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INTRODUCTION



Russia and China between cooperation and competition at the regional and global level. Introduction

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ABSTRACT

The steady intensification of Sino-Russian cooperation over the past few years has triggered a surge in scholarly interest. However, in light of the far-reaching geopolitical implications of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, most studies of Sino-Russian dynamics are not only conducted from the disciplinary perspective of International Relations (IR), but also continue to be embedded in realist assumptions and power-political perspectives. This special issue seeks to advance the scholarly knowledge on the Sino-Russian relationship by making the case for expanding the scope of analysis theoretically, disciplinarily and empirically. This introductory article first sets the context by providing a historical overview of key developments in Sino-Russian relations. Following an in-depth review of the IR-dominated literature, it then substantiates the claim that there is a need to broaden the scope of analysis in order to move beyond the IR realist perspective that predominates the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship. Together, the articles in the special issue add new insights to the literature by analyzing the depth of the relationship; scrutinizing Russian discourses on China, in both historical and contemporary contexts; exploring the limitations and dilemmas of the relationship; and paying specific attention to the agency of the countries “in-between”, from Central Asia to Mongolia.

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Introduction

While growing political polarization in Western societies is undermining the current world order from within, non-Western powers are increasingly challenging Western hegemony and are attempting to shape a post-liberal world order. This special issue focuses on two of the main protagonists of this global transformation, namely Russia and China. Importantly, Russia and China are

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also neighbors, with a contentious historical relationship, and in their aspirations to create a non-western international order, they are not only partners but also competitors. Nowhere does this duality emerge more openly than in Central Asia, a region traditionally dominated by Russia but increasingly becoming part of China's sphere of influence.

The steady intensification of Sino-Russian cooperation over the past few years has triggered a surge in scholarly interest. However, in light of the far-reaching geopolitical implications of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, most studies of Sino-Russian dynamics are not only conducted from the disciplinary perspective of International Relations (IR), but also continue to be embedded in realist assumptions and power-political perspectives (e.g. Krickovic 2017; Korolev and Portyakov 2019; Ambrosio, Schram, and Heopfner 2020). This implies that we are left with an IR literature that is preoccupied with a narrow range of questions, focused mainly on the character of the relationship, the causes of the enhanced cooperation and the barriers preventing both states from entering into a fully-fledged political-military alliance. Moreover, these questions are mostly addressed using a limited conceptual-theoretical repertoire. As a result, the IR literature fails to capture the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the Sino-Russian relationship and tends to overstate certain aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship, such as the extent of normative convergence between the two states, while overlooking or downplaying several other elements, such as Russia and China's divergent approaches to a number of key aspects of the international order and global governance, as well as the agency of the "countries-in-between". At the same time, a lack of engagement by the discipline of IR can be observed with studies of the Sino-Russian dynamics that use a different disciplinary approach, in particular geography, economics and history. Engaging more with these studies and approaches could undoubtedly help to better capture the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the Sino-Russian relationship.

In sum, this special issue seeks to advance the scholarly knowledge on the Sino-Russian relationship by going beyond the IR perspectives dominant in the study of Sino-Russian relations. In particular, it makes the case for expanding the scope of analysis theoretically, disciplinarily and empirically.

In the remainder of this introductory article, we will first set the context by providing a brief historical overview of key developments in Sino-Russian relations. We will then substantiate the claim that there is a need to broaden the scope of analysis in order to move beyond the IR realist perspective that currently predominates the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship. Next, we will indicate how the special issue seeks to address this need, namely by broadening the scope of analysis theoretically, disciplinarily, and empirically. The article concludes with a brief account of the individual contributions and their main findings.

The context: from Sino-Soviet to Sino-Russian relations

Overall, Sino-Russian relations in recent history are characterized by shifting patterns of asymmetry in terms of balance of power. While Russia was long the most powerful of the two, it witnessed China's steep rise onto the international stage in the decades following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Whereas Russia had enjoyed the upper hand over its south-eastern neighbor since the mid-19th century in terms of power and status, it was only the end of the Second World War and the victory of the communist movement in China that formalized Moscow's primacy. The Sino-Soviet relationship emerged as a mixture of a traditional great power alliance and a patron-client relationship. The Soviet Union's degree of control over the Chinese Communist Party never reached the level typical for Eastern Europe, but the scale of technological assistance and the provisions of an alliance treaty of 1950 indicated the existence of a clear asymmetry between the two (Bobo 2008). The attempts by the People's Republic of China (PRC) to break free from the Soviet influence coincided with the increasing ideological rivalry for primacy in the communist camp. The domestic political dynamic in both states fueled tensions, leading to the breakup of the Sino-Soviet ties in the early 1960s. Looking into the causes of the rise and fall of the Sino-Soviet alliance, scholars have pointed to the role of power-political dynamics, ideological tensions, and domestic politics, in China in particular (Radchenko 2009; Lüthi 2010). It took both states more than two decades to initiate the process of rapprochement in the late 1980s.

Mikhail Gorbachev's openings toward China, coupled with the rolling back of the Soviet influence in Asia (in Afghanistan and Vietnam), enabled Moscow's reconciliation with Beijing (Radchenko 2014). The fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a new democratizing Russian state did not slow down the process of Sino-Russian rapprochement. In the 1990s, Russia and China solved the majority of their border disputes, introduced confidence-building measures and signaled their dissatisfaction with Western primacy by promoting the idea of a multipolar world order (Wishnick 2001). The modernization of the People's Liberation Army saved the Russian military-industrial complex (Donaldson and Donaldson 2003).

These dynamics continued under Vladimir Putin, even though Russia's policy toward China was not particularly consistent. After signing the good neighborhood treaty in June 2001 and jointly opposing US policies, Putin made a U-turn in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks when seeking to reestablish the relationship with the US, thereby leaving his Chinese counterpart in the cold (Kuhrt 2007). While disappointment with Washington pushed Moscow once again closer to Beijing, Russia exercised a degree of cautiousness in its dealing with China. In the mid-2000s, Moscow practically suspended arms trade with China and attempted to bid Beijing and Tokyo against each other in the race for Russia's oil and gas. At the same time, Russia and China

ultimately solved their remaining border dispute, with an agreement in 2004 and its implementation in 2008. The military-security cooperation gathered pace, with the first joint military exercises taking place in 2005 and 2007. These developments led scholars to emphasize the tactical and superficial nature of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, making the term “axis of convenience” (Bobo 2008) a dominant interpretation. The 2008–2009 global economic crisis turned out to be a watershed in Sino-Russian relations (Kaczmariski 2015). Russia reversed a number of its policies, having in effect chosen to acquiesce to China’s rise. Russia built an oil pipeline to China and Russian state energy companies entered into long-term contracts on oil supply and borrowed heavily from Chinese banks. Both sides intensified their security cooperation with the revival of arms trade and regular joint exercises. Russia also began to adapt to China’s growing economic influence in Central Asia (Wilson 2021). Since Vladimir Putin’s return to the presidency in Russia in 2012 and the selection of Xi Jinping as China’s leader in the same year, the personal relationship between the two has further strengthened the ties between Moscow and Beijing (Xu and Reisinger 2019).

Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea and the ensuing conflict with the West only accelerated bilateral cooperation and the process of Moscow’s acquiescence to China’s rise. Beijing’s political support emboldened Russia in its policy, whereas selected economic support intensified Sino-Russian cooperation in the energy sphere (Skalamera 2018a). The number and scope of joint exercises increased, accompanied by major arms deals (Korolev 2019). Both states managed to avoid competition over such issues as alternative projects for Eurasia, namely the Russia-backed Eurasian Economic Union and China’s Belt and Road Initiative, or over their ambitions in the Arctic. The advent of open Sino-American rivalry in 2017–18 brought back a certain degree of symmetry into the Russian-Chinese relationship, as it increased the value of Russia’s political support for Beijing (Kaczmariski 2020). Although the China-US conflict brought Moscow and Beijing closer together, it has not fundamentally transformed the relationship. Still, as will become clear in the next section, the “axis of convenience” interpretation, which emphasized the tactical and superficial nature of the Sino-Russian rapprochement, has lost its dominant position in recent scholarship, and a new consensus has emerged, recognizing a substantial deepening of the Sino-Russian relationship over the last decade.

A literature in need of analytical expansion

This special issue starts from the observation that despite the increasing complexity of the Sino-Russian relationship and its multi-faceted character, the literature remains dominated by studies embedded in the discipline of International Relations. In addition, those studies are characterized by

a limited set of realist-inspired questions pertaining mostly to the character of the relationship and the causes of the enhanced cooperation. Indeed, a substantial amount of scholarly attention has been paid to the nature, intensity and durability of the relationship, with a series of realist concepts used to examine these questions, namely concepts such as alliance (Blank 2020; Lukin 2021), alignment (Ambrosio 2017; Korolev 2020) and strategic partnership (Cox 2016; Haynes 2020). This scholarship has also been preoccupied with the question of the factors driving the rapprochement. In this respect, an overwhelming amount of interest has been dedicated to the role of the opposition to the material primacy of the USA and Western liberal hegemony as the key driver underpinning ever closer cooperation between Moscow and Beijing (e.g. Ambrosio, Schram, and Heopfner 2020; Haynes 2020; Owen 2020), although several scholars have sought to either challenge or complement this specific explanation with other factors linked to economic interests, interpersonal relations and/or power asymmetry (e.g. Xu and Reisinger 2019). Irrespectively, the explanations tend to be based on realist assumptions and coated in realist terms (e.g. balancing, bandwagoning, hedging, material military and economic capabilities), even if they do not follow specific realist theories.

Korolev (2020), for instance, interprets the Sino-Russian relationship in terms of strategic alignment, which he explains with the combination of three mechanisms of the balance of power, balance of threats, and balance of interests, mostly centered on US power and policy. Blank (2020) reads Sino-Russian relations as a *de facto* alliance, the emergence of which in the 2010s he ascribes to geopolitical and ideological anti-American perspectives dominant in both states, reinforced by the belief in the growing weakness of the US. Ambrosio (2017) focuses on the durability of Sino-Russian alignment, summarizing the relationship as one based on common interests and common views on international politics, institutionalized by the network of agreements. Unlike most realism-oriented authors, he traces the foundations of the alignment to the 1990s and sees it as preceding the current downturn in US-Russia relations.

More recently, scholars have begun to draw more extensively from the IR theory repertoire, reaching out to constructivist (Flikke 2016; Wishnick 2017), status (Krickovic and Zhang 2020; Larson 2020), domestic-political (Skalamera 2018b; Wilson 2019) and English School-based (Paikin 2021; Lukin and Novikov 2021) explanations in order to determine the causes and implications of closer ties between Moscow and Beijing.

By moving away from realist assumptions and concepts, the emphasis has shifted toward the growing normative affinity between Russia and China that can be traced back to the mid-2000s (Rozman 2014; Wishnick 2017; Ying 2018). Russia and China's shared worldviews have been rooted in their opposition to political and ideological values promoted by the West in domestic politics, and resistance to liberal internationalism (including transgressions of traditionally

understood sovereignty) in the international realm. In this reading, Russia and China increasingly share norms constitutive of political identity that brings them closer together despite the absence of a civilizational affinity. In identity terms, China as the “Other” does not threaten Russia’s ontological security, as it does not pose a challenge to the civilisationist identity discourses that emphasize Russia’s distinctiveness from the West.

The shifts in dominant identity narratives, observed in Russia since the mid-2000s, have fueled status-seeking, thus increasing the relevance of status recognition in Russia’s foreign policy. As a consequence, explanations of Russia’s policy toward China in terms of status-seeking have gained prominence (Flikke 2016; Larson and Shevchenko 2019; Larson 2020). According to this logic, the search for great power status has pushed Russia closer toward China, with cooperation with Beijing reinforcing Moscow’s great-power status. These new insights have helped to explain why China continues to explicitly recognize this status, promoting the discourse of equality between the two states. Alongside China’s more confident and assertive actions toward the external realm, Beijing pays particular attention not to look down on Moscow.

The new consensus on a substantial deepening of the Sino-Russian relationship over the last decade notwithstanding, the overwhelming focus on the discontent with the liberal order shared by Russia and China tends to overstate the extent of normative convergence between the two states. Little attention is paid to Russia and China’s divergent approaches to a number of aspects of the international order and global governance (Snetkov and Lanteigne 2014; Kaczmariski 2019; Chen and Yin 2020). All in all, however, the literature on the Sino-Russian relationship remains preoccupied with great-power politics and geopolitical dynamics and even the recent shift away from realism has not helped much in terms of broadening the scope of analysis.

This observation also applies to research on the regional dimensions of the Sino-Russian relationship, which have gained increasing prominence since China and Russia have further deepened their cooperation in their shared neighborhood, and in particular in Central Asia. Scholarly focus appears to be centered around the binary cooperation-competition axis. Some authors see the relationship as bifurcated, with global balancing (i.e. joint push back) against the US and regional competition, in Central Asia in particular (Korolev 2016; Elgin 2021). No consensus has been achieved on whether the “facts on the ground” are sufficient to constitute hedging (i.e. keeping one’s options open) or balancing behavior on the part of Russia. Wishnick (2017) interprets Moscow’s development of relations with other Asian states as reflecting its attempts to (re)construct Russia’s identity as that of a Euro-Asian, rather than just European or Eurasian, power. Dikarev and Lukin (2021) reiterate this assertion when analyzing Russia’s policy toward the South China Sea that, they argue, does not constitute either balancing or hedging vis-à-vis China. A growing number of authors have responded to this

stalemate by exploring the dynamic of shifts that take place between Russia and China in their neighborhood and attempting to go beyond the competition-cooperation framework. Instead, they explore the processes of Russia's gradual adaptation to China's rising power and influence (Christoffersen 2018; Kaczmarek 2017; Samokhvalov 2018; Odgaard 2017). On the other hand, China's implicit deference to Russia's great power status in their shared neighborhood, for instance, the acceptance of the Great Eurasian Partnership – according to most scholars, a grand idea with little economic underpinnings and dim prospects of implementation (e.g. Lewis 2018) – seems to have helped to alleviate the Russian elite's fears of becoming a junior partner (Larson 2020).

As mentioned, due to the literature's overwhelming focus on great power politics and the geopolitical dynamics of the Sino-Russia relationship, multiple aspects and dimensions remain overlooked or neglected. For instance, we still know little about how the deeper cooperation between Russia and China in their shared neighborhood plays out concretely on the ground and to what extent the lofty declarations of partnership result in actual outcomes. Even more so, the literature tends to remain silent about the views and roles of the “countries in-between” and the extent to which the latter's agency influences the Sino-Russian relationship and the broader dynamics in Eurasia. It is only very recently that scholars have started to remediate and problematize this silence. For instance, Kazantsev, Medvedeva, and Safranchuk (2021) are among the first to consider the role of the Central Asian states as active agents shaping integration processes in Greater Eurasia according to their own interests and perspectives. In the introduction to a recent special issue, Korosteleva and Paikin (2021, 321–323) have called upon scholars of Sino-Russian relations in Eurasia to “go beyond the existing debates that traditionally focus on geopolitics and great power rivalry so well-rehearsed in the mainstream scholarship [...] by advancing the need to focus on ‘the local’”. As part of the same special issue, Pieper (2021) follows up on this call by examining to what extent Kazakhstan's agency in its interaction with the BRI is shaped not only by Russia's regional integration policies and China's financing projects, but also by “de-centring practices at the regional and sub-national level”, thereby demonstrating “how Kazakhstan is a microcosm for the dynamics of a new Eurasian order in the making”. In a similar vein, Šantić and Antić (2020) have analyzed the specificities of Serbia's response to the COVID pandemic by showing, among other things, how the country has found itself in a coronavirus diplomacy triangle between China, Russia and the EU. Using a political geography lens, Grant (2020), in turn, has demonstrated how China's border practices at the Kazakh border complicates the exercise of Chinese BRI soft power.

In addition, due to its preoccupation with accounting for material factors and the power-politics dimension, the scholarship is unable to provide insights on how the relationship is perceived locally in Russia and China, and on whether

the political elite's discourse resonates with that of the experts and the population. A few recent studies have started to look into these questions. Laruelle and Luo (2020), for instance, have provided a unique insight into Chinese reception of Russian political and cultural influence at both elite and popular levels. In turn, Kolosov and Zotova (2021) have studied discourses in Russia on Sino-Russian relations, as well as China at the level of officials, experts and the media. Similarly, we still lack knowledge on how discursive politics determine the evolving partnership and to what extent discursive frames behind the policy decisions interrelate with national identity discourse. In this regard, Kuteleva (2021) has provided a pioneering account that shows how China's energy relations with Russia and Kazakhstan are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the discursive politics of oil. Svarin (2016), in turn, has used a critical geopolitical lens to analyze how Russian policy-makers define and articulate the three "geopolitical spaces" – Eurasia, the Euro-Atlantic and the Asia-Pacific – and how each of these spaces assumes a specific function for the pursuit of Russia's interests.

Expanding theoretically, disciplinarily and empirically

With the purpose of further filling these gaps in the IR-dominated literature, this special issue seeks to broaden the scholarly understanding of the relationship between Russia and China in the regional and global dimensions. In particular, it aims to go beyond the IR narrow, realist-inspired focus on great power politics and geopolitical dynamics by expanding the scope of analysis in three ways:

(1) theoretically, by including a wider variety of approaches, including constructivism and poststructuralism. This is necessary in order to make sure that immaterial and discursive factors and aspects can be more accounted for in the Sino-Russian engagement and that an analytically more diverse range of questions and assumptions can emerge. Poststructuralism, which has yet to enter the IR scholarship on the relationship between China and Russia, is uniquely placed to help examine a number of underexplored questions, among other things, because it has the ability to grasp the co-constitutive relationship between identity, discourse and foreign policy (see e.g. Hansen 2013, 2016). It can also help to research changes in the discursive structures and discursive strategies of Russia and China, and as such reveal, for instance, how the Self-Other nexus has been (re)constructed in their relationship, and how this impacts China's and Russia's foreign policy discourses. However, several material aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship also remain understudied at the theoretical level. In this regard, theoretical engagement with the approaches used within political and/or human geography, such as socio-technical approaches, Science and Technology approaches and new materialisms, could help to better understand certain material implications of Sino-Russian dynamics, including the impact of their deepening relationship on the countries in-between.

(2) disciplinarily, by working across disciplines, and hence enriching our understanding of the relationship between China and Russia and their involvement in Eurasia by drawing on insights from various disciplines. In today's world, which is characterized by ever higher levels of complexity and relationality, gaining an understanding of international affairs requires a cross-disciplinary perspective, which opens up to interdisciplinary research as a way to enable cross-fertilization of insights and perspectives. As such, in gaining a more profound understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship and these actors' involvement in the shared neighborhood, it seems essential to account for the historical, economic, domestic, legal and spatial aspects and how these aspects are interrelated with the regional and international dimensions of the Sino-Russian relationship and involvement in the region. In other words, it seems essential to go beyond the field of IR and to engage with the disciplines of economics, political geography, history and area studies, among others.

(3) empirically, by expanding the analysis to underexplored domains of the Sino-Russian relationship and their engagement with the shared neighborhood. The literature's preoccupation with realist-inspired great power politics and the geopolitical dynamics of the Sino-Russia relationship means that empirical attention has remained limited to the more "traditional" or material power aspects, such as military and geo-economic capabilities, and geopolitical policy areas, such as security policy. For the same reasons, the literature has tended to overlook the views and roles of the "countries in-between" and the extent to which the latter's agency affects the Sino-Russian relationship and the broader dynamics in Eurasia. Therefore, there is a need to venture into un(der) explored policy areas, such as higher education, anti-corruption and development assistance, and to reverse the focus of the agency by starting from the perspective of the countries "in-between" instead of from the perspective of China and Russia.

More concretely, at the theoretical level, the special issue includes a variety of theoretical perspectives, ranging from realist-inspired perspectives to constructivism and post-structuralism. As mentioned, the latter two theories have a lot to offer to the literature. For instance, using a constructivist lens, the contribution by Kuteleva and Vasiliev looks into the discursive politics of the BRI in Russian media. By drawing on constructivism, they are able to uncover the narratives and images of the BRI in Russian newspapers and can trace how these have shifted over the past six years. The contribution by Dharmaputra, in turn, adopts a poststructuralist perspective in order to examine how discourses on China have been embedded in Russia's identity discourses and how these have evolved over time. This allows him to recover Russia's identity discourse vis-à-vis China, structured around linking/differentiation and such topics as the relative perception of China's threat.

At the disciplinary level, the special issue moves beyond the field of IR to include insights from history, area studies, international economics, international law and political geography. This interdisciplinary approach proves

particularly helpful to broaden our understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship. The contribution by Adda, for instance, offers a unique perspective by tracing historical narratives on Sino-Russian relations in Russia and examining how history museums near the Chinese border currently present these narratives. The contribution by Defraigne, in turn, draws on insights from international economics to analyze how China's BRI has affected the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a project of regional economic integration. The article by Kruessmann takes a highly original angle by marrying international law with political geography in order to examine whether anti-corruption governance is emerging in the case of the Polar Silk Road and if so, how this governance can be characterized. Last but not least, several contributions combine insights from area studies with IR, which is particularly helpful in order to shed light on the perspectives and agency of the "in-between countries". In the contribution by Pieper, for instance, this has allowed the author to address the puzzle of how Mongolia's self-perception as a geopolitical bridgehead state can be reconciled with the partially diverging interests of China and Russia and the dilemmas that it faces as China's influence grows.

Empirically, the special issue covers a multitude of un(der)explored policy areas, including higher education, anti-corruption, development assistance, transport infrastructure and water management. The articles aim at analyzing the depth of the relationship; scrutinize Russian discourses on China, in both historical and contemporary contexts; and explore the limitations and dilemmas of the relationship. Importantly, the special issue also focuses on the agency of the countries "in-between", from Central Asia to Mongolia, which remain largely overlooked in the IR literature. By assessing how countries in Eurasia respond to Russia's and China's initiatives in their shared neighborhood, the special issue seeks to offer new insights into how their perception and reception of Russian and Chinese leadership and cooperation initiatives influences the dynamics between Moscow and Beijing. Also methodologically, the special issue reflects a wide range of approaches and methods, including discourse analysis, field observation, elite interviews, document analysis, and economic modeling.

The special issue's structure and contributions

The special issue consists of eight research articles. Following this introductory article, the first three articles are each centered around (mutual) perceptions, narratives and discourses that characterize historical and contemporary Sino-Russian relations. To begin with, Iacopo Adda's article offers a unique micro perspective by examining how historical narratives of Russia's relations with China are represented in Russian history museums situated at the border with China. Adda explores changing representations and dominant narratives of Sino-Russian history, analyzing ways in which the Nerchinsk Treaty (1689), the first ever international agreement between Russia and China, is presented in the

Russian Far East's museums in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Chita and Nerchinsk. Adda illustrates the often contradictory attempts aimed at reconciling the cooperative narrative that dominates current official discourse in Russia with the inability to completely renounce particularistic narratives or obliterate elements of pride considered to be founding elements of Russia's past.

Next, Anna Kuteleva and Dmitrii Vasiliev scrutinize how China's – and Xi Jinping's personal – flagship project, the BRI, is portrayed in the Russian media. They trace the coverage of the BRI in Russia's major newspapers between 2013 and 2019. Their research points to the relevance of China's recognition of Russia's great power status for smooth cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. The “linking up” of the Russia-led EAEU with the BRI received unanimously positive assessments in the Russian media, serving as a testimony to Russia's unique position in Eurasia.

In turn, Radityo Dharmaputra focuses on changing discourses on Russia's identity and the role of China in the “Asian” dimension of this identity. Analyzing foreign policy debates in Russia between 2010 and 2016, Dharmaputra asserts that the existing identity structures seriously limited the scope of Russia's economic engagement with China. Whereas the post-2014 Russian-Western crisis has enabled the shifts in Russia's identity, its slow pace continued to put limitations on Russia's cooperation with China.

These three contributions neatly enrich our understanding of the dynamics underpinning the Sino-Russian relationship and help to go beyond the prevailing vision of Moscow-Beijing ties as a geopolitical response to US primacy. All three articles illustrate the constant (re)construction of the relationship and the attempts to adapt to the growing power disparity between Russia and China.

The subsequent three articles go deeper into investigating the processes taking place between Russia and China in their shared neighborhood, paying particular attention to the question of regional leadership. Elena Soboleva and Svetlana Krivokhizh analyze the prospect of regional leadership in Central Asia from Beijing's perspective. They focus on Chinese initiatives in the policy fields of counter-terrorism, infrastructure development and water management. Their findings explain the variation in those three areas with the help of the evolution of China's foreign policy interests, the specificities of the Central Asian states, and the role of Russia as the other prominent external actor. Soboleva and Krivokhizh trace the evolution of Beijing's approach to regional leadership and demonstrate China's growing readiness to reach out to selected Central Asian states bypassing Russia, which previously was not the case. Jean-Christophe Defraigne, in turn, takes an in-depth look at the economic challenges posed to the EAEU by the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. Exploring the processes of economic integration and the division of labor, Defraigne concludes that Russia's economic leadership via the EAEU in the region has weak underpinnings and its prospects remain dim. The contribution by Thomas Kruessmann shifts the focus to the Arctic by exploring whether a shared understanding

between Russia and China of the need to combat corruption on the Polar Silk Road could result in China and Russia adopting a post-territorial approach in which both sides agree on common legal frameworks in such critical areas as infrastructure investment, procurement and trade. He finds that China is not likely to confront Russia on a state-to-state level over corruption risks on the Polar Silk Road, although Beijing knows that its continuing “soft spot” on anti-corruption is negatively affecting trust in the BRI in general. Therefore, any shared governance between China and Russia on anti-corruption on the Polar Silk Road seems preferable.

The final two contributions foreground the perspectives of the states located “in-between” China and Russia, and in particular the Central Asian countries and Mongolia. Natalia Leskina and Emma Sabzalieva focus on the underexplored realm of higher education and examine to what extent the Russia-led EAEU and China’s BRI can lead to the emergence of a common Eurasian higher education space. They go beyond the competition-cooperation dichotomy and propose instead the concept of points of correspondence. By highlighting the perspectives of the Central Asian states, they assess how these countries are approaching China and Russia’s efforts to construct a Eurasian higher education region. Finally, the article by Moritz Pieper investigates the triangular relationship between Russia, China and Mongolia. Pieper traces the evolution of Mongolia’s attempts to keep the balance between Moscow and Beijing and identifies the shifts in Mongolia’s approach to the BRI.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that Sino-Russian cooperation has steadily intensified over the past decade. While this has been accompanied by a surge in scholarly interest, most studies of Sino-Russian dynamics appear to be conducted from an IR perspective and are embedded in realist assumptions and frames. As a result, most of the existing scholarship fails to capture the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the Sino-Russian relationship and tends to overstate certain aspects of the Sino-Russian relationship, such as the degree of normative alignment between the two states, while neglecting or minimizing several other elements, including the agency of the “countries in-between”. Moreover, the IR-dominated literature does not engage with studies of the Sino-Russian dynamics that use a different disciplinary approach, in particular geography, economics and history.

Therefore, this special issue has argued that there is a need to go beyond the IR perspectives dominant in the study of Sino-Russian relations. In particular, it makes the case for expanding the scope of analysis theoretically, disciplinarily and empirically. Theoretically, the special issue has sought to broaden the scope of analysis by including a wider variety of approaches, including constructivism and poststructuralism. This does not only allow us to account for the immaterial

and discursive factors and aspects that remain understudied in the Sino-Russian engagement, but it also enables us to raise an analytically more diverse range of questions and assumptions. Poststructuralism, for instance, enables us to capture the co-constitutive relationship between identity, discourse and foreign policy and to uncover changes in the discursive structures and discursive strategies of Russia and China, and as such reveal, for instance, how the Self-Other nexus has been (re)constructed in their relationship, and how this impacts China's and Russia's foreign policy discourses. By studying Russia's identity discourse vis-à-vis China, structured around linking/differentiation and key issues such as the relative perception of China's threat, the contribution by Dharmaputra adds new insights to our understanding of Russia's "pivot to the East" and the emergence of the notion of "Greater Eurasia". His article reveals that despite some changes in Russia's discourse regarding China in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, such as the repositioning of China as a "friend" and the emerging notion of common history, they were not sufficient to imprint any change on the core identity layer of Russian foreign policy identity toward China. Similarly, by scrutinizing the narratives and images of the BRI in Russian newspapers and mapping how these have shifted over the past few years, the contribution by Kuteleva and Vasiliev shows that despite diverging and even contradictory discursive depictions of the BRI in Russian newspapers, the newspaper discourses unanimously support Sino-Russian cooperation in Eurasia and, in particular, the Russian proposal of the "linking up" of the EAEU and BRI, which they view as a strategy that benefits Russia's international status.

Disciplinarily, the special issue has moved beyond the field of IR to include insights from history, area studies, international economics, international law and political geography. This interdisciplinary approach seems essential to better capture the multi-faced nature of the Sino-Russian relationship. By engaging with history, for instance, and focusing on the present-day depiction of the Nerchinsk Treaty in Russian museums near the Chinese border, the contribution by Adda reveals how contemporary ideological contradictions mirror the existence of important tensions between Chinese and Russian historical narratives. Among other things, his findings highlight the contradiction between historical narratives that express patriotic pride in the national past and those that tend to downplay potential sources of criticism toward this past as a way to avoid bilateral diplomatic tensions with China. Drawing on insights from international economics, in turn, the contribution by Defraigne adds new insights to the debate on the EAEU as a tool for economic integration and for enhancing Russia's economic leadership in Eurasia by explaining why Russia remains a weak economic regional leader. His article finds that China's economic influence is increasing in many of the EAEU member countries, because of the EAEU countries' relatively low level of industrialization and their economic complementarity as provider of commodities to the growing Chinese economy. Even more original is the

interdisciplinary perspective used by Kruessmann, who combines international law with political geography, allowing him to explore anti-corruption in the case of the Polar Silk Road as a test case of how governance in the new spatial regimes of the BRI is emerging.

Empirically, the special issue has sought to broaden the scope of analysis by covering some of the un(der)explored domains of the Sino-Russian relationship and their involvement in the shared neighborhood. For instance, by scrutinizing Chinese initiatives in Central Asia in the policy fields of counter-terrorism, infrastructure development and water management, the contribution by Soboleva and Krivokhizh has traced the evolution of China's approach to regional leadership and has revealed China's increased readiness to engage with specific Central Asian states bypassing Russia. Importantly, the special issue has not only ventured into un(der)explored policy areas, such as higher education, anti-corruption and development assistance, but it has also reversed the dominant scholarly focus on the agency of China and Russia by starting instead from the perspective of the countries "in-between". By studying how countries in Eurasia respond to Russia's and China's initiatives in their shared neighborhood, the special issue offers new insights into how these countries' perception and reception of Russian and Chinese leadership and cooperation initiatives affects the Sino-Russian dynamics. The contribution by Leskina and Sabzalieva, for instance, has shown that the responses of the Central Asian countries to China's and Russia's higher education initiatives in the region can be best described as a strategy that relies on points of correspondence, which allows for both competition and collaboration. In turn, the contribution by Pieper has demonstrated how Mongolia has embarked on a new phase of trilateral diplomacy with China and Russia, both in an attempt to benefit from the potential gains that could come with the promised "linking-up" of the EAEU and the BRI and to counter-balance China and Russia against each other.

In sum, in line with the special issue's ambition to enrich the scholarship of the Sino-Russian relationship by expanding the scope of analysis theoretically, disciplinarily and empirically, together, the articles in the special issue add new insights to the existing scholarly knowledge by analyzing the depth of the relationship; scrutinizing Russian discourses on China, in both historical and contemporary contexts; exploring the limitations and dilemmas of the relationship; and paying specific attention to the agency of the countries "in-between", from Central Asia to Mongolia.

Of course, our call to further expand the scope of analysis theoretically, disciplinarily and empirically does not end with the articles in this special issue. There remains huge potential in further following up on this agenda. Particularly important in this regard is our call to work more across disciplines. Given that today's world is characterized by ever higher levels of complexity and relationality, gaining an advanced understanding of a topic such as the Sino-

Russian relationship requires a cross-disciplinary perspective, which opens up to interdisciplinary research as a way to enable cross-fertilization of insights and perspectives. Therefore, in order to further advance our understanding of the Sino-Russian relationship and their involvement in the shared neighborhood, more research is needed that accounts for the historical, economic, domestic, legal and spatial aspects of this topic and how these aspects are interrelated with the regional and international dimensions of the Sino-Russian relationship and their engagement with the countries in Eurasia. In this regard, there lies specific potential in cross-fertilization of insights from political and/or human geography. Certain approaches used within these two fields are uniquely placed to capture the multi-faceted and interconnected nature and implications of Sino-Russian dynamics, which IR perspectives have so far been unable to grasp. Indeed, approaches like socio-technical approaches, Science and Technology and new materialisms could help to better understand certain material, as well as immaterial dimensions of Sino-Russian dynamics, including the impact of their deepening relationship on the countries in-between. Bridging the gap between the IR-dominated scholarship and studies from political and/or human geography would allow researchers to bring in concepts and issues like spatiality, borders and socio-technical aspects and the interconnection between them, thereby adding yet another much needed new layer of insights into Sino-Russian dynamics.

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