

Hedged Bets or Shared Norms? Sino-Russian Great Power Relations and Public Opinion

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1. Introduction

Much has been written in recent years about diverse, growing threats to the U.S.-inspired values and institutions that support the prevailing international order at the political, economic, and strategic level. One of the most important potential threats facing U.S. foreign and security policy over the next decade is that of closer cooperation between Russia and China, particularly in opposition to American interests and values.¹ The ability to anticipate the likely scope and strength of Sino-Russian cooperation is clearly important. If emerging revisionist agendas of Russia and China increasingly align in terms of advancing alternative norms and institutions, the U.S.-led liberal global system is likely to weaken significantly. With the ebbing of U.S. power, the sources of international instability will grow, competing centers of regional power will emerge (particularly in Eurasia), and the retreat of global democracy will accelerate. For example, if Russia increases its diplomatic and strategic support for China, Beijing may be tempted to challenge more openly American values and interests in East Asia, thereby undermining democracy, free trade, and U.S.-led alliances in the region.

How can Washington better evaluate the dimensions and development of this potential threat? An important conceptual and theoretical obstacle is the disagreement among scholars and analysts over whether ties between China and Russia are best explained as “hedging” behavior, in which collaboration faces significant limitations due to its primarily contingent nature, or as norms-based conduct, which assumes an emerging and robust partnership will be anchored not only in common (if often transient) interests but in deeply-shared values and norms.² The central purpose of this study is to provide evidence as to which of these opposing assessments holds greater explanatory value. It does so through an empirical investigation of Russian and Chinese public opinion, specifically, the attitudes and values of future elites – students at the top universities in China and Russia. Our findings indicate that a majority of the students in both Beijing and Moscow did not believe their countries shared common values and norms that would bind them in durable, deep cooperation. If the Chinese students in the focus groups were openly ambivalent about forging stronger ties with Russia, their Russian counterparts were often very wary of a similar course with China. By contrast, both groups of students, while often critical of U.S. foreign policy, expressed respect and often admiration for American values and institutions (both political and socio-economic). These results have important implications for US policies toward China and Russia that seek to predict the quality and extent of cooperation between the two most important rivals to American influence abroad.

¹ This issue is usually neglected in current debates over whether a new “Cold War” now envelops U.S.-Russian relations. Yet the character and quality of the current tensions between Moscow and Washington will be shaped in important ways by how and to what extent China bolsters Russia in its struggle with the West.

² For careful studies of this issue, see in particular Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2014), and Elizabeth Wishnick, “In Search of the ‘Other’ in Asia: Russia–China Relations Revisited,” *The Pacific Review*, 30:1, 2017, pp. 114-132.

The approach and method of the proposal are grounded in the assumption that public opinion, including that of future elites, helps shape the nature and quality of Sino-Russian cooperation, allowing us to understand whether “hedging” conduct or “norms-based” behavior is the primary force drawing the two states into cooperation. Although both regimes have authoritarian systems, public opinion is still a relevant consideration for understanding state behavior in foreign policy. While both China and Russia lack the familiar feedback mechanisms of liberal democracy, to varying degrees and in different ways both regimes take into account how public opinion affects their legitimacy. According to Beibei Tang, a Chinese sociologist, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is highly sensitive to the attitudes and values of the population – and understands that it cannot “create legitimacy out of mere manipulation” (Tang 2014: 117) (the “mere” qualifier here reflects that the CCP is committed to a high degree of manipulation). The opinions of the elite college students in our focus groups are particularly useful because elite college students are perhaps more representative of the future cohort of leadership in both countries.³

Both regimes currently present the rosier of pictures of the two countries’ relationship. Just recently, CCP-controlled media and “news” outlets universally swooned over President Putin’s surprise gifting of ice cream to CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping on the latter’s sixty-sixth birthday while the two “bosom friends” (Xi’s words) were meeting in Tajikistan, their second meeting in just a few weeks following closely on the heels of Xi’s recently completed state visit to Russia.⁴ Whether meeting about or signing agreements related to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), conducting bilateral military exercises, joining voices to morally support illiberal governments like that in Venezuela, signing bilateral trade agreements, or just saying nice things about each other -- Xi recently told Putin that Putin is “really popular in China”—the CCP’s media machine seems unable to contain its effusive praise of the China-Russia relationship personified in the persons of the Xi-Putin bromance. The state-controlled media in Russia has been similarly lavish in its approval of Sino-Russian cooperation.

While the cynicism expressed by the Russian students we surveyed seemed to reflect significant insulation from official propaganda, the relationship between official propaganda and actual beliefs among Chinese students was far more complex, as we explain in more detail below. As a result, we adopted two somewhat different approaches to conducting and analyzing the focus groups to better triangulate the students’ potentially “true” feelings towards the other country. To put it simply, Russians are not “zombified” by state propaganda.⁵ To be sure, Russian stoicism, civic apathy, and political disengagement, combined with Putin’s authority and power, allow the Kremlin to ignore public opinion to a certain degree. But not without eventual cost. According to Dmitri Trenin, the prominent Russia expert: “Putin and other Russian officials understand that Russia’s future, and their own, depends mostly on how ordinary citizens feel...Russia is an autocracy, but it is an autocracy with the consent of the governed (Trenin 2016).

³ http://media.hoover.org/sites/default/files/documents/clm8_lc.pdf

⁴ <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/17/world/xi-russian-ice-cream-putin-birthday-intl/index.html>

⁵ This conclusion is based on the large-N surveys and numerous focus groups that I have executed in Russia over the past two years.

The CCP, on the other hand, is much more determined to have its citizens actually commit to certain ideals and beliefs that the CCP understands as critical to its survival as an autocratic regime. China is hardly North Korea: the Chinese have access to enormous amounts of information about their country and the world. However, the ubiquitous, incessant penetration of society by CCP discourse formation efforts relentlessly exploit certain Chinese cultural characteristics to exert a strong influence not only on how people express thoughts (and what they don't express) on the great matters of state, but also on what they actually think. This political control and manipulation of public discourse is perhaps one of most significant factors that has thwarted (or delayed?) the West's predicted political liberalization of post-Mao China, that was supposed to be driven by modernization and deepening linkages with the global economy. At the same time, evidence from the focus groups examined in this paper suggest a more complex outcome: the survival of an important measure of discursive autonomy on the part society, particularly its future elites.

2. Case Study: China

Overview and Selection of “Great Power” as a Category of Analysis

The sources for the China Case Study are primarily a series of twelve focus groups conducted in March 2018 at two elite universities in China among fifty students between 18 and 21 years old. Each focus group was composed of five to six students. Questions asked of each focus group were identical. The focus groups were conducted almost entirely in Mandarin Chinese, although a few students responded in English and code-switching (going being languages) was also somewhat present. The figures that accompany the text below represent *Word Clouds* produced out of the qualitative analysis software NVIVO, showing words that appeared more frequently in larger font. Our analysis does not rely solely on word frequency but rather how the words were used in context. So, for instance, the word “strong” appears large in the description of Russia (figure 3b), yet most respondents were clear that Russia was a lopsided power, strong *only* in military affairs and ability to persevere. Further contextualization is provided by the author's reading of the internal and external Chinese-language discourses on China from sources within varying degrees of CCP influence and control (for instance, People's Daily and other Party-sensitive conventional and social media) and finally follow up trips to Nanjing, Beijing, Xi'an, and Hangzhou conducted in April and June 2019 in which the author deliberately engaged in conversations with people from various walks of life on the topic of the “Twelve Socialist Core Values,” an on-going, multi-year CCP propaganda onslaught meant to inoculate the Chinese people against liberal-democratic thought by redefining liberal-democratic terms of discourse (democracy, freedom, rule of law) to reify autocratic Party rule.⁶ Because the

⁶ According to the US-based CCP propaganda mouthpiece, *China Daily*,

Core socialist values comprise a set of moral principles summarized by central authorities as prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity and friendliness.

thoughts of individual Chinese citizens are often infused with contradictory definitions and CCP-newspeak, our focus groups used a proxy theme of “great power relations” to parse out what young Chinese elite truly value in terms of international relationships to gauge potential future affinity for Russia.

In understanding the potential – hedging versus norm-based – for the relationship between China and Russia, the “great power” theme was especially important for the China groups because it allowed a triangulation of information that at least took some account of the Party’s ubiquitous discourse formation mechanisms. In an attempt to triangulate the potential complexity of Chinese feelings on Russia, our focus groups deliberately used a “great power” theme rather than one directly focused on Russia. The use of the “great power” category of analysis allowed the groups to compare and contrast the attributes, values, and characteristics of the United States, Russia, and China without focusing solely on CCP-contested terms like “democracy.” From the students’ comments, we draw preliminary conclusions about whether the Russia-China relationship reflects short-term hedging or potentially long-term norms-based behavior.

Accounting as best as possible for both how the CCP’s pervasive discourse formation mechanisms affect what our participants actually think and how they express what they think, the China focus groups demonstrated that the Chinese highly value three attributes of the state: cultural influence, wealth and power. While they generally parroted the current Party line on Russia’s and China’s shared political and social-collectivist values, the group discussions revealed that they highly respect (and seek to emulate) America’s cultural influence as well as American wealth and power whereas they express either deep ambivalence or Soviet-era nostalgia for Russia, which is generally seen as a power in steep decline. Based on this, assuming *respected, sought-after characteristics* or *national goals* such as cultural-influence, wealth and power, to be akin to values, our findings suggest that, at least from the Chinese elite college student perspective, China-Russia relations will not be norm-based but rather continue to be contingent on the expected transactional value to be gained from such transactions. In order to gain insight into the comments of our focus group participants and conversations with PRC interlocutors, one has to have some understanding of the individual Chinese citizen who has been deliberately educated as a discursive asset of the CCP. Individual Chinese – who retain significant agency in many spheres of social life – fulfill this role more or less knowingly, more or less enthusiastically, and more or less effectively from the Party perspective. Those who openly reject it often pay a dear price in terms of their employment, social status, freedom, or life.⁷ Overall perhaps most Chinese are rather ambivalent about their assigned role perpetuating

This doctrine has been encouraged by the Communist Party of China (CPC) since its 18th Party Congress in late 2012. It has evolved into a national campaign to rebuild faith amid concerns that the world's second-largest economy has lost its moral compass during its three-decade economic miracle.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/19thcpcnationalcongress/2017-10/12/content_33160115.htm.

⁷ Punishments ranges from the recent suspension of Tsing-Hua University law professor Xu Zhangrun to the the imprisonment and essentially-murder of Nobel Prize Winner Liu Xiaobo.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/26/world/asia/chinese-law-professor-xi.html>

CCP propaganda, but there are many who are actually quite enthusiastic about it, weather for personal career advancement, and even some for actual ideological reasons.⁸

People adopt the propaganda as knowledge to understand the word but are also somewhat aware that they are probably not getting all the facts and that their understanding may be superficial. For instance, if one asks a Beijing taxi driver about China's illegal occupation of the entire South China Sea, his first response may be to adamantly and righteously parrot the Party line, "Of course, the South China Sea has been an inseparable part of China's sovereign territorial waters since ancient times." But, if challenged with the fact that China's absurd "nine dash line" only came into existence in the 1930's, has never been clearly defined, notoriously violates China's UNCLOS treaty obligations, and no other country has ever recognized the Chinese claim, the same driver will sheepishly respond, "Oh, that I know nothing about. That's all politics."

Internal (domestic) discourse formation is the lifeblood of the CCP, whose primary goal is to maintain its monopoly on power. Through an extensive media and information-access apparatus, the CCP discursively constructs a domestic world in which the CCP's own unelected and autocratic exercise of power over the Chinese people is naturalized as both beneficial to the people and historically inevitable.⁹ Internally, it does this first through basic and secondary education as well as broad propaganda campaigns, re-defining of the terms of discourse from an early age. For instance, when

an American and Hong Kong resident use the term of reference "democracy," they are (likely) at least talking about the same liberal-democratic public good; when a CCP-educated Chinese youth uses the term, he may be well aware of his Western interlocutors definition but his response will often be infused with internalized CCP obscurist content, so he might be earnestly arguing that China is democratic because the Party has "raised the standard of living." If his misappropriation of the term is challenged, he will often respond with the knee-jerk Party response (internalized as his own) that a Westerner does not have the right to criticize Chinese definitions.

This type of linguistic obfuscation, which aims to blunt the attractiveness of universal values by eradicating common terms of international discourse – is a key part of internal PRC discourse construction as well as key to the CCP's Orwellian appropriation and repurposing of Nye's



Figure 1. A West Point cadet capstone research group conducted a year of in-country and media-based research to develop this graphic depicting the relationship between China's internal and external discourse formation.

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/technology/china-communist-app.html>.

⁹ <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/why-china%E2%80%99s-zombified-civil-society-cautionary-tale-west-29312>

notion of “soft power” in the international context.¹⁰ For instance, rather than challenge the value of rule of law (*fazhi* 法治), freedom (*ziyou* 自由), democracy (*minzhu* 民主) and other attributes of liberal democracy – the Party has actually enshrined their Party-versions of these values as three of the “Twelve Socialist Core Values” memorized by all school children in little songs, dutifully repeated by smiling and clapping adults at official televised functions, and plastered on every streetcorner in the country – the CCP has instead completely redefined these terms of discourse to neuter their liberal-democratic connotations, so in China rule of law means ultimate decisions issued by “judges” (sworn Party loyalist wearing black judges robes) on “judicial matters” are actually made first by *ex parte* Party legal committees (政法委员会 *zhengfa weiyuanhui*), freedom means freedom to follow the Party’s rules, and democracy means perpetual Party rule.¹¹ This is made even more complicated by the fact that, as in any language, multiple, layered, and often contradictory meanings continue to subsist within a single term even without a despotic and powerful governing power constantly manipulating truth.

Within this context, “great power” relations is a useful category of analysis for discerning what state attributes Chinese admire.¹² It dovetails well with a century-long national rhetoric of China’s goal to become strong and wealthy (*fuqiang* 富强) that while predating the Communist era yet is one of the Communist’s primary claims to legitimacy (only the Party can make China great and strong). If anything, CCP propaganda in recent years has doubled down on the notion of China becoming a “great power.” For instance, Secretary Xi’s droning three-hour speech to the 19th Party Congress in October 2017 used the term “great power” (*daguo*) more than 26 times and Chinese propaganda since at least the 18th Party Congress in 2012 has increasingly added the label “great power” to various attributes of China, such as referring to Chinese diplomacy as “great power diplomacy.” In other words, assuming that Chinese believe China should be a “great power,” understanding the ideal characteristics of a “great power” and the models of a great power that exist in the minds of Chinese youth are probably better proxies that directing asking about political values which are fraught with CCP propaganda baggage.

¹⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10670564.2012.701031?needAccess=true>

¹¹ Reeves, S.R. & Alcalá, R.P. & Gregory, E. (2018). Fake news! China is a rule-of-law nation and respects international law. *Harvard International Review*. 39. 42-46.

¹² One point of clarification is necessary here. In our questions, we used the term “*daguo* 大国” for “great power,” but this term can connote both a “great power” (which could also be a *qiangquan* 强权) or even a superpower (*chaoji qiangguo* 超级强国) or simply a physically “big” or “populous” country without any implication of “greatness” or “power.” Given that the PRC has officially sworn off ever being a “superpower” in the 1972 *Shanghai Communique* Chinese interlocutors can knowingly take advantage of the ambiguity of the term to both assert “great power status” and simultaneously claim the status of a “big developing country” (*yige henda de fazhanzhong guojia* 一个很大的发展中国家). The multilayered meanings and deliberate out-of-context (according to Western sensibilities of “honest” dialogue) translation of terms make these word games very common when CCP-indoctrinated individuals speak with foreign interlocutors.

Chinese citizen is not yet high enough (after 3000 years!) for individuals to have a vote so China's current "democracy" is best suited to China for now. Focus group participants noted that "through education of cultural values, a country can obtain great power" status."¹⁴ "Cultural influence is important."¹⁵ "International cultural exportation...is also important."¹⁶ [A Great Power must have] "comprehensive power...culture."¹⁷

While the Chinese see cultural influence as an indispensable attribute of a great power, Russia's culture is seen as uninteresting. "Chinese lack interest in Russian culture. Everyone studies English and nobody studies Russian..."¹⁸ "Russian culture is not attractive."¹⁹ The paltry example cited of China-Russia cultural exchange was "dance troops," almost orientalizing praise.²⁰ If China desires to be a great power, the recognition of the United States as a great power along with America's liberal-democratic attributes presents a contrast with the Russian case. While some students noted that Russia had, unlike China, been able to preserve much of its traditional culture ("After the Cultural Revolution Chinese tradition was destroyed and Chinese traditional culture was abandoned"), no students noted that Russia has a culture with a strong external influence. In fact, students who did mention Russian culture either noted that it had little outside influence and/or that Chinese themselves were not very interested in Russian culture. This contrasted significantly with their consideration of American culture which many students mentioned as having a strong impact on the world and as an essential component of American power. "America's cultural influence is seen in movies broadcasted worldwide, for instance in *Captain America* and *Black Panther*."²¹ One student bluntly stated that "culture is what makes [America] a superpower" and other students expressed similar sentiments.²²

Even where ties with Russia were noted favorably by group participants, they were often framed in a context of nostalgia, invoking, for example, Soviet aid to China in the 1950's when Soviet influence (Marxist culture) was seen as a strong, animating force on the world stage. "Historically, Soviet/Chinese relationship was special...Russia used to be Communist and this is a basis of friendship with China."²³ Nostalgia for the significant influence of Russia during the Soviet era also seemed to frame a view that China and Russia share a certain political-social culture of "collectivism," although participants seemed unable to define what common attributes of "collectivism" the two countries shared other than a once-upon-a-time common Communism.

The discussions surrounding culture were also deeply tied in with the idea of what the CCP has of late been referring to as "discourse power (*huayu quan* 话语权) and influence. Several students defined discourse power as the power to set definitions and frame international discussions. They saw discourse power as largely flowing from cultural influence. "On the outside in terms of foreign affairs we have to think about this being the diplomatic world and in

¹⁴ Focus Group 1-2 (Participant C).

¹⁵ Focus Group 1-3 (Participant A).

¹⁶ Focus Group 1-3 (Participant D).

¹⁷ Focus Group 1-4 (Participant A).

¹⁸ Beijing Focus Group 1-1 (Participant C).

¹⁹ Beijing Focus Group 1-1 (Participant D).

²⁰ Focus Group 1-4 (Participant A).

²¹ Focus Group 1-2 (Participant A).

²² Focus Group 1-2 (Participant B).

²³ Focus Grtoup 1-1 (Participant D).

known domestic problems, such as racism, while simultaneously holding a very idealistic view of America itself.

Contrast the difference between the image of America held by elite students and the image of Russia held by those same students (Fig 3b). For Russia, which many students viewed as a strong military power but not otherwise, the primary attribute noted was *strength*, but strength through a sort of military and *stoic willingness to suffer and not give up*, an idea several students articulated describing the Russians as a “fighting race (*zhandou minzu* 战斗民族).” After hearing this term from several participants in several different focus groups, we asked one participant what he meant by it. He pulled out a cellphone with what looked like a picture of five or so American soldiers collectively carrying a heavy log on their shoulders. His second picture was that of a single, hefty Russian peasant woman carrying the same log by herself. It means the ability to stoically suffer, not exactly something Chinese are striving for.

Chinese who embrace the CCP’s aspiration to become a great power as well as its emphasis on the importance of cultural influence could easily conclude that America is the model to emulate, not Russia. This does not mean the students in the focus groups want to imitate American political and social institutions, but it does suggest they understand that close ties with Russia are unlikely to help China achieve American outcomes (influence, wealth, and power).

National Character and Shared Values: To be Rich, Powerful (and Tolerant)

Returning to the “wealth and power” theme, when asked about national character (*minzuxing* 民族性) students noted that in China, having high economic status is considered success, another characteristic that might portend a lack of long-term affinity for Russia with its poor economic prospects. Much of the initial attraction of the American model in the 1980’s and 1990’s stemmed from the fact that America’s system seemed to be the only way to achieve such a high standard of living. Contrasted against the moribund Soviet consumer economy, America’s shining liberal-democracy seemed to be the only effective *means to the ends* of wealth and power. The Party recognizes this and now seeks to provide an alternative *means to the same ends*, achieving a high standard of living through authoritarian capitalism. While this may diminish the motivation of individual Chinese to look to American political institutions, it does nothing to make economically-backward Russia an attractive model. According to one participant, “The concept of values is different. Chinese are eager to have individual and personal success, for example, in housing, medical/welfare/health, marriage, etc. However, the ability to achieve those things is not always there. Because Chinese are eager to have such things, they are often consumed with worry and anxiety.”

3. Case Study: Russia

Just as Western expectations of political liberalization in post-Mao China have gradually faded, hope for democratization in Russia existed in the initial post-Soviet era, but increasingly withered during Putin's first term in office (2000-2004). As the political elites of both countries developed more authoritarian institutions and patterns of rule, they shared concerns over the diffusion and targeted export of liberal political values from the West. Lacking strong, like-minded allies, both countries sought shelter in closer relations. China and Russia also perceived cooperation with each other as beneficial in economic terms, with resource-rich Russia complementing China's requirements for rapid economic growth. For some Western experts, the main bi-lateral attraction is rooted in geo-strategic ambitions and an aversion to American international dominance: "What binds these powers together... is their agreement that the [international] status quo must be revised. Russia wants to reassemble as much of the Soviet Union as it can. China has no intention of contenting itself with a secondary role in global affairs, nor will it accept the current degree of U.S. influence in Asia and the territorial status quo there."²⁵

Despite these strong incentives, Western scholars and analysts are divided over whether cooperation between China and Russia is best explained as "hedging" behavior, in which bi-lateral collaboration faces significant limitations due to its primarily contingent nature, or as norms-based conduct, which assumes any partnership will be anchored not only in common (if often transient) interests but also deeply-shared political values.

An analysis of the values and attitudes of Russian youth, particularly those of the students at elite universities in Moscow, provides evidence of which of these competing assessments holds greater explanatory value.²⁶ Although both regimes are mindful of public opinion on foreign and domestic issues, they are clearly dissimilar in their ability to shape elite and mass political attitudes. One of the core differences between today's Russia and China, confirmed by our focus groups in both countries, is that China's capacity to influence domestic public perception through complex and extensive discourse-constructing mechanisms outstrips that of Russia. The 2018 focus groups in Moscow often revealed a significant misalignment between the official views of the Russian state and the perspectives of elite youths on such fundamental notions as the overall

²⁵ Walter Russell Mead, "The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers," 93 *Foreign Affairs*, 69 (2014)

²⁶ For recent analysis of the political culture of Russian youth as well as references to useful studies, see Marlene Laruelle, "Beyond Putin: Russia's Generations Y and Z," *PONARS Eurasia* (March 2019), at <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/beyond-putin-russia-generations-y-and-z>. Also see Ellen Mickiewicz, *No Illusions. The Voices of Russia's Future Leaders* (New York: Oxford, 2014); Felix Krawatzek, *Youth in Regime Crisis: Comparative Perspectives from Russia to Weimar Germany* (New York: Oxford, 2018); Tom Dwyer, et al., *Handbook of the Sociology of Youth in BRICS Countries* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2018); Mikhail Gorshkov and Frants E. Sheregi, "Historical, Theoretical, and Methodological Background for Youth Studies in Russia," in Dwyer, et al., *Handbook of the Sociology of Youth in BRICS Countries*; Maria Lipman and Denis Volkov, "Russian Youth: How Are They Different from Other Russians?" *PONARS Eurasia*, January 18, 2019; Kryshchanovskaya Laboratory, et al., *Mental'nost' rossiiskoi molodyozhi: politicheskie orientiry i kumiry*, at <http://gefter.ru/archive/8369>; V. Kasamara, and A. Sorokina, "S chego nachinaetsya Rodina," *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost'*, no. 6, 2016, pp. 99-110; and Kasamara and Sorokina, "Post-Soviet Collective Memory: Russian Youths about Soviet Past," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, vol. 48, nos. 2-3, 2015, pp. 137-145.

direction of the country, the legitimacy and effectiveness of its political institutions, and the utility of closer relations with China.

That the public views of students at Beijing's elite universities usually align with (or reflect) those of the government across important foreign policy and socio-political issues reflects more than the state's efforts to control public discourse and political socialization. For these privileged students, China's startling pace of modernization and attendant social mobility generates optimism about personal opportunity in the future while the country's increasingly assertive role in international affairs stimulates national pride. These reinforcing individual and collective factors influenced the participants in our focus groups to view the CCP government and its policies, including its approach to Russia, as justified. While the perceived costs of dissent may have inhibited any impulse of the Chinese students to disagree with their government's policies, their displays of support for the government nevertheless appeared authentic. (We should note, however, that when one Chinese focus group participant seemed to go too far in its praise for the American system, a self-identified CCP-student representative among the participants shut down the line of discussion).

By contrast, their counterparts in Moscow broadly criticized their government, expressing deep concern about the future of their country as well as their own life prospects. Four years of conflict with the West over Ukraine and other issues, which have worsened economic decline, had all but destroyed the heady belief, which was widespread after Russia's incorporation of Crimea in 2014, that Russia had rejoined the ranks of the great powers and could now make its own way, snubbing the geopolitical preferences of the America-led West. Pessimism in each of the 15 groups underscored the limited ability of Russia's state-controlled media to suppress or redirect criticism of the government and its policies, including closer ties to China.

We hypothesize that individuals are more likely to support the foreign and domestic policies of their government if they are optimistic about the future. Indeed, optimism is likely dependent to a significant extent on an individual's assessment of the performance of the government in the domestic and external arenas. A 2019 survey by Deloitte, the accounting organization, asked Millennials and Gen Z'ers five questions to generate a composite score of optimism across different countries.²⁷ The survey asked respondents whether they expected the economy to advance over the next year; whether overall socio-economic conditions would improve over the following twelve months; if they thought their personal financial conditions would improve over the same period; whether they were optimistic or pessimistic that efforts to protect the planet would be effective; and if they thought businesses were having a negative or positive impact on the wider society in which they operated. A score of zero reflects absolute pessimism; a score of 100 registers complete optimism.

The difference in the level of optimism for youth in China and Russia was dramatic. In China, Gen Z respondents scored 66; Millennials, 61. Chinese youth were near the top of the list of countries in terms of optimism, including within their subgroup of developing countries (countries like Nigeria and India) in which youth overall tend to be more optimistic than in the

²⁷ See pp. 22-25. Download the pdf of the survey, called the MillZ Mood Monitor: <https://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/millennialsurvey.html>

authoritarian regime: “If we aren’t a democratic country in full measure, they are even more so. That’s scary. You do not know what to expect from such a closed society.” Other students in the focus groups agreed that China was a “closed” system that lacked essential political freedoms due to widespread censorship and bans on criticism of the Communist Party. Several students found the Great Wall to be an apt metaphor for the Chinese political system.

These negative assessments, particularly distrust of Chinese authoritarianism, colored the students’ evaluation of possible economic or strategic advantages of cooperation with China. One student observed that: “China will discard us – or perhaps put a knife in our back – when Beijing sees it in its interest to do so....” Another student described Russia’s predicament using an analogy of juvenile romance: America had jilted Russia, leading Moscow to start a flamboyant courtship of Beijing. But the new “girlfriend” embraced Moscow only because it had a “driver’s license and a car.” Since China was now completing a crash course at “driver’s school” while accumulating savings for its own car, Beijing would likely be unfaithful to Moscow sooner rather than later. Still other students discussed the difficulty of establishing a stable relationship with China given the twin pressures of demography and history. They fear a steady flow of Chinese settlers and traders along and over Russia’s border with China in the Russian Far East (RFE), a region with a miniscule Russian population.

These concerns are only partly supported by demographic statistics: Chinese legal migration to Russia remains quite small, but Russian out-migration and low birth rates in the RFE led the region to lose a quarter of its population since 1991.³¹ Several students also believed that China’s plans for the RFE were motivated by still-raw memories of vast land grabs in Siberia in the 19th century by imperial Russia against the weak Qing dynasty. Indeed, two students familiar with the region said that local Russians were convinced that China would eventually hold a stage-managed referendum that would legitimate its reclamation of vast swaths of Siberia. Significantly, the students were not reassured by the fact that Putin had enthusiastically launched with China several long-term cooperation projects in 2009, and special economic zones in 2014. Subsequent Russian efforts at bi-lateral development of the RFE have been lackluster and underfunded, while China’s own investment in the region has been circumspect.³² Even those students who saw the US as now more threatening than China often preferred to lean to the West rather than “throw in with China” because it was “unclear what Beijing has in mind” for the future of the relationship.³³

The students who still favored closer ties with China remained aware of other risks associated with drawing closer to their rising neighbor. A frequently-voiced worry was that Russia would eventually be relegated to political, strategic, and socio-economic dependency on China that might surpass the inequalities, insecurities, and grievances associated with Russia’s historical reliance on the West. A few students felt such risks were worth running as well as unavoidable. Russia should acquiescence to China and its power, serving as its “younger brother” (offered

³¹ <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2100228/chinese-russian-far-east-geopolitical-time-bomb>

³² <https://www.economist.com/europe/2018/09/13/the-realities-of-life-in-russias-far-east>;
<https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2100228/chinese-russian-far-east-geopolitical-time-bomb>

³³ Focus Group notes, p. 39.

without historical irony) since “we have no other allies.”³⁴ Reversing course now would be strategically “stupid.”

Other students perceptively argued that if ties between the two countries eventually frayed into confrontation, China would hold the upper hand in the Far East and likely Central Asia, a traditional sphere of Russian influence but now a target of Chinese economic expansionism. China would possess sufficient power to isolate and coerce Russia, particularly if Beijing decided to mend fences with Washington, enabling a strategic double-cross that would be disastrous for Moscow.

The students who still believed that Russia on balance would profit from closer ties to China, enabling it to become stronger -- absolutely and relatively -- in economic and strategic terms, constituted a sizable minority. But more students than not viewed the Kremlin’s turn to the East as a hazardous gamble that threatened to undermine, rather than advance, Russia’s interests and values. In order of preference, the students expressed the following strategic choices for Russia:³⁵ look inward and focus on domestic problems; carefully balance between America and China; lean to the West; and favor closer ties to China while moving away from the West.³⁶

What do Russian students think of America as a great power?

If the students expressed wariness of China, they were often despondent over strained relations with the United States. Despite over four years of tense relations, deepened by a constant drumbeat of official hostile rhetoric on both sides, few of the students expressed anger at or fear of America. While the participants frequently rebuked America as an expansionist, aggressive power, citing its interventions in Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, the perceived danger for Russia was not military attack, but rather economic, political, or cultural pressures of differing intensity.³⁷ Some students pointed to America’s self-serving condemnation of human rights abuses to “interfere in the domestic politics of other countries, including Russia” while others acknowledged that Russia would do the “same thing if we had the [same] opportunity and authority and power globally [as the United States].³⁸

Such criticism of the United States did not emerge as a dominant theme in any of the nine focus groups in 2018. Instead, the groups tended to discuss the strengths of the United States and relative weaknesses of Russia. The attraction of the United States and the West remains strong despite ongoing tensions over Ukraine, controversy over election meddling, and other issues. Most participants acknowledged without qualification the superiority of American soft power, spanning the dimensions of popular entertainment, technological innovation, and broad-based economic prowess. Although the participants were bemused by the behavior of Donald Trump, they frequently judged American political institutions as superior to those in Russia in terms of their legitimacy and effectiveness. In discussions about U.S. global power, particularly in the economic sphere, students often pointed to the emphasis in Russia’s state-controlled media on

³⁴ Focus Group notes, p. 75.

³⁵ Focus Group notes, p. 72.

³⁶ Focus Group notes, p. 72.

³⁷ Focus Group notes, p. 53.

³⁸ Focus Group notes, p. 94.

the “precarious stability” of American influence. They believed that Russians should be suspicious of a “beautiful picture” of America that hid its considerable domestic and international difficulties. At the same time, it would be incorrect to underestimate the United States. As one student put it, “...despite all of the problems about the United States we’ve mentioned, in principle it all works, it all holds. And it’s been holding for a quite a long time.”³⁹

The students of the focus groups clearly admire American political and socio-economic freedom. While the participants criticized the economic inequality and perceived excesses of “political correctness” in the United States, they viewed the American Dream as an authentic project, not a trait of a bygone era or a legitimating narrative concocted by ruling elites. According to one student, “America and freedom are deeply associated in our subconscious.” This perspective reflects a general attraction to personal freedom long commonplace among Russia’s youth. According to a recent survey by the Russian Academy of Sciences, most young Russians (18-25 years old) “think it better to stand out and be unique rather than to live like the rest of the people...such a disposition towards the values of individualism, independence, and competition have only become stronger in the past decades.”⁴⁰

Most of the students hoped that relations with the United States would improve for the sake of their country’s well-being as well as their personal opportunities, including the chance to travel to the United States for leisure, study, work, or permanent emigration. Reflecting a humorous and somewhat affectionate take on the United States, a popular fad among college-aged youths (and older) in Moscow in 2018 was the wearing of T-shirts, sweatshirts and baseball caps emblazoned with the names of U.S. colleges. Some participants in the focus groups openly mocked the Kremlin’s 2018 campaign that encouraged Russian students studying abroad to express their patriotism by returning home. As for whether improved relations with America was likely, some students in the groups were perceptively pessimistic, arguing that powerful factions in both countries were committed to crafting “enemy images” to strengthen their domestic political power.

The students’ often positive attitudes toward the West and the U.S. stand in contrast to the mixed feelings about China noted above. In the FOM survey, a question probed whether Russians were more attracted to Western or Chinese culture. More than any other demographic group in the survey, educated Russian youths were more interested in European than Chinese culture (48:14). 22% expressed equivalent interest in both cultures while 12% expressed no interest in either. By an almost 2 to 1 margin (60:33) educated youths in the FOM survey would prefer to travel to a European country they had never visited rather than travel to China for the first time. As noted above, the students in the focus groups expressed similar proclivities for the West, particularly the United States. As numerous participants observed, Russian youth was “directly linked” to the West due to the dominance of American mass culture, from Apple and McDonalds to U.S. movies and fashion trends. But students also pointed to the importance of democratic political values and the rule of law in the American polity as a key factor that joined their generation to the West. Others underlined the importance of a shared Christian heritage.⁴¹

³⁹ Focus Group notes, p. 48.

⁴⁰ Gorshkov, in *Handbook of the Sociology of Youth*, p. 879; Focus Group notes, p. 30.

⁴¹ Focus Group notes, p. 39.

The economic opportunities, stability, and political liberties of the West, as well as Russia's economic difficulties and the strictures of its political system, lead a significant minority of Russia's youth to seriously contemplate emigration. Although opinion surveys suggest that youth today is significantly happier with life in Russia than their predecessors in the 1990s, other polling data indicates that 31% of respondents aged 18-24 said they would like to leave Russia permanently.⁴² [According to Rosstat, the official statistical agency, the main destination for Russian emigration is the United States.⁴³] In his January 2018 address to students at MGU [Moscow State University], Putin frankly acknowledged the lure of emigration for his audience. "There is a saying that 'the grass is always greener on the other side' but in fact there is no place like home."⁴⁴

Many of the students across the nine focus groups addressed this issue, echoing the comment that one of the "greatest challenges facing our generation is whether to leave the country or not." Several students hoped that better relations with the United States would help propel Russia's technological modernization, weakening the urge of her classmates to emigrate for equivalent job opportunities "in Silicon Valley or Germany." Others were doubtful that relations might improve significantly in the near future, often pointing to the bellwether exodus of western expats from Russia due to rising political tensions and economic stagnation.⁴⁵

Given their deep ambivalence about leaning to the East, many of the students in the focus groups felt their country should maintain amicable relations with China and avoid burning more bridges to the West, while emphasizing self-reliance in advancing its national security and socio-economic development. This sober expression of geopolitical caution challenges the common Western portrayal of Russia's world view as self-confident and expansionist. Instead, the national perspective of most of the students was defensive, revealing a keen understanding of Russia's multiple vulnerabilities as a state.

4. Conclusion

The views of China's future elites on the necessary attributes of a great power, common national attributes and values, views of democracy, and the overall benefits and obstacles of inter-state relationships paint a very mixed picture of the prospects for Russian and Chinese cooperation. While the uniformly optimistic and rosy picture painted by the CCP's internal discourse formation machine does not necessarily translate into a deepening affinity for Russia among China's elite youth, it does have some effect. Surprisingly, the lack of perceived cultural influence of Russia – seen as an important attribute of a great power – and Russia's apparent lack

⁴² <https://wciom.com/index.php?id=61&uid=1554>. This contrasts with the population as whole, where as many as 88% would not choose to live abroad. "An absolute majority of our fellow countrymen (88%) would not want to leave Russia to live in some other country," the Russian Public Opinion Research Center said in a report. "The share of those willing to leave remains practically the same - in 2011-2018 it has hovered at around 10 to 13%," it said. "Ten percent of those polled stated they would want to leave Russia, and this share reaches 31% among young people (18-24 years of age). See <http://tass.com/society/1011675>. Also see the excellent study by Moscow's Project Research Center of emigration trends over time, at <https://www.proekt.media/research/statistika-emigration/>

⁴³ <https://imrussia.org/en/analysis/nation/2224-a-new-emigration-the-best-are-leaving-part-1>

⁴⁴ <http://tass.com/society/927310>

⁴⁵ Peter Hobson, "Why Expats are Still Fleeing Russia," <https://themoscowtimes.com/articles/why-expats-are-still-fleeing-russia-51334>

of potential to become an economic power – are two areas in which young Chinese elites tend to look down on or express ambivalence about Russia. Any sense of shared identity often rested on the fragile foundation of nostalgia for the early CPSU-CCP relationship. Even expressions of shared political values between China and Russia tended to be superficial, not extending significantly beyond the recognition that neither Russia nor China practices democracy like the West. These views contrasted with the generally idealistic impression of the United States, and may suggest an underlying or potential cynicism regarding official assurances that China and Russia truly share political values, as opposed to the mere absence of real democratic values. Overall, the focus groups in China did not express significant affinity or admiration for Russia – unlike the desire to emulate America’s cultural power – other than a respect for Russians’ perceived ability to endure suffering.

If the Chinese students in the focus groups were ambivalent about forging stronger ties with Russia, their Russian counterparts were outright wary of a similar course with China. Only a minority of the students in the focus groups in Moscow viewed China as a partner that would rescue Russia from what was viewed as its disastrous estrangement from the West. Most of the students had thought intently about the value of Russia’s “pivot to the East” and found the strategy lacking in terms of advancing Russia’s interests and values. Partly offsetting their deeply critical assessment of Russia’s domestic political and economic conditions was the hope that relations with the United States would improve sufficiently to slow or reverse the pivot and arrest what was viewed as the quickening erosion of Russia’s European or Western identity. For many of the Russian students, a rapprochement with the United States was an essential prerequisite for a future that held the possibility of political liberalization and economic opportunity, tamping down the growing desire among Russia’s youth to emigrate.

Given the quest of the ruling elites of China and Russia for greater global influence and power, and their harsh criticism of the United States for blocking their ambitions, it is noteworthy that the perspective that was most strongly shared across the focus groups in Beijing and Moscow was respect and often admiration for America. For the Chinese students, American cultural and economic power were objects of intense interest and fascination, although often laced with significant criticism of US policies overseas and observations about US domestic problems. Although the same was true for Russian students, they were also drawn to the United States because of its Western identity and the perceived importance of American political values and institutions.

How these views will shape Sino-Russian relations in the near term is unclear. What does seem clear is that the future elites of China and Russia, as represented in our focus groups, do not share sufficient values at this point to forge a durable, deep partnership between the two countries. The results of the focus groups seem to suggest that Russia and China will likely continue to cooperate across socio-economic, political, and strategic arenas, but that such cooperation will be largely transactional, made relatively thin by a lack of authentic trust and mutual respect. This also raises the question of the precise transactional value that is driving the current episode of Chinese-Russian cooperation. While it is certainly not the only or even the major factor, there should be little doubt that deteriorating relations between the United States and both China and Russia is one factor. Given their lack of strong allies, Russia and China both increasingly seek comfort and mutual-affirmation from one another. At least as of 2018 (a

lot has changed since then in the US-China relationship), that comfort-seeking did not extend far below the dynamic Putin-Xi relationship to the Chinese and Russia people themselves. But it conceivably could. If Russians and Chinese truly came to believe that the United States considers the Russian and Chinese people themselves as the enemy – Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” is becoming a very common reference in US discussions of China – that could engender mutual affinity.

Our findings present something of a perhaps-surprising validation of significant aspects of past US practice and a cautionary sign for the present. America’s decades-long policy of engagement with China on all fronts, which is currently understood by many in Washington to have been a failure that emboldened and made powerful a determined Communist enemy, apparently had a profound – if mixed – impact on the thinking of the elite youth of China today. While they are highly critical of the United States leaders’ actions on the world stage, they contradictorily and simultaneously maintain a highly idealistic picture of the United States’ values and system of government, if for no other reason than they are perceived to make America influential, rich, and strong. This suggests that the universality of the liberal-democratic message of the United States has penetrated to an important extent, at least among the segment of the population represented by the focus groups, the CCP propaganda haze. This finding counsels for greater caution in discussions of “total disengagement” and “decoupling” of the US and China.⁴⁶ Similarly, the attitudes of Russian youth suggest that the United States would be unwise from a conceptual or policy perspective to view Russia as an inveterate enemy. In sum, many future elites in China and Russia view the US as a model for instrumental or ideological reasons. US policy should take care to consistently align US values, rhetoric, and actions in order to encourage and empower the liberal aspirations of the next generation in China and Russia.

⁴⁶ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2018/11/19/decoupling-the-us-from-asia/>

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