable material circumstances that are unlikely to improve amid its current disposition. In other words, what makes places like Ukraine and Georgia so immediately important to Russia that they are worth economic sanctions and a possible arms race on its border? Furthermore, why has Russia shifted so rapidly from embracing Europe to being on the verge of open hostility? Because realism falls short in providing a complete explanation for the importance of the 'Near Abroad' in Russian thinking and its fickle relationship with the

West, it consequently cannot fully explain Russia's relations with its immediate neighbors.

When inserted as an independent variable, identity as defined by constructivist theory completes the explanation of Russian foreign policy behavior in the 'Near Abroad'. Russian identity is not static as realism theorizes. Rather, Russia has multiple identities, each of which plays a significant role in dictating its foreign policy behavior. First and foremost is Russia's identity as a great power, which as Ted Hopf writes implies its own particular set of interests.<sup>293</sup> Russia, argues Iver B. Neumann, feels that it is nothing if it is not a great power.<sup>294</sup> Critically, that feeling is the most significant constant amid the country's relentlessly fluctuating national identity, which since the fall of the Soviet Union has swung between European and Eurasian. The latest identity, adopted by the Putin regime, maintains that Russia is both European and unique from Europe. But Putin did not simply "discover" the interests related to that identity.<sup>295</sup> Those interests are rooted in Russia's collective memory and historical narrative, based on its experiences with both Europe and Asia. Significantly, that identity, interwoven with feelings of both superiority and humiliation, relies heavily on Russian influence over the 'Near Abroad' and its specific role therein.

The following case study will explore Russian behavior in the 'Near Abroad', concentrating most heavily on Ukraine and Georgia. As before, it will examine the

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<sup>293</sup> Ted Hopf. "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998), 176.

<sup>294</sup> Iver B. Neumann. "Russia in International Society Over the Long Dureé: Lessons from the Early Rus' and Early Post-Soviet State Formation," in *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions* edited by Ray Taras (London: Routledge, 2013), 25.

<sup>295</sup> Peter J. Katzenstein, "Introduction: Alternative Perspectives on National Security," in *The Cultural of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter J. Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2.

current situation for contextual background purposes before turning to the respective realist and constructivist perspectives. It will uncover the realist motivations for a heavy hand in the region, including material capability and security, as well as how realism explains timing and strategy, all of which play a vital role in Moscow's foreign policy decisions. Following this, the chapter will proceed to the importance of identity as an independent variable. It will demonstrate how identity dictates Russian behavior in ways power fails to fully explain and, as with China, the importance of meeting identity's associated norms and interests. The Kremlin is using the "Euro-East" national identity as a means to ensure its power, but now that it has done so it must meet popular expectations within the 'Near Abroad' or face a crisis regarding its legitimacy to rule, something of increased necessity as the Russian economy has begun to slow with the decline of global energy prices.

### **The Situation in the 'Near Abroad'**

Nearly two years since the Russian annexation of the Crimea in March 2014, the situation remains tense in Eastern Europe with Moscow and the West at odds over Western sanctions imposed upon Russia following its interference in Ukraine while ethnic Russian (and some insist Russian-supported) separatists continue to occupy and fight in the eastern portion of that country. In recent months, the strain has intensified as both sides up their rhetoric and, much more alarmingly, slowly begin backing their words with threats to increase their regional military presence. The mutually heightened

security measures and disinterest in backing down are leaving many wondering if a larger conflict is possible.<sup>296</sup>

Despite the calamitous fall of the Soviet Union followed by a decade of social and economic chaos, Russia has to a large degree rebounded on the strength of its energy reserves and is once again asserting itself as a great power, though an economic slowdown threatens to undo much of its progress. Immense in size and resources, the country remains a military and nuclear powerhouse, making it impossible for the West to take Russian aggression lightly. Putin's threats of an arms race even in the face of Western sanctions and NATO's technological superiority demonstrate a stubbornness that goes beyond pure power calculations, which by most material appearances seem to indicate that Russia's current strategy is a losing one.

But the situation in Ukraine is only the most recent manifestation of Russian assertiveness in what it calls the 'Near Abroad.' Specifically, the term 'Near Abroad' refers to the former Soviet Socialist Republics that are now independent states. The term arose from the idea that Russia remains connected to those states on a political and cultural level due to a shared history and the millions of ethnic Russians that still reside there.<sup>297</sup> These include the Baltic States Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the Eastern European states of Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova, the Caucasus countries Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan, and lastly the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The following chapter will exclusively cover

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<sup>296</sup> Jeremy Diamond and Greg Botelho, "U.S.-Russia military tit for tat raises fears of greater conflict," *CNN.com*, last modified June 22, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/06/17/politics/russia-us-military-threats-rise-ukraine/>.

<sup>297</sup> Sinikukka Saari, "Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies to Increase Its Influence in Former Soviet Republics: Public Diplomacy *Po Russkii*," *Europe-Asia Studies* 66, no. 1 (January 2014), 54.

the states of Eastern Europe including the Caucasus where Russia's interaction with the West has been particularly complicated. It will most intimately examine Ukraine and Georgia, as these two countries have experienced the brunt of Russia's new policies toward its neighbors in the 'Near Abroad'.

### **Russian Behavior in the 'Near Abroad'**

Whereas Chinese "assertiveness" in the South China Sea has thus far been limited to naval stand-offs, fishing and oil exploration restrictions, island building, and a general refusal to discuss issues of sovereignty through international institutions, Russian assertiveness in the 'Near Abroad' has consisted of political manipulation, embargoes, assassinations, and even invasions and an annexation, consequently proving that, though they may not work like they used to, the "old tried and true hard power solutions" as Jeffrey Mankoff put it, are still very much a part of Russia's foreign policy arsenal.<sup>298</sup> One of the more popularized and very globalization-relevant means of asserting its dominance over the region has been the use of the popularly dubbed "gas weapon," or the taking advantage of outside dependence on Russian energy as a tool for foreign policy leverage.<sup>299</sup> Moscow has typically done this in reaction to political events it found unfavorable, for example following the 2004 Color Revolution in Ukraine.<sup>300</sup>

Other more traditional examples within or relevant to the 'Near Abroad' include the assassination of dissidents in 2006, the suspension of the Conventional Forces in

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<sup>298</sup> Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008), 57; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 3.

<sup>299</sup> Matthew Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism: The Evolution of Russia's Regional Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace* 31, no. 2 (June 2014), 89.

<sup>300</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 24.

Europe Treaty, hostility towards the construction of a NATO missile shield, and support for separatists in Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Transnistria, South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Moldova.<sup>301</sup> Of course the most outstanding examples of Russian assertiveness were the 2008 invasion of Georgia and the 2014 annexation of the Crimea, again incidents sparked by political developments in the respective countries of which Moscow disapproved.<sup>302</sup>

In the summer of 2008, amid a Georgian offensive against separatists in South Ossetia, Russia invaded Georgia.<sup>303</sup> The invasion, touted by Moscow as an effort to halt human rights abuses, was in actuality a hard power means to stop Georgia's westward lean.<sup>304</sup> Since the five-day war, Russian-Georgian relations have remained frosty and only recently have warmed slightly as a result of the election defeat suffered by former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili in October 2012. Though some analysts predicted Georgia would move back towards Russian influence, the new government has remained adamant in its desire to obtain NATO and EU membership. Meanwhile, Russia and Georgia continue to disagree on the issue of sovereignty over South Ossetia while Russian forces remain in occupation of some 20% of internationally recognized Georgian national territory.<sup>305</sup> Determined to sustain his opposition to Putin, in May 2015, one day after being granted Ukrainian citizenship, Saakashvili accepted the position as Governor of the Ukrainian province of Odessa in a move no doubt meant by Kiev to bolster the

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<sup>301</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 24-25; Saari, "Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies," 58.

<sup>302</sup> Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 87.

<sup>303</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 263.

<sup>304</sup> Susan Turner, "Russia, China and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspectives* 33, no. 1 (2009), 180.

<sup>305</sup> "Five years on, Georgia makes up with Russia," *BBC.com*, last modified June 23, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23010526>.

country's continued opposition to Russian interference. Unsurprisingly, the Kremlin's reaction was hostile.<sup>306</sup>

Over a year and a half since the Russian interference and annexation of the Crimea following the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014, civil war continues to rage in the predominantly ethnic Russian Eastern Ukraine. Although Putin has vowed not to participate in any possible breakup of Ukraine, many in the West are highly skeptical.<sup>307</sup> While Russia has admitted to sending humanitarian aid to the pro-Russian separatists as well as offering the same to the Ukrainian government, it continues to deny equipping the separatists with arms and military supplies.<sup>308</sup> The West believes otherwise, certain that not only Russian equipment but also troops continue to flow across the Russian border into Ukraine. The Ukrainian government has reported sightings to support that accusation on numerous occasions.<sup>309</sup> Meanwhile, any semblance of a truce, including one signed in Minsk in February 2015, has been nothing more than a myth as both sides accuse the other of its violation and the conflict persists with little end in sight. Since the start of the war, well over 6,000 have been killed.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Greg Botelho, Laura Smith-Spark, and Victoria Butenko, "Ukraine gives former Georgian president citizenship, governor's job," *CNN.com*, last modified June 23, 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/05/30/europe/ukraine-mikheil-saakashvili-governor/>.

<sup>307</sup> Michael B. Kelley, "Putin: Crimea is Part of Russia," *Business Insider*, last modified June 22, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/live-putin-speaks-about-crimea-2014-3>.

<sup>308</sup> Michael Birnbaum, "Russia acknowledges sending aid to eastern Ukraine; separatist leader visits Moscow," *The Washington Post*, last modified June 24, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-acknowledges-sending-aid-to-eastern-ukraine-separatist-leader-visits-moscow/2014/06/11/11dad9e3-2d08-4169-9aca-510c53bfca02\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-acknowledges-sending-aid-to-eastern-ukraine-separatist-leader-visits-moscow/2014/06/11/11dad9e3-2d08-4169-9aca-510c53bfca02_story.html).

<sup>309</sup> Gregory L. White and Laurence Norman, "Ukraine Accuses Russia of Sending More Weapons to Separatists," *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified June 24, 2015, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraine-accuses-russia-of-sending-more-weapons-to-separatists-1424436775>.

<sup>310</sup> Pavel Polityuk and Jason Bush, "Ukraine and pro-Russian separatists trade accusations as Minsk deal frays," *Reuters*, last modified June 24, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/25/us-ukraine-crisis-casualties-idUSKBNONGOB220150425>.

Russia's relations with the Baltic States of the 'Near Abroad' have been strained ever since the breakup of the Soviet Union when Russian military forces were purposefully slow in withdrawing from the three countries on account of the poor treatment of Russian minorities.<sup>311</sup> Since the Kremlin's intervention in Ukraine, fears have heightened considerably in Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, leading all three countries, now NATO allies, to agree to an influx of American heavy military equipment. Lithuania has even reinstated national conscription. Their greatest fear is Moscow stirring up Russian minority populations within their borders in order to destabilize the region, much like it has done elsewhere.<sup>312</sup>

The Western response to Russian behavior in the 'Near Abroad', particularly its recent activities in Ukraine, has been sanctions against Moscow targeting its defense, energy, and banking sectors. Citing Russia's continued failure to support cease-fire initiatives in Eastern Ukraine, the United States and European Union extended those sanctions into early 2016. In response, the Kremlin has threatened measures of its own to add to an already imposed import ban on Western foodstuffs.<sup>313</sup>

Much more menacing, however, has been the military build-up in the region as NATO seeks to strengthen its defenses in order to deter future Russian aggression and demonstrate its resolve to the states of Eastern Europe. The United States announced in

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<sup>311</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence: Russia's Quest for Multipolarity* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 59.

<sup>312</sup> Phil Stewart, "U.S. to pre-position tanks, artillery in Baltics, Eastern Europe," *Reuters*, last modified June 24, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/23/us-usa-europe-defense-idUSKBN0P315620150623>.

<sup>313</sup> Karoun Demirjian, "Russia warns of deeper rifts with West as Europe extends sanctions," *The Washington Post*, last modified June 23, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-warns-of-deeper-rifts-with-west-as-europe-extends-sanctions/2015/06/22/22349101-1a8b-4cc8-92a9-d5b4f84b5191\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-warns-of-deeper-rifts-with-west-as-europe-extends-sanctions/2015/06/22/22349101-1a8b-4cc8-92a9-d5b4f84b5191_story.html).

June 2015 that it will contribute to bolstering NATO forces by adding high-end assets, intelligence, heavy equipment, and special operations forces.<sup>314</sup> It had already dispatched some of its most advanced fighter jets and bombers to Europe and committed to participating in NATO military exercises.<sup>315</sup> Most Western officials agree that any future Russian exercises near Ukraine must be met with their own, particularly in the Baltic States.<sup>316</sup>

Russia has reacted with threats to strengthen its own forces in the region, most alarmingly with the addition of forty intercontinental ballistic missiles to its nuclear arsenal, which would mean a serious escalation of the pending arms race.<sup>317</sup> Western intelligence indicates an increase in Russian forces by some 30%, enough for Lieutenant General Ben Hodges, commander of United States Army forces in Europe, to warn that the Russian military could run several Ukraine-sized operations simultaneously. In addition, the Kremlin plans to bolster its reserves, strengthen the Black Sea Fleet, and, in imitation of China, increase development of multidimensional tactics such as cyber warfare. Still, the ballistic missiles and other nuclear-capable forces, many forwardly positioned in Kaliningrad, remain the greatest threat as Russia continues to rely predominantly on nuclear intimidation due to the technological inferiority of its conventional forces.<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Phil Stewart, "U.S. pledges troops, equipment for NATO rapid response force," *Reuters*, last modified June 23, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/22/us-usa-europe-defense-ashcarter-idUSKBNOP20TK20150622>; Phil Stewart, "U.S. to pre-position tanks, artillery in Baltics, Eastern Europe,"

<sup>315</sup> Jeremy Diamond and Greg Botelho, "U.S.-Russia military tit for tat raises fears of greater conflict."

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> Stewart, "U.S. pledges troops, equipment for NATO rapid response force"

<sup>318</sup> Stephen J. Blank, "Imperial Ambitions: Russia's Military Buildup," *World Affairs* 178, no. 1 (May-June 2015), 68-71.

### Is the Situation Dangerous?

Randall Schweller writes that a state that can mobilize and allocate resources to meet policy commitments, has broad scope over societal activities and social groups, is autonomous from domestic and outside pressure groups, commands compliance and enjoys general consent from its people will be less constrained by international systemic incentives.<sup>319</sup> These conditions are largely true of modern Russia and can explain why Moscow would act, for example, in Ukraine in the face of Western threats of sanctions. Since the annexation of the Crimea, Russia has in fact been considerably stalwart in the face of sanctions. A year later, Putin referred to the sanctions as damaging, but not fatal.<sup>320</sup> It is possible that sanctions alone may not prove enough to prevent future Russian assertive behavior in the 'Near Abroad'.

Furthermore, Western resolution to stick to the sanctions can also be questioned. The United States and European Union have made it clear that they would consider eliminating or reducing the sanctions should Russia cooperate in the implementation of a number of cease-fire agreements for Eastern Ukraine that have since been signed and subsequently collapsed, the first reached in Minsk in September 2014. But in that event, Russia would be left with the Crimea, leaving Moscow the ultimate winner and perhaps setting a precedent for the use of hard power to gain other regional objectives. In fact, Russian participation alone in such cease fire discussions has often managed to curtail

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<sup>319</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 108.

<sup>320</sup> "Crimea annexation: Putin admits sanctions 'damaging'," *BBC.com*, last modified June 23, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31945962>.

further sanctions for weeks or even months.<sup>321</sup> Tensions nevertheless remain high as a result of the sanctions, which Russia argues will only serve to damage its relationship with the West. Nikolai Patrushev, chair of the Russian Security Council has even gone so far as to proclaim that “the United States wants Russia to cease to exist as a country,” a sentiment hardly conducive to a peaceful resolution.<sup>322</sup>

An expanded conflict beyond that in Eastern Ukraine is extremely possible. Despite the potential benefits of a “common economic space” in the ‘Near Abroad,’ it will never trump Ukrainian feelings of national identity and political independence, which Zbigniew Brzezinski argues are growing, especially amongst the youth, and is dangerously underestimated by Moscow.<sup>323</sup> Kiev continues to protest the Russian annexation of the Crimea, its president, Petro Poroshenko insisting that “Crimea is and always will be Ukrainian,” and that one day his country would recover the lost territory.<sup>324</sup> Meanwhile, many European leaders have expressed their fear that Russia would be willing to escalate the conflict in Ukraine to a level beyond which the West could assist Kiev, a testament to Russia’s connection to the region that will be highlighted further below.<sup>325</sup>

A regional arms race is perhaps most threatening, leaving open the possibility of accident or miscalculation should the escalation elevate to levels difficult to control.

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<sup>321</sup> Michael Birnbaum, “Putin appears the biggest winner of Ukrainian cease-fire talks,” *The Washington Post*, last modified June 23, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-ukraine-peace-negotiations-continue-war-intensifies/2015/02/12/e81403c4-b27f-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/as-ukraine-peace-negotiations-continue-war-intensifies/2015/02/12/e81403c4-b27f-11e4-886b-c22184f27c35_story.html).

<sup>322</sup> Demirjian, “Russia warns of deeper rifts with West as Europe extends sanctions”

<sup>323</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision: America and the Crisis of Global Power* (New York: Basic Books, 2012), 141.

<sup>324</sup> Michael Birnbaum and Karoun Demirjian, “A year after Crimean annexation, threat of conflict remains,” *The Washington Post*, last modified June 22, 2015, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/a-year-after-crimean-annexation-threat-of-conflict-remains/2015/03/18/12e252e6-cd6e-11e4-8730-4f473416e759\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/a-year-after-crimean-annexation-threat-of-conflict-remains/2015/03/18/12e252e6-cd6e-11e4-8730-4f473416e759_story.html).

<sup>325</sup> Birnbaum, “Putin appears the biggest winner of Ukrainian cease-fire talks.”

There has been a sharp increase in incidents regarding the close proximity of Western and Russian forces, many due to the intensification of flights and submarine activity.<sup>326</sup> "We do not seek a cold, let alone a hot war with Russia. We do not seek to make Russia an enemy," said United States Defense Secretary Ash Carter. "But make no mistake: we will defend our allies, the rules-based international order, and the positive future it affords us all."<sup>327</sup> "If someone threatens our territories," Putin spoke similarly, "it means that we will have to aim our armed forces. It is NATO that is coming to our borders, it's not like we are moving anywhere."<sup>328</sup> The more Russia perceives itself to be a country under siege, warns Stephen Blank, the greater the risk of miscalculation.<sup>329</sup>

Schweller writes that, generally speaking, maritime hegemonic powers are threatening because of what they can do while continental hegemonic powers are threatening because of what they are.<sup>330</sup> Both China and Russia are large, expansive states dominating huge portions of the Eurasian landmass. China's possible pursuit of hegemony, however, extends out into the largely uninhabited Pacific Ocean where, in fact, its capabilities are feared more than its actual presence. The reverse is true in the case of Russia, which pursues hegemony over dry land and large human populations making its presence more significant than its capabilities. As a result, Russia's behavior in the 'Near Abroad', while it may be no less assertive or fast-paced than China's in the South China Sea, appears more menacing as its impact on human life is, at least up to the present time, much greater. While the level of aggression may be relatively equal, the

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<sup>326</sup> Joshua Melvin and Valerie Leroux, "Accidental conflict is 'true danger of Russia-West clash'," *Yahoo.com*, last modified June 23, 2015, <http://news.yahoo.com/accidental-conflict-true-danger-russia-west-clash-152423628.html>; Blank, "Imperial Ambitions," 67.

<sup>327</sup> Stewart, "U.S. pledges troops, equipment for NATO rapid response force."

<sup>328</sup> Diamond and Botelho, "U.S.-Russia military tit for tat raises fears of greater conflict"

<sup>329</sup> Blank, "Imperial Ambitions," 74.

<sup>330</sup> Schweller, *Unanswered Threats*, 29.

possibility of accident or miscalculation in the event of miscommunication and an arms race is also greater in the case of the 'Near Abroad' as large forces and more actors will be in closer proximity as opposed to the open ocean upon which, should an incident occur, there will be more time to react by fewer participants. The current situation in the 'Near Abroad' and Ukraine in particular is thus truly alarming and must be viewed in that context.

### **The Realist Explanation for Russia's Behavior**

If there is some question as to whether or not China is attempting to pursue hegemonic power in East Asia, the same cannot be said of Russia in Eurasia where among most scholars, realist and constructivist alike, it is a certainty. As Robert Gilpin states, Russia's objective is to control a larger portion of the world system while influencing others and the global economy.<sup>331</sup> In effect, Russia is trying to create a sphere of influence. But what is its motivation for doing so? According to realist theory, the motivation is predicated purely on increasing material power so as to ensure survival.<sup>332</sup> In regards to the 'Near Abroad', there is undoubtedly power and security to be gained. Direct power is to be had in the resources of the region, particularly as relates to natural gas, as well as ensuring control of the Black Sea through the annexation of the Crimea. More important are the security guarantees as related to power, one being economic and the other political. Moscow's creation of a sphere of influence will both protect its desperate economic reliance on the westward export of hydro-carbons and

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<sup>331</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 23-24.

<sup>332</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 51.

form a protective buffer against the encroachments of NATO. In this way, realism explains Russian foreign policy behavior in the ‘Near Abroad’ as both a means to increase relative power and security.

### **Material and Economic Security Motivations**

Attainable power from the ‘Near Abroad’ is predominantly measured in an economic sense, specifically in terms of energy export security, while the establishment of regional prominence is based on creating economic dependence on Moscow. Thanks to the sheer immensity of Siberia, Russia controls more proven oil, gas, and coal reserves than the United States, European Union, and China combined.<sup>333</sup> Moscow consequently benefits tremendously from any increase in energy prices, allowing the Kremlin to utilize hydro-carbons as an effective foreign policy tool.<sup>334</sup> Certainly, as Yury Fedorov claims, the growing dependence on Russian gas, especially in Europe, along with rising oil prices in the mid-2000s transformed the Russian mindset, convincing it that it was an ‘energy superpower’.<sup>335</sup>

Like the South China Sea for China, the geographic location of the ‘Near Abroad’ makes it critical to Russian economic security. Being as Belarus and Ukraine serve as intermediaries of the energy flow westward, Moscow is especially sensitive to any political changes or internal turmoil that could lead to its disruption, meaning those two countries factor heavily into power equations as they have the ability to damage the fossil

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<sup>333</sup> Khanna, *The Second World*, 11.

<sup>334</sup> Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 83.

<sup>335</sup> Yury E. Fedorov, “Continuity and Change in Russia’s Policy toward Central and Eastern Europe,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 46, no. 3 (September 2013), 322.

fuel-dependent Russian economy.<sup>336</sup> The absorption of Belarus is a real possibility as the country's nationalism has never been tested and its authoritarian government alienates it from Western Europe, leaving an opportunity so wide open that it may be impossible for Moscow to ignore.<sup>337</sup>

Similarly, Russia is sensitive to other areas within the 'Near Abroad' drifting from its energy orbit, which partly explains its 2008 invasion of Georgia as a reaction to the competition offered by the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline that was purposefully built by the United States and European Union to skirt Russian territory.<sup>338</sup> In a material sense, the invasion proved a great success as the pipeline was disrupted, dampening Western enthusiasm to invest in more pipelines in the region and convincing a number of countries to switch to Russian pipelines.<sup>339</sup> Furthermore, as Zbigniew Brzezinski adds, Russian dominance over Georgia would almost by default lead to dominance over neighboring Azerbaijan, a country that is central to controlling the rich Caspian Sea basin, is the link between the West and Central Asia, and whose energy supplies are a key to European diversification, making its control a means by which to attain greater leverage over the continent.<sup>340</sup>

The economic element, however, goes beyond the 'Near Abroad' as a transit region. Russia in fact desires a central position in the economy of Eastern Europe, which

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<sup>336</sup> Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 89.

<sup>337</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 94.

<sup>338</sup> Nicklas Norling, "China and Russia: Partners with Tensions," *Policy Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (January 2007), 40.

<sup>339</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 129, 257.

<sup>340</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 91; Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 46-47.

would certainly pull the region into Moscow's orbit, thus strengthening Russia itself.<sup>341</sup> The Ukrainian attempt to diversify away from Russia, for example, partly explains the Russian annexation of the Crimea, as it contains offshore gas deposits estimated at 4-13 trillion cm that would have been crucial in the Ukrainian effort towards energy independence. Not only does it keep Ukraine economically dependent on Moscow, but gives Russia control over those resources, translating into a direct increase in its material power. A similar economic element has many fearing that Russia seeks a repeat of the Crimean annexation in war torn Eastern Ukraine where the massive Yuzivska shale field is located.<sup>342</sup> Certainly, given the demonstrated success of the American shale boom, Russia would greatly benefit from its acquisition. Russia is also likely interested in Ukraine's strong industrial and agricultural sectors. Prior to 2014, encouraged by the Kremlin, Russian firms had already been working to gain control over major Ukrainian industrial assets.<sup>343</sup>

But the Russian failure to diversify its exports away from energy as Europe continues to diversify its energy imports away from Russia does severe harm to the Russian economy, especially in conjunction with the drop in global energy prices.<sup>344</sup> This in turn hinders Russia's strategy for establishing a regional sphere of influence as its energy noose loosens. It is this sudden drop in the potency of its "gas weapon" that may

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<sup>341</sup>Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy," 322.

<sup>342</sup> Frank Umbach, "The energy dimensions of Russia's annexation of Crimea," *NATO Review*, last modified June 22, 2015, <http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2014/nato-energy-security-running-on-empty/Ukraine-energy-independence-gas-dependence-on-Russia/EN/index.htm>.

<sup>343</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 95.

<sup>344</sup> Gordon G. Chang, "China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States," *World Affairs* 76, no. 6 (March-April 2014), 20-21; Fedorov, 322; Maria Raquel Freire and Carmen Amado Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship: Forging Strategic Partnerships?" *Journal of Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2009), 30; Khanna, *The Second World*, 14; Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 89. Luxmoore placed hydrocarbons as making up 70% of Russia's export revenue as of 2014.

very well explain Moscow's much more physically assertive approach in 2014 compared to the years immediately prior.

### **National Security Motivations**

The national security motivation for Russia's foreign policy behavior in the 'Near Abroad' is the expansion of the Western military alliance NATO. Over fifteen years ago, NATO's bombing of Serbian forces in Kosovo demonstrated that the Western alliance would be willing to use its military strength ever closer to Russia itself. Its expansion, however, is seen as an even greater threat, and was officially branded as such by the National Security Concept of 2000.<sup>345</sup> Since 1999, most of the countries of Eastern Europe have joined NATO, including the three Baltic States. Ukraine and Georgia, meanwhile, have consistently expressed interest in joining as well, an occurrence that would indeed leave Russia surrounded. As former President Dmitry Medvedev later expressed, "The real problem is that NATO brings its military infrastructure right up to our borders...No matter what we are told, it is only natural that we should see this as an action directed against us."<sup>346</sup> The frequent considerations regarding the construction of missile shields in Poland, Czech Republic, and elsewhere demonstrate the practical military implications of NATO expansion and serve to alienate Russia further.<sup>347</sup>

In the context of the approach of NATO and its associated weapons to its borders, realism can explain the Russian strategy within the 'Near Abroad' as an attempt to create

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<sup>345</sup> Ria Laenen, "Russian 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbors*, edited by Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 30.

<sup>346</sup> Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy," 317.

<sup>347</sup> Fyodor Lukyanov, "Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World," *Journal of International Affairs* 63, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 2010), 21.

a buffer zone between itself and NATO consisting of those post-Soviet states not already absorbed into the alliance. It is essentially, as Roy Allison explains, a strategy of area denial meant to deny territory to the West and reassert Russian primacy in the post-Soviet region. Russia does not directly need to control those states (at least not for this purpose), simply ensure their non-aligned status, as Putin in fact promoted at the UN. In this way, Russia's behavior in those states, particularly Ukraine and Georgia, can be described as defensive. As Medvedev said in reference to Georgia, "If we faltered in 2008, geopolitical arrangements would be different now and a number of countries... would have probably been in NATO." The Kremlin previously suspected NATO had already planned to extend invitations to both countries.<sup>348</sup>

In many ways the mere existence of NATO is seen in Russia as provocative now that its original reason for existing, to counter the Soviet Warsaw Pact, has been absent for over a quarter century. The Kremlin sees the West's proclaimed new agenda for NATO, to prevent strategic ambiguity and maintain stability in Eastern Europe, as nothing more than an obvious excuse to curtail the re-emergence of Russia as a great power.<sup>349</sup> A great deal of disconnect, argues Jeffrey Mankoff, stems from the failure by either side to define their post-Cold War relationship, leaving both viewing the other as expansionist and dangerous.<sup>350</sup> Initially, Russia tolerated the expansion of NATO because of its temporary dependence on Western institutions following the collapse of the

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<sup>348</sup> Roy Allison, "Russian 'Deniable' Intervention in Ukraine: How and Why Russia Broke the Rules," *International Affairs* 90, no. 6 (November 2014), 1269-1270, 1273.

<sup>349</sup> Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy," 320; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 107.

<sup>350</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 102.

Soviet Union.<sup>351</sup> With Russia's economic recovery, however, that motivation, and hence its tolerance, has waned considerably.

Just as polls show the majority of Russians view NATO to be a threat, most find the United States to be internally meddling.<sup>352</sup> As Niall Ferguson writes, liberal empires almost always declare their own altruism. Like others before it, the United States feels that it has a responsibility to spread its own values.<sup>353</sup> America's 'drive for democracy' poses every bit as much a threat to Vladimir Putin's regime and Russia's identity as do NATO arms.

The major turn away from the United States occurred in the wake of the Kosovo conflict in 1999 in which American unilateralist action within the former Yugoslavia, a region historically linked to Russia, convinced Moscow of Washington's hegemonic intentions. Several years earlier, Russia sided with the West regarding Serbia in support of sanctions against Belgrade and suffered a nationalist backlash for its failure to defend a traditional friend. Wishing to avoid that same mistake, Russia threatened to use its veto in the UN Security Council to prevent military intervention in Kosovo, causing the United States to in turn avoid the UNSC and intervene through NATO, a strategy that threw Russia's internationally perceived irrelevance right in the Kremlin's face and convinced it, as Jeffrey Mankoff states, that realist power politics are still very much

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<sup>351</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: US Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 23.

<sup>352</sup> Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 84.

<sup>353</sup> Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Rise of America's Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 23.

alive and well.<sup>354</sup> Though not as close to home, the American invasion of Iraq had a similar effect.<sup>355</sup>

Moscow sees Washington as diplomatically targeting Russia as well. The Kremlin values its bilateral treaties with the United States because it allows Russia to feel like a relevant and equal partner with the world's only superpower. It is therefore unsurprising that the American withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and its refusal to ratify START II convinced many among Russia's elite that the US actively seeks to remove the country from the rank of great powers, not to mention leave it militarily vulnerable and thus susceptible to Western pressure.<sup>356</sup>

As a result of the insecurities generated by the expansion of NATO and American unilateralist behavior, Russia is especially sensitive to the politics of and political changes that occur in the countries of the 'Near Abroad'. Since the mid-1990s, the West has vigorously backed Ukrainian independence and Kiev's looking westward.<sup>357</sup> In 2004, fearful of Kiev's attempts to move into the Western orbit, Russia illegally interfered with the Ukrainian presidential election, leading to the temporary victory of the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich. The West's subsequent condemnation of that initial election was viewed in Moscow as an attempt to infringe upon its sphere of influence.<sup>358</sup> Similarly, Mikhail Saakashvili's aforementioned attempt to move Georgia towards the West, including a bid to enter into the NATO alliance, prompted the Russian invasion of 2008. Georgia and South Ossetia, Ria Laenen writes, were not about

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<sup>354</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence*, 37, 94, 120; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 108.

<sup>355</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 120.

<sup>356</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 106.

<sup>357</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 113.

<sup>358</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 250.

expansion, but about drawing a line against Western encroachment, as Matthew Luxmoore insists is evident by Moscow's not attempting to remove Saakashvili from power.<sup>359</sup> The Kremlin, he argues, was only looking to obtain security and so was content to simply halt Georgia's westward lean.<sup>360</sup> Meanwhile, despite hopes among some analysts that a Ukraine somewhat ahead of Russia in terms of access to the West would in turn encourage Russian movement westward, the exact opposite occurred in 2014 when Moscow instead acted aggressively against a perceived Western threat.<sup>361</sup>

At the same time that Russia sees the expansion of NATO and American unilateralism as overtly hostile, however, it has, at least until recently, grown in confidence on the assumption that the West, and the United States in particular, is becoming less of a threat in the sense that it is losing its resolve in the face of Russian persistence, thus explaining the Kremlin's timing. The Obama administration's decision to reverse the Bush plan to construct missile defenses in Eastern Europe, for example, was largely taken by the Kremlin as political weakness and indicated that it was possible to undermine Western security guarantees. Meanwhile, Moscow's decision to withdraw from the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE) that acted to balance the militaries of West and East demonstrates both the threat Putin feels towards NATO as well as a lack of concern over an increase in the size of its military.<sup>362</sup> Whether genuinely dismissive of NATO resolve or simply for popular consumption, Putin's

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<sup>359</sup> Laenen, "Russian 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," 26; Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 87.

<sup>360</sup> Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 87.

<sup>361</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 150.

<sup>362</sup> Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy," 319-321.

menacing boast that he could occupy any Eastern European capital within two days reveals an arrogance the West is forced to take into account.<sup>363</sup>

But recent events have proven that calculation to be far off the mark and now, following the events in Ukraine and with the CFE no longer operative, Eastern Europe is threatened with becoming ground zero of a massive arms race. Moscow's perception of the Western material threat will ultimately determine to what extent an arms race occurs and if aggressive action is taken by either side. Thus far, NATO's sudden resolve in the face of aggression has not compelled Putin to reconsider his actions, rather it has encouraged Russia to bolster its own forces and threaten an increase in military exercises. At the same time, however, it may have halted any overt acts of Russian assertiveness in the near future. Both sides now better understand each other's limits and while it is unlikely that either side will intentionally cross those limits, the sudden build-up in tensions combined with the close proximity of large military forces undergoing frequent exercises could very well prove an explosive cocktail.

### **The Value of the Crimea**

The extreme situation of the Crimea calls for its own evaluation. Here, it is almost impossible to deny the Kremlin's realist intentions. One of the motivators behind the annexation was the need for a stable warm water port on the Black Sea. Russia's lease on the naval facilities at Sebastopol in the Crimea was set to expire in 2015.<sup>364</sup> Following the election of the Russian-backed Viktor Yanukovych as Ukrainian president in February 2010, Kiev and Moscow reached an agreement whereby the Russian lease on

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<sup>363</sup> Blank, "Imperial Ambitions," 67.

<sup>364</sup> Khanna, *The Second World*, 21.

the naval base would be extended a further twenty-five years in exchange for a preferential pricing of Russian energy exports.<sup>365</sup> Admittedly, even this deal was limiting as it did not permit Russia to increase the size of its fleet in Sebastopol. When in early 2014 it appeared Ukraine was taking a Western turn that could lead to NATO membership, the Kremlin acted to save its naval base, which it feared would be lost. If Ukraine was to join NATO, Putin said in alarmist fashion, its navy would replace that of Russia in a port historically linked to Russian glory and from there would be a threat to Russia itself.<sup>366</sup>

The Crimea “is a fortress,” Putin stated on the anniversary of its annexation, “where the Russian Black Sea Fleet is in port.”<sup>367</sup> Indeed that has long been the case. But realists speculate that Moscow has bigger plans for the Crimea than simply saving its fleet. Many realist scholars believe Russia plans to completely dominate the Black Sea, which would allow for greater influence in the Middle East. In fact, Russia did not just seize the Crimea. It also seized a portion of the Ukrainian fleet, the addition of which made Russia’s naval presence larger than that of Turkey. Moreover, Moscow has definite plans to further augment its fleet with submarines, as well as construct new airbases, coastal defenses, and air defenses all seemingly designed for purposes of power projection.<sup>368</sup> The recent Russian intervention in the Syrian Civil War appears to vindicate those realist fears.

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<sup>365</sup> Allison, “Russian ‘deniable intervention’ in Ukraine,” 1271; Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 95.

<sup>366</sup> Allison, “Russian ‘deniable intervention’ in Ukraine,” 1274, 1278.

<sup>367</sup> Michael B. Kelley, “Putin: Crimea is Part of Russia.”

<sup>368</sup> Allison, “Russian ‘deniable intervention’ in Ukraine,” 1277-1280.

### Does Russia Have Hegemonic Ambitions?

The acquisition of power certainly plays a role in Russia's calculations within the 'Near Abroad'. The best way to ensure survival, John Mearsheimer argues, is to attain hegemonic power, the only point at which the pursuit of power finally comes to an end.<sup>369</sup> In the realist perspective, Russia's efforts to transform the vast areas on its periphery into a sphere of influence is an attempt to establish a regional hegemony for the purpose of balancing against the power of the United States and the other global centers of power such as Western Europe and China. Many analysts draw a direct correlation between energy prices and foreign policy. In others words, as soon as high energy prices made it feasible to do so, Russia more actively pursued regional hegemony.<sup>370</sup> Unlike China, which claims sovereignty in the South China Sea, Russia is intentionally using the 'Near Abroad,' over which it does not claim direct sovereignty other than in the Crimea, as a field to contest against other world powers by asserting itself as one of those same powers, which is only made possible by domination of the region. For this reason, some like Ria Laenen dispute the idea that Russia is neo-imperialist or is attempting to territorially reconstruct the old Soviet Union as those with a more extreme view insist.<sup>371</sup> Russia has no intention of physical conquest or ownership. Instead, it is attempting to establish its regional prominence, much like the United States in North America.

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<sup>369</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle for Power," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 52-53.

<sup>370</sup> Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 74.

<sup>371</sup> Laenen, "Russian 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," 26; Marcel H. Van Herpen, *Putin's Wars: The Rise of Russia's New Imperialism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 5, 61.

Russia's objective, as Yury Fedorov explains, is to separate the states of Central and Eastern Europe from the rest of Europe and transform them into 'agents of influence' by demonstrating that they cannot rely on Western security guarantees. Known as the 'New Yalta Accords', Moscow's strategy consists primarily of making economic deals at the expense of its neighbors, manipulating them through its energy exports, and creating pro-Russian media communities in order to influence internal sentiment. Conciliating its neighbors regarding the Soviet Union's past behavior towards them has been another common Russian foreign policy tactic.<sup>372</sup>

Russia also uses its diaspora population as a tool to gain leverage in the 'Near Abroad', a tactic that Sinikukka Saari rightly finds contradictory to its frequent emphasis on state sovereignty when challenging the Western liberal order.<sup>373</sup> Moscow has chosen to utilize soft power through the public diplomacy of non-governmental organizations rather than state-conducted propaganda in an attempt to maintain its influence in its former satellites, concentrating on the Russian minority populations. In this way, it appears less abrasive and can more easily claim no responsibility for ethnic tensions that have been occurring throughout Eastern Ukraine since early 2014. Combined with the economic leverage provided by its energy exports, the Kremlin is able to put a great deal of pressure on its neighbors.<sup>374</sup> Meanwhile, the population at home supports Putin's efforts in regards to the diaspora. It often views the circumstances much as did Andrei Tsygankov in the wake of the Color Revolutions concerning which he writes that Russia sought no territory or natural resources from its neighboring states, only human dignity

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<sup>372</sup> Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy," 320-321.

<sup>373</sup> Saari, "Russia's Post-Orange Revolution Strategies," 56.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid*, 51, 56-57.

and quality of life for the citizens whom it regards as cultural compatriots.<sup>375</sup> Following the annexation of the Crimea, however, such assertions are more difficult to support.

The use of hard power, however, is never far behind. Throughout history, hard power has been the traditional means by which Russia has staked its influence and remains a foreign policy tool today despite the often times contradictory imperative of integrating the country into the modern global economy.<sup>376</sup> In 2008, the Kremlin began reforming the military for the purpose of achieving its goals along its periphery, keeping it locally powerful and prepared to intervene when necessary while, as Fedorov asserts, never discounting the possible use of brinkmanship tactics.<sup>377</sup> The public largely agrees with such measures. Just as the crackdown in Chechnya strengthened Putin politically, so too years later was the annexation of the Crimea greeted enthusiastically by the public at large.<sup>378</sup> Jingoistic television coverage by state controlled media may have reinforced Putin's actions and raised his approval ratings, but the interference in Eastern Ukraine and the Crimea, framed by the government as an effort to protect Russian minorities, would have been largely popular even without the Kremlin's efforts to stabilize opinion in its favor.<sup>379</sup> Moscow often refers to such activities as peacekeeping endeavors, a role Laenen argues to be synonymous with regional great power status, conducive to its historic agenda, and so readily acceptable to the public.<sup>380</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Russia's International Assertiveness: What Does It Mean for the West?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 2 (March-April 2008), 39.

<sup>376</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 1-2.

<sup>377</sup> Fedorov, "Continuity and Change in Russia's Policy," 323.

<sup>378</sup> Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism," 82, 103.

<sup>379</sup> George Kuchinsky, "Russia: Shifting Political Frontiers," *Comparative Strategy* 33, no. 3 (2014), 270; Luxmoore, 82.

<sup>380</sup> Laenen, "Russian 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," 31-32.

That great power status and historic agenda reveal that the Russian identity, despite the evidence above, is not static and exclusively power-driven as realist scholars suggest. While realists are correct that Russia is indeed pursuing an increase in its power relative to other great powers in an effort to establish a regional sphere of influence with hegemonic undertones, it is doing so on the basis of interests long formed by the Russian national identity. That is precisely why the general Russian public is behind the Kremlin's activities in the 'Near Abroad', because it meets its expectations for Russia historically and as a great power, an identity intimately tied to the larger national identity. Realism and the pursuit of power explain the appeal of the 'Near Abroad' in material and security terms. It also explains Moscow's opportunistic approach and generally aggressive strategy. But there nevertheless remain some questions realism fails to answer in a completely satisfactory manner. Realism does not fully explain, for example, why Russia would act in a way almost certain to cripple its economy, especially at a time when the reduction in energy prices has already begun to do so. Furthermore, realism does not adequately explain why Russia fears NATO expansion given the extreme reluctance of democratic Europe to use military force even on its own continent, if it truly fears it at all. Finally, realism fails to explain why Russia, now that it has possession of the Crimea, has so obstinately refused to compromise on Eastern Ukraine when it believes that the Western sanction regime could slacken if it offers up some conciliation.<sup>381</sup> Doing so quickly would have the likely effect of ending the sanctions while securing the Crimea, a seemingly win-win situation. There must be another

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<sup>381</sup> Christopher Harress, "Germany Wants Russian Sanctions Lifted To Safeguard Economy And Continue Trade Relationship With Moscow," *International Business Times*, last modified October 13, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.com/germany-wants-russian-sanctions-lifted-safeguard-economy-continue-trade-relationship-1997080>.

variable at work alongside power that influences Russian foreign policy behavior in the ‘Near Abroad’. Once again, that variable is identity.

### **The Role of Identity**

Much like China in the South China Sea, Russia is now inexorably bound to avoid any appearance of weakness in the ‘Near Abroad’. Compromise in regards to Eastern Ukraine in the spirit of the Minsk Agreement or a withdrawal from South Ossetia has become difficult if not impossible without an agreement that would allow Russia to appear the victor and thus save face. Even backing down from a potential arms race in Eastern Europe could prove difficult. The reason for this is not because of the material or security benefits offered by the ‘Near Abroad’, but rather because of the threat to the regime itself.

Faced with a political crisis in Ukraine and a declining economy due to the fall in global energy prices, which is the disproportionate source of Russia’s wealth, the Kremlin turned to nationalism as a means to ensure its own legitimacy. In this way it could in effect blame Russia’s problems on the outside world and take action to amend those problems, both of which would (and has) boost its popularity and maintain authority at home. Although unlike in China there is a semblance of procedural legitimacy because Vladimir Putin must be re-elected to remain in power, the Russian government is nevertheless extremely heavy-handed if not outright authoritarian, meaning that much like China it relies on its performance to maintain legitimacy.<sup>382</sup> Accordingly, the Kremlin elevated talk of the abuse of Russian minorities in the ‘Near

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<sup>382</sup> Ning Liao, “Presentist or Cultural Memory: Chinese Nationalism as Constraint on Beijing’s Foreign Policy Making,” *Asian Politics and Policy* 5, no. 4 (October 2013), 546.

Abroad' and threats like the expansion of NATO to new heights and proved to its people in early 2014 that it was willing to back its rhetoric with decisive action.

But nationalistic interests within the 'Near Abroad' were not, as Peter J. Katzenstein would insist, "discovered" by Putin or his regime.<sup>383</sup> Instead, Putin has co-opted Russian interests, which, having been formed through the Russian national identity, have long existed. As such, Russia's foreign policy behavior in the 'Near Abroad' is largely determined by its identity. The section below will examine that identity, focusing specifically on those aspects that influence Russian behavior in the 'Near Abroad', most predominantly its complicated status as a European state and frustrating historic relationship with Europe. It will also examine Russia's identity as a great power, which is informed by its historical narrative to such a degree that it cannot be divorced from the country's collective memory. Next, the section will discuss the importance of the 'Near Abroad' in defining the Russian identity. It will conclude by examining the relationship between the Russian identity, the regime's need for legitimacy, and Russia's foreign policy behavior in the 'Near Abroad', which, as with China in the South China Sea, explains why the Kremlin, now that it has stoked the fires of nationalism, must satisfy the norms and interests associated with the identity it has invoked through assertive behavior in the post-Soviet space or face a crisis of legitimacy.

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<sup>383</sup> Katzenstein, *The Cultural of National Security*, 2.

## The Russian National Identity

The Russian national identity is perhaps best described as an identity crisis. In fact, the very identity Vladimir Putin has come to embrace, that of the “Euro-East” perspective, reveals its schizophrenic nature quite obviously. According to the “Euro-East” perspective, Russia is a European nation with great power capabilities and with special relations outside of Europe, specifically due to its history and geography as relates to Asia.<sup>384</sup> Putin, writes Joan DeBardeleben, places Russia’s role as a sovereign state and great power within a European context, drawing a distinction between those who see Russia as exclusively European and those who view Russia as its own entity entirely.<sup>385</sup> But Europe does not, nor has it ever, fully accepted Russia as a European state. At the same time, despite its desire to be European, Russia never fully accepted the type of progressive politics and culture that define Europe. Certain aspects of its identity, borne from its connection with Asia throughout its historical and cultural narrative, continuously pull Russia away from its century’s old desire to be a full-fledged member of the European community. That failure to adopt European practices, writes Iver B. Neumann, has created a social dynamic characterized by a relentless quest for status that is still evident today in Russia’s clumsy international relations and foreign policy behavior.<sup>386</sup> It is as if Russia has, for lack of a better term, an inferiority complex that entirely defies its tremendous material power capabilities.

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<sup>384</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Idea: “West,” “Eurasian,” and “Euro-East” in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” *Geopolitics* 12, no. 3 (July 2007), 382.

<sup>385</sup> Joan DeBardeleben, “Applying Constructivism to Understanding EU-Russian Relations,” *International Politics* 49, no. 4 (March 2012), 420.

<sup>386</sup> Neumann, “Russia in International Society Over the Long Dureé,” 26-27.

“Above all else Russia was, is and will, of course, be a major European power. Achieved through much suffering by European culture, the ideals of freedom, human rights, justice and democracy have for many centuries been our society’s determining values.” Those bewildering words were spoken by Vladimir Putin in 2008 as he attempted to define Russia’s place in Europe.<sup>387</sup> Since even before the reign of Peter the Great and until the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Russia has striven to be seen as an equal within European politics and culture, a quest it resumed after the fall of the Soviet Union. But Europe has never been convinced that Russia was on par, just as it is unconvinced about Russian “ideals of freedom, human rights, justice and democracy” today.<sup>388</sup> Russia, explains Neumann, instead bears a history of parting ways with Europe. After the Napoleonic Age, as Europe modernized, Russia reaffirmed the power of the ancien régime. Following the First World War, as Europe maintained its commitment to bourgeois society, Russia became fiercely socialist. And in the present day, as Europe transitions into international integration through the European Union, Russia has doubled down on ideas of strict national sovereignty. As a result, Europe considers Russian practices, mired in a disposition inherited from the Eurasian steppe, to be awkward and backward. Through Western eyes, Neumann argues, Russia fails the test as a great power because of its lack of progressiveness, especially in governing where Moscow resists the trend that less is more. As a result of an historical memory of rejection, he continues,

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<sup>387</sup> Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Ideal,” 375.

<sup>388</sup> Iver B. Neumann, “Russia’s Standing as a Great Power, 1494-1815,” in *Russia’s European Choice* edited by Ted Hopf (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 19-30.

Russia has always attempted to “punch above its weight” in international politics and continues to pursue its great power ambitions assertively.<sup>389</sup>

Accordingly, Russia’s own identity since the end of the Cold War has been confused as relates to its degree of “Europeanness”. Historically, even as Russia has desired to be European, it also considered itself too powerful to be satisfied with being just another European state, but at the same time has never been strong enough to dominate or even influence the continent for long.<sup>390</sup> Atlanticists, or Russians who see themselves as Europeans, desire an increased integration with the West.<sup>391</sup> Dominant in the years immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Atlanticists have since lost a great deal of influence due to the general disillusionment over the failed liberal experiment of the 1990s and the opposition they posed to Russia’s imperialist great power history.<sup>392</sup> The Russian move towards Europe, explains Andrei Tsygankov, was not historically rooted in liberalism, but rather the desire to be part of a club of European monarchies, which of course has no relevance today.<sup>393</sup> As a result, Atlanticists lost power relatively quickly when the popular perception came to be that Russia was being overly subordinate to the West. They were in turn replaced by the Eurasianists who believed adamantly in multipolarity and a greater influence over the ‘Near Abroad’.<sup>394</sup>

Although no longer dominant, Eurasianists nevertheless retain many key positions within the Kremlin today.<sup>395</sup> Eurasianists, who began their rise in 1993 led by Yevgeny

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<sup>389</sup> Neumann, “Russia in International Society Over the Long Dureé,” 27, 29-30, 36-39.

<sup>390</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 138.

<sup>391</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>392</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence*, 30-32.

<sup>393</sup> Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Idea,” 381.

<sup>394</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence*, 53-57.

<sup>395</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 67.

Primakov, emphasize Russia as the core of the post-Soviet space with special ties to greater Asia and the Middle East, drawing a firm distinction from Europe. They cherish Russia's great power identity, which will be discussed in detail below, unique culture and tradition of strong governing, linking their perspective to the historic idea of Russia as the "Third Rome."<sup>396</sup> They were also behind the brief resurgence of Pan-Slavism in the early 2000s, which as Elena Melnikova explains, was an attempt to racially separate Russians from Europeans by rejecting Russia's Nordic origins in order to forge a new nationalism to replace the ideological gap liberalism failed to fill.<sup>397</sup> Correspondingly, the rise of the Eurasianists marked a pull away from the West, highlighted by the National Security Concept of 1997, which posited Russia to be an influential European and Asian power and emphasized the importance of creating a sphere of influence over the 'Near Abroad'.<sup>398</sup> Critically, their idea of Russia as a unique power with the ability to balance the East and West, because it opens up a clear avenue to re-establishing the country's historic internationally-recognized great power status, remains highly influential even as their own political power has waned.<sup>399</sup>

By the late 1990s, writes Tsygankov, the Eurasianist perspective seemed unproductive, expensive, and extremist. Vladimir Putin, who emphasized Russia's European identity over that of Asia, wanted a compromise. By uniting Westernist business elite with Eurasianist security services and so stressing economic recovery and

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<sup>396</sup> Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea," 376-377, 381, 384.

<sup>397</sup> Elena Melnikova, "The 'Varangian Problem': Science in the Grip of Ideology and Politics," in *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, and Misperceptions* edited by Ray Taras (London: Routledge, 2013), 42, 49.

<sup>398</sup> Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea," 384.

<sup>399</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 68.

the fight against terrorism, Putin forged the “Euro-East” perspective.<sup>400</sup> He underscored Russia’s Europeanness, but did so in way that made Russia unique as a great power and thus satisfied those who feared that a “return” to Europe would compromise the country’s core values. For Putin, argues Tsygankov, great power is not a goal in and of itself, but rather a means towards a more advanced engagement with the world.<sup>401</sup> Accordingly, in 2001 Moscow was eager to be a “strategic partner” with the US in its war on terror as it served the purpose of elevating Russian prestige and keeping the country relevant, but that soon changed to opposition when it became obvious that the American presence in Afghanistan would be long-lasting and consist of the imposition of American liberal values on the region.<sup>402</sup> Rather than go its own way, in 2003 Russia sided with France and Germany over the American invasion of Iraq. On that occasion, Moscow had the opportunity to appear one with Europe while opposing Washington at a low diplomatic cost.<sup>403</sup>

But the optimism that the country could have a closer relationship with the West while maintaining its unique status did not last. Before long the West’s familiar doubts re-emerged, spurred on by the Kremlin’s reactions to the Color Revolutions in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Putin’s claim that he was attempting to assist cultural compatriots as they decided for themselves the “pace, terms, and conditions of moving towards democracy” were unconvincing.<sup>404</sup> At the same time, argues Joan

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<sup>400</sup> Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Idea,” 385, 391.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid, 376, 382.

<sup>402</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence*, 131, 139; Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (London: Chatham House, 2008), 93-94; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 108; Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 86.

<sup>403</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 88.

<sup>404</sup> Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Idea,” 385.

DeBardeleben, Russia's identity formation remained on shifting ground as NATO continued its expansion. Exacerbating Russia's confused identity was Europe itself, the identity of which too constantly shifted amid the integration process that was the European Union. The entrance of different countries with different identities into the EU, some of which are very suspicious of the giant to the East, make it increasingly difficult for Moscow to get a handle on a consistent foreign policy approach. The Russian desire for bilateral negotiations, she writes as an example, which indicates its greater degree of comfort when interacting on an individual basis, has become impossible while attempting to decipher the rules of negotiation with the EU.<sup>405</sup> Tsygankov writes that the premier Russian challenge is to somehow reconnect to Europe while maintaining its traditional values.<sup>406</sup> Currently, that prospect does not appear favorable and Russia's frustration has been plainly evident.

### **Russia as a Great Power**

As stated above, Russia's identity as a great power cannot be divorced from its national identity. It is the very being of Russia. To repeat Iver Neumann, Russia believes that it is either a great power or nothing.<sup>407</sup> A great power identity, writes Ted Hopf, implies a particular set of interests.<sup>408</sup> Perhaps with no other country is that more

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<sup>405</sup> DeBardeleben, "Applying Constructivism to Understanding EU-Russian Relation," 419, 421, 429.

<sup>406</sup> Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea," 379.

<sup>407</sup> Neumann, "Russia in International Society over the Long Dureé," 25.

<sup>408</sup> Hopf, "The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory," 176.

true than Russia, a nation, states Bo Petersson, that considers itself a naturally ordained great power almost as if it is a burden.<sup>409</sup>

Like China, Russia believes the international arena is becoming multipolar within which, as Fyodor Lukyanov explains, the future world order will be based on the competitive interactions between principle centers of power rather than any one power's domination.<sup>410</sup> The open promotion of multipolarity can be dated back to the 'Primakov Doctrine' of 1992, barely six months after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and was a cornerstone of Eurasianist thinking.<sup>411</sup> In the words of Vladimir Putin, "There is no reason to doubt that the economic potential of the new centers of global economic growth will be converted into political influence and will strengthen multipolarity."<sup>412</sup> Justification for this, the Kremlin has argued, can be found in the economic crisis of 2008, the rise of the popularly-dubbed BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), and the global opposition to the American invasion of Iraq, especially by the EU.<sup>413</sup> Also like China, not only does Russia believe multipolarity is coming, it outwardly endorses it, as for example did former-president Dmitry Medvedev officially through his Foreign Policy Concept of July 2008. Critically, Moscow considers itself to be one of those new centers of global economic growth and consequently a future pole, or in the language of the Strategy of National Security of May 2009, a "key subject of the multipolar international

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<sup>409</sup> Bo Petersson, "Mirror, Mirror...Myth-making, Self-images and Views of US 'Other' in Contemporary Russia," in *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions* edited by Ray Taras (London: Routledge, 2013), 11.

<sup>410</sup> Lukyanov, "Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World," 28.

<sup>411</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence*, 51. The 'Primakov Doctrine' was named after former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov who promoted a policy of balancing United States power and influence.

<sup>412</sup> Kupchan, *The End of the American Era*, 169.

<sup>413</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 15.

relations being formed.”<sup>414</sup> In modern times, the Russian leadership points to its economic potential, most notably regarding energy and other material capabilities, as the most clear and relevant indicator of its great power status.<sup>415</sup>

Going back as far as the Foreign Policy Concept of 2000, Russia has denounced the American-controlled global order while, similarly to China, emphasizing national sovereignty.<sup>416</sup> It does so for the declared purpose of avoiding a subservient status within the current system in which it feels it is subject to the whims of a unilateralist power.<sup>417</sup> Russian foreign policy is subsequently modeled under the shared national understanding that it is itself a great power that is meant to play a role in international affairs equal to that of the United States while at the same time is free to pursue its interests as it sees fit; each great power within the multipolar order in turn respects each other’s spheres of influence and the general balance of power amongst them.<sup>418</sup>

Diplomatically, Russia is very similar to its neighbor China in that it feels that a great power’s sovereignty should not be determined internationally, but rather bilaterally, as multilaterally is far too intrusive.<sup>419</sup> For the Kremlin, a great power’s territory should not be up for debate. The term great power, as Andrei Tsygankov explains, speaks to the idea of defining Russia’s territorial integrity.<sup>420</sup> It would not, for example, recognize any international rulings on the status of the Crimea. At the same time, however, it relishes

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<sup>414</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, “A Multipolar World As Seen by Russia and China: International Challenges,” *Far Eastern Affairs* 38, no. 3 (July-September, 2010), 1.

<sup>415</sup> Hanna Smith, “Domestic Influence of Russian Foreign Policy: Status, Interests and Ressentiment,” in *Russia and Its Near Neighbors*, edited by Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 43.

<sup>416</sup> Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 80.

<sup>417</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence*,” 154.

<sup>418</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 12.

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid*, 14-15.

<sup>420</sup> Tsygankov, “Russia’s International Assertiveness,” 49.

its position within institutions such as the UN Security Council and (until recently) the G8 as it sees those as exclusive and consequently in recognition of Russia's great power status while at the same time not infringing on its domestic affairs, national sovereignty, or ability to act unilaterally.<sup>421</sup> Even more cherished are its arms treaties with the United States, as these allow Russia to feel on a somewhat equal footing with the world's largest power.<sup>422</sup>

In the realist sense, size and power play a large role in fostering the country's self-identity as a great power. Here, relative power matters a great deal. Confidence emanates from several sources, chiefly military prowess, an abundance of natural resources, a rise in fortunes through energy exportation (even in light of the recent downturn), and the idea of the United States being tied down by overwhelming obligations.<sup>423</sup> All of these factors combine to seemingly indicate an increase in relative power. Even the constructivist Hanna Smith admits that Russia's imperial character lies in its image of a military power and the status it holds due to the sheer size of the country.<sup>424</sup> As discussed above, the Kremlin has certainly not hesitated to press its advantage as a massive energy exporter. But the foreign dependency created through the country's aforementioned stock of hydro-carbons has provided only the most recent boost to the Russian identity as a great power. In a material power sense, Russia has traditionally held the most pride in its military, which despite a poor showing in Chechnya remains large and highly formidable, most notably its gigantic nuclear

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<sup>421</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 14-15, 16.

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid*, 5.

<sup>424</sup> Smith, "Domestic Influence of Russian Foreign Policy," 43.

arsenal.<sup>425</sup> As Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth point out, arms is one of the few areas in which Russia maintains a high technological competency, not only strengthening its own forces, but also allowing it to continue on as an attractive international arms supplier, which greatly aids its economy.<sup>426</sup>

But much more than power, history has forged the Russian identity. Although Russia has a long history as a large and expansionary state, it is its more modern experience as the core of the globally-relevant Soviet Union that serves to vindicate great power status. The Kremlin is resentful of Russia's fall from prestige at the center of the world stage, angered, as Fyodor Lukyanov states, by the now-defunct notion of the "end of history", as that end was defined by its own demise.<sup>427</sup> A powerful sense of nostalgia for periods of national strength remains, including for those during the most authoritarian days of the Soviet Union. Aside from the small minority of Westernists that believe the Soviet Union curtailed Russian progress and should never have existed, Russian elite overlook Soviet flaws while school textbooks emphasize great power status as the premier accomplishment of communist rule.<sup>428</sup> Naturally, Russia's inability to discredit a time in its history when it oppressed its own people as well as others serves to divide it from the West, especially its once-victimized European neighbors.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>425</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 76.

<sup>426</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 76. A number of scholars dispute the claim that the Russian military is technologically competitive including Parag Khanna and Susan Turner, though it nevertheless remains formidable. Khanna, *The Second World*, 13; Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 172.

<sup>427</sup> Khanna, *The Second World*, 11; Lukyanov, "Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World," 20. The idea of the "end of history" coming alongside the fall of the Soviet Union comes from *The End of History and the Last Man* by Francis Fukuyama who claimed that all countries will inevitable become liberal democracies.

<sup>428</sup> Tsygankov, "Finding a Civilisational Idea," 383; Ted Hopf, "The Evolution of Russia's Place in the World: 1991-2011," *Demokratizatsiya* 20, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 280.

<sup>429</sup> Brzezinski, *Strategic Vision*, 144.

For Putin and many others, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a disaster as Russia lost many parts of the country it had once considered natural.<sup>430</sup> Referencing the Crimea in March 2015, he stated that “Everything is related to Russia history.” The “Crimea is a unique melting pot of traditions and culture and that's why it looks like Russia.” Inserting an historical element to justify the Crimean annexation and emphasizing modern Russian bitterness he added, “We all used to belong to the same country: the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union has collapsed. The events happened in such a fast way that many countries didn’t realize...When Crimea ended up in a different state, Russia realized that not only Russia was robbed, but Russia was robbed in broad daylight.”<sup>431</sup> There is a potent desire within the country to restore Russia to its former position as an internationally accepted and influential great power so as to erase that humiliation, though its future role as a great power as well as the means by which to achieve that objective remain a contested issue within the country, as it has been for more than twenty years.<sup>432</sup>

### **The Importance of the ‘Near Abroad’ within the Russian Identity**

Alongside the society-wide consensus that Russia is a great power is the correspondingly strong consensus that Russia’s national interests lie within the ‘Near Abroad’ where, because of its history and status, it has a right to behave accordingly.<sup>433</sup> Three factors relating to Russia’s identity come together to create the importance of the ‘Near Abroad’: the perceived need for a sphere of influence, the historic link between Russia and its neighbors, and the presence of a massive Russian diaspora. Russia’s

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<sup>430</sup> Lukyanov, “Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World,” 19.

<sup>431</sup> Kelley, “Putin: Crimea is Part of Russia.”

<sup>432</sup> Lukyanov, “Russian Dilemmas in a Multipolar World,” 19-20.

<sup>433</sup> Laenen, “Russian ‘Vital and Exclusive’ National Interests in the Near Abroad,” 25.

identity as a great power and its objective to obtain international recognition of that status essentially fuse with the historic and ethnic significance of the ‘Near Abroad’, where Moscow is working to solidify its claim as a regional hegemon and thus a great power. Because of the Kremlin’s urgency to uphold that identity both externally and internally, Russian foreign policy within the ‘Near Abroad’ is especially assertive.

Historically the ‘Near Abroad’ is a critical element in defining Russian identity. While it is of vital national interest in a realist sense, it also provides critical links to Russia’s imperialist past.<sup>434</sup> The influential Swedish political scientist Rudolf Kjellen once observed for example that without Ukraine, Russia could not be a European empire.<sup>435</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski agrees, arguing that without Ukraine, Russia could at best be an Asia-only imperial power, thus making Ukraine what he refers to as a geopolitical pivot. Even without a large Russian minority population, Ukraine consequently holds a special meaning for Russia, having been, along with Belarus, part of the Empire since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century and a key to defining itself as the defender of pan-Slavism.<sup>436</sup> Russia is indeed, argues Andrei Tsygankov, “in a unique position to understand the situation of the post-Soviet states as they search for their own ways and to provide the collective goods of security, sovereignty, and stability they need as they do so,” which, he adds, is a promotion of European values.<sup>437</sup> Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine particularly share a collective memory, as they all recognize Kievan Rus’ as the origin of their state.<sup>438</sup> “Russia has always believed that Russians and Ukrainians are one people.

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<sup>434</sup> Laenen, “Russian ‘Vital and Exclusive’ National Interests in the Near Abroad,” 28.

<sup>435</sup> Khanna, *The Second World*, 20.

<sup>436</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 46, 88-89.

<sup>437</sup> Tsygankov, “Finding a Civilisational Idea,” 386.

<sup>438</sup> Neumann, “Russia in International Society Over the Long Dureé,” 30.

I still think so now,” said Putin accordingly on the anniversary of the Crimean annexation.<sup>439</sup> Given such a strong historic connection, it is no surprise that although Russia has no current claims over the country, many Russian elites believe that a separate Ukrainian state is an aberration. As far back as 1996, Boris Yeltsin’s top advisor, Dmitry Ryurikov, expressed that very opinion when he referred to Kiev’s independence as a “temporary phenomenon.”<sup>440</sup>

Additionally, the Russian diaspora within the ‘Near Abroad’, a phenomenon left over from the days of the Soviet Union when Russians lived and worked throughout the Empire, has created an extended identity for Russia outside of its own political borders.<sup>441</sup> With nearly 25 million Russians living outside Russia, writes Matthew Luxmoore, it is difficult for Moscow to even consider its relations with the former Soviet Republics as foreign policy.<sup>442</sup> Initially, with the country controlled by Atlanticists, Moscow looked to international institutions to settle the issues of Russian minority populations within the ‘Near Abroad,’ declining to consider them a part of Russia and removing its troops from places like the Baltics in the face of discrimination towards Russian minorities.<sup>443</sup> But the situation reversed with the adoption of the ‘Primakov Doctrine’. Now Moscow was determined to protect those with ethnic, cultural, and linguistic ties to Russia and had the backing of nearly all parties in Parliament to do so. A new Russian ethnic nationalism was born as, in many ways, Russia too was newly independent of the Soviet Union. Though the new position stopped short of irredentism,

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<sup>439</sup> Birnbaum and Demirjian, “A year after Crimean annexation, threat of conflict remains.”

<sup>440</sup> Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, 104.

<sup>441</sup> Saari, “Russia’s Post-Orange Revolution Strategies,” 54.

<sup>442</sup> Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 78.

<sup>443</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence*, 39-43.

it did include a policy of controlling conflicts along the Russian border ostensibly for national security and, more significantly for the future, left open the possibility for peaceful border change. Emphasis remained on the use of international organizations to settle any disputes, but Moscow now reserved the right to act unilaterally in defense of ethnic minorities outside of its borders, marking the start of its efforts to create a local sphere of influence and reassert itself as a great power.<sup>444</sup> Some scholars such as Roy Allison argue that the Russian diaspora has never seriously had a large influence over the Kremlin's foreign policy behavior, stating that Putin simply renewed identifications and commonalities in order to garner public support.<sup>445</sup> While there is no doubt that Putin co-opted Russian ethnic nationalism, the interests associated with that identity, as constructivist Peter Katzenstein would argue, were not "discovered" by Putin. Those interests already existed through a process of social interaction.<sup>446</sup> As a result, the regime in Moscow must now deliver on the identity it has invoked or risk a crisis in its legitimacy to rule.

### **The Relationship of Identity, Legitimacy, and Foreign Policy Behavior**

It is no surprise to find that Putin feared that allowing Kiev to tilt towards the West could cost him politically, not to mention severely retard the Kremlin's hegemonic ambitions.<sup>447</sup> Indeed the annexation of the Crimea remains wildly popular in Russia one year later, with Putin's approval ratings reaching record highs, thus solidifying his grip

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<sup>444</sup> Ibid, 55-59, 65-67.

<sup>445</sup> Allison, "Russian 'deniable intervention' in Ukraine," 1283-1286.

<sup>446</sup> Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security*, 2.

<sup>447</sup> Kuchinsky, "Russia: Shifting Political Frontiers," 270.

on power.<sup>448</sup> The attachment to the rest of the ‘Near Abroad’ is similar as all was once under Russia’s power and so are symbols of Russian greatness. Color Revolutions, such as those in Georgia and Ukraine, are consequently viewed in the Kremlin as signs that Russia’s influence is weakening.<sup>449</sup> As Luxmoore argues, the 2004 Color Revolution in Ukraine especially compelled Moscow to reassess its regional and domestic policy spheres leading to an increased focus on the internal consolidation of power and external insulation from the West’s “democratic drive”, which, he concludes, provides a striking example of the merger of foreign policy and internal stability. In this way he states, Russia’s regional interventionism can be considered “defensive imperialism”.<sup>450</sup>

As with China, the most important perspective is the internal perspective, namely the popular perception by Russians that their country remains a great power and must behave as such. There is even a word for it – ‘*derzhavnost*’, which Hanna Smith defines as the craving for status that most Russians believe is theirs by right of size and history.<sup>451</sup> Also like the regime in Beijing, Moscow’s foreign policy must factor in public opinion for reasons of political survival. The only difference between the two is a matter of degree. While China is an economically robust state, Russia is much more fragile, giving the Kremlin far less room for error.<sup>452</sup> Right from the start of his taking power in 2000, Matthew Luxmoore explains, Putin was placed in a position in which legitimation relied on the ability to appease a public that had become disillusioned with liberal democratic values following the humiliation of the 1990s and was now eager to regain

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<sup>448</sup> Birnbaum and Demirjian, “A year after Crimean annexation, threat of conflict remains.”

<sup>449</sup> Saari, “Russia’s Post-Orange Revolution Strategies,” 50.

<sup>450</sup> Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 77, 94.

<sup>451</sup> Smith, “Domestic Influence of Russian Foreign Policy,” 40.

<sup>452</sup> Luxmoore, “Defensive Imperialism,” 76-77.

the country's lost prestige.<sup>453</sup> As Bo Petersson contends, Putin plays the part of the national hero that saved Russia from its most recent 'Time of Trouble,' one of the "frequent episodes of turmoil, weakness, and foreign intervention throughout history" that have played a pivotal role in defining the Russian identity.<sup>454</sup> The result is what Luke March describes as a blur between strict foreign policy and domestic nationalism, separating the modern era from the traditional Russian policy of choosing state over nation.<sup>455</sup>

But the necessity of always showing strength in international politics, Hanna Smith emphasizes, places Russia in a difficult position as its assertive behavior leads to isolation that in turn incites more assertiveness and causes increased isolation. The Russian leadership, she concludes, is effectively constrained by domestic politics, which lends itself heavily to assertive tactics.<sup>456</sup> March largely agrees. Though centralization allows the Kremlin to ignore nationalist hard-liners, he argues, public image remains critical. It attempts to co-opt and manage nationalism in order to appease the public, but nevertheless remains reluctant to unleash the full force of nationalism and social mobilization for fear of losing control.<sup>457</sup> In fact, many already see evidence that Putin's power is eroding as a result of an increasing sphere for public debate, even if there are as

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid, 78.

<sup>454</sup> Petersson, "Mirror, Mirror," 11-12.

<sup>455</sup> Luke March, "Nationalist Grievance and Russian Foreign Policy: The Case of Georgia," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbors*, edited by Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kant (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 66.

<sup>456</sup> Smith, "Domestic Influence of Russian Foreign Policy," 59; Tsygankov, "Russia's International Assertiveness," 51.

<sup>457</sup> March, "Nationalism Grievance and Russian Foreign Policy," 68, 71.

yet no parties or movements capable of competing with his hold on power.<sup>458</sup> Some even envision a circumstance in which Putin is unable to finish out his latest full term as president.<sup>459</sup> That reluctance to completely embrace nationalism is why some scholars like Andrei Tsygankov go so far as to brand Putin a moderate within the realm of Russia's political atmosphere.<sup>460</sup>

The importance of identity in Russian foreign policy behavior within the 'Near Abroad' has now become clear. Much like the regime in China, the Kremlin, faced with an economic crisis amid a drop in global energy prices, has stoked the fires of nationalism as informed by its identity, particularly its cultural and political rejection by Europe, historic great power status, humiliation in the 1990s, and cultural, historic, and ethnic connection to the 'Near Abroad'. While that nationalism had been slowly brewing since the rise of the Eurasianists, it has taken on a greater urgency now that Vladimir Putin must find a way to maintain performance legitimacy. The regime, however, did not create the national identity it now invokes. Instead, that identity already bears a long-associated set of norms and interests that Putin must satisfy in order to maintain his popularity. Most important of those interests is obtaining international recognition of Russia's great power status, which is most readily achieved by consolidating a sphere of influence over the 'Near Abroad'. Moscow cannot ignore the 'Near Abroad.' With nationalism incited, it must act when there is a crisis in countries like Ukraine and

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<sup>458</sup> Kuchinsky, "Russia: Shifting Political Frontiers," 262-263. Kuchinsky uses the example of Aleksey Navalny, a popular blogger and campaigner and one to Moscow mayoral candidate who was "too big to jail" as an example of Putin's lessening grip.

<sup>459</sup> David J. Kramer, "The Ukraine Invasion," *World Affairs* 177, no. 6 (March-April 2015), 11.

<sup>460</sup> Tsygankov, "Russia's International Assertiveness," 52.

Georgia or risk losing face. Once engaged, it is difficult to retreat from entrenched positions, even if such stubbornness contradicts realist logic.

### **Conclusion**

Constructivism, especially its emphasis on identity, complements realism in explaining the foreign policy behavior of states with realist-oriented leadership in their areas of core interest, including the Russia of Vladimir Putin in what is known as the 'Near Abroad'. Realism, as has been shown, indeed explains a great deal. Power shows the material draw to the 'Near Abroad,' most evidently in regards to the naval facilities at Sebastopol and the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. More importantly, it explains national and economic security, as the 'Near Abroad' is a buffer against NATO and a critical transit region for Russia's vital hydro-carbon exports, the lifeblood of its economy. Realism also explains Russia's opportunistic timing, given the perceived weaknesses of the United States and Europe as well as its level of aggression due to the imperative nature of the economic downturn, a far cry from China, which can afford to act more methodically.

But realism does not fully explain the root causes of the Kremlin's actions. It does not explain why the 'Near Abroad' is so critical to appeasing nationalism. More importantly, realism cannot explain why Russia cannot back down without a popularly-perceived victory in the 'Near Abroad' now that the country has put its pride at stake there. If the Kremlin was completely rationalist, acting only in the interests of power, for example, why would it not accept the Minsk Agreement and in this way maintain the Crimea and most likely have the Western-imposed sanctions lifted? The only cost to the regime relating to power would be abandoning support to the separatists of the Eastern

Ukraine and risking possible impediments to the area as an energy transit zone. But does war already not carry an equal or greater risk in that respect? Also, can pipelines not be constructed elsewhere? The lifting of sanctions would no doubt prove much more beneficial than carving up the Ukraine, which many realists predicted but has yet to occur.<sup>461</sup> Furthermore, as Roy Allison notes, considering the events that have already transpired, it is extremely unlikely that Moscow need worry about Ukraine joining NATO anytime soon. Its territorial conflicts and uncertainties will undoubtedly prompt a number of wary states to block that country's membership.<sup>462</sup>

The explanation for these realist gaps is that Russian foreign policy behavior is not only determined by power but also by identity. The Kremlin invoked the historic Russian national identity in order to draw attention away from a fledgling economy, which, upon dangerous reflection, could remind many Russian citizens of the humiliation and poverty of the 1990s, a prospect that would most certainly undermine Putin's status as the leader who rescued the country from its most recent 'Time of Trouble'. Putin cannot turn the economy around quickly enough to escape criticism, but he can create a distraction and find another means to maintain popular support. It is for this reason that he has co-opted the Russian identity. That identity, however, comes with its own pre-associated norms and interests that the Kremlin must meet in order to sustain its credibility. Failure to do so could risk a severe loss of the regime's legitimacy to rule. For this reason, the regime is sometimes compelled to act in ways that contradict realism.

According to realist John Mearsheimer, states will often pursue misguided foreign policies due to the intrusion of domestic politics, which trumps sound logic. There are

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<sup>461</sup> Allison, "Russian 'deniable intervention' in Ukraine," 1275.

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid*, 1273.

some instances when domestic pathologies lead states to act in suboptimal ways, he insists, however, in harmony with rational actor theory, those instances are the exception rather than the rule.<sup>463</sup> Yet if one were to consider Russia's behavior in the 'Near Abroad' as misguided, it would prove to be one of those rare exceptions as politics, particularly Vladimir Putin's need to maintain popularity against political opposition, plays a large role in determining Russian foreign policy with its neighbors. The pursuit of Russia's nationalist interests and the threat of war it creates justifies the existence of his regime. Defending the regime against all threats is Putin's primary goal.<sup>464</sup> Considering that a similar situation exists in Beijing, another country with an historical memory of superiority and humiliation, perhaps Mearsheimer's exceptions are not so rare after all.

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<sup>463</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations* 23, no. 2 (June 2009), 245-246.

<sup>464</sup> Kramer, "The Ukraine Invasion," 11.

## Chapter 4

### Sino-Russian Relations

The previous two case studies established that, when it comes to the foreign policy behavior of states with realist-oriented leadership within their areas of core interest, the constructivist variable of identity complements realism in creating a more complete explanation. Particularly, the studies found through the examples of China and Russia that once a realist regime relying on performance legitimacy invokes a national and great power identity, it is forced to meet the norms and interests of those identities in order to maintain its legitimacy to rule, thereby constraining its behavior within its area of core interest. Concurrently, the respective studies examined in detail the Chinese and Russian national identities, discovering similar strains of superiority, humiliation, and great power status sown within.

The preceding case studies explored the behavior of the two states in the context of their relations with predominantly liberal powers, that being China with the United States and its allies in the South China Sea and Russia with the West in general in the 'Near Abroad'. But what of the relations between two states with realist-oriented leadership? Can identity help inform regarding their behavior with each other in a realm seemingly dominated by realism? Without question, the topic is an important one. Because of the shift toward a multipolar world as perceived by many in the international arena, Sino-Russian relations are certain to increase in importance in the coming years. It is therefore imperative for American scholars and analysts to have a better comprehension of both the realist and constructivist perspectives of their often misunderstood relationship.

For the past two decades, the governments of China and Russia have periodically met to espouse their shared vision of a multipolar world order, or to put it another way, to denounce the American-dominated unipolar system. Twenty years on, however, their rhetoric has yet to translate into action. Despite mutual disdain and fear of the perceived hegemonic status and behavior of the United States, China and Russia have failed to cooperatively balance against the greater material threat as realist theory predicts. Undoubtedly, there are important realist reasons for this including close geographical proximity, opposing strategies, and a competition for resources within the expansive Eurasian landmass. But are these explanations the full story?

The following case study will seek to answer that question by examining the influence of the Chinese and Russian identities on their efforts (or lack thereof) to cooperatively balance against the United States. Certainly, the above realist explanations are correct, but once again constructivism can complement realism, in this instance by explaining why China and Russia cannot overcome the power-related impediments to cooperative balancing. Particularly, it will demonstrate how elements of their respective identities discussed in the prior studies serve to divide the two giant neighbors in a way that goes beyond material threat, concentrating specifically on China's wariness of its northern neighbor and Russia's desire to be European. Furthermore, it will show that while realism plays a large role in determining the opposing Chinese and Russian geopolitical strategies, their respective great power identities, as informed by their unique national identities, also contribute, fueling a tension that until now has prevented close coordination between Beijing and Moscow.

The study will begin by exploring balance of power theory, the mutual Chinese and Russian motivations to cooperatively balance, and the evidence that some scholars point to as an indication that cooperative balancing is in fact occurring. The second section, however, will refute that evidence through an assessment of the facts on the ground, which overwhelmingly portray a very dysfunctional partnership. Following this, the study will proceed to discuss the realist account of China's and Russia's failure to cooperatively balance against American power, which provides the basic groundwork for Chinese and Russian behavior towards each other. Lastly, the study will discuss those impediments as related to their respective identities. Alongside security considerations and power-related obstacles, which are highly formidable but not unsurmountable, those identities have, at least through to the present day, kept a Sino-Russian alliance securely within the realm of fantasy.

### **Sino-Russian Cooperative Balancing**

As two great or aspiring great powers, according to realist theory China and Russia should actively work together in an effort to balance against the power of the United States. Such a balance could manifest itself as an alliance or in a much more nuanced way through soft power alone. Many analysts believe that cooperative balancing is underway. China and Russia, it can be argued, possess similar motivations for taking such a course. Evidence that they have begun the process can be cited in their joint declarations regarding multipolarity, healed relationship since the end of the Cold War, increased trade in energy and arms, and their partnership in Central Asia, most notably through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

### China, Russia, and a Balance of Power

The primary means by which a state seeks to maximize its relative power is through balancing against the power of the dominating actor or hegemon within the international arena, doing so out of the belief that its survival is at risk due to the actual or potential existence of a hegemonic power. Simply put, balancing consists of those actions taken by a state for the purpose of evening the odds of survival against their competitors so that rival states are unable to hold dominance over them. There are two types of balancing: hard balancing and soft balancing. Hard balancing is balancing by means of material power, typically building up military strength, which usually comes in the form of allying with other states against a more powerful rival.<sup>465</sup> By contrast, soft balancing is the effort to criticize and undermine the legitimacy of a hegemon's rule, which, if successful will impose costs on that rule. While hard balancing is more likely to occur when the actual or potential hegemon maintains a relative power that appears surmountable, soft balancing is typical when the power of the hegemon appears overwhelming.<sup>466</sup>

Although realists claim that history demonstrates balancing to be the most common form of ensuring survival and security in the face of a hegemon, a state may also chose to bandwagon, or align itself with the hegemon.<sup>467</sup> According to Stephen Walt, while balancing occurs in the more frequent circumstances in which a state feels

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<sup>465</sup> Stephen Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education, Inc., 2009), 96.

<sup>466</sup> Randall Schweller, *Unanswered Threats: Political Constraints on the Balance of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>467</sup> Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning," 96, 99.

security is more prevalent, bandwagoning occurs when security appears scarce.<sup>468</sup> In other words, if the hegemon is attracting more enemies than friends, balancing will occur. The choice regarding whether to balance (and in what form) or bandwagon is based on the results of a cost-benefit analysis, which is subject to change with time as relative power rises and ebbs.<sup>469</sup> As Walt illustrates, there are risks and rewards associated with both strategies. For example, balancing can be highly rewarding if the challenges of communication and organization between allies can be overcome. A strong state within the triumphant coalition will gain a greater stake in any future order that is established because of its large contribution to the winning effort, while defeat could endanger its very survival. Bandwagoning, meanwhile, is common among weaker states that are too small to influence outcomes and so they trust in the security of the hegemon. But bandwagoning entails the immense risk that the hegemon will continue to be benevolent, an often impossible prediction to make.<sup>470</sup>

This idea that strong states will always choose to balance against a hegemon or a potential hegemonic power is known as balance of power theory. The ultimate goal is to create or ensure the continuance of a multipolar world system in which power is relatively equalized among a collection of great powers, which Robert Ross defines as a state that can contend in war with any other state in the international arena.<sup>471</sup> Great powers have considerably more options in how to pursue their goals and consequently

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid, 96.

<sup>469</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism after the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000), 38.

<sup>470</sup> Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning," 96-100. Walt's work delves deeply into the calculations behind the decision on whether to balance or bandwagon, including interestingly at what time during a conflict a state is more likely to choose either strategy.

<sup>471</sup> Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies* 15, no. 3 (July-September 2006), 357.

dominate the arena, shaping it by their balance of power arrangements.<sup>472</sup> Cooperation between great powers, as with all states, is based on how they expect to gain in power relative to other actors within the system, therefore making alliances temporary arrangements of convenience subject to abrupt reconfigurations.<sup>473</sup>

Also known as the Westphalian System, realists argue that balance of power theory's reliability as a predictor of great power behavior, and subsequently the very essence of realism itself, has been borne out repeatedly throughout history, and that modern hopes of it being obsolete due to liberal constraints such as democratization or interdependence are over-optimistic.<sup>474</sup> Furthermore, as Hans Morgenthau insists, world transformations can only take place through the manipulation of forces that have shaped the past and will shape the future. They cannot come by confronting political reality that has its own laws with an abstract ideal that refuses to take those laws into account.<sup>475</sup> The exhaustive work of Paul Kennedy, in which he details five hundred years of great power history illustrating those forces that shaped the past, provides for many realists the most influential vindication for the dominance of their international perspective.

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<sup>472</sup> Jonathan Kirshner, "The Tragedy of Offensive Realism: Classical Realism and the Rise of China," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 1 (March 2012), 57.

<sup>473</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, "Anarchy and the Struggle of Power," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, edited by Robert Jervis and Robert Art (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 52, 59.

<sup>474</sup> John G. Ikenberry, *Liberal Leviathan: The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011), 240. The Westphalian System is named for the treaty that ended the Thirty Years' War; Charles A. Kupchan, *The End of the American Era: US Foreign Policy and the Geopolitics of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 37.

<sup>475</sup> Hans J. Morgenthau, "Six Principles of Political Realism," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Pearson Education Inc., 2009), 11.

Beginning with the successful effort to balance the Habsburg Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, writes Kennedy, rivals have continually united to prevent regional hegemony.<sup>476</sup>

There is some historical precedent for China and Russia seeking to cooperatively balance against the power of the United States, though it was under much different circumstances and was bathed more in ideology than realism. Following the Chinese Civil War in 1949, Communist Moscow and Beijing were allied in opposition to the West, but due primarily to deep ideological fissures regarding the nature of socialism that relationship lasted barely a single decade. The American rapprochement with China in the early 1970s merely capped off what was already a messy divorce complete with violent border clashes that exposed those two countries as more of a threat to each other than the US was to either of them. With the fall of the Soviet Union two decades later and the unquestionable establishment of American international preeminence, however, China and Russia had new motivations for reestablishing their partnership, including a classic realist balancing effort against the closest state to achieving global hegemony in world history.

In many ways China and Russia appear natural partners. Both have realist-oriented regimes, large militaries, and critically, as James MacHaffie notes, are often at odds with the United States. More specifically, China and Russia oppose many of the objectives of the liberal world order that the US enables and promotes, such as the forceful pushing of democratization and human rights, both of which are seen as

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<sup>476</sup> Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Changes and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (New York: Random House, 1987), 38.

violations of their national sovereignty.<sup>477</sup> China first turned towards Russia in the early 1990s, motivated by American interference in its internal affairs, namely Washington's insistence that trade agreements be contingent on human rights. Russia, meanwhile, reciprocated as its struggles with liberalism became increasingly difficult. Following a brief flirtation with the US at the start of the American 'War on Terror,' Moscow would again turn to China, driven chiefly by the expansion of NATO and its frustrating attempts to acquire loans through the IMF.<sup>478</sup> By that time, both harbored similar grievances concerning American hegemonic tendencies, best illustrated in the context of Taiwan and Chechnya respectively. The American invasion of Iraq in 2003 reinforced those grievances.<sup>479</sup> Meanwhile, both powers continue to share similar opinions regarding nationalism, separatism, regional stability in Central Asia, American hard and soft power, and the interventionist nature of the liberal order.<sup>480</sup> Both consequently support multipolarity and, according to Vladimir Portyakov, are encouraged by the belief that American unipolarity may be weakening, as was seemingly demonstrated by their collective success in checking US intentions to bomb Syria in 2013.<sup>481</sup> Furthermore, Russia's economic weaknesses, especially amid Europe's increasing energy diversification, and China's reservations concerning Washington's 'pivot to Asia,'

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<sup>477</sup> James MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Explored," *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations* 10, no. 2/3 (Summer-Fall 2011), 22, 30.

<sup>478</sup> Susan Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order: The Danger in the Undefined," *Asian Perspective* 33, no. 1 (2009), 161-162; Nicklas Norling, "China and Russia: Partners with Tensions," *Policy Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (January 2007), 38.

<sup>479</sup> Thomas Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence: Russia's Quest for Multipolarity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 81-82; Turner, 164.

<sup>480</sup> Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Partnership: Views from Beijing and Moscow," *Journal of Slavic Studies* 23, no. 2 (2010), 256, 271.

<sup>481</sup> Vladimir Portyakov, "A Multipolar World as Seen by Russia and China: International Challenges," *Far Eastern Affairs* 38, no. 3 (July-September 2010), 2; Gordon G. Chang, "China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States," *World Affairs*, 176, no. 6 (March-April 2014), 26.

naturally serve to strengthen the desire for a stronger relationship.<sup>482</sup> Thus, based on external motivations alone, the potential for a Sino-Russian relationship constructed for the purpose of balancing the power of the United States clearly exists.

### **Evidence Supporting Balancing**

There are a number of scholars who contend that China and Russia are indeed forming a stronger partnership predominantly for the purpose of working to cooperatively balance against the power of the United States and challenge the Western liberal order in general. Some even go so far as to refer to it as a burgeoning alliance. After all, as Bobo Lo points out, Sino-Russian ties have never been better.<sup>483</sup> MacHaffie is one such scholar, arguing that China and Russia are at the very least in a state of quasi alliance based on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an institution created to link the interests of both powers as well as the former Soviet Republics in Central Asia. The massive power of the United States, he claims, motivates such balancing rather than dissuading it.<sup>484</sup> Though a formal Sino-Russian alliance seems far-fetched to most short of a major international occurrence, there does exist a considerable amount of evidence that, at least on the surface, points in the direction of a cooperative balancing effort.

Separately, neither China nor Russia have shied away from declaring in favor of a multipolar world in which they themselves are one of the poles. On a number of occasions they have done so together as well. The desire for multipolarity is, Jeffrey Mankoff claims, the core of Sino-Russian cooperation while their approach provides a

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<sup>482</sup> Chang, "China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States," 22.

<sup>483</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (London: Chatham House, 2008), 1.

<sup>484</sup> MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Explored," 30, 39.

certain degree of comfort being that the relationship is bilateral in the tradition of great power politics rather than institutional like those of the West.<sup>485</sup> Upon the first inklings that Western-style liberal reforms were failing in Russia, Boris Yeltsin reached out to China, visiting Beijing in December 1992.<sup>486</sup> China's post-Tiananmen ostracism made it keen to give ear to the Kremlin's entreaties. Suddenly, old ideologically-based disagreements were no longer relevant.<sup>487</sup> Discussions relating to multipolarity were well underway by 1996, the result being the release of the "Joint Russian-Chinese Declaration about a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New World Order" one year later.<sup>488</sup> Relations were strengthened under the context of anti-hegemony as Russia adopted the one-China policy while China voiced its support for the Russian effort against separatism in Chechnya.<sup>489</sup> In 1999, the accidental American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade provided another occasion for a joint declaration against Washington's unilateralist behavior. In this instance, Beijing and Moscow denounced American activities in Kosovo, condemned its refusal to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and denounced its consideration of a National Missile Defense system.<sup>490</sup> Those same objections were reiterated in the 2001 "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship,

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<sup>485</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), 198, 200.

<sup>486</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 29.

<sup>487</sup> Lowell Dittmer, "Ghost of the Strategic Triangle: The Sino-Russian Partnership," in *Chinese Foreign Policy: Pragmatism and Strategic Behavior* edited by Suisheng Zhao (New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 2004), 211.

<sup>488</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 162-163.

<sup>489</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 30.

<sup>490</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 163.

and Cooperation”, which stressed the UN as the proper forum for resolving international disputes and, as always, promoted multipolarity.<sup>491</sup>

Shortly thereafter, the United States reaction to the events of September 2001 led to renewed and more vigorous Chinese and Russian joint declarations once the Kremlin had decided that it was no longer interested in participating in America’s ‘War on Terror.’ Moscow and Beijing criticized the American presence as a destabilizing force in a region they considered vital to their own interests. Accordingly, in July 2005 they released the “Russia-China Declaration on the International Order in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” again emphasizing multipolarity and anti-US hegemony.<sup>492</sup>

Meanwhile, the two countries were making strides to settle their own differences, most critically that which had once nearly led to all-out war. For decades, a significant stumbling block to improved Sino-Russian relations had been the numerous territorial disputes along their massive 2,700 mile-long border, a number of which had led to brief but violent clashes since the 1960s. In July 2008, Beijing and Moscow reached a comprehensive agreement that conclusively settled all outstanding territorial disputes.<sup>493</sup> The significance of such an agreement cannot be overstated as it relieved some of the tensions naturally felt by two large powers in close proximity and permitted them to concentrate on projecting their power elsewhere.

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<sup>491</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 205; Turner, “Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order,” 164.

<sup>492</sup> Maria Raquel Freire and Carmen Amada Mendes, “Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship: Forging a Strategic Partnership?” *Journal of Chinese Affairs* 38, no. 2 (2009), 35.

<sup>493</sup> Chang, “China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States,” 19.

Many analysts point to the dramatic increase in bilateral trade as another example of a growing Sino-Russian partnership that could be construed as or at least enable cooperative balancing. Unsurprisingly, the trade expansion has come predominantly within the energy sector, leading many in the Russian press to cynically brand the “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation” as the “summit of oil and natural gas.”<sup>494</sup> The so-called “Year of Russia in China” in 2005 followed by the “Year of China in Russia” in 2006 served to popularize the increased trade relations and expand economic opportunities between Chinese and Russian companies.<sup>495</sup> Though Russian oil accounted for only 11% of Chinese imports that year and many anticipated that number to decrease, the opposite has in fact occurred.<sup>496</sup> In May 2015, Russia surpassed Saudi Arabia as China’s largest oil supplier for the first time.<sup>497</sup> Taken in combination with a plan to construct a new natural gas pipeline between the two countries, it appears, at least on the surface, that Sino-Russian trade relations continue to grow prosperously, though such agreements, as will be shown, have typically self-destructed.<sup>498</sup> In fact, a year later, the pipeline deal has yet to be either finalized or financed.<sup>499</sup> Nevertheless, an interest to expand energy infrastructure clearly exists on both sides.

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<sup>494</sup> Freire and Mendes, “Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship,” 34.

<sup>495</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 194.

<sup>496</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 134.

<sup>497</sup> Ami Sedghi, “Russia overtakes Saudi Arabia as largest supplier of oil to China,” *The Guardian*, last modified July 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/business/datablog/2015/jun/24/russia-overtakes-saudi-arabia-largest-supplier-oil-china>.

<sup>498</sup> Alec Luhn, “Russia signs 30-year deal worth \$400bn to deliver gas to China,” *The Guardian*, last modified July 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/21/russia-30-year-400bn-gas-deal-china>.

<sup>499</sup> Emma Graham-Harrison, Alec Luhn, Shaun Walker, Ami Sedghi, and Mark Rice-Oxley, “China and Russia: the world’s new superpower axis?” *The Guardian*, last modified July 14, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/07/china-russia-superpower-axis>.

At the same time, Russian arms sales to China began to increase in 2001, justified by the two powers as necessary so that China can defend the burgeoning multipolar order.<sup>500</sup> Though those sales soon tapered off, they remained significant and, likely as a result of Western sanctions on Russia following its intervention in Ukraine, have recently rebounded to an estimated \$1 billion annually. Critically, those sales include the missile systems China so desperately desires in the South China Sea.<sup>501</sup> Thomas Ambrosio argues that Russian arm sales to China seem to suggest that Moscow's short-term aspirations as a great power outweigh its long-term considerations of power relative to China. That insinuation in turn suggests that collective balancing against the United States is more important than its relative power as compared to its giant Asian neighbor.<sup>502</sup> As will be shown below, that assessment is only partially accurate.

It is in Central Asia, however, where China and Russia share a mutual desire to exclude Western influence, that most scholars look to determine the strengths and weaknesses of Sino-Russian relations.<sup>503</sup> There are certainly a number of regional indications that appear to show balancing to be taking place, which many are tempted to translate onto a general scale. Economically rich in natural resources, especially natural gas, both countries have an interest in exploiting the region, while its remoteness from Western power adds much-desired security, being it is a place where, unlike the South China Sea, American military power cannot so easily interrupt energy flows.<sup>504</sup> The other large point of interest and cooperation is in combating secessionism, about which

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<sup>500</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 171.

<sup>501</sup> Graham-Harrison, Luhn, Walker, Sedghi, and Rice-Oxley, "China and Russia."

<sup>502</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence*, 85.

<sup>503</sup> Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order* (New York: Random House, 2008), 70.

<sup>504</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 210.

China is particularly fearful in its western provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang.<sup>505</sup> For this reason, especially in the years prior to American involvement in Afghanistan, Beijing accepted Russian regional leadership under the tacit agreement that Moscow would crack down on separatism and extremism. In this way, writes Bobo Lo, Russia's great power ego was stroked while China was free to concentrate its resources on other priorities, creating a circumstance which, as was shown in the previous case studies, fit both countries perfectly.<sup>506</sup> In order to meet their economic and political objectives, China and Russia formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, an institution the West often looks upon with deep suspicion.<sup>507</sup>

A political, economic, and military organization made up of China, Russia, and the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia with the exception of Turkmenistan, analysts often view the SCO as a clear example of Sino-Russian cooperative balancing.<sup>508</sup> Indeed its predecessor, known as the "Shanghai Five," directly referenced multipolarity as a goal in the Bishkek Declaration of 1999.<sup>509</sup> More recently, talk of multipolarity within the organization has quieted in favor of an emphasis on combating terrorism, but that does not stop some analysts from suspiciously questioning its true nature.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>505</sup> Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship," 36.

<sup>506</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 92-93.

<sup>507</sup> Norling, "China and Russia," 39.

<sup>508</sup> As of July 2015, India and Pakistan were invited to become full members, which could occur in 2016. Andy Davis, "The New Eastern Bloc: China, Russia, and India are Joining Forces," *Newsweek.com*, last modified July 15, 2015, <http://europe.newsweek.com/new-eastern-bloc-china-russia-india-are-joining-forces-329968>.

<sup>509</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 173; The "Shanghai Five" was formed in 1996 to resolve border disputes. It was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in 2001 with the entry of Uzbekistan. Freire and Mendes, 40; Lo, 30.

<sup>510</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence*, 138.

Scholars debate to what extent, if any, the SCO has effectively strayed from its original purpose of securing borders in order to reduce separatism, extremism, and trafficking.<sup>511</sup> On at least a small scale, the SCO is certainly an example of soft balancing meant to halt American unilateralism in the region.<sup>512</sup> But Gordon Chang goes so far as to boldly refer to it as the Sino-Russian version of NATO, warning that comments emanating from Chinese and Russian officials regarding security and stability must be taken seriously as possible preludes to action.<sup>513</sup> James MacHaffie agrees with Chang, citing Article Three of the organization's charter, which leaves open the possibility of expanding cooperation beyond its original objectives. Furthermore, the SCO has conducted a number of military exercises that some argue reveal it to be security-based on a scale that transcends simply maintaining stability.<sup>514</sup> The last such exercise, known as "Peace Mission 2014," took place in Northern China and involved 7,000 soldiers, predominantly Chinese.<sup>515</sup> Given what appears to him to be concrete evidence of cooperative hard power balancing, MacHaffie warns that it is highly possible that the SCO charter was purposefully framed in an ambiguous style in order to forestall Western attempts to form a counter-alliance.<sup>516</sup>

Meanwhile, Jeffrey Mankoff explains why the SCO is of particular concern to American analysts. It unites China and Russia, opposes a United States regional

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<sup>511</sup> Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance: International Relations and the Challenge of American Primacy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 73-74.

<sup>512</sup> Charles A. Kupchan, "The False Promise of Unipolarity: Constraints on the Exercise of American Power," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 2 (June 2011), 169; Yeung and Bjelakovic, 256.

<sup>513</sup> Chang, "China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States," 26-27.

<sup>514</sup> MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," 30-31.

<sup>515</sup> Miles Yu, "A Shanghaied Exercise," *The Washington Times*, last modified July 15, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2014/sep/4/inside-china-a-shanghaied-exercise/>.

<sup>516</sup> MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," 30.

presence, rejects democratization, aspires to a security role, and has reached out to Iran, he explains. Few in the West doubt that it is a deliberate attempt to weaken Western influence.<sup>517</sup> For some, the possible consequences are dramatic. As Zbigniew Brzezinski once warned, should Russia ally with the East, then US primacy in Eurasia would sink dramatically.<sup>518</sup> Short of a very unlikely European defection, argues Lowell Dittmer, if American power is to ever be challenged a Sino-Russian partnership is the only vehicle through which it can be accomplished.<sup>519</sup>

### **The State of Sino-Russian Relations**

Although there is some evidence that indicates China and Russia are cooperating in an effort to balance against the United States, the reality on the ground serves to demonstrate that evidence to be superficial at best. While it is indeed true that Beijing and Moscow share a common multipolar vision, have increased trade, and have joined together in organizations such as the SCO that exclude the West, there also exists a great deal of tension between the two giant neighbors that serves to undermine any balancing effort that may exist. As Bobo Lo emphasizes, the aforementioned Sino-Russian treaties are packed with rhetoric for popular consumption, but rarely possess any real substance.<sup>520</sup> The potential complications for US security, maintains Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, are merely bonuses, overshadowed by more substantive factors. There is no observable commitment to establishing global equilibrium and certainly no

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<sup>517</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 216.

<sup>518</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 35.

<sup>519</sup> Dittmer, "Ghost of the Strategic Triangle," 211.

<sup>520</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 43.

provision for mutual defense.<sup>521</sup> Even as Moscow, for example, backed Beijing's one China policy, it at the same time rejected the idea of conducting the SCO Peace Mission 2005 opposite Taiwan, as it has no interest in being involved in a dispute of which it cannot directly gain.<sup>522</sup> In other words, the partnership, especially regarding security aspects, is skin deep. Rather than tell a tale of a growing bond between two like-minded great powers, the events and circumstances between China and Russia speak to a partnership that is unenthusiastic at best.

### **A Lack of Harmony in Central Asia**

If the SCO was meant as a means to balance against the United States, it has certainly fallen short of that objective. The level of actual cooperation between China and Russia within the organization has been far too low to consider it to be anything close to James MacHaffie's quasi-alliance. The prime cause of the SCO's irrelevancy or perhaps dysfunction lies in the contrarian vision its two prominent members hold for the organization. While China views it as the mechanism for an economic cooperation zone, Russia idealizes it as a military alliance with geopolitical implications, something Beijing outright rejects.<sup>523</sup> Moscow envisions an organization strong enough to provide regional peace and security against threats of the highest levels, including the spread of American influence.<sup>524</sup> China, on the other hand, takes it much less seriously. Ironically, argues Bobo Lo, given these differences, any significant increase in SCO strength (such as the upcoming addition of India and Pakistan) would likely tear the organization apart as China and Russia vied for leadership over a suddenly relevant group of states.

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<sup>521</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 72.

<sup>522</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 220-221.

<sup>523</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 174-175; Lo, 111.

<sup>524</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 272.

Remaining small, as well as a continued unwelcome American regional presence, may be the only way for the SCO to survive.<sup>525</sup>

Despite the Kremlin's efforts, the militarized aspect of the SCO that Moscow wishes to emphasize and expand is insignificant and most certainly could not balance against the United States, a united West, or really any other major player. As mentioned, the military exercises have been woefully underwhelming. The drills that occurred in February 2010, which were in actuality anti-terrorism exercises, consisted of only 400 Russians and Chinese respectively, not enough to warrant MacHaffie's claim that they were overtly military in nature.<sup>526</sup> Even the latest exercise, "Peace Mission 2014", was barely enough to garner much attention, including from the actual participants themselves. There exists no mutual defense clause or standing army among the organization's participants. In fact, members are free to join other alliances or blocs at will without prior consultation within the SCO.<sup>527</sup>

Coincidentally, there is indeed another regional alliance option. The Collective Security Treaty Organization or CSTO is Russia's alternate answer to meeting its militarized needs in Central Asia. Comprised of itself, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus, and Armenia, it predates the SCO by two years and is in no way connected to it militarily.<sup>528</sup> But such weak membership means the organization is relatively harmless, compelling Russia to attempt to combine CSTO and SCO military exercises since it cannot militarize the SCO to the extent it desires. As with the militarization of the SCO itself, China rejects such coordinating efforts, believing them to

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<sup>525</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 110.

<sup>526</sup> MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," 33.

<sup>527</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 217, 220.

<sup>528</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 176.

be loosely veiled Russian attempts to compel it into or create the illusion of a full-blown Sino-Russian alliance.<sup>529</sup> Beijing has thus far agreed only to allow the CSTO to observe SCO maneuvers.<sup>530</sup> As a result, the CSTO remains feeble and divided. Its member states even failed to endorse Moscow's invasion of Georgia in 2008 so as not to be trapped by other alliance commitments. Nevertheless, an undaunted Kremlin has increasingly pushed for ever greater militarization, including the formation of a 16,000-strong Rapid Reaction Force.<sup>531</sup>

As with the 'Near Abroad' in Europe, Russia has been reaching into the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia in order to keep them within its orbit, which means implicitly an effort to prevent the spread of Western influence. A number of suspicious events have afflicted the region increasing speculation as to Moscow's true designs. The Kremlin, for example, predicted the Uzbek insurgency of May 2009 after the country's government permitted American access to Navoi Airport for operations in Afghanistan then did nothing to quell the uprising. It was suspected of launching cyber-attacks against Kyrgyzstan when that country also negotiated with the United States over the use of the Manas airbase. Meanwhile, a pipeline explosion in Turkmenistan occurring only four days before a meeting with the German energy company RWE also appeared to have emanated from Russia. In response, there has been some coordination between the Republics of Central Asia to raise their bargaining power against Russia over natural gas,

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<sup>529</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 259.

<sup>530</sup> Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship," 41.

<sup>531</sup> MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," 32, 34; Maria Freire and Carmen Mendes argue that the primary reason for the failure of the SCO to support the Russian invasion of Georgia was because of Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which violated a core principal of the SCO preventing separatism. Freire and Mendes, 32.

writes Nicklas Norling, though this will likely only lead to greater tensions.<sup>532</sup> On a more militaristic note, Russia has increased its naval presence in the Caspian Sea from the port of Astrakhan.<sup>533</sup>

But Russia may not simply be seeking to prevent the encroachment of Western influence in the region. Beijing has become increasingly suspicious that Moscow is also working to limit Chinese economic influence. The Kremlin is most adamant in preventing the creation of a Central Asian Free Trade Zone, an entity Christina Yeung and Nebojsa Bjelakovic say China is desperate to establish, especially in Xinjiang in order to undermine the Uighur separatist movement.<sup>534</sup> Undoubtedly, agrees Simon Serfaty, Russia is concerned about growing Chinese economic power in the region, something with which it ultimately cannot compete.<sup>535</sup> The Kremlin has grounds for concern as their past monopoly in the regional extraction of hydro-carbon energy has indeed given way to mounting Chinese competition.<sup>536</sup> China has been using its soft power effectively in Central Asia and undoubtedly desires economic leverage in Russia's 'Near Abroad', which as will be explained below is a prospect Moscow will not accept.<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>532</sup> Nicklas Norling, "Is Russia Stirring Unrest in Central Asia?" *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst* 11, no. 13 (July 2009), 3-4.

<sup>533</sup> Khana, *The Second World*, 53.

<sup>534</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 260.

<sup>535</sup> Simon Serfaty, "Moving Into a Post-Modern World," *Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (Spring 2011), 18; Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 270.

<sup>536</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 276.

<sup>537</sup> Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship 30.

## Trade Disputes

Though it has recently grown more robust, Sino-Russian trade relations have been riddled with difficulties, including within the energy sector, which is crucial to China as an importer and Russia as an exporter. Nowhere has this been more evident than over natural gas and the construction of the pipelines to deliver it. Over the last decade, China and Russia have signed a number of agreements regarding energy and the construction of pipelines only to see Moscow consistently back out.<sup>538</sup> Perhaps none are more infamous than the East Siberian-Pacific Ocean pipeline, which was originally planned to transport gas from Russia directly to China. When Japan offered a more profitable deal, however, Russia was quick to abandon China to construct an alternative pipeline that bypassed Chinese territory altogether. Though the deal with Japan ultimately collapsed, that failed to temper Chinese resentment and mistrust.<sup>539</sup> As a result of such mishaps and decisions, the efforts of Gazprom, Russia's largest natural gas corporation, have fallen far short of export expectations to China, covering only a small percentage of the country's immense energy needs.<sup>540</sup> At the same time, Russian arms sales to China, though they have recently recovered some since early 2014, have been on average lackluster.<sup>541</sup> Making matters worse, Beijing has become increasingly wary of Moscow's arms sales to India, which typically include weapons of superior quality to those it ships to China.<sup>542</sup> Being as India is China's primary rival in Asia, argue Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, Russian arms sales to New Delhi are sufficient in and of themselves to completely

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<sup>538</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 269.

<sup>539</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 143-145.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid*, 134.

<sup>541</sup> Graham-Harrison, Luhn, Walker, Sedghi, and Rice-Oxley, "China and Russia."

<sup>542</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 173.

undermine any argument that Russia and China are working together to balance American global power.<sup>543</sup>

### **Tensions in the Russian Far East**

But if there is one issue more than any other that serves to defeat the idea that China and Russia are working together to balance against the United States it is the tensions over the Russian Far East where, far from allies, Beijing and Moscow are outwardly hostile, perhaps even more so than with any country in the West. The collapse of the Soviet Union hit Far Eastern Siberia particularly hard as its fledgling economy leaned heavily on the military industrial complex.<sup>544</sup> As a result, the geographically expansive region suffered a demographic collapse as millions of ethnic Russians migrated west while those that remained drastically reduced family size to the point of more deaths than births.<sup>545</sup> By 2010, there were less than seven million Russians remaining between Lake Baikal and the Pacific coast with many demographers predicting the population to drop by a further two million in the coming decade.<sup>546</sup> Recent Russian efforts to revive Far Eastern Siberia have failed. Few migrants from Western Russia are willing to relocate.<sup>547</sup> The remaining population has been left despondent, administered by corrupt local officials, and, most worrying for Moscow, increasingly dependent on China.<sup>548</sup>

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<sup>543</sup> Brooks and Wohlforth, *World Out of Balance*, 76.

<sup>544</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 57.

<sup>545</sup> Artyom Lukin, "Russia and the Balance of Power in Northeast Asia," *Pacific Focus* 27, no. 2 (August 2012), 161.

<sup>546</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 59; Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 270; Chang, "China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States," 18.

<sup>547</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 66.

<sup>548</sup> *Ibid.*, 57, 66.

While the Russian Far East suffers from massive depopulation, some 100 to 200 million Chinese live just across its southern border, many of whom look north towards what they consider a land of opportunity filled to the brim with untapped natural resources.<sup>549</sup> Large numbers of Chinese are in fact migrating into Siberia, creating a fear of Sinocization, or the idea that the region will become culturally linked to China. The “Chinese are now invading Russia with suitcases,” declared Alexander Shaikin, head of border control at the Russian Federal Border Guard Service.<sup>550</sup> Unsurprisingly, the region, which is estimated to contain as much oil as the entire United States, is heavily dependent on Chinese labor in order to extract its resources, making it all but impossible for Moscow to close its borders. It is also heavily dependent on Chinese financial investment considering the local oil fields will take an estimated \$100 billion to develop, money Russia simply does not have.<sup>551</sup>

Consequently, the Kremlin fears the region becoming what Lo describes as a raw-material appendage of China, or even the dramatic possibility of Chinese irredentism, though because of its economic circumstances Russia has remained relatively muted on the subject while China has been quick to deny any such intentions. Nevertheless, tensions remain on both an international level and locally in the Russian Far East as ethnic-related fears continue amongst the native Russians while the ever-growing pockets of Chinese settlers refuse to assimilate.<sup>552</sup> The only reason the situation has not become outright explosive, argues realist Kenneth Waltz, is because of China’s and Russia’s need

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<sup>549</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, “The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership,” 270; Lo, 59; MacHaffie, “The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed,” 27; Chang, “China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States,” 18.

<sup>550</sup> Norling, “China and Russia: Partners with Tensions.” 41.

<sup>551</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 194, 223.

<sup>552</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 62-63, 69.

to cooperate in balancing against an increasingly intrusive United States.<sup>553</sup> But while realist theory may predict such cooperative balancing, and multipolar rhetoric emanating from Beijing and Moscow indicates such a motivation, that balancing is not occurring, at least not with any measurable effect. Ironically, realism can partly explain why.

### **The Realist Explanation for a Failure to Balance**

If the goal of states and great powers is to maximize power in order to gain relative to their rivals within an anarchic international setting, China and Russia would naturally do the same in relation to each other. While the United States is indeed the largest global power, it does not compete on the same level for the same geographical space as do China and Russia in Central Asia and the Russian Far East. The following section will show their competition to be largely explained by the need for the material resources and security those regions have to offer, which would enable their growth relative to the US. Their material needs in turn inform much of their respective geopolitical strategies which, being largely contrarian and exploitative, make it nearly impossible for China and Russia to agree on a mutual balancing strategy. Amid it all is the natural friction and security challenges created by their being neighbors despite having settled their outstanding border disputes. Simply put, realism provides the basic explanation for why China and Russia are not only failing to balance cooperatively, but are embroiled in a rivalry that impedes a close partnership and even endangers friendly relations and security.

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<sup>553</sup> Kenneth Waltz, "Structural Realism After the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000), 38.

### Political and Material Competition

According to realists, any partnership that exists between China and Russia would be characterized by a competition for the dominant position within the context of their relationship. In this way, the goal of survival would be better assured, as within the paranoid anarchic international arena even a partner with mutual objectives cannot be trusted. In the case of Sino-Russian relations, dominance would be ascertained by gaining a leadership position among the countries of Central Asia and within the SCO and controlling a larger portion of Eurasia's natural resources, thus having leverage in trade and diplomatic relations.

Russia has provided plenty of evidence that it desires a hegemonic status within Central Asia. The region is, after all, part of what it considers its 'Near Abroad,' being composed primarily of former Soviet Republics. By default, Moscow has the most to lose should those states strike a balance between itself and Beijing or worse slip entirely into the Chinese orbit.<sup>554</sup> Accordingly, something like the CSTO, remarks Bobo Lo, however ineffectual, is nothing more than a means for Russia to exert authority.<sup>555</sup> Moscow's efforts to link the CSTO with the SCO demonstrates its desire to obtain greater regional leverage, as it would force the local states to rely on Moscow rather than Beijing as the source of their security.<sup>556</sup> Such would be a crucial first step towards safeguarding its grip on the region.

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<sup>554</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 196.

<sup>555</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 113.

<sup>556</sup> Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship," 41.

Both China and Russia have looked for ways to politically balance each other in the region in order to ensure the other does not grow dominant. Within the SCO for example, Russia saw Indian observation as a means to balance Chinese influence while China countered with India's rival Pakistan.<sup>557</sup> Undoubtedly, they view those countries' impending membership status in the same light as an observation status and, being concerned about each other's power, disregard any influence India or Pakistan may gain in Central Asia. Fortuitously for the small states caught in between this predictable power play, the balance created between China and Russia allows them to maximize their own autonomy, vindicating their membership within the organization.<sup>558</sup>

As Lo describes, the competition over who controls equity in Central Asian oil and gas companies and regional pipelines has become fierce. Partly as a result of Russia's proven inability to provide a stable source of energy, Beijing quite naturally seeks to diversify its imports to Central Asia, a development that threatens any would-be Russian monopoly. Furthermore, China wishes to do business free from Russian interference while Russia desires Chinese dependence, thus creating a situation of total opposition.<sup>559</sup> Moscow has real reason to fear a steep decline in its regional power. When it comes to an economic battle, China has the clear advantage, possessing the manufactured goods required by the Central Asian states. But Russia too has an advantage it can exploit. While those manufactured goods are indeed needed, a Chinese

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>558</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 218.

<sup>559</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 102-103.

monopoly allows Moscow to play on the region's fear of a loss of independence as a result of complete economic subservience to Beijing.<sup>560</sup>

Material competition also largely explains the tensions in the Russian Far East. Here, two factors come into play that would naturally push China northward, consequently creating friction with Russia that would disrupt cooperation. Both factors are related to China's rapid economic growth. First is its desperate need for the raw materials that fuel that growth, which, as was shown in the case study concerning the South China Sea, the regime in Beijing considers a top priority above even international relations. To state that the Russian Far East contains those resources in abundance would be an understatement, most critically energy but also timber, which Moscow accuses Beijing of illegally importing. Second is China's huge surplus of workers, an unemployment problem it must solve to prevent domestic instability. Migration to Siberia seems the perfect solution for the regime, though evidence has shown it to be an unattractive choice among Chinese laborers, at least in terms of long-term settlement. Nevertheless, these trends for China are significant and unlikely to reverse or even slow any time in the near future, meaning the Russian Far East will continue to hamper Sino-Russian relations and hijack any attempts to coordinate global balancing.<sup>561</sup>

### **Opposing Strategies and Mutual Exploitation**

As James MacHaffie frames the situation but seemingly rejects as significant, the stark contrast between recent Chinese and Russian fortunes highlight political differences

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<sup>560</sup> *Ibid*, 111.

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid*, 63-64; 70-71.

that could serve as a source of resentment and tension.<sup>562</sup> While both are great powers with realist-oriented leadership, China and Russia have fundamentally different geopolitical strategies. Of critical importance is China's view of itself as a rising power that has time on its side thanks to a robust economy. As a result, it emphasizes the maintenance of economic growth and stability as the most prominent consideration in its foreign policy calculations, thus lending itself to the strategy of "peaceful rise/development."<sup>563</sup> Generally speaking, it is much more measured regarding its multipolar comments, as Susan Turner notes. When the United States invaded Iraq, for example, China remained quiet by comparison to Russia.<sup>564</sup> In this way, China attempts to draw less attention to itself in order to avoid Western counter-balancing initiatives. Russia, by contrast, with its economy on much shakier ground, must scratch and claw for every opportunity, especially concerning energy, which leads to a greater emphasis on hard power.<sup>565</sup> While China too values the ability to project its hard power as demonstrated by its behavior in the South China Sea, its reluctance to militarize Central Asia shows that it does not rely on hard power as predominantly as does the Kremlin. Bobo Lo sums up their respective geopolitical identities bluntly as a result of material power when he writes that China is inward looking and assertive in its strength and Russia expansionary and imperialist in its weakness.<sup>566</sup>

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<sup>562</sup> MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," 27.

<sup>563</sup> Barbara Onnis, "Has China Plans for World Domination?" *Comparative Civilizations Review* 68 (Spring 2013), 59, 63; Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship," 29.

<sup>564</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 168, 179.

<sup>565</sup> Andrei P. Tsygankov, "Russia's International Assertiveness: What Does It Mean for the West?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 55, no. 2 (March-April 2008), 38.

<sup>566</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 4.

Consistent with its overall strategy of “peaceful rise/development,” China emphasizes economics in its approach to Central Asia. While it can agree with Russia to utilize the SCO as a means to prevent terrorism and separatism, it is entirely opposed to the militarization of the organization as it would be completely contradictory to “peaceful rise/development.”<sup>567</sup> As argued previously, China prefers to remain under the radar, determined to avoid triggering a Western effort to counter-balance. While the United States can do little to balance against militarization in Central Asia directly, it could retaliate in other sensitive areas, primarily in the Pacific. For China, that is not a risk worth taking, especially not for the sake of Russia, an “ally” that refuses to return the favor through active support over Taiwan and elsewhere.

Russian inconsistencies are another concern in Beijing. Defense of state sovereignty is one of the overriding principals behind Sino-Russian relations. Both mutually denounce separatism, the fight against which is central to the SCO. Outside of Central Asia, however, Russia has abandoned that shared principal in its quest to dominate the ‘Near Abroad’, specifically in Ukraine and Georgia. Terrified of separatism in their own western provinces, China’s reaction to Russian support for secessionists has been cool, even though it also opposed the Color Revolutions and spread of Western influence into Eastern Europe.<sup>568</sup> Russia’s blatant disregard for a core principal in their relationship and the precedent it sets creates a huge disconnect as Beijing views Moscow to be undermining its own territorial integrity, albeit in a secondhand manner.

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<sup>567</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, “The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership,” 256-257; Lo, 46.

<sup>568</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 26, 198, 206; Turner, “Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order,” 181.

Congruently, both China and Russia have always viewed their relationship with each other as secondary to that of the West. They craft their multipolar rhetoric and agreements, including the SCO, to grab the West's attention in the hopes of gaining concessions through greater leverage.<sup>569</sup> Correspondingly, the vague nature of their treaties is intentional and serves to prevent condemnation and alienation from the United States, with which they both seek an independent relationship in accordance with their tendency toward bilateralism.<sup>570</sup> For both countries, their economic ties to the West are larger and more lucrative, meaning either would readily abandon the other should the West prove more conciliatory in its approach.<sup>571</sup>

There is thus a mutual fear that exact circumstance will inevitably occur. That fear is especially acute for China, which has witnessed the Kremlin's fickle nature in the past. As noted for example, Moscow was initially supportive of the American war in Afghanistan, motivated primarily by the idea of being Washington's "strategic partner," something it believed would raise its standing within global politics. After an extremely brief time, however, Russia rescinded its support, outwardly because it was wary of the American presence in Central Asia, which it believed undermined its security and dominance in the 'Near Abroad' as a realist would predict, but also because it was not receiving the respect and prominence for which it had hoped as a "strategic partner."<sup>572</sup>

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<sup>569</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 36.

<sup>570</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 205. The author cites here specifically the 2001 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation; Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship," 39.

<sup>571</sup> Norling, "China and Russia," 40.

<sup>572</sup> Ambrosio, *Challenging America's Global Preeminence*, 131, 139; Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 93-94; Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 108; MacHaffie, "The Potential for a China-Russia Military Alliance Exposed," 29; Matthew Luxmoore, "Defensive Imperialism: The Evolution of Russia's Regional Foreign Policy," *International Journal on World Peace* 31, no. 2 (June 2014), 86.

By contrast China never wavered on the issue of American interventionism.<sup>573</sup> It does not seek a leadership position within the international community to the same extent as does Russia and so feels no need to participate in endeavors that are of no direct benefit. Moscow's apparent tendency to alter directions and side with the West whenever it believes it has an opportunity to gain in international prominence is not lost on Beijing. Russia's turning to France and Germany rather than China in 2002 as relations deteriorated with the United States over Iraq, writes Bobo Lo, provides yet another example of the Kremlin considering China a last resort.<sup>574</sup>

At times for Beijing, the Kremlin's behavior has crossed from fickle to outright betrayal and deception. In 1999, following the accidental American bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, Russia agreed with the West to discuss the situation in Kosovo without Chinese input. Two years later, Beijing was angered when Russia accepted the American termination of the ABM Treaty without concessions and retaliated by refusing to join Moscow in condemning United States plans to establish a missile defense system in Central Europe.<sup>575</sup> For China, which lacks the capability of contending with missile defense as does Russia, the United States withdrawal from the treaty was a local and existential concern. Consequently, Moscow's relaxed approach appeared completely dismissive of Chinese security sensitives. The Kremlin's initial "strategic partnership" with the US in Afghanistan proved yet another insult, as Russia failed to

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<sup>573</sup> Turner, "Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order," 166.

<sup>574</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 54.

<sup>575</sup> Yeung and Bjelakovic, "The Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership," 252-254.

even bother informing its fellow SCO member of the decision.<sup>576</sup> Clearly, any solidarity against Western encroachment is highly conditional.

Indeed it is the West's opinion of which Putin is much more concerned. In his vision of multipolarity, similar to Boris Yeltsin before him, Russia would use China as a means to force the West to take Russian interests into greater account.<sup>577</sup> It is what Jeffrey Mankoff calls a diplomatic force multiplier.<sup>578</sup> This strategy of obtaining global influence prompts Lo to refer to the Sino-Russian relationship as a kind of anti-relationship. As China rises to power parity with the United States, the Kremlin seeks a special relationship with both sides in the Eurasianist tradition, creating a kind of pole between East and West that would provide the international clout Moscow seeks. In this way, Lo continues, Russia uses China as a crutch to enable foreign policy independence.<sup>579</sup>

But China has its own ulterior motives for the relationship as well. As discussed above, Russia is a huge source of natural resources and assists in maintaining a stable Central Asia, both of which benefit China economically. As Russia taxes itself in Central Asia to maintain stability, China reaps the profit while at the same time ensuring Moscow never quite attains its hegemonic objectives. Meanwhile, Russia's international bravado deflects attention away from China politically, allowing Beijing to elude Western scrutiny, an important element of "peaceful rise/development."<sup>580</sup> Put another way, the partnership China offers Russia, however skin deep, emboldens Russian foreign policy

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<sup>576</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 51, 95.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>578</sup> Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 194.

<sup>579</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 43-44.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

behavior, granting China a valuable distraction from the intrusive liberal international order. The more China allows Russia to believe it can be used effectively as a crutch, the more assertive Russia will become and the more assertive Russia becomes, the more conducive the environment for “peaceful rise/development”.

Their trade relationship is also a relationship rife with resentment. Russia is the obvious loser in what has become an immense trade imbalance. Despite having made little effort to diversify its energy exports from Europe to Asia because of the lure of the wealthier European markets and already existing infrastructure, Russia nevertheless depends highly on China as an energy importer simply because energy makes up a drastically disproportionate amount of its economic output.<sup>581</sup> While Russia depends highly on exports of energy to China, China has diversified its imports and consequently does not view Russian imports as critically as does Moscow. At the same time, Russia imports few Chinese goods, meaning it has little value as a market for China.<sup>582</sup> Although China in turn requires raw materials for continuing its rapid growth and modernization, much of which Russia supplies, the need is not nearly as dire as is Russia’s to export energy.<sup>583</sup> Succinctly put, Russia needs China more than China needs Russia. A genuinely close partnership necessary for balancing, Bobo Lo insists, will be impossible amid such inequality.<sup>584</sup> Considering the sheer immensity of Chinese growth, the widening of that inequality shows no signs of abating. Eventually, he continues, as

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid, 136.

<sup>582</sup> Freire and Mendes, “Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship,” 37; Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 50.

<sup>583</sup> Norling, “China and Russia,” 39.

<sup>584</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 7.

China needs Russia less and less it is bound to take Moscow's interests into decreasing account.<sup>585</sup>

Undoubtedly, the pursuit of power and security through material gain, which realists argue to be the primary motivation behind state behavior, explains to a large extent why China and Russia are failing to forge the close relationship necessary to coordinate a balancing strategy against the power of the United States and its Western allies. Russia's economy is fragile and almost entirely dependent on hydro-carbons. It must act fiercely in the defense of its own self-interest in its relationship with China in order to gain as much as possible, which includes militarism in Central Asia and using its giant neighbor as leverage in trade negotiations with the West. Likewise, China must do what it must to continue its economic growth and stability without attracting Western counter-balancing initiatives, including challenging Russia's quest for an energy monopoly by the diversification of its energy imports and an increased investment in Siberia to procure much needed resources. As a consequence, realism, particular the pursuit of material power, explains much of China's and Russia's opposing geopolitical strategies that in turn create an environment of exploitation, which is hardly a recipe for a successful partnership. But those strategies are not motivated by power alone. Their national and great power identities also contribute, reinforcing their strategies and to make cooperative balancing all but impossible. Furthermore, their respective identities inform as to their direct behavior with each other, which is also not conducive to close cooperation. While realism no doubt dominates the Sino-Russian dynamic, an argument can be made for constructivism.

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<sup>585</sup> *Ibid*, 89.

### The Constructivist Argument

Opposing geopolitical strategies, a competition for political dominance and natural resources, and close geographical proximity, as realism would predict, prevent China and Russia from cooperatively balancing against the larger material threat, the United States. Realist theory accurately predicts that, despite America's overwhelming strength and intrusive unilateralist tendencies, China and Russia nevertheless view each other as the greater threat largely due to the three reasons mentioned above. But are those realist obstacles insurmountable? At least on the surface it does not appear so. There is undoubtedly room for Beijing and Moscow to compromise in the vast Central Asian steppe economically in a way that benefits both countries. Additionally, Chinese investment would most certainly open up much of the untapped resources of the Russian Far East, vastly boosting the power of both countries. Most significantly, stronger and more reliable trade relations between the two, including both energy and arms, would almost definitely enhance their geopolitical leverage. In all of these ways, China and Russia could benefit tremendously in a very realist sense. While they may not increase power relative to each other, they would do so as compared to the United States. What holds them back? As discussed above, their proclivity towards dealing economically with the wealthier West plays a significant role, but is economic interdependence with the liberal world the wisest strategy on the part of two states with realist-oriented regimes? There must be an additional variable that can complement realism in explaining why Beijing and Moscow mutually find each other to be more distasteful and threatening than even the United States, against which their rhetoric is so often directed. That variable is identity.

The following section will explore how identity complements power in explaining Sino-Russian relations. First, it will show how identity influences their respective geopolitical strategies alongside power and security, relying predominantly on their great power identities which, as Ted Hopf explains, come with its own particular set of interests.<sup>586</sup> But the Chinese and Russian great power identities are not identical. They are informed by their respective national identities, composed of their unique historical and cultural narratives. As a result, China and Russia do not behave identically within the context of their great power status, meaning their strategies are not only different, but are also in many ways conflicting. Following this, the section will discuss how the Chinese and Russian national identities impact their relations more directly. Here, there is little doubt that the Russian national identity plays the greater obstructionist role. While Chinese superiority in East Asia and resentment towards its giant neighbor, which was a leading antagonist in its narrative of humiliation, factor in, it is the Russian desire to be European and subsequent antipathy towards Asia that most prevents a Sino-Russian relationship durable enough to challenge the United States.

### **Identity and Strategy**

Power influences strategy. China developed “peaceful rise”, a reflection of its lack of power parity with the United States, primarily as a means to avoid a counterbalancing effort in East Asia.<sup>587</sup> When the US and others grew suspicious of the Chinese intentions behind “peaceful rise”, Beijing substituted it for “peaceful development”.<sup>588</sup>

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<sup>586</sup> Ted Hopf, “The Promise of Constructivism in International Relations Theory,” *International Security* 23, no. 1 (Summer 1998), 176.

<sup>587</sup> Barbara Onnis, “Has China Plans for World Domination?” *Comparative Civilizations Review* 68 (Spring 2013), 63.

<sup>588</sup> Turner, “Russia, China, and a Multipolar World Order,” 169.

The strategy helps to ensure security while the country focuses on maintaining rapid economic growth, both for internal reasons of stability and external reasons of balancing relative power. The militarization of the SCO as advocated by Russia, for example, would consequently be an unnecessary drain on resources and, more importantly, attract unwanted attention for minimal gain.<sup>589</sup> In this way realism explains the tension between China and Russia as regards their geopolitical strategies, as highlighted best in Central Asia. While Beijing seeks to “stay the course” so to speak, Russia desires a more assertive hard power approach in order to safeguard its energy-dependent export economy and politically dominate the smaller states of the region.<sup>590</sup>

But identity also motivates China’s and Russia’s contrasting geopolitical strategies in Central Asia. Compared to Russia, China has very little interest in the region, where it has fewer cultural connections than in the east and no historical enmities. Other than the cold realist economic and political logic that economic supremacy and diversity in the region would boost its own power, reduce Russian power, and increase stability in separatist-infested Xinjiang, China has no particular interest in Central Asia.<sup>591</sup> Besides, as Peter Ferdinand notes, China rejects formal alliances as too restricting, which is how many would essentially consider a militarized SCO.<sup>592</sup>

That contrasts sharply with Russia, which, as with other areas of the post-Soviet ‘Near Abroad’, has an historic link to much of Central Asia primarily because of the region’s connection to its imperialist past both within the context of the Russian Empire

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<sup>589</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 46.

<sup>590</sup> Freire and Mendes, “Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship,” 37; Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 41.

<sup>591</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 102; Norling, “China and Russia,” 39.

<sup>592</sup> Peter Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise: China and Russia Construct a New Relationship,” *International Affairs* 83, no. 5 (September 2007), 842.

and the Soviet Union.<sup>593</sup> Consequently, Russia is compelled to take on a larger role within the region not simply because of the political dominance it would entail, but also to satiate its great power identity, which, as emphasized in the previous case study, is of primary importance when it comes to achieving the level of international recognition the Kremlin so sorely desires. Russia's efforts to militarize the SCO, an institution that by no means could ever compete with NATO, can in this way be seen as one of those clumsy foreign policy efforts described by Iver B. Neumann.<sup>594</sup>

That clumsy effort, influenced by the Russian national identity, exacerbates Chinese and Russian tensions that serve to prohibit cooperative balancing. China views the Russian effort as a means to obtain political leverage, as any militarization would almost by default be Russian dominated. Russia, on the other hand, feels it must use a hard power approach, not only because it cannot compete with China economically, but because its identity dictates that it must reassert its traditional influence over the Central Asian 'Near Abroad'. Even if Beijing and Moscow could work out their realist-related differences in the region, it is unlikely Russia would ease its heavy-handed approach. Strong Chinese influence, even if it is exclusively economic, is simply insufferable in a region that was until recently part of the Soviet Union.

But Central Asia and the dispute over the SCO is merely a microcosm of a larger trend. As discussed above, the Kremlin's fickle international behavior alerts the regime in Beijing that the closer the partnership to Moscow the greater the risk. China, writes

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<sup>593</sup> Ria Laenen, "Russian 'Vital and Exclusive' National Interests in the Near Abroad," in *Russia and Its Near Neighbors*, edited by Maria Raquel Freire and Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 28.

<sup>594</sup> Iver B. Neumann. "Russia in International Society Over the Long Dureé: Lessons from the Early Rus' and Early Post-Soviet State Formation," in *Russia's Identity in International Relations: Images, Perceptions, Misperceptions* edited by Ray Taras (London: Routledge, 2013), 26-27.

Ferdinand, is well aware that Russia yearns to be European and thus sees relations in the East as nothing more than “partnerships.”<sup>595</sup> Russia’s never ending quest for international recognition as a great power would almost inevitably lead it to reduce or rescind its ties to China, as it is the West’s opinion of which Vladimir Putin is primarily concerned.<sup>596</sup> Thus, Russia’s history of ignoring and abandoning China at the slightest inclination such as its failed attempt to be America’s “strategic partner” in 2001 is not simply based on realist opportunism, but also a desperate desire for the Western recognition it has sought since the days of Peter the Great and has henceforth been ingrained in the country’s very geopolitical strategy.<sup>597</sup> While as noted above China too favors its relationship with the West, China’s favoritism is based purely on economic considerations, unlike Russia’s deeply-rooted historic and cultural ties. Virtually nothing could keep Russia committed to an effort to cooperatively balance against the United States if the West actively sought to appease the norms and interests inherent within the Russian identity.

### **National Identity and Sino-Russian Antipathy**

The identity-related reasons behind the Chinese and Russian failure to overcome realist obstacles to cooperative balancing are not restricted to how identity affects geopolitical strategy. China and Russia also have opinions of one another that are informed by their historical memories. Those opinions, while perhaps not overtly hostile, are at the very least dismissive if not outwardly condescending. There exists no history of Russia and China as natural partners. Only once have the two countries maintained

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<sup>595</sup> Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise,” 843-844.

<sup>596</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 33.

<sup>597</sup> Iver B. Neumann, “Russia’s Standing as a Great Power, 1494-1815,” in *Russia’s European Choice* edited by Ted Hopf (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 19-30.

any sort of solidarity, and even that ideologically-motivated “alliance” was fraught with imbalance and lasted barely over a single decade.

There is no civilizational attraction that would lead China to collaborate with Russia, argues Peter Ferdinand. In fact, there is a deep cultural divide. The majority of Russians gravitate more towards Europe than Asia, including the aforementioned Vladimir Putin, whose statements and actions to that effect give reason for Beijing to doubt his sincerity. The most China truly asks of Russia, Ferdinand continues, is to provide a stable border, both between themselves and in Central Asia.<sup>598</sup> But much like its relationship with the West, China perceives a history of injustice concerning its relationship with its giant northern neighbor given Russia’s part in China’s ‘Century of Humiliation’. As the Western powers came from the sea to humiliate China climaxing in events like the Opium Wars and Boxer Rebellion, and as China suffered its own internal calamities as a result, particularly the bloody Taiping Rebellion, tsarist Russia wasted little time “kicking China when it was down” by securing huge swaths of land through unfavorable treaties. Moscow even encouraged the Mongols to rebel and create their own Outer Mongolian state.<sup>599</sup> While the Western and Japanese indiscretions of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries tend to receive most of the publicity, in many ways the Russians began much earlier and were far more aggressive, having arrived in force in East Asia as early as the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century to seize, at least according to many Chinese accounts, more Chinese territory than any other power. Though not officially representing the Chinese government, a number of PLA officers have referred to the Russian Far East as a

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<sup>598</sup> Ferdinand, “Sunset, Sunrise,” 843-845.

<sup>599</sup> Dittmer, “Ghost of the Strategic Triangle,” 207.

historically Chinese region, citing its links to the Manchus.<sup>600</sup> While there is no Chinese consensus as to all the territories “lost” during the ‘Century of Humiliation’, states William Callahan, many nationalistic Chinese maps claim much of Russia’s Asian lands, no doubt heightening Moscow’s fear of Chinese irredentism in the Russian Far East.<sup>601</sup>

But there is little doubt that China’s focus when it comes to its humiliation is centered on the West and Japan. Regarding identity, therefore, it is much more the case that it is Russia’s perception of China that prevents a partnership capable of cooperative balancing than vice versa. Russia has a substantially low opinion of China. Vladimir Putin often disregards China when he speaks of his vision for Eurasia, as if his giant neighbor has no impact on the continent whatsoever.<sup>602</sup> Moscow feels uncomfortable with the idea of being a junior partner to China, much more so than in relation to the United States.<sup>603</sup> Such a prospect would be an affront to Russia’s identity, most obviously because it would be a reversal of their Cold War roles and humiliating for an aspiring European-oriented power to be subservient to an Asiatic power. It is what Bobo Lo calls Russia’s “Mongol complex” – or the perspective that China and the East are barbarous and backward, as historically understood since the 19<sup>th</sup> Century as Russia expanded while the Qing Dynasty crumbled. The irony that Western Europe essentially feels the same about Russia seems almost lost on the Kremlin. Such Russian feelings of superiority continued until the early 1960s as the Soviet Union dominated their

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<sup>600</sup> Chang, “China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States,” 19-20.

<sup>601</sup> William A. Callahan, *China: The Pessimist Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 103-104.

<sup>602</sup> Chang, “China and Russia: An Axis of Weak States,” 18.

<sup>603</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 165; Ambrosio, *Challenging America’s Global Preeminence*, 88.

communist partnership with China militarily, economically, and politically.<sup>604</sup> Still within living memory, old habits die hard.

Again, these constructivist arguments by no means replace realism, which provides the bulk of the explanation for the lack of Sino-Russian cooperative balancing. They do, however, reinforce realism, allowing the analyst to understand that should realist obstacles be overcome there would still be formidable obstructions to a balancing effort. Most critical is the grounds constructivism establishes for future research, as Sino-Russia relations are far too understudied in the United States. Furthermore, a thorough comprehension of the Chinese and Russian identities and their impact on Sino-Russian relations will allow the US to better construct a global strategy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Even if a true multipolar world lies decades in the future, the perceived American relative decline in Beijing and Moscow means Sino-Russian are certain to grow in geopolitical importance in the coming years.

### **Conclusion**

Bobo Lo makes a valid point when he concludes that it is important to keep Sino-Russian relations in perspective as being vastly improved since the dark days of the Cold War.<sup>605</sup> True though that is, it does not mean those relations are now strong enough to threaten the United States or the West. While on the surface their treaties and multipolar rhetoric appear formidable, there remains little of substance. The US has little to fear from a coordinated Sino-Russian effort to balance, though the door remains open to possible opportunism. Instead, as Simon Serfaty states, China and Russia will remain

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<sup>604</sup> Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, 18, 21, 24.

<sup>605</sup> *Ibid*, 174.

regional powers harboring a shared objection to United States primacy, but any alignments will be merely for tactical convenience and consequently short-lived.<sup>606</sup> At best their relationship is what Maria Freire and Carmen Mendes refer to as a negative relationship, constructed ostensibly for the containment of the US but in actuality little more than an economic arrangement meant primarily to contain each other.<sup>607</sup> While the threat of China and Russia balancing against the United States separately as discussed in the previous studies is real, under the current conditions of Sino-Russian relations, which is more of a combination of circumstances than any genuine desire for a partnership, there will be no cooperative effort to balance.<sup>608</sup>

Without question, realist theory can explain the Sino-Russian failure to cooperatively balance. The competition for resources and security concerns, so fierce between China and Russia, makes it difficult to work together towards such a lofty objective. Russia desires as comprehensive a stranglehold on energy as it can possibly attain simply to sustain itself economically, much less reach its goals as a great power. China, meanwhile, needs to create a Central Asian market conducive to maintaining its growth, which necessarily requires preventing any sort of Russian monopoly that could compromise its economic independence. Correspondingly, their geopolitical strategies are not mutual conducive meaning Beijing and Moscow cannot reach a consensus on how balancing should actually occur. At the same time, neither is prepared to trust the other

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<sup>606</sup> Serfaty, "Moving Into a Post-Western World." 12.

<sup>607</sup> Freire and Mendes, "Realpolitik Dynamics and Image Construction in the Russia-China Relationship," 33, 35.

<sup>608</sup> Barthélémy Courmont, "Promoting Multilateralism or Searching for a New Hegemony: A Chinese Vision of Multipolarity," *Pacific Focus* 27, no. 2 (August 2012), 195.

and both understand that, while the liberalist United States is the world's dominant power, the greater threat may very well come from their realist-oriented neighbor.

But while realism certainly plays the lead role, there is room for the constructivist explanation, which serves to highlight why, even if the realist obstacles could be surmounted, China and Russia would nevertheless likely fail to cooperatively balance against the United States. Examining identity shows that while the two giant neighbors both identify as great powers, they have adopted vastly opposing strategies to meet their individual needs, a circumstance that leads to an inability to fully cooperate. Those strategies are not only informed by material power capability, but also by national identity. Because of this, rationalist cost-benefit calculations are unlikely to lead to a radical enough change in the geopolitical strategy of either power to enable a successful collective strategy. Furthermore, China and Russia, far from natural partners, possess a history of mutual antipathy. China, its focus on East Asia, has little faith in an "ally" that has a modern history of fickle relationships and exploitative opportunism while Russia, its eyes perpetually gazing westward, cannot stomach being second to an Asian power. In these ways, it can be seen how identity serves to complement power in explaining the Sino-Russian inability to cooperatively balance.

As the oldest theory in international relations, realism has proven incredibly resilient. Without question its central argument that states seek to survive in an anarchic international arena by enhancing their material power relative to all potential rivals appears to have been borne out through all of human history and is difficult to dispute. But history, and indeed current times, has also shown that states do all not share a single,

static identity. Rather, the identity of each state is unique, constructed over time through social processes, which means each behaves differently given similar situations. Critically, it also means states, including states with realist-oriented leadership, will not always act as realist theory would predict. The studies above have shown that even within areas of core interest that hold very realist importance to the state, a state with realist-oriented leadership will still be constrained by its national self-identity, particularly by the norms and interests associated with that identity that transcend a rationalist cost-benefit analysis. Furthermore, identity can play a role in preventing states from behaving in other ways realism would predict such as cooperatively balancing against a perceived hegemonic power. The studies above, through the examples of modern China and Russia, thus vindicate the value of constructivism as a complement to realism. While it is indeed true that the Chinese and Russian leadership strive to institute a realist foreign policy, the collective identities of their nations, particularly a mutual history of both superiority and humiliation, often compel them to act in ways contrary to their rationalist ideals. Armed with the knowledge that identity influences behavior, the foreign policy analyst can better predict the behavior of not only China and Russia, but of all states within the international arena. That ability, made possible by the utilization of constructivism as a complement to realism, ultimately forges a safer and more stable world built on more effective communication and mutual understanding between nations.

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