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Abstract

The expectation that Russian will balance China's growing presence in Central Asia and Northeast Asia is premised on fundamental misunderstandings of the nature of balance of power politics and of Russian great power capabilities. First, contrary to neorealist scholarship, secondary powers nearly always bandwagon; the traditional classical realist security studies literature's focus on the centrality of capabilities, rather than on intentions and threat perception, explains non-great power behavior in the context of great power competition. Second, contrary to a widespread assumption, and following the understanding of the attributes of great power in the traditional security literature, Russia is not a great power in East Asia; it lacks the necessary relative great power capabilities in its Far East. China is the sole great power on mainland Northeast Asia. In this respect, the sources of Russian security policy will be similar to other secondary powers, both in East Asia and elsewhere.

Keywords Sino-Russia relations · Rise of China · Balance of power · Bandwagoning

Many observers of contemporary great power politics expect that as China continues to rise, Russia will experience heightened threat perception and balance Chinese power. This expectation frequently encourages analysts to promote improved US–Russian relations in Europe, the Middle East and the Caucasus to enable Russia to focus its attention on China, thus contributing to US security in East Asia.¹ Policy

¹ See, for example, Alexey Khlebnikov, Nikolay Shevchenko, "Russia's Relations with the West, Through a Neorealist Filter" (interview with John Mearsheimer), *Russia Direct*, November 17, 2016, at <http://www.russia-direct.org/qa/russias-relations-west-through-neorealist-filter> (accessed July 18, 2017); Doug Bandow, "A Nixon Strategy to Break the Russia-China Axis," *The National Interest*, January 4, 2017, at <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-skeptics/nixon-strategy-break-the-russia-china-axis-18946> (accessed July 18, 2017); Robert Matthew Shines, "Japan Outpaces U.S. in Race to Enlist Russia to Balance China," Foreign Policy Association, January 5, 2017, at <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2017/01/05/japan-outpaces-us-race-to-enlist-russia-to-balance-china/> (accessed July 18, 2017).

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makers share this expectation. Most recently, US National Security Advisor John Bolton explained to Russian leaders that China presented a growing threat to Russian security in its Far East and that Russia should resist the rise of China.²

The expectation that Russia will balance China's growing presence in Central Asia and Northeast Asia is premised on fundamental misunderstandings of the nature of international politics and balance of power politics and of Russian great power capabilities and its role in the balance of power politics. First, contrary to neorealist scholarship, this article argues that secondary powers nearly always bandwagon, rather than balance; the traditional classical realist security studies literature's focus on the centrality of capabilities, rather than on intentions and threat perception, explains non-great power behavior in the context of great power competition.³ Second, contrary to a widespread assumption, and following the understanding of the attributes of great power in the traditional security literature, this article argues that Russia is not a great power in East Asia; it lacks the necessary relative great power capabilities in its Far East. China is the sole great power on mainland Northeast Asia. In this respect, the sources of Russian security policy will be similar to other secondary powers, both in East Asia and elsewhere. Moreover, there is little likelihood that Russia will reemerge in as a Northeast Asian great power over the next two decades, at least. Third, Russia faces many strategic challenges, but its strategic priorities are not in its Far East and Northeast Asia, abutting China. Despite the rise of China, China is a secondary concern for Russia. Russia is preoccupied with the US/NATO challenge to Russian security in its European theater. After Europe, Russia's next priority is Central Asia, where it contends with porous borders and cross-border minority populations. Fourth, China's rise over the past 10 years has had a minimal incremental impact on Russian security in the Far East. China has held the upper hand in Sino-Russian relations since 1991. Thus, going forward, should China continue to rise, contrary to widespread expectations, there is no reason to expect Russia will reevaluate China's challenge to Russian security. Lastly, Russia does not have the option of external balancing to constrain Chinese power. Because balance of power politics is great power politics and because China is the sole great power on mainland Northeast Asia, the prospect of Russian external balancing does not exist. These factors all combine to create a theoretically and empirically based expectation that Russia has little choice but to accommodate China's rise and that it will continue to accommodate China both in Central Asia and in Northeast Asia.

The first part of this paper address addresses the debate in the security studies literature between classical realism and neorealism over the behavior of secondary powers in balance of power politics. It argues that classical realism's emphasis on capabilities better explains international politics and contemporary East Asian

² See John Bolton's October 31, 2018, interview at the Alexander Hamilton Institute, Washington, D.C., at <https://www.c-span.org/video/?453856-1/john-bolton-discusses-national-security-strategy&start=798> (accessed November 26, 2018).

³ For conditions in which secondary states' alignment may be influenced by revisionist intentions, see Randall L. Schweller, "Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In," *International Security*, vol. 19, no. 1 (Summer 1994).



politics and is a superior framework for assessing Russian policy toward China. The second part of this paper assesses Russia's military capabilities and its corresponding status in balance of politics—as either a great power or a secondary power. It argues that Russia has rarely been a great power in Northeast Asia, that it is not now a great power, and that the likelihood of its reemerging as a great power in East Asia is declining. This section also assesses the prospects for Russian external balancing in Northeast Asia against Chinese power. The third part of this paper assesses Russia's strategic environment. It argues that among Russia's three strategic theaters—Europe and the Caucasus, Central Asia, and East Asia—East Asia is the least important theater and the region where it is least capable. This strategic condition determines Russia's response to the rise of China in Central Asia and in East Asia. The final part of this paper assesses the implications of the Sino-Russian distribution of power for the long-term trends in Russia's China policy, for Sino-Russian relations, and for China's rise as an East Asian maritime power.

Balancing and bandwagoning in international politics

How do secondary powers respond to shifts in the balance of power? Do they bandwagon with and accommodate/appease the rising power or do they balance against the rising power by aligning with the weaker power? There is not a consensus in the security studies literature on the security policies of secondary powers. The classical realist literature is clear: Great powers balance rising powers, secondary powers accommodate rising powers. But the neorealist literature argues that both great powers and secondary powers balance a rising power.

Theoretical approaches to secondary power behavior

There is a consensus in the security studies literature that state's fear unchecked power and that great powers participate in balance of power politics and that they balance superior power in international politics. There is also a consensus that military capabilities are the critical factor in balance of power politics, for it is the ultimate source of security. Scholars discuss the multiple attributes of great powers, including territorial size, demography, natural resource endowments, and economic and technological development. But such attributes are understood as the bases of power that enable countries to develop military power to provide for their security and, with sufficient military power, to be a great power.⁴

There is also a consensus in the security studies literature regarding the key characteristic of a great power. A great power is a state that can contend in a war against every other state in the system and thus can independently provide for its own security vis-a-vis any other country. Walter Lippman observed that only “the great

⁴ See, for example, Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, fifth ed., rev. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), chap. 9, 10; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Relations* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979).



powers can wage great wars. Only the great powers can resist a great power.⁵ Martin Wight wrote that a “great power is a power that can confidently contemplate war against any other existing single power.”⁶ Harold Sprout and Margret Sprout concurred that the status of great power reflects the ability to wage war at the top of the “hierarchy of power.”⁷ Robert Rothstein, a scholar of the behavior of secondary powers, differentiates between a great power, that can fight wars against any country, and a secondary power, which “cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities”⁸ Jack Levy, based on an extensive review of the international politics literature, concluded that a great power “At a minimum, ... has relative self-sufficiency with respect to military security.”⁹

Realist diplomatic historians make similar arguments. In the spirit of Leopold Ranke and A.J. P. Taylor, Paul Kennedy examines diplomatic history through the policies of the great powers and argues that “the mark of a Great Power [sic] is a country which is willing and able to take on any other” country.¹⁰ Thus, from this realist perspective on international security affairs, there are only two types of countries—great powers that can independently contend with any other country in the system (not necessarily defeat any other country) and secondary powers that must depend on cooperation with other countries for security.

Nonetheless, among scholars of international security, there are significant differences regarding the alignment preferences of secondary powers within great power competition and the balancing tendencies in international politics. Classical realists, including Thucydides in his recounting of the Melian dialogue, have argued that secondary states must yield to the powerful, rather than balance the powerful. This literature argues that small states, fearful of the costs of antagonizing a superior power, have minimal policy choice and that strategic vulnerability constrains them to adjust their alignment to accommodate increasingly the interests of a rising power. Secondary power security thus comes from appeasing the stronger power, thus minimizing the stronger power’s incentive to use force to compel cooperation.

Spykman wrote that “a balance of power policy is in the first place a policy for the great powers.” Small states tend to be “weights in a balance used by others.” They are “stakes, rather than players”¹¹ A.J. P. Taylor wrote that in nineteenth-century European balance of power diplomacy, when the statesmen of the great powers spoke of their “allies,” they meant the other great powers, not the “smaller”

⁵ Walter Lippman, *U.S. Foreign Policy: Shield of the Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1943), p. 100.

⁶ Martin Wight, *Power Politics*, Hedley Bull and Carsten Holbrad, eds. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978), p. 52.

⁷ Harold Sprout and Margaret Sprout, *Foundations of International Politics* (Princeton: D. Van Nostrand, 1962), pp. 136–137.

⁸ Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*, p. 29. Also see, Edward Hallett Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis, 1919–1939* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 103–105.

⁹ Jack S. Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System: 1495–1975* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983), pp. 10–19. In this context, “relative” means with respect to all other countries.

¹⁰ Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (New York: Doubleday Publishing Group, 2010), p. 224.

¹¹ Nicholas John Spykman, *America’s Strategy in World Politics: The United States and the Balance of Power* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942, p. 20. Also see Edward Vose Gulick, *Europe’s Classical Balance of Power* (New York: Norton, 1967), pp. 70–72, 304–305.



states.¹² Hans Morgenthau similarly suggested a local power's alignment in great power relations is determined by the shifting great power balance in its immediate vicinity and that small states align with the dominant power. He examined Korea's periodic adjustment to the shifting fortunes in the Sino-Japanese balance of power in Northeast Asia to illustrate his approach to secondary power alignments, observing that throughout its history Korea has aligned with the stronger power in the Sino-Japanese balance.¹³ Raymond Aron argued that weak states do not balance, but that through history a "small nation was inclined to yield to a great one because the latter was stronger."¹⁴ George Liska emphasized that vulnerability to great power capabilities constrains a secondary power's ability to balance against a great power, unless a local *equilibrium* is created by the counterpressure of another great power.¹⁵

Traditional realist scholars of small state behavior agree with this classical approach to balance of power politics. Robert Rothstein observes a small power, "cannot obtain security primarily by use of its own capabilities" He thus argues that whereas great powers make alignment decisions with regard to threats to systemic balances, small powers ally "in terms of a threat to its local balance" and "the range of options open to Small Powers will be related to the specific nature" of its international setting. As the local balance of balance shifts, small powers will loosen their ties with the declining power.¹⁶ Michael Handel and David Vital argue that weak states gravitate to the side of the more powerful country in a local balance, for they lack a credible ally to resist the rising power.¹⁷ Fox argued that small states, "instead of moving to the side of the less powerful ..., tend to comply with the demands of the more powerful." Thus, whereas the great powers balance, small states engage in "anti-balance of power" behavior.¹⁸

In contrast to this traditional realist literature, neorealist scholars posit that secondary powers have considerable agency in international security and that they prefer to balance against a rising, more powerful state. Kenneth Waltz, for example, argued that "secondary powers, if they are free to choose, flock to the weaker side On the weaker side they are ... safer"¹⁹ But Waltz does not explain what conditions contribute to a secondary power's freedom of choice or why a secondary

¹² A.J. P. Taylor, *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe, 1848–1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 1–2.

¹³ Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, chap. 12, pp. 181–184.

¹⁴ Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations* (New York: Praeger, 1968), p. 58.

¹⁵ George Liska, *Nations in Alliance: The Limits of Interdependence* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1968), p. 27. Author's emphasis.

¹⁶ Robert L. Rothstein, *Alliances and Small Powers*, pp. 29, 62–63. Also see Carr, *The Twenty Years Crisis*, pp. 103–105.

¹⁷ Michael Handel, *Weak States in the International System* (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1981), pp. 135–136; David Vital, "The Analysis of Small Power Politics," in *Small States in International Relations* (New York: John Wiley, 1971), p. 33.

¹⁸ Annette Baker Fox, *The Power of Small States: Diplomacy in World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1959), p. 187.

¹⁹ Waltz, *Theory of International Relations*, p. 127. Author's emphasis. For an analysis of bandwagoning and balancing behavior in domestic political systems, see Avery Goldstein, *From Bandwagon to Balance-of-Power Politics: Structural Constraints and Politics in China, 1949–1978* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).



power would risk the wrath of the stronger state by aligning with its adversary and undermining its security. It is not clear why would they be safer on the weaker side, and thus incur heightened conflict with the stronger power and a greater risk of hostilities.²⁰

In addition, the implicit assumption in the phrase “free to choose” seems to be that if there is a great power that has the interest *and* capabilities to defend the security of the secondary power, then the secondary power will align with that great power. But in these circumstances that great power is not the weaker great power; the secondary power is bandwagoning, rather than balancing, because the secondary power is aligning with the more powerful great power. From this perspective, in the post-World War II era and through much of the post-Cold War era, East Asian countries such as Singapore, South Korea, Japan and Malaysia did not balance against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, the Soviet Union, or the rise of China, but instead aligned with the most powerful country in the region, the USA. This is bandwagoning.

Following Walt’s suggestion, Stephen Walt has argued that only the weakest states bandwagon; all other states participate in balance of power politics and they prefer to balance against rising powers.²¹ Walt’s analysis of the behavior of such secondary powers as Egypt and Iraq suggests that the expectation of balancing not only encompasses the behavior of larger secondary powers, such as France and Japan, but also smaller states traditionally assumed to be the subjects of great power balancing, rather than agents of balancing. Thus, for Walt, the concept of “weak states” and the expectation of bandwagoning applies only to a limited subset of states, such as Burma or Bhutan, which have traditionally submitted to their larger neighbors.

Walt further argues that the traditional realist and neorealist arguments that states balance power (i.e., capabilities) is incorrect. He argues that nearly all states balance “threat” rather than simply power and that threat perception reflects the assessment of another state’s intentions, rather than simply its capabilities.²² Walt’s focus on intentions and “balance of threat” allows incorporation a wide range of non-realist variables into balance of power analysis. For example, some scholars have argued that the USA, through judicious use of its military superiority and its construction of and participation in multilateral institutions, can give other nations confidence that it will be constrained in the use of its power, thus reducing threat perception and the post-cold war emergence of a balance of power. From this perspective, the USA can be a “benign hegemon.”²³

The neoclassical literature on balancing has been influential in scholarship on US policy toward the rise of China, including assumptions about US ability to depend

²⁰ Also see Randall L. Schweller, *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler's Strategy for World Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), pp. 21–22.

²¹ Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, pp. 29–31.

²² Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. Also see Michael Barnett, “Alliances, Balances of Threat, and Neorealism,” in John A. Vasquez and Colin Elman, eds., *Realism and the Balancing of Power* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003).

²³ John Ikenberry, *After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint, and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars* (Princeton, NY: Princeton University Press, 2001); Pape, “Soft Balancing Against the United States.”



more on Russia to balance China. Layne argues that as China rises, reducing US ability to maintain the regional balance of power, the USA can count on East Asia's secondary powers, including Japan, India, and Russia, to do more to balance China's rise.²⁴ Barry Posen similarly argues that should the US exercise "restraint" in East Asia, Russia, Japan, and India will step up and compensate for reduced American balancing.²⁵ Mearsheimer believes that a weaker USA can count not just on Japan, Russia and India to balance with a diminished USA against China's rise, but also on the very smallest states in East Asia, including Singapore and Taiwan.²⁶ Beckley goes further, arguing that the Southeast Asian countries can depend on their own capabilities to balance the rise of the Chinese navy and prevent Chinese domination of the South China Sea.²⁷

The empirical record: secondary power bandwagoning

Empirical observations indicate that small powers nearly uniformly adjust their alignments as the distribution of power changes to favor the rising power.²⁸ In European history, southeast European states bandwagoned with rising Germany prior to World War II. During the Cold War, Finland, because it did not benefit from US military presence on its territory and thus a credible US tripwire, bandwagoned in security affairs with the more powerful Soviet Union. Since the Cold War, Ukraine, after a brief flirtation with joining the European Union and NATO, has accommodated Russian coercive power by forsaking any hope of joining a US-led security system or the European Union. Similarly, in the Western Hemisphere, a balancing coalition of states has never developed in opposition to US power, despite the enduring US threat to region posed by its 125-year tradition of using coercive force to destabilize and overthrow unfriendly Latin American regimes. More recently, in South Asia, all of India's neighbors have bandwagoned with India, with the exception of Pakistan, whose resistance to Indian power is made possible by its nuclear weapons capability.

Post-Cold War East Asian security confirms this trend of small state accommodation of superior power. In the aftermath of the US defeat in Vietnam and its

²⁴ Christopher Layne, "China's Challenge to US Hegemony," *Current History*, vol. 107, no. 705 (January 2008), p. 17.

²⁵ Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), pp. 96–102. Also see Joshua Shiffrin, "The Rise of China, Balance of Power Theory, and U.S. National Security: Reasons for Optimism?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* (forthcoming; online first view December 2018).

²⁶ John Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?" *National Interest*, October 25, 2014, p. 19, 23–27, at <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204>.

²⁷ Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion" *International Security*, vol. 42, no. 2 (Fall 2017). But as Fox explained, the sole small state attempt at allying to balance a great power regularly failed in Europe, because "the sum of their power was weakness." Fox, *The Power of Small States*, p. 185.

²⁸ For an earlier theoretical and empirical study of this issue, see Robert S. Ross "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (July–September 2006).



diminished capabilities on mainland Southeast Asia and the corresponding rise of China in this region, Thailand aligned closer with China. Following the collapse of the Soviet power in 1989, further contributing to the relative increase in Chinese power on mainland East Asia and in Central Asia, every country on China's periphery that had been aligned with the Soviet Union shifted its alignment to accommodate China. Vietnam, Mongolia and China's neighboring Central Asian countries all gradually entered China's sphere of influence. As China peacefully built up its ground-based capabilities in the 1990s, other countries near China began to accommodate China's rising power. Taiwan abandoned its destabilizing independence diplomacy and decreased its defense spending and South Korean security policy increasingly reflected a greater balance between the USA and China. Most recently, in 2017 Moon Jae-in won the South Korean presidency based, in part, on a commitment to oppose USA's deployment of THAAD in South Korea. He then reached agreement with China to limit South Korean missile defense cooperation with the USA.²⁹

These trends in East Asia's secondary power accommodation of China's rise have continued as China has developed maritime power over the past 5 years, affecting the US–China balance of power in maritime East Asia. The Philippines no longer actively challenges Chinese maritime claims in the South China Sea and has initiated Sino-Philippine naval cooperation, thus establishing greater balance in the US–China competition.³⁰ Malaysia has not challenged China's territorial claims and it has also expanded naval cooperation with the Chinese Navy.³¹ Vietnam, despite its interest in defense cooperation with the USA, has repeatedly assured China that it will not cooperate with the USA to challenge Chinese interests.³² In recent years, throughout East Asia, every country, with the exception of Japan, has improved security and

²⁹ Ankit Panda, "What China Gains With Its Détente With South Korea Over THAAD," *The Diplomat*, November 7, 2017, at <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/what-china-gains-with-its-detente-with-south-korea-over-thaad/> (accessed January 16, 2018); Anna Fifield, "South Korea Suspends Deployment of American Missile Defense System," *Washington Post*, June 7, 2017, at [washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2017/06/07/6215f314-4b60-11e7-b69d-c158df3149e0-story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/2017/06/07/6215f314-4b60-11e7-b69d-c158df3149e0-story.html) (accessed July 19, 2017). For an analysis of the challenge to South Korean security policy posed by the rise of China, see Scott A. Snyder, *South Korea at a Crossroads: Autonomy and Alliance in an Era of Rival Powers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), chap. 9.

³⁰ On recent Philippine alignment policy see Richard Javad Heydarian, "Tragedy of Small Power Politics: Duterte and the Shifting Sands of Philippine Foreign Policy," *Asian Security* (forthcoming, 2018); For a characteristic Philippine statement distancing the Philippines from US policy, see Jim Gomez, "Philippines Says it Won't be Embroiled in US-China Sea Spat," *ABC News*, January 18, 2018, at <http://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/philippines-embroiled-us-china-sea-spat-52499821>.

³¹ For a comparison of Malaysia and Philippine policies, see Peter Kreuzer, "A Comparison of Malaysian and Philippine Responses to China in the South China Sea," *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, vol. 9, no. 3 (September 2016), pp. 239–276.

³² On the delicate nature of Vietnam's effort to constrain Chinese power, see Carlyle A. Thayer, "The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea," *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, vol. 33, no. 3 (December 2011).



diplomatic cooperation with China, thus, developing relatively diminished alignment with the USA and undermining US confidence in its regional alliances.³³

On the other hand, through history secondary states that have defied the strategic logic of accommodation of the stronger great power, utilizing whatever freedom of choice they may possess, have incurred a considerable cost, and they then adjusted their security policies to accommodate the stronger power. Poland's and Czechoslovakia's efforts to ally with France against Germany failed to deter German occupation. When both Georgia and Ukraine challenged superior Russian ground force capabilities on their borders by expanding cooperation with the USA, the European Union, and NATO, they each incurred Russian retaliation and they paid a heavy price. Vietnam challenged Chinese security when it is aligned with the Soviet Union to occupy Cambodia in 1978. It subsequently endured 10 years of war in Cambodia against the Chinese-supported insurgency and Sino-Vietnamese protracted and costly border hostilities. Vietnam ultimately retreated from Cambodia in 1989 when the Soviet Union ended its support for the occupation.³⁴ For the ensuing 20 years, Vietnam accepted Chinese hegemony in Indochina; its defense budget and its military capability declined as Hanoi accepted the necessity to bandwagon with Chinese power. In Latin America, the few countries that have tried to cooperate with an outside power to "balance" the USA suffered costly US retaliation, including Castro's Cuba, Allende's Chile, and the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Ultimately, these countries succumbed to American power and adjusted their foreign policies to accommodate US power and interests.

History suggests that secondary powers that oppose the security interests of superior great powers incur significant security costs. Strategic adjustment to accommodate the interests of a rising power is a strategy of survival. States that challenge this strategy risk being extinguished. With few instructive exceptions, secondary powers bandwagon; they do not balance.

Russia and post-cold war great power politics

The classical realist literature persuasively argues that only great powers balance rising powers and it suggests that whether Russia is a great power in Northeast Asia, whether it and can contend in war with China, will determine whether Russia will balance the rise of China in East Asia. Given Russia's geographic presence in Northeast Asia, its periodic participation in the East Asian balance of power, and its superpower status during the Cold War, it would seem that a *prima facie* case could

³³ Some scholars have characterized this diplomacy as "hedging." But insofar as these secondary powers had not hedged before, their hedging constitutes improved relations with China in response to the rise of China. This is not balancing but rather part of a process of bandwagoning. See, for example, Evan S. Medeiros Strategic Hedging and the Future of Asia-Pacific Stability, *Washington Quarterly*, 2005, vol. 29, no. 1 (2005).

³⁴ On China's protracted military pressure on Vietnam, see Zhang Xiaoming, *Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979-1991* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).



be made that Russia has been an East Asian great power and it will continue to be an East Asian great power. But since the mid-nineteenth century, both Russia and the Soviet Union have seldom possessed regional great power war-fighting capabilities, and they have been marginal participants in regional balance of power politics.

Russian and Soviet secondary state status in Northeast Asian history

Based on the traditional understanding of the sources of great power status in international politics, despite its physical presence in Northeast Asia, Russia's status as a regional great power and its participation in regional balance of power politics has been tenuous and rare. The primary reason for this has been the inhospitable geography separating the Russian Far East from western Russia. Russians have never migrated east in large numbers to the Russian Far East. Although the southeast sector of the Far East can sustain agriculture, its isolation from Russia's population and industrial bases obstructed development of the infrastructure necessary to support population growth and financial investment. Russia's ultimately fruitless effort to establish reliable rail links with the Far East reveals the obstacles posed by the cold and barren Russian heartland.³⁵ The result has been the enduring lack of manpower, natural resources, and infrastructure necessary to sustain Russian great power military presence in the North Pacific and to avoid Russian dependency on foreign resources.

The one exception to this trend was Russian expansion into the Russian Far East, northeast China, and the Korea Peninsula during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Yet this success reflected the anomaly of Chinese weakness and Japan's self-imposed isolation rather than any norm of Russian strength. There was no great power competition in Northeast Asia. Moreover, at times Russian forces were so overextended that had China knowledge of Russia's situation it could have easily reversed St. Petersburg's advances. At other times, China's preoccupation with other powers compelled it to acquiesce to Russian occupation of its territory.³⁶

Despite Chinese weakness, Russia was unable to control its border with China; the Russian border remained open to Chinese migration and the Russian Far East economy remained dependent on foreign suppliers. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, 80% of the civilians in Vladivostok were Chinese and Korean. In 1877 Russia's Pacific Squadron, to avoid total dependence on foreign merchants in Vladivostok, purchased coal in San Francisco and used repair facilities in Japan. In 1885, the Pacific Squadron still depended on imported coal as well as winter anchorages in Nagasaki. As late as 1912, Russians were a bare majority of the Vladivostok population.³⁷

³⁵ For a thorough discussion of Russian frustration at trying to overcome the geographic obstacles to expansion into the Far East, see Walter A. McDougall, *Let the Sea Make a Noise; A History of the North Pacific from Magellan to MacArthur* (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

³⁶ See the treatment of the territorial conflict in S.C.M. Paine, *Imperial Rivals: China, Russia, and Their Disputed Frontier* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), pp. 52–57; 87–88.

³⁷ John J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), pp. 57, 84–85; David Wolff, "Russia Finds its Limits: Crossing Borders into Manchuria," in Stephen Kotkin and David Wolff, *Rediscovering Russia in Asia: Siberia and the Russian Far East* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 42.



These resource and logistical difficulties negated Russia's overall material advantage vis-a-vis Japan during the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War. The Russian military could not contend with Japan's naval blockade of Port Arthur by using land routes to resupply its naval and ground forces, so that the Japanese Army easily landed and defeated the Russian Army. The Japanese Navy used its readily available harbors, supply depots, and coal supplies to destroy the Russian Pacific and Baltic Sea fleets.³⁸ When confronted with a great power in Northeast Asia, Russia offered no significant military resistance.

In the aftermath of Russo-Japanese War, Russia's great power presence in Northeast Asia quickly eroded as Moscow concentrated its military in western Russia to contend with the rise of Germany in Europe, so that Japan emerged as the only great power in Northeast Asia. Russian presence in the Far East remained minimal through World War I and following the 1917 revolution and the ensuing civil war. As late as 1925, Chinese controlled the retail trade in much of the Far East and Japanese firms dominated the region's banking and shipping and they controlled 90% of the fisheries. In 1920 Japanese forces moved into northern Sakhalin, withdrawing in 1925 only after the Soviet Union agreed to unfettered Japanese access to Sakhalin's natural resources. Russian military forces remained focused on Germany during the inter-war period and during World War II.³⁹

After World War II and throughout much of the Cold War, Russia was not an East Asian great power. It deployed whatever military capabilities it possessed in western Russia and Eastern Europe to contend with US capabilities in Western Europe. During Liu Shaoqi's visit to Moscow in 1948, Stalin ceded to China responsibility for Asia's revolutionary movements, not because he was generous, but because the Soviet Union possessed no capabilities in its Far East, including on the Sino-Soviet border.⁴⁰ During this period Northeast Asia was primarily a US–China zone of competition. During the Korean War, the Soviet Union provided military assistance to China and a “nuclear umbrella,” but only China possessed the forward military deployments in Northeast Asia necessary to wage war against the USA.

Not until the late 1960s, as the Sino-Soviet conflict intensified, did Moscow begin to establish a stronger military presence in the Far East. In the 1970s, it revived the Baikal-Amur Railway project.⁴¹ By the 1980s, Moscow had strengthened its military presence in East Asia. It used Vladivostok to develop its Pacific Fleet and deployed 45 divisions and strategic bombers in the Sino-Soviet border region. But the Baikal-Amur Railway was never fully operational, and Vladivostok remained

³⁸ Donald W. Mitchell, *A History of Russian and Soviet Sea Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1974), pp. 204–210, 216–233; chapters 11, 12.

³⁹ Stephan, *The Russian Far East*, pp. 163, 266; Hara Teruyuki, “Japan Moves North: The Japanese Occupation of Northern Sakhalin (1920 s),” in Kotkin and Wolf, *Rediscovering Russia in Asia*.

⁴⁰ Chen Jian, *China's Road to the Korean War: The Making of the Sino-American Confrontation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 104.

⁴¹ Stephan, *The Soviet Far East*, p. 163; Hara Teruyuki, “Japan Moves North: The Japanese Occupation of Northern Sakhalin (1920 s),” in Kotkin and Wolf, *Rediscovering Russia in Asia* On the Baikal-Amur Railway, see John J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East: A History* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 266; *Deloviy Mir*, July 25–July 29, 1997, in FBIS, August 18, 1997 (SOV-970157-S).



isolated from the western Soviet Union, constraining Soviet capabilities. The Soviet Pacific Fleet relied on an unreliable railway system and on highly vulnerable sea and air routes for supply, so that it was the most exposed of the Soviet fleets. And the maritime geography of Northeast Asia continued to plague Soviet naval access to blue water—offensive action by the US Seventh Fleet could have devastated Soviet naval forces before they could exit the Sea of Japan. The Pacific Fleet never achieved parity with the US Seventh Fleet and Moscow only maintained about half of its Far East divisions at full strength. Nevertheless, the burden of the Soviet Union's Far East deployments significantly added to Soviet over-expansion that contributed to the demise of the empire in 1991.⁴²

Russia as a secondary power in contemporary Northeast Asia

Contemporary Russian presence in its Far East reflects the historical norm. Russia is not a Northeast Asian great power; it cannot contend in a war with China. Russia is a regional secondary power.

Russia's strategic and economic presence in its Far East region has been in steady decline since the end of the Cold War. In 1991 there were 14 million Russians living in the Far East, but the 2010 Russian census found that less than 6.3 million Russians lived in the region. To encourage migration to the Far East, Moscow has offered free land grants to settlers, but without success.⁴³ In 2015, the Far East economy was far poorer than the Russian economy east of the Urals and, at best, it has stagnated over the past 25 years, so that Russia has called for China to help with the development of the Far East economy.⁴⁴ Infrastructure in the Far East has also suffered since the end of the Cold War.⁴⁵ Russian military power in the Far East has declined. Russian

⁴² On Soviet Cold War buildup in the Far East and its expanded naval presence, see George W. Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: 1890–1990* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1993). On conventional deployments, see Paul F. Langer, "Soviet Military Power in Asia," in Donald S. Zagoria, ed., *Soviet Policy in Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982); Robert A. Scalapino, "Asia in a Global Context: Strategic Issues for the Soviet Union," in Richard H. Solomon and Masataka Kosaka, eds., *The Soviet Far East Military Buildup: Nuclear Dilemmas and Asian Security* (Dover, Mass: Auburn House, 1986); Harry Gelman, "The Soviet Far East Military Buildup: Motives and Prospects," in *ibid.*; Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Far East Buildup and Soviet Risk-Taking Against China* (Santa Monica, Calif: RAND, 1982).

⁴³ Dragoș Tîrnoveanu, "Russia, China and the Far East Question," *The Diplomat*, January 20, 2016, at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/russia-china-and-the-far-east-question/> (accessed July 15, 2017); Nicholas Eberstadt, "The Dying Bear: Russia's Demographic Disaster," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 6, (November/December 2011); Michael Khodarkovsk, "So Much Land, Too Few Russians," *New York Times*, September 16, 2016, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/opinion/so-much-land-too-few-russians.html>; Paul Goble "Russians Are Not Fools"—Moscow Failing to Encourage Significant Migration to Far East". Eurasia Daily Monitor, vol. 15, no. 12 (January 25, 2018), at <https://jamestown.org/program/russians-not-fools-moscow-failing-encourage-significant-migration-far-east/>.

⁴⁴ Nathan Hodge, "Putin Pitches for Foreign Investment in Russia's Far East" *Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2015, at <https://www.wsj.com/articles/putin-pitches-for-foreign-investment-in-russias-far-east-1441354851> (accessed July 15, 2017); Stephen Blank, "Toward a New Chinese Order in Asia: Russia's Failure," *NBR Special Report* no. 26 (March 2011).

⁴⁵ On the decline of infrastructure, see "Russian Far East's Population Decline Spurred by Poor Infrastructure," *Russia Business Today*, July 4, 2018, at <https://russiabusinesstoday.com/infrastructure/russian-far-east-s-population-decline-spurred-by-poor-infrastructure/>.



intervention in the Ukraine and subsequent NATO renewed ground force and naval exercises on Russia's periphery have compelled Russia to concentrate its limited ground force capabilities on the growing US/NATO challenge to Russian security, thus further weakening the Russian strategic presence in the Far East.⁴⁶ To sustain its support for the opposition forces in the Ukraine and coerce Ukraine compliance with Russian demands, Moscow has had to transfer much of its professional ground force units in the Far East to the Ukraine conflict.⁴⁷

In contrast to Russia's ongoing decline in its Far East, just south of the Sino-Russian border China enjoys the benefits of plentiful arable land and rapid industrial growth. In its northeast, despite the decline of its "rust-belt" industries, China possesses an increasingly well-educated and capable population, advanced ground force capabilities, and a sophisticated high-technology infrastructure. From 2010 to 2016, the average annual growth rate of the Russia Far East was 1.8%. Over the same period, the average Heilongjiang growth rate was over 6.7%.⁴⁸ Moscow cannot patrol its borders and the Sino-Russian border can be as porous to Chinese migration and trade as it was for most of the nineteenth century and twentieth century. Only Chinese cooperation in controlling emigration prevents Chinese demographic overwhelming of the Russian Far East. Overall, China's stronger commercial presence in the Far East challenges the economic integration of the Far East with the rest of Russia.⁴⁹ China's domination of the Sino-Russian border has increased since the end of the Cold War.

Overall, the gap between Chinese and Russian underlying great power capabilities has expanded in the twenty-first century, diminishing Russia's prospects to regain great power capabilities in Northeast Asia. The significant difference in Chinese and Russian GDP growth rates over the past 25 years has contributed to the widening of the Sino-Russian economic and technological gaps.

⁴⁶ Lance M. Bacon, "Joint Exercises Put U.S. Navy at Russia's Doorstep," *Navy Times*, April 4, 2015, at <http://www.navytimes.com/story/military/2015/04/04/russia-navy-exercises-aggression/25265193/>.

⁴⁷ Igor Sutyagin, *Russian Forces in Ukraine* (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2015), at https://www.rusi.org/downloads/assets/201503_BP_Russian_Forces_in_Ukraine_FINAL.pdf.

⁴⁸ *Business and Financial Climate in the Far Eastern Region*, Deloitte CIS Research Center (2018), at <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/ru/Documents/research-center/far-eastern-federal-district.pdf>; National Data, Annual by Province, National Bureau of Statistics of China, at <http://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103>; "2017 GDP Figures for 20 Chinese Provinces Released," China Banking News, January 24, 2018, at <http://data.stats.gov.cn/english/easyquery.htm?cn=E0103>.

⁴⁹ On Sino-Russian border relations in the 1990 s, see James Clay Moltz, "Regional Tensions in the Russo-Japanese Rapprochement," *Asian Survey*, Vol. 35, No. 6 (June 1995), 511–527; Gilbert Rozman, "Northeast China: Waiting for Regionalism" *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 45, No. 4 (July–August 1998), pp. 3–13; Gilbert Rozman, The Crisis of the Russian Far East: Who Is To Blame?," *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (September–October 1997), pp. 3–12.



Moreover, the gap between Russia and China continues to expand. In 2018, Russian GDP was 1.7 trillion US dollars; China's GDP was 13.6 trillion dollars. Russia's annual GDP growth rate was 2.3%; China's GDP growth rate was 6.6%.⁵⁰ And Russia has yet to reform its economy; it has been content to rely on oil revenues to sustain economic growth. The prospects for relative improvement in Russia's economic situation have not improved. More recently, the combination of new international sources of gas and oil and the resulting drop in world energy prices with NATO's economic retaliation against Russian intervention in the Ukraine have contributed to the onset of a Russian recession. Russian recession or stagnation is likely to endure for many years, thus further postponing Russia's ability to develop sustained economic growth and to field a strong military in the Russian Far East.⁵¹ Russian defense spending as a share of GDP is already more than double Chinese defense spending as a share of GDP. Russian defense spending is over 11.4% of its central budget; for China, the figure is 5.5%.⁵² Russia cannot contend with China in an arms competition.

Russian military technology has also stagnated. Despite successful Russian ground force actions in Georgia and Ukraine, much of the Russian military remains backward and in relative decline. The Russian Navy has been in decline since the end of the Cold War and it consists primarily of Soviet-era ships. Its long-term ship-building plans focus on construction of small coastal defense ships, leading to further erosion of Russian blue-water capabilities, especially in Northeast Asia.⁵³ China, on the other hand, has developed advanced ground force and naval technologies and platforms and advanced conventional missile capabilities that contribute to the growth of its full-spectrum conventional superiority over the Russian military. For the most part, China no longer requires purchases of Russian arms to modernize its military.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "GDP (current US\$)," World Bank, at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/ny.gdp.mktp.cd?view=map>; GDP growth (annual %), World Bank, at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?view=map>. These figures are based on official national statistics. Neither Russian nor Chinese statistics are reliable as absolute indicators. They should be used for comparative perspectives.

⁵¹ On the Russian economy in 2017, see Anna Andrianova, "Russian Recovery Sputters as Economy Continues Slog After Crisis," Bloomberg, May 17, 2017, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-17/russian-recovery-sputters-as-economy-continues-slog-after-crisis> (accessed July 18, 2017).

⁵² Nan Tian, Aude Fleurant, Pieter D. Wezemana and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2016*, SIPRI Fact Sheet, April 2017 (Stockholm, SIPRI, April 2017); "Military expenditure (% of general government expenditure)," World Bank, at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.ZS>.

⁵³ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Tracking Developments in the Russian Military," January 14, 2015, at <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/2015/01/14/russian-naval-capabilities-and-procurement-plans/> (accessed July 16, 2017); Gudrun Persson, ed., *Russian Military Capability in a*

Ten-Year Perspective—2016 (Stockholm, Swedish Defence Research Agency FOI, 2016); "How Russia Will Struggle to Keep Its Shipbuilders Afloat," Startfor, January 20, 2016, at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/how-russia-will-struggle-keep-its-shipbuilders-afloat>.

⁵⁴ On the closing military technology gap between China and Russia, see Abraham Ait, "Does Russian Military Aviation Have Anything Left to Offer China?," *The Diplomat*, April 5, 2019, at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/04/does-russian-military-aviation-have-anything-left-to-offer-china/>. The major exception is aircraft engines.



Russia's status as a Northeast Asian secondary power is also reflected in its tertiary role in regional diplomacy. Russia does not have alliances or spheres of influence in anywhere in East Asia. No East Asian country depends on Russia for its security. Nor is Russia part of regional great power diplomacy. It is peripheral, at best, to the North Korean nuclear non-proliferation negotiations. In Northeast Asia, the USA and China deal with each other as great powers and they all but ignore Russia. Similarly, Russia is not a participant in the US–China naval competition.

Russia cannot contend with China in a ground force war or a naval war in Northeast Asia. It is a minor player in US–China great power diplomacy. Current Sino-Russian economic, demographic, technological and military trends suggest that Russia's status as a secondary power in Northeast Asia will endure and likely deepen over many decades.

Prospects for Russian external balancing in Northeast Asia

Russia cannot balance China in Northeast Asia with its own capabilities. But nor can it find allies to help it with external balancing. Because Russia is a secondary power, external balancing is not an option for it to balance Chinese power in either Central Asia or Northeast Asia.

Because Russian capabilities cannot contribute to constraining Chinese power, third parties will find little incentive to commit to Russia's defense vis-à-vis China. This is especially the case because potential Russian partners, such as Japan, India and the USA, would value Russia cooperation against China in maritime East Asia, where China poses the greatest challenge to their security. But Russian naval capabilities in Northeast Asia, much less elsewhere in Asia, are inconsequential. Thus, for third parties, cooperating with Russia against China would incur high commitment costs, but no strategic gain.⁵⁵

Frequently, a secondary power can find a great power ally by offering it strategically important geography for its forward military presence on an adversary's periphery. But neither Japan nor the USA is interested in contesting Chinese power on mainland Asia. They have both defined their interests as maritime balancing of the rise of China. Even should they deploy ground forces in the Russian Far East, they could not challenge Chinese mainland security. Rather, they would be diverting resources from the competition over the maritime balance of power, and their troops in the Russian Far East would become mere hostages to the Chinese military. For Russia, ceding bases to foreign powers would not help its security, but it would incur greater Chinese hostility and challenge the government's international prestige and its domestic standing.

Equally important, potential Russian partners lack the ground force capabilities to contribute to Russian security and to balancing Chinese capabilities on mainland Asia. Japan and the USA have focused on developing their regional naval

⁵⁵ On the costs and risks associated with commitments, see Glenn H. Snyder, "The Security Dilemma in Alliance Politics," *World Politics*, vol. 36, no. 4 (July 1984).



capabilities. Their ability to project ground force power onto mainland Northeast Asia to contend with Chinese capabilities is almost nonexistent. India shares a border with China, but the Himalayan Mountains and Indian ground force inferiority vis-à-vis China pose significant constraints on India's ability to challenge Chinese territorial security. Hence, China would not need to reorient its ground force deployments from the Russian border in Northeast China or diminish funding for its navy to contend with new challenges to its territorial security from prospective Russian partners. For Russia, should it ally with Chinese competitors in Asia, it would simply incur Chinese hostility and heightened threat perception in both Central Asia and Northeast Asia, and heightened insecurity of its Far East.

External balancing is not an option for Russia because China is the only great power throughout continental East Asia, not just on continental Northeast Asia.⁵⁶ The USA is an East Asian great power, but it is a maritime power. The other East Asian countries are secondary powers, including Japan. Neither their economic nor military power can independently contend with the rise of China. Balance of power politics is great power politics, and there is no continental great power for Russia to use to balance Chinese power.⁵⁷

Russia's geostrategic dilemma

Compounding Russia's inability to project power into the barren Far East and the widening gap in Chinese and Russian capabilities in Northeast Asia is the strategic challenge posed by Russia's geopolitical environment. As in the past, following the late-nineteenth-century rise of Japan and the 1904 Russo-Japanese war, Russian strategic presence in contemporary Northeast Asia is undermined by Russian response to more pressing security challenges arising from Europe and Central Asia. As in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary Russia's must prioritize its strategic interests. Given Russia's limited resources, contending with the rise of China in Northeast Asia cannot be a Russian strategic priority.

Thus, whereas China does not face great power challenge anywhere on its borders and it can manage well potential security challenges along its entire perimeter, Russia must contend with significant security challenges in the three strategic theaters on its perimeter—the European theater, the Central Asian theater, and the Far East/Northeast Asia theater.

The European theater poses the greatest threat to Russian security. Since NATO expansion during the 1990s, Russia has confronted American military presence on its eastern border and on the perimeter of its "buffer states" in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. Thus, the military power of the USA, the world's most powerful state,

⁵⁶ For a discussion of China's development of hegemony in mainland East Asia, see Robert S. Ross, "Balance of Power Politics and the Rise of China: Accommodation and Balancing in East Asia," *Security Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3 (July–September 2006).

⁵⁷ On Chinese and U.S. dominance over the other East Asian countries, see Øystein Tunsjø, *The Return of Bipolarity in World Politics: China, the United States, and Geostructural Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).



fronts European Russia. Over 75% of Russia's population lives in European Russia and Russia's political center, Moscow, is in European Russia. European Russia is also the region most important to the Russian economy. Russia's military actions in both Georgia and Ukraine significantly reflected its acute sensitivity to its vulnerability to US presence on its European borders and to US efforts to expand cooperation with countries within a traditional Russian sphere of influence.⁵⁸

Russia also faces security challenges in Central Asia that it did not face in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The region's proximity to European Russia endows the region with strategic importance for Moscow. The cross-border Muslim populations in Central Asia are a source of domestic instability in Russia. The energy pipelines from Central Asia to Europe are also important source revenue for Russia. Yet the poor infrastructure in the region and the porous borders between Central Asia and Russia make it difficult for Russia to establish security along its borders with the Central Asian states.

China's modern ground force capabilities and its economic expansion into Central Asia exacerbate Russian security concerns in its Central Asian theater. For Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan, the three countries bordering China, the overwhelming superiority of the Chinese Army on their borders poses the greatest threat to their security. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan do not border Russia, so that China dominates their security concerns. China's military presence in southern Kazakhstan is superior to Russian military presence in northern Kazakhstan. Throughout Central Asia, Russia deploys one tank brigade and one artillery brigade.⁵⁹ Russian ground force deployments in its Eastern Military District, including those defending Vladivostok, are highly vulnerable to Chinese ground force superiority along the entire length of the Sino-Russian border.⁶⁰

Throughout Central Asia, Chinese economic expansion challenges Russian security. The expansion of the Chinese gas and pipeline network throughout Central Asia enables the Central Asian states to reduce their dependence on revenue from energy exports through the pipelines that run through Russia to Europe, thus expanding Chinese influence in the region at the expense of Russian influence in the region.⁶¹ Chinese investment in Central Asia and its exports of inexpensive consumer goods are also important to the regional economies. Chinese investment in roads and railways connecting Central Asia to China's western provinces contributes to the ongoing expansion of Chinese regional influence. China's Belt and Road

⁵⁸ See, for example, John Mearsheimer, "Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West's Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin," 93 *Foreign Affairs*, 77 (September/October 2014); Neil MacFarlane and Anand Menon, "The EU and Ukraine," *Survival*, vol. 56, no. 3 (2014).

⁵⁹ Dmitry Gorenburg, "Armed Forces of Central Asia and the Regional Threat Situation," Russian Military Reform, October 28, 2010, at <https://russiamil.wordpress.com/category/force-structure/>.

⁶⁰ Catherine Harris and Frederick W. Kagan, *Russia's Military Posture: Ground Forces Order of Battle*, Institute for the Study of War, March 2018, at http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Russian%20Ground%20Forces%20OOB_ISW%20CTP_0.pdf.

⁶¹ On China's expanded presence in Central Asia and its pipeline construction, see Younkyoo Kim and Stephen Blank, "Same Bed, Different Dreams: China's 'peaceful rise' and Sino-Russian rivalry in Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary China*, vol. 22, issue 83 (2013).



Initiative, including its focus on the construction of high-speed railways, will expedite Central Asia's integration into the Chinese economy. In recent years, China has contributed more than Russia to Central Asian trade, investment, and infrastructure development.⁶² Given Russia's economic constraints, it can offer only meager resistance to China's growing economic presence in Central Asia.⁶³

Russia's Far East theater is Moscow's third strategic priority. The Far East hosts a small percentage of the Russian population, its economy makes a minimal contribution to the Russian national economy, and it is far from Russia's population, economic, and political centers. Because of the poor infrastructure and the minimal Russian military and economic presence in the Far East and because of the significant gap in Chinese and Russian military capabilities along the Sino-Russian border in Northeast Asia, the Russian Far East is also the least defensible of Russia's three theaters.

Moscow will prioritize its strategic resources in defense of its European borders. But because Russia has significant security concerns along its Central Asian borders and has relatively greater capabilities in this theater than in its Northeast Asian theater, Moscow might be tempted to increase its resistance to Chinese presence in Central Asia, thus contributing to greater Sino-Russian conflict and Russian balancing against the rise of China.

But the Sino-Russian distribution of power in Northeast Asia will constrain Russian ability to resist Chinese expansion into Central Asia. Overwhelming Chinese demographic, economic, and military presence on the Sino-Russian border in Northeast Asia enables China to hold the Russian Far East hostage to Soviet policy in Central Asia. Should Beijing simply free Chinese citizens to migrate to the Russian Far East, it could jeopardize Moscow's ability to govern the region. China could create a military crisis on the Sino-Russian border that would threaten the territorial integrity of Russia's Far East. In such a crisis, Moscow would have the choice between capitulating to Chinese demands regarding Central Asia or to escalate the border crisis with the threat of nuclear war. Neither is an attractive option, given China's conventional military superiority and its stable second-strike capability and Russia's preoccupation with the US presence in Europe.

Toward the future: the false promise of Russian balancing

Russian is not a great power in Northeast Asia. Relative to Chinese power, Russia is a secondary power; it cannot contend in a war with China in Northeast Asia. Although the neorealist literature suggests that Russia should nonetheless balance against Chinese power, the classical realist literature argues that secondary powers bandwagon. The classical realist literature explains the policies of Latin American countries since the early twentieth century, of the southeast European countries prior

⁶² "Central Asia's Economic Evolution From Russia To China," Stratfor World View, April 5, 2018, at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/central-asia-china-russia-trade-kyrgyzstan-kazakhstan-turkmenistan-tajikistan-uzbekistan>.

⁶³ See, for example, Jeanne L. Wilson, "The Eurasian Economic Union and Chia's Silk Road: Implications for the Russo-Chinese Relationship," *European Politics and Society*, vol. 17, no. 51 (2016).



to World War II, of the smaller countries of South Asia in response to Indian power, and of the smaller countries of contemporary East Asia in response to China's rise. This literature also explains contemporary Russian behavior in Northeast Asia—since the end of the Cold War, Russia, as a secondary power in Northeast Asia, has bandwagoned with Chinese power, just as the other secondary powers discussed above, have bandwagoned with rising powers. Moreover, ever since the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1989, Russia has been an inferior power vis-à-vis China and it has experienced uninterrupted heightened threat perception. Having accommodated China's growing relative growing power since 1989, it is unlikely that Russia will now transform its policy and begin to balance China.

Rather than resist Chinese superiority, Russia has done little to expand its presence to improve the security of its Far East region. On the contrary, since the onset of the Ukraine conflict Russia has reduced its military presence on the Sino-Russian border. Similarly, it has not challenged Chinese interests in countries along China's perimeter, including in North Korea, in Indochina, South Asia, or Central Asia. It continues to sell China military equipment, despite the contribution of Russian arms sales to China's military superiority.⁶⁴ Moreover, Moscow has sought improved Sino-Russian relations as the US military presence on Russia's Europe perimeter has increased since the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014. It has also deepened its dependency on the Chinese economy by encouraging Chinese investment in energy pipelines for Russian export oil and natural gas to China and by seeking Chinese investment throughout the Far East to promote the region's economic development.⁶⁵ Similarly, in Central Asia, Russia has been nearly passive in the face of China's growing presence. It has posed minimal resistant to Chinese pipeline construction and to China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia.

Russia's secondary role in Northeast Asia is also reflected in its near irrelevance in the negotiations over North Korea's nuclear program. Similarly, Japan pays scant attention to Russian naval capabilities in Northeast Asia. Russia matters in Europe, but not in Northeast Asia.

Even should the USA and Russia improve relations and enhance security cooperation in Europe and the Middle East, Russia will still not resist China's rise in East Asia. Improved US–Russia diplomacy will not alleviate Russia's long-term concern for superior American capabilities on its eastern borders. More recently, growing European interest in developing greater military capabilities to contend with Russian

⁶⁴ Elizabeth Wishnick, "Russia in 2015: Putin Seeks Asian Escape from European Chill," *Asian Survey*, vol. 56, no. 1 (January/February 2016); Gabriel Domingue, "Russia Begins Delivering S-400 Air Defence Systems to China, Says Report," *Jane's 360*, January 18, 2018, at <http://www.janes.com/article/77157/russia-begins-delivering-s-400-air-defence-systems-to-china-says-report>.

⁶⁵ On Sino-Russian energy cooperation, see Øystein Tunsjø, *Security and Profit in China's Energy Policy: Hedging Against Risk*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). On the 2014 Sino-Russian gas and pipeline agreement see Jane Perlez, "China and Russia Reach 30-Year Gas Deal," *New York Times*, May 21, 2014 (accessed on July 18, 2017).



activism will arouse Russian concern.⁶⁶ But, most important, regardless of developments in Europe, China's superiority over Russia in nearly all aspects of aspects of national power and the stark contrast in long-term Russian and Chinese economic and military trends will combine with China's significant geopolitical advantages on the Sino-Russian border in Northeast Asia to deter any Russian effort to challenge Chinese security in either Central Asia or in Northeast Asia, so that Russia will continue to bandwagon with Chinese power.

Trends in the Sino-Russian distribution of power, rather than encourage Russia to balance the rise of China, facilitates rising China's ability to balance against the USA. The decline of Russian capabilities in Northeast Asia diminishes the necessity for Beijing's to allocate significant resources to defend its northern border. For Chinese security, the Sino-Russian border increasingly resembles US security on the US–Canadian border. Consolidated Chinese border security around its entire mainland perimeter has allowed China to allocate an increasing share of its growing defense budget to developing a large and modern naval force, thus challenging US security in maritime East Asia. Thus, the rise of China may require the USA to reduce US–Russian tension so that it can focus its military resources on China's rise in East Asia, but the USA cannot expect Russian assistance in balancing the rise of China, regardless of the course of US–Russian relations.⁶⁷

Should China continue to rise over the coming decades, Russia will not experience greater urgency to balance Chinese power. Rather, China's rise will simply consolidate the contemporary Sino-Soviet military balance that has reduced Russia to a secondary power in Northeast Asia and has impelled Russian bandwagoning in both Central Asia and Northeast Asia. Moreover, in the coming decades, the primary direction of China's rise will be toward East Asian maritime regions. Thus, China's ongoing rise will not significantly contribute to greater Russian urgency to balance Chinese power. On the contrary, China's growing naval power will balance US capabilities in maritime East Asia, thus contributing to Russian security vis-à-vis the USA, while not undermining the superiority of China's ground force capabilities in Northeast Asia. The combination of persistent Chinese superiority in Northeast Asia and its balancing of US power will increase Russian interest in cooperation with rising China.

Over the next two decades, the likelihood of Russian balancing of Chinese power will depend more on developments in China than on developments in Russia. First, Russia's Far East geography will remain a major obstacle to Russia's ability to sustain a major presence in Northeast Asia. Second, Russia's focus on security developments first in Europe and then in Central Asia will inhibit Moscow's ability to attempt to strengthen its strategic presence in the Russian Far East and challenge Chinese security. Thus, should the gap narrow between China and Russia, the most likely source would be the determined erosion of China's economic health and the

⁶⁶ Allen Cone, "European NATO members to boost spending this year," UPI, June 25, 2019, at <https://www.upi.com/Defense-News/2019/06/25/European-NATO-members-to-boost-spending-this-year/2541561467847/>.

⁶⁷ Author's interviews with Chinese government and military researchers.



implications for China's ability to maintain a large and modern military force and to maintain domestic social and political stability. As in the mid-nineteenth century, the rise of Russian relative power in Northeast Asia and its development of great power status will depend more on the decline of China and Chinese weakness and the emergence of a political vacuum on mainland Northeast Asia than on the rise of Russian capabilities. China must once again fragment for Moscow to enjoy a resurgence of Russian great power capabilities in Northeast Asia. But it is far more likely that Russia will remain economically challenged than that China will fragment, so that Russia will continue to bandwagon with Chinese power.

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