

## The Sino-Russian Partnership and the East Asian Order

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*After dismissing the Sino-Russian partnership for the past decade, scholars now scramble to assess its significance, particularly with US foreign policy in disarray under the Trump administration. I examine how China and Russia manage their relations in East Asia and the impact of their approach to great power management on the creation of an East Asian order. According to English School theorist Hedley Bull, great power management is one of the ways that order is created. Sino-Russian great power management involves rule making, a distinctive approach to crisis management, and overlapping policy approaches toward countries such as Burma and the Philippines. I conclude with a comparison between Sino-Russian great power management and the US alliance system, note a few distinctive features of the Trump era, and draw some conclusions for East Asia. KEYWORDS: China, Russia, East Asia, great power, order.*

AFTER DISMISSING THE SINO-RUSSIAN PARTNERSHIP FOR THE PAST decade, scholars now scramble to assess its significance, particularly with US foreign policy in disarray under the Trump administration. Is the Sino-Russian partnership a transactional relationship, destined for failure as China rises? Is it an alliance? Is it based on enduring shared norms or less securely premised on transactional interests? Focusing on what partnership is or is not, while interesting as a scholarly exercise, does not, however, advance our understanding of its mechanisms and impact on East Asia. Following the English School and the writings of Hedley Bull, I argue that Russia and China are seeking to create a society of states that defines a pluralist East Asian order. For Bull, great power management is one of the ways that order is created. Accordingly, I examine how China and Russia manage their relations in East Asia and the impact of their approach to great power management on the creation of an East Asian order.

### **The English School and International Order**

The English School provides a useful lens through which to examine the Sino-Russian partnership because it helps us examine the common values, interests, rules, and practices that bring Russia and China together in East Asia as well as the factors that set limits to their cooperation. For Hedley Bull, one of the early theorists of the English School, two or more states are said to form an international society when they claim to share values and interests, consider themselves to be bound by a common set of rules, and cooperate together in institutions through diplomacy, international law, and agreement on the appropriate conditions for the use of force (Bull 2002, 13). Although states operate in conditions of anarchy (i.e., the absence of a Leviathan or world government), Bull believed that what he called an “anarchical society” would be maintained thanks to balance of power, international law, diplomacy, policies toward the use of force, and great power management (Bull 2002, 15).

The common interests shared within a society of states provide order, or a pattern of behavior that sustains the basic goals of social life for a given group of states (Bull 2002, 51). In his study of order in East Asia, Muthiah Alagappa defines order as “a formal or informal arrangement that sustains rule-governed interaction among sovereign states in their pursuit of individual and collective goals” (2003, 39). For Bull these goals are (1) the preservation of the society of states; (2) the independence and sovereignty of member states; (3) the absence of war and maintenance of peace within a given society; and (4) sharing of key normative values about the limitation of violence, the importance of reciprocity, and state sovereignty (Bull 2002, 15–19).

English School theorists have been debating the types of order (Western) society has encountered over time. Building on Bull’s work, Andrew Hurrell defines three types of order: pluralist, solidarist, and complex governance. Pluralist order, the most limited arrangement, is a society of separate sovereign states that interact in institutions and are connected by shared practices, norms, and rules (Hurrell 2007, 3–4). Although states may have different interests and values, even in this minimalist conception of order they are able to negotiate rules and common understandings. Hurrell

notes that contemporary society has changed to create more far-reaching institutions and develop greater normative ambitions. We now think in terms of an international community that plays a key role in global governance (Hurrell 2007, 5). This is the liberal solidarist order that is premised on the existence of common values in international society, such as human rights. Finally, Hurrell widens the notion of order beyond the purview of the state to include the role of nonstate actors in contributing to global governance and the resulting erosion of the privileged position of sovereign states (Hurrell 2007, 6–7). Although historical changes in international society have created three possible orders, Hurrell notes that the Westphalian world is still with us and that the contemporary era is characterized by the sometimes unhappy coexistence of aspects of pluralism, solidarism, and complex governance (2007, 9).

### **Sino-Russian Great Power Management and Order in East Asia**

Scholarship applying the English School approach to East Asia has sought to address the general appropriateness of a framework grounded in the history of Western civilization for Asia (Alagappa 2003), and for China more particularly (Zhang and Buzan 2012). Specifically, China's rise and interaction with the United States globally (Foot and Walter 2011) and within East Asia (Goh 2013) have been key areas of English School research. Focusing on the global level, Rosemary Foot and Andrew Walter portray China's preference for a pluralist order challenged by transnational problems such as climate change and humanitarian disasters (2011, 300), while Goh argues that China's rise has led to an order transition in East Asia in which US hegemony is maintained but China tops a hierarchy of regional great powers (2013, 209).

English School perspectives are rarely found in analysis of the Sino-Russian partnership, however. One exception is Liselotte Odgaard's (2017) analysis of the compatibility of Russian and Chinese perspectives on the use of force, legitimacy, and international institutions as a means of evaluating the depth of the Sino-Russian partnership in Central Asia. In her broader conclusions for East

Asia, Odgaard finds that the creation of a Sino-Russian security order in Central Asia enables China to direct its attention to its primary competition, which is with the United States (2017, 54).

My purpose is to address the impact of the Sino-Russian partnership on the East Asian order by focusing on their interaction in great power management. On a global level, Bull argued that great powers contribute to order by managing their relations with one another, avoiding and controlling crises, preventing war from breaking out, and defining their individual and/or joint level of interest in particular issues or geographic spaces (2002, 201). Goh further explains that great power management involves a combination of great power restraint and coordination: they try to prevent problems in their own relations from spilling over to the broader society of states and attempt to provide leadership on global problems (2016, 169). She notes that Bull and other English School theorists have largely neglected the issue of regional great power management (Goh 2016, 171).

Why the focus on East Asia as an arena for Sino-Russian partnership? As China seeks to play a greater role within the region and expand its military power in support of it, it faces an inhospitable environment—all of the larger states are either US allies or competitors of China. Partnership with Russia, which is not a party to any of the disputes China has in the region, offers some desirable support. Moreover, as we will see, the principles of the Sino-Russian partnership provide a more flexible framework to justify Chinese policies in the neighborhood.

Russia is not the first great power that comes to mind in a study of great power management in East Asia. Since the Soviet era, Russian leaders have sought to define their country's role in Asia (Lee and Lukin 2016, 39–42). A variety of external and domestic factors—the Sino-Soviet split, Cold War security concerns, and, in the post-Soviet era, the economic weakness and corruption in the Russian Far East—have frustrated Russia's Asian ambitions (Blank 2017, 25). Putin's Asia pivot and effort to increase energy exports to the region have injected new life into this effort, but for most Asian states, Russia remains an outside power (Gabuev 2016). For this reason, Russian cooperation with China in East Asia strengthens its claim to be an Asian state,

which also supports Russia's more important goal of being a global power.

China, to be sure, has a long history as a great power in East Asia and does not face the same pressure as Russia does to justify its role in the region. Nonetheless, the Sino-Russian partnership increasingly plays an important role in China's effort to outline its own vision of East Asian order. Xi Jinping likened the partnership with Russia to a "ballast stone in safeguarding global and regional peace and stability" (*Xinhua* 2017). While many Western analysts dismiss Russia as a declining state and a junior partner to China, China's access to Russian resources contributes to Chinese economic power, and Russian support for Chinese positions in East Asia bolsters China's effort to make what Goh termed an "order transition" (2013, 13). Although China may not yet have the capabilities to challenge US power in the region, the Chinese leadership is, nonetheless, providing an alternative approach to great power management, involving different rules and practices.

The Chinese leadership's effort to develop a "new type of great power relations" typically has been associated with US-China relations in the 2010s and conflated with ideas for a G2 Sino-US partnership in global governance (Xiao 2013; Zeng and Breslin 2016, 775) when in fact the concept actually originated in documents governing the Sino-Russian relationship (Mancinelli 2017, 12–13). China's concept of a new type of great power relations can be summarized in four points: (1) avoidance of conflict or confrontation by emphasizing partnership, treating each other's strategic intentions objectively, and dealing with disagreements through dialogue and cooperation; (2) mutual respect, including for each other's social system, development path, core interests, and major concerns; (3) mutually beneficial cooperation by abandoning the zero-sum game mentality and advancing areas of mutual interest; and (4) control of disagreements (Du 2017).

Looking back at the 1997 Sino-Russian Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World, we see the very same principles that Xi Jinping would herald fifteen years later. In their 1997 declaration, Russia and China announced that they were "forging a new type of long-term inter-State relations that are not directed against third countries. This provides important practical experience for

the establishment of a new international order.”<sup>1</sup> This new type of relations was based on the following five principles, which are found in the subsequent 2001 Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship and Good Neighborly Cooperation and all future joint declarations, as well as in later Chinese statements regarding Sino-US relations: (1) a preference for a multipolar world that recognizes diversity and the growing role of developing countries and avoids hegemony; (2) mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, nonaggression, noninterference in domestic affairs, equality and mutual advantage, and peaceful coexistence; (3) no bloc politics or use of force—disputes should be resolved peacefully; (4) a stronger role for the United Nations in maintaining international order; and (5) a bilateral partnership based on equality, trust, and mutually beneficial cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China 2001).

Given the provenance of the concept of a new type of great power relations, it makes sense that the first selection under “New Model of Major-Country Relations” in the collection of Xi Jinping’s speeches published in 2014 refers to Russia. This selection is a speech Xi gave to the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, where he made a case for all countries to “join hands in building a new model of international relations featuring cooperation and mutual benefit . . . to safeguard world peace and promote common development” (Xi 2014, 299). Xi goes on to praise Sino-Russian relations: “The relationship between China and Russia is one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world. It is also the best relationship between major countries” (2014, 301).

In the second selection, on Sino-American relations, Xi reflects on the June 2013 Sunnylands summit with Obama. In contrast to the Sino-Russian relationship, Xi depicts the new model of great power relations in Sino-US relations in aspirational terms, as a type of relationship that should and can be achieved so that conflict can be avoided (2014, 306). Subsequently, Chinese and US analysts have focused considerable attention on the degree to which the Obama administration mirrored Xi’s language on great power relations, seeking a linguistic parameter for measuring Sino-US cooperation (Li and Xu 2014). Terminology is important in

diplomacy and acquiescence to another country's descriptor can be seen as an indicator of the balance of power between the two. Does China seek to be a responsible stakeholder (according to the definition of responsible outlined by US policymakers)? Or is the United States agreeing to abide by the (Chinese) concepts of win-win cooperation and noninterference? President Obama sought to avoid echoing Chinese terminology while Secretary of State Rex Tillerson immediately ran into criticism in Washington for repeating it (Rosenberger 2017).

Instead of defining how great powers should conduct their relations, Russian foreign policy documents and Putin's speeches outline a vision for equal partnerships among countries. In his speeches in recent years, President Putin has emphasized the importance of state sovereignty and noninterference in the domestic affairs of states (President of Russia 2015) and the need for an equal world order based on mutual respect among countries (President of Russia 2014). Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept elaborates on these principles and states that the key objectives of Russian diplomacy are

to further promote the efforts to strengthen international peace and ensure global security and stability with a view to establishing a fair and democratic international system that addresses international issues on the basis of collective decision-making, the rule of international law, primarily the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations (the UN Charter), as well as equal, partnership relations among States, with the central and coordinating role played by the United Nations (UN) as the key organization in charge of regulating international relations. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b)

Regarding foreign policy, the concept goes on to specify that Russia seeks

to promote, within bilateral and multilateral frameworks, mutually beneficial and equal partnerships with foreign countries, inter-State associations, international organizations and within forums, guided by the principles of independence and sovereignty, pragmatism, transparency, predictability, a multidirectional approach

and the commitment to pursue national priorities on a non-confrontational basis; expand international cooperation on a non-discriminatory basis; facilitate the emergence of network alliances and Russia's proactive participation in them. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b)

These principles that China and Russia have separately articulated in recent years as key principles of their foreign policy are reiterated in their most recent joint declarations. Their July 5, 2017, joint statement calls on the international community to recognize its diversity, to respect the rights of all countries in choosing their own development path and political system, and to resolve differences through dialogue and cooperation. Russian and Chinese leaders further commit to establishing a common security concept based on cooperation and decisionmaking on the basis of international law. In June 2016, Russia and China issued a declaration on the promotion of international law, in which they highlighted the importance of sovereign equality of states, reaffirmed their commitment to refraining from the use of force, and expressed their opposition to unilateral military interventions and interference in the domestic affairs of states. They reiterated their support for the peaceful settlement of disputes and highlighted their opposition to unilateral coercive measures such as sanctions (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016a).

Russia and China distinguish here between what should go on at the global level (i.e., what standards the United States and its allies should adhere to) and what rules they propose to follow in their own neighborhoods (Charap, Drennan, and Noel 2017, 37). Both China and Russia envision separate rules governing their interactions with neighboring states as what transpires along their peripheries, or even in the general vicinity, may affect their stability and sovereignty. In Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept, "adjacent states" are discussed as a distinct category, apparently neither foreign nor domestic (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016b). Xi Jinping's 2014 address to the Chinese Communist Party Work Conference on Neighborhood Diplomacy sought to balance mutually beneficial cooperation with neighboring countries with safeguarding China's sovereignty and

interests (Xi 2014, 325). Chinese analysts call this the “bottom line principle”: “while adhering to the past dictum of shelving disputes and engaging in joint development, Beijing now allegedly stresses the need to ‘stick to the bottom line’ of defending China’s sovereignty rights” (Swaine 2014, 6).

### **The Sino-Russian Challenge to the US-Led Order in East Asia**

One facet of Sino-Russian collaboration in great power management involves rule making. While it is true that China and Russia lack the military power or the soft power to replace the United States in East Asia, this does not mean that they are prepared to accept the rules underlying the US-led order. Indeed, China and Russia have outlined a series of rules of conduct that they would like to see implemented in East Asia, many of which run counter to US positions.

#### *Opposition to the THAAD System and Expansion of the US Alliance System*

Both China and Russia feel pressured by the US alliance system. From a Chinese vantage point, the US role in East Asian security is positive to the extent that it promotes stability in the region, especially in the Taiwan Strait and on the Korean peninsula, and it prevents Japanese militarization. However, US alliances concern China when they seek to constrain what it views as its own legitimate interests in Taiwan and in maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, or they increase pressure on China, for example, by maintaining a security relationship with a future united Korea (Wu 2016).

Although for Russia NATO is the main source of pressure, US alliances with Japan and South Korea also affect Russia’s calculus regarding the northern Kuriles as well as Russian military deployments in the region. The Russian Pacific fleet is now a shadow of its former Cold War self, and, due to budgetary constraints and other competing priorities, recent efforts to modernize it have

focused on coastal defense and A2AD (area access and area denial) (Bitzinger 2017; Felgenhauer 2017; Gady 2018). Ironically, the prospect of a settlement of the territorial dispute with Japan over the northern Kuriles appears to have increased Russian determination to secure them through forward basing, lest a US base move to a returned island (Yu 2017). Thus, Russia shares with China concern about the impact of US alliances with Japan and South Korea on their interests in the Asia Pacific region. Their July 2017 “double freeze” proposal called for a moratorium on large-scale US–South Korea military exercises in exchange for North Korea’s commitment to denuclearization (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation July 2017a).

Both Russia and China have argued against the deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) weapon system, which they see as reducing the effectiveness of their own deterrent. China has been more strenuous in opposing THAAD, which, depending on its mode of use, could imperil China’s second-strike capability (Suh 2017). China also fears that Japan’s cooperation with the United States in missile defense will contribute to Japanese military capabilities, which could be used against Chinese interests (Zhao 2017). Although Russia’s deterrent would not be affected by a missile defense system in Asia, Putin has vociferously opposed similar systems in Europe and supports Beijing on THAAD as a matter of principle.

### *Nonproliferation to Non-Nuclear States*

Despite their opposition to THAAD, neither Russia nor China wants to see a nuclear North Korea lead to a wider nuclear arms race or to conflict in the region. Although China and Russia are at times competitors in their approach to Korean peninsula economic issues, as tensions heated up in the summer of 2017 between Kim Jong-un and Donald Trump, we have seen greater coordination between Russia and China on North Korea. After the July 2017 meeting between Putin and Xi, the two leaders issued an additional joint statement outlining their common positions on the Korean peninsula, which advocated restraint by all sides, a freeze on testing by North Korea and on military exercises by the United States

and its allies, nonproliferation, and international and North-South dialogue. They also stated that tensions on the Korean peninsula should not be used as a pretext for the United States to increase its military capabilities in the region and expressed their opposition to the THAAD system in particular, which they see as ineffective in addressing North Korea's security challenges.

#### *Limited Role for Outside Powers*

Xi Jinping famously told the Conference on International Cooperation in Asia that "it is for the people of Asia to run the affairs of Asia, solve the problems of Asia and uphold the security of Asia. The people of Asia have the capability and wisdom to achieve peace and stability in the region through enhanced cooperation" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China 2014). This statement was directed at the United States, not at Russia, but one may well ask where the Chinese government sees Russia fitting in Asia. Chinese and Russians alike typically see Russia as a European country with Asian interests. China has helped to some extent to bring Russia into regional institutions. Moreover, Russia's growing role as an energy supplier for Asia, supported by Chinese and other Asian investment, and its efforts to expand exports of military technology have also helped boost Russia's profile in Asia, but the weak Russian Far East economy, underlying wariness in the regions regarding integration, and the continually poor investment climate and corruption have all served to restrain Russia's role in the region. For Russia, domestic challenges are its biggest obstacle to its goals in East Asia, not the United States (Lee and Lukin 2016, 209).

#### *Noninterference in the Domestic Affairs of Authoritarian States*

In East Asia, Sino-Russian agreement on noninterference focuses on authoritarian states; both oppose regime change in North Korea, for example, and have opposed taking measures that would apply severe economic pressure (such as China's stopping all oil exports). China and Russia also are united in their opposition to

unilateral sanctions, except when they impose them personally on democracies. For example, China retaliated against the South Korean government's agreement to cooperate with the United States by deploying THAAD antimissile systems on its territory by restricting Chinese tourism to South Korea (which dropped by 40 percent within a month of the imposition of the measures) and closed down half of the operations of the South Korean conglomerate, Lotte, in China (Suh 2017, 5). Similarly, to register displeasure at Democratic Progressive Party candidate Tsai Ing-wen's electoral victory in Taiwan's presidential election, China restricted tourism to the island (Horton 2017) and has sought to influence Taiwanese investors in the mainland to support a One China policy (Brown and Scott 2017).

Russian intervention in democracies has involved subversion through information warfare to safeguard Putin's regime and enhance Russia's great power status (Ball 2017, 2). For Russia, information warfare involves controlling one's own information space and weaponizing information by sowing discord in other countries (Ball 2017, 12–13). Christopher Paul and Miriam Mathews (2016, 1) at RAND liken Russia's approach to a "firehose of propaganda" because of the sheer volume of the messaging and disregard for the factual basis of the content. Ironically, considering Putin's well-known opposition to regime change in the former Soviet space, some Russian military analysts admit that the ultimate goal of information warfare is regime change through disinformation campaigns targeting the population (Giles 2016, 18).

Russian and Chinese information warfare have proceeded in parallel but with some differences. While the Putin government has enlisted criminal hackers and trolls, the Chinese government has chosen to affiliate its cyberwarriors with militias subordinate to military and civilian agencies (Green 2016, 7). Russia has sought what Joseph Nye (2017) has termed "negative soft power," meaning to discredit opponents, while the Chinese government has used its control over media domestically as well as economic leverage over foreign companies and universities to shape a desired narrative about China. Inside China, "patriotic hackers" are now paid—the so-called 50-centers (*wumao dang*)—to infiltrate social media to counter objectionable viewpoints and put forward the official view

(Green 2016). In August 2017, Russia followed China's lead in restricting access to virtual private networks (VPNs) domestically. In Russia, VPNs will be banned as of November 1, while in China they are legal only if licensed by the government. Apple recently acceded to Chinese demands to remove VPNs from its app store in the People's Republic (Browne 2017; Newman 2017).

Although the focus of Russian information warfare (or at least the awareness of its focus) has been on the United States and European democracies, US democratic allies in Asia may also be targets in the future, especially as Russia and China deepen their cooperation in the region. Indeed, both Russia and China see information warfare as a means of prevailing over an adversary without resorting to armed conflict (Ball 2017, 10; DOD 2017, 66). Although Japan and Russia have discussed cooperation in cybersecurity in the past and Japanese authorities have primarily been concerned about cyberthreats from China and North Korea, given Japan's high level of vulnerability and Russia's strengths in information warfare, a potential threat from Russia cannot be excluded (Lewis 2015, 12; Nitta 2015). For South Korea, North Korea is the primary cyberthreat, but Chinese hackers connected to the People's Liberation Army reportedly launched a variety of attacks against South Korean institutions in the spring of 2017 to protest THAAD (Panda 2017).

### **Crisis Management in Territorial Disputes**

Russia and China have maintained neutrality on the border disputes and territorial issues that are viewed as crucial by the other. On issues of concern to China such as the dispute between China and Japan over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in the East China Sea, Russia has not overtly supported China's position. National Security Council chairman Nikolai Patrushev stated that "Russia doesn't take any position" on the issue but noted that the situation in the region was dynamic and likely to change (Naka 2012). Russian statements regarding disputed territories on the fortieth anniversary of the war against Japan (Hirose 2017) have begun to echo Chinese positions, however, and the dominant narrative in

the Russian media supports China's view of the territorial dispute as stemming from Japanese expansionism and portraying Japan as the interloper rather than the legitimate holder of the territory (Brown 2015, 903–906).

Moreover, Russian military exports to China, such as the S-400 anti-aircraft systems, will upgrade China's ability to defend its self-declared air defense identification zone in the East China Sea and improve air cover. In 2017 Russian planes periodically supported Chinese overflights over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands, according to the Japanese Ministry of Defense Joint Staff. Russia and China also held a joint naval exercise to the northwest of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands in May–June 2014, a year when both countries dramatically increased their overflights near Japanese territory, with Russia largely focusing on northern Japan. While an official Sino-Russian statement expressing their support for each other's positions on the Diaoyu and Kurile islands is unlikely, Japan's fear that Russia may move in this direction supports Russian efforts to use the China card to achieve Russian aims in relations with Japan (Yu 2017).

On the South China Sea, Russia has inched closer to Chinese positions, though the Russian government has not yet provided the unequivocal support that Chinese counterparts would like. Although some observers interpret this as “lukewarm support” (Korolev and Portyakov 2018), nonetheless, Xi Jinping has not directly complained about Russia's position and, to the contrary, has thanked Putin for his support. The Russian Foreign Ministry declared its neutrality right after the July 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration in favor of the Philippines' claims in the South China Sea. At the time, Putin stated that interference by third parties would be “counter-productive” (Reuters 2016), though he later added that President Xi had never specifically asked for Russia's support and highlighted that Russia stood “in solidarity and support of China's position on this issue—not to recognize the decision of this court” (*Sputniknews* 2016). Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Liu Chunying acknowledged that China valued Putin's position, which showed that Russia was “objective and fair, and represents the voices of justice from the international community” (*Xinhua* 2016). In September 2016,

Russia and China held the Joint Sea–2016, the first joint exercises by the two countries in the South China Sea, though Russian diplomats reportedly insisted that the drills would be held in waters that are indisputably Chinese (*The Hindu* 2016; Wishnick 2016). The eight-day exercises involved island and reef seizure maneuvers (Zhou 2016) as well as antisubmarine operations, air defense, and naval and air operations. Wang Hai, deputy commander of the Chinese Navy, who directed the Chinese fleet during the exercises, described the drills as an effort to enhance Sino-Russian cooperation in countering “common security threats” (An 2016).

This being said, Russia has to balance its deepening partnership with China with its long-standing ties to Vietnam. While Russia’s relationship with Vietnam is typically viewed as evidence of Russian hedging against China (Blank and Kim 2016; Tran, Vieira, and Ferreira-Pereira 2013), some scholars argue that this relationship is necessary for Russia to make a claim to be an Asian power (Wishnick 2017). For the most part, although Chinese analysts conclude that the Russia-Vietnam relationship is problematic for China, they reject its motivation as anti-Chinese. When China has expressed concerns about Russia-Vietnam energy cooperation taking place within the nine-dash line area of the South China Sea claimed by China, Russia has proved amenable to altering the project in response to China’s concerns (Wishnick 2013). More recently, Vietnam has become concerned about Russia’s reliability as a partner and sought to diversify its diplomacy (Du 2016). A series of statements by Foreign Minister Lavrov arguing against “the internationalization” of the South China Sea disputes led Vietnam to doubt Russia’s support for its position (Tsvetov 2016). Under the Obama administration, an improved relationship with the United States was central to Vietnam’s efforts to diversify its supporters, but with the Trump administration’s uncertain approach to Asia, Vietnam has had to accommodate China more. For example, in July 2017, Vietnam stopped drilling for gas in an area of the South China Sea that China claims, in response to Chinese threats to attack Vietnamese positions on the Spratly Islands if Hanoi failed to abandon the gas project (Thayer 2017).

Compared to the 2008 Georgia war, when China withheld support for the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, we

have seen greater Chinese understanding for Russian positions on Ukraine. Both China and Russia found reason to agree on support for Ukrainian sovereignty and opposition to interference by the West, especially the United States. Official Chinese statements have linked their country's position to key principles of peaceful coexistence, involving respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and noninterference in the domestic affairs of other states (*People's Daily Online* 2014). Russia and China also stated their opposition to sanctions in their May 2014, joint statement. Although China abstained in the vote on the March 15, 2014 United Nations Security Council draft resolution on Crimea sponsored by the United States and it has argued for dialogue and restraint in Ukraine, Liu Jieyi, China's permanent representative to the UN, has repeatedly argued that "respect for independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of states has been the consistent position of China" (Liu Jieyi 2014). While Putin may have preferred more direct support, he nonetheless thanked "the people of China, whose leadership sees the situation in Crimea in all its historical and political integrity" (Putin 2014). What we have seen emerge over the past decade is a tacit agreement between Russia and China granting each other a wide berth to protect their sovereignty, security, and stability and to respond as needed to threats in their peripheries that they may perceive as undermining these interests (Charap, Drennan, and Noel 2017, 38). As Fu Ying, Chair of the National People's Congress Committee on Foreign Affairs, has noted, China may not always agree with the manner in which Russia protects its interests, but China and Russia nonetheless share the same goals. She writes,

In international practices, China and Russia have different styles and focuses . . . Russia's foreign policy style that is more on the hawkish side, and leans towards the unexpected. This may lead to confrontations and strains in foreign relations. In comparison, China's diplomatic moves are more conservative. Naturally this has to do with different levels of perceived pressure in each country's respective security arena. . . . Despite some differences over certain issues, China and Russia share similar political considerations about the need to firmly develop their bilateral relations. (Fu 2016)

## Parallel Policy Efforts

China and Russia have separate, at times competitive but largely parallel, efforts to engage with US partners in Southeast Asia. Two of such initiatives, in the Philippines and Burma, are described in greater detail below. Russia and China have each taken advantage of opportunities provided by political changes in the region, such as the 2014 coup in Thailand, which brought in an authoritarian government, ethnic unrest in Burma, and the election of Rodrigo Duterte as president in the Philippines. The perception of US disengagement from the region, which began under the Obama administration and has been heightened under Trump, has increased interest in the region in engaging with China and Russia.

Moreover, Russia and China each seek to link countries in the region to their own economic projects—Vietnam became the first external free trade partner of the Eurasian Economic Union, and China is building rail connections to several Southeast Asian states, including Laos, Thailand, and Singapore, as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. The Eurasian Economic Union is exploring the possibility of negotiating additional free trade agreements with other Southeast Asian states, including Singapore, Cambodia, Thailand, and the Philippines (Han 2016). For Russia, the aim is to diversify and expand cooperation with Southeast Asian countries beyond arms exports and develop projects in the energy, space, tourism, and education sectors. For China, which has long been an important investor in the region, the goal is to develop infrastructure to support increasing Chinese investments and potentially provide more legitimacy for its greater maritime military presence.

### *The Philippines*

China has long sought to use economic inducements to forestall the Philippines' efforts to block China's South China Sea claims agenda. What is new is Russia's engagement with the Philippines and the new president's receptivity to both Russian and Chinese overtures. All this has happened at a time of at least surface tensions between Duterte and the White House. Duterte has been pursuing an "independent foreign policy" to reduce the Philippines'

dependence on the United States. His election soured relations with the Obama administration, which criticized human rights violations in Duterte's campaign to reduce drug trafficking and postponed weapons transfers to the Filipino police in response (Heydarian 2017a). Duterte's conciliatory approach to China also ran counter to the Obama administration's effort to challenge Chinese claims in the South China Sea. Duterte has sought instead to reduce competition between the United States and China and aims to expand economic and military cooperation with China and Russia. Duterte also harbors a variety of personal grievances against the United States, though most Filipinos disagree with him. In a December 2016 *Asia Pulse* survey, 76 percent of Filipinos said they trusted the United States, compared to just 38 percent for Russia and China. Moreover, 22 percent expressed no trust at all in China, compared to 17 percent for Russia and just 2 percent for the United States (Placido 2017).

Nonetheless, Duterte has provided China with an opening to move beyond the July 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration decision to work on changing the facts on the ground (or at sea) and palliating the Philippines at least in the short run with economic agreements. After two state visits to China, Duterte can point to some concrete results, namely, \$24 billion in Chinese aid and investment pledges, including for some major infrastructure projects as part of China's Belt and Road Initiative for Southeast Asia. China and the Philippines have also resumed high-level dialogues on economic cooperation. As a result, tensions in the South China Sea have been reduced, Chinese tourism to the Philippines has increased, Filipino agricultural exports to China have grown, and Filipino fishermen are once again able to freely access the Scarborough Shoal (Rabena 2017).

Russia has been eyeing the Philippines with interest in recent years, and Russian diplomacy appears to be paying off at last. During a May 2017 visit to Moscow, Duterte and Putin signed a defense cooperation agreement, which the Filipino leader hopes will translate into Russian aid in countering extremists in the Philippines through intelligence sharing, training, and joint military drills (Heydarian 2017a). Nonetheless, experts note that despite the increased Chinese economic cooperation and Russian

security assistance, the United States remains the leading foreign investor in the Philippines. In addition, Russia and China provide a fraction of the military aid that the United States does, and without the long-standing military-to-military ties and interoperability (Heydarian 2017a; Parameswaran 2017b).

Much like Donald Trump, who tweets first and thinks later, Duterte's inflammatory rhetoric about the United States and his interest in downplaying tensions with China often put him at odds with his own Defense Ministry officials, who are more concerned with the Chinese threat to the Philippines' positions in the South China Sea. When the Defense Ministry protested what they saw as China's unauthorized activities on the Benham Rise on the Philippines' continental shelf and the possibility of Chinese construction on the Scarborough Shoal, which they considered unacceptable, Duterte dismissed their concerns. It has been up to Filipino diplomats to try to square that circle (Heydarian 2017b). Meanwhile, China's assertiveness supports those voices in the Philippines that advocate greater cooperation between the United States and the Philippines and more caution about engaging China. Despite Duterte's rhetoric, the United States has continued antiterrorism cooperation with the Philippines, delivering new equipment and proceeding with military exchanges and cooperation in training (Parameswaran 2017a, 2017b).

Trump, who has downplayed the importance of human rights issues in foreign policy, has been more sympathetic to Duterte's tactics in confronting drug traffickers and terrorists and even invited the Filipino leader to visit the White House. While Duterte had previously pledged never to set foot in the United States and called Obama a "son of a whore," he met with Trump on the sidelines of the November 2017 Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) summit (Corr 2017). For his part, Trump claimed he had a "great relationship" with Duterte, and the two leaders focused their conversation on common priorities such as counterterrorism and trade (Davis 2017). Even though Russia and China are unlikely to displace the United States in the Philippines given its historical ties to the country and strong support among the population, the new flurry of diplomacy between Russia and China and the Philippines reaffirms some of the principles of

Sino-Russian partnership, namely, support for noninterference (where strong-arm methods are used in the name of domestic stability) and a bid to create a more multipolar East Asian order.

### *Burma*

As the country made a transition from authoritarian rule, economic and military ties with China, Burma's primary partner, came under scrutiny by the new democratic government. A major Chinese investment, the Myitsone Dam, has been put on hold, though development of oil and gas pipelines, a deepwater port on the Indian Ocean, and a special economic zone are proceeding as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (Lintner 2017b). On the one hand, China has supported noninterference in Burma's affairs by blocking (with Russia) a UN Security Council effort to issue a statement condemning attacks on the Rohingya, the Burmese Muslim community in the Rakhine State (RFE/RL 2017), and opposing an investigation by the UN Human Rights Council. On the other hand, China has been interfering in Burma's domestic politics by supporting and arming the United Wa State Army, its largest ethnic militia, as well as other ethnic groups in the northeast. This role gives Beijing a major voice in the peace process to end the civil war (Naw 2017) and provides it with a bargaining chip in economic negotiations with the Burmese government (McCartan 2017).

While both Russia and China seek to reduce Western influence in Burma, unease in Yangon about China's role has benefited Russia, which has sought to capitalize on interest in Burma by diversifying its foreign and military ties away from China. Russia's military exports to Burma began when Burma was under authoritarian rule and subject to Western sanctions. Currently, Burma is the second largest export destination for Russian weapons in Southeast Asia, after Vietnam. According to Ko Ye (2017), the executive director of the Tagaung Institute of Political Studies in Yangon, the value of Russian arms sales to Burma (\$1.45 billion from 2001 to 2016) exceeded China's (\$1.42 billion). The Burmese air force has bought twenty-one Russian helicopters (nine Mi-35 Hind helicopter gunships and twelve Mi-17 transport helicopters) and may purchase additional Mi17V5s for

use against ethnic groups in the north, armed by China (Lintner 2017b; *Myanmar Times* 2017b). Though China and Burma held their first joint naval exercise in May 2017, Russian naval vessels had quietly begun to pay port of call visits to the country, first in 2013 and then again in 2016 (Ko 2017). China has long been an investor in Burma's energy industry—the oil pipeline from the Bay of Bengal to Yunnan province in China finally began operations this year after lengthy delays—but Russia is also a player in Burma's energy sector now. The Russian company Bashneft invested \$38.3 million in the central Myanmar basin in a project with the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise (Chongkittavorn 2017; *Myanmar Times* 2017a).

### **The Sino-Russian Order versus the US Alliance System**

A Sino-Russian East Asian order in the making is much different from the US-based order that involves formal alliances interconnected in a hub-and-spoke system. China and Russia are creating a more fluid order, reflecting the characteristics and limitations of their approach to great power management. Unlike the US-led order, China and Russia lack formal alliance relations either with each other or with other states in East Asia, with the exception of North Korea. On paper, China and North Korea have a treaty relationship dating back to 1961, which states that

The Contracting Parties undertake jointly to adopt all measures to prevent aggression against either of the Contracting Parties by any state. In the event of one of the Contracting Parties being subjected to the armed attack by any state or several states jointly and thus being involved in a state of war, the other Contracting Party shall immediately render military and other assistance by all means at its disposal. (Treaty of Friendship 1961)

The 1961 treaty was renewed for additional twenty-year periods in 1981 and 2001, meaning that it remains in effect until 2021. The Chinese government has not stated whether it continues to adhere to the letter of the treaty. Certainly, the relationship

between China and North Korea has cooled in recent years, from one “sealed in blood” during the Korean War to a distant sponsorship (*People’s Daily Online* 2016). Although Xi Jinping reportedly looks down on Kim Jong-un, he recently met with him (Council on Foreign Relations 2014). Chinese scholars increasingly criticize their country’s relationship with North Korea as counterproductive—noted historian Shen Zihua went so far as to dismiss the 1961 treaty as a “piece of scrap paper” (Perlez 2017). A *Global Times* editorial noted that the situation on the peninsula had changed since the renewal of the treaty in 2001 because of North Korea’s tests, which put Chinese territory at risk, and because of closer US and South Korean military cooperation, which Pyongyang sees as a threat (*Global Times* 2017a). In the aftermath of North Korea’s sixth nuclear test on September 1, 2017, the Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang called for a peaceful settlement of problems on the peninsula and stated that “the use of force is not an option” (*People’s Daily Online* 2017). An editorial in *Global Times* argued that China should not impose additional sanctions, unless developments on the Korean peninsula directly affected Chinese territory (*Global Times* 2017b).

Like China, Russia had qualms about a mutual defense clause in its Cold War–era treaty with North Korea, and the revised treaty the outgoing Yeltsin government eventually signed with Pyongyang omitted such language (Lukin 2016). Although China has the greatest economic leverage over North Korea because of its fuel exports to the country, Russia has also maintained a significant economic relationship with North Korea. Nonetheless, after the sixth nuclear test, Putin stated firmly that Russia refused to recognize North Korea’s nuclear status and rejected the use of force to resolve peninsula security issues (*Pravda* 2017). The Russian Foreign Ministry put the blame squarely on North Korea for violating the nonproliferation regime and creating a threat to the security of the peninsula as well as the East Asian region as a whole. The Russian Foreign Ministry urged dialogue on the basis of the Sino-Russian “double freeze” proposal as the only solution (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2017b).

Participation in regional institutions and frameworks has not yet been an important component of the Sino-Russian vision for

East Asian order either. Indeed, in Central Asia institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization or the Eurasian Economic Union have served to highlight differences between China and Russia more than to unite them. In East Asia, China and Russia have participated (China more actively) in institutions created by other Asian countries, such as ASEAN and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). Some analysts have argued that the Trump administration's pull-out from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), leading to its demise, leaves China in the driver's seat for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP). Some pundits have argued that the agreement will pave the way for Chinese economic domination of East Asia, but it was actually initiated by Indonesia. The new framework was established to coordinate ASEAN's multiple existing free trade agreements with China, and a Japanese proposal to include another major Asian power, India, as well as Australia and New Zealand, prevailed over the Chinese preference for a focus on the ASEAN+3 (Japan, South Korea, China) membership (Armstrong and King 2017).

### **The Trump Factor**

If the Sino-Russian vision of order for East Asia has any currency, given its preliminary stage of development, it is because the Trump administration has not clearly articulated any US strategy for East Asia, resulting in a policy vacuum. "Not Obama" seems to be the policy, which began with the US pull-out from the TPP. Some bilateral outreach has taken place, and policy-makers have sought to reassure allies of continuity. So far this has been successful only with Japan, and factional infighting within the Trump administration over the priority of an America First trade agenda has aggravated US relations with South Korea, at a time of heightened tension with North Korea. Indeed, North Korea appears to have replaced the South China Sea as the key issue of concern for the United States in Asia, as Kim Jong-un succeeds in capturing the world's attention and China seeks to downplay its South China Sea agenda. Although some US freedom of navigation exercises have proceeded in this region, the

Trump administration largely has avoided confronting China for the time being over its militarization of the South China Sea out of the (vain) hope that China would play a key role in pressuring North Korea to desist from its testing program and denuclearize. Inadequate staffing of key Asia policy positions at the US Department of State and a diminished role for diplomacy in general in the Trump administration have compounded unclear policies and the sense of a security vacuum in Asia, which may lead states in the region to opt for bandwagoning with China or to engage with other key states, such as Japan and India.

## **Conclusion**

The retreat of the United States in East Asia and the Trump administration's policy confusion highlight the more active approach by China and Russia in the region. As the United States retreats, at least temporarily, China appears to be filling the gap, which some see as potentially creating a new hierarchical Sino-centric order.

Through their efforts to define new rules, their deference to one another in regional conflicts in the neighborhood, and their parallel activities, China and Russia are providing a challenge to the US-led order in East Asia, though they are unlikely to succeed in replacing it in the short term.

Nonetheless, by calling attention to the common values, interests, rules, and practices that bring China and Russia together, the English School helps us to understand the underlying framework for their interaction. Analyses that focus on the balance of power or the balance sheet in the relationship overlook the normative dimension. While China and Russia are creating a pluralist order, the most limited arrangement as defined by Hurrell, they have been working in parallel to create a political basis for a new order for East Asia in the future, though not one that is immediately capable of challenging long-held US positions.

Such an order is unlikely for a number of reasons. Russia is likely to chafe at a new hierarchical order that has China at the top and Russia playing the role of junior partner. Moreover, it is unclear that East Asian states would accept Russia as cofounder

of any new East Asian order, even if the Russian Far East were more integrated within the regional economy and Russian diplomacy became more active in the region. Bull notes that a common culture or civilization is typically a common feature of a society of states (2002, 15). Xi Jinping has certainly echoed this perspective with his comments on Asia for Asians. Russia, for its part, has sought to rebalance its foreign policy but not necessarily to recreate itself as an Asian state. On the contrary, it is toward Europe that Russia has always gravitated, but legitimacy as a player in East Asia is needed for Russian global ambitions.

Great power management plays out differently in East Asia than in other parts of the world as ASEAN, though made up of small states, has managed to carve out a role as gatekeeper. Accordingly, the United States has been afforded certain prerogatives, especially in the security sphere, but only as long as it has appeared to abide by ASEAN norms. This meant that the United States had to sign the Amity Treaty before becoming a member of the East Asian Summit (Buzan and Zhang 2016, 210). The United States is still an outside power, however, and it remains to be seen how vigorously ASEAN will make sure that China follows local rules. Nonetheless, concern in the region about China's maritime claims and underlying mistrust about its intentions in regional economic projects will serve to limit its ability to challenge the US-led order, even as the Trump administration has retreated from it.

## Notes

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1. For the full text of the 1997 Sino-Russian Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World, see United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (1997).

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