

Russian-Chinese Interaction in the Context of the One Belt – One Road Initiative: Discourse Analysis

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Received June 26, 2019

Abstract—This article examines the attitude of the Russian society toward the Russian-Chinese relations in general and toward the One Belt – One Road (OBOR) megaproject in particular. An analysis is made of the Russian scientific, official and expert discourse, based on methods of critical geopolitics, as well as investigating the grass-roots ideas concerning China and the OBOR Initiative. It is found that expert discourse is dominated by negative and neutral analytical publications, whereas official discourse and grass-root ideas have a clearly positive connotation, although occasionally with some wariness. The critical nature of expert discourse in respect of China reflects distrust Chinese politics from Russian specialists, associated with the lack of comparability of the demographic and economic potentials of the two countries and the ambitions of the Chinese leadership. It is established that in foreign scientific circles, the Russian strategy of the “turn to the East” is perceived skeptically. The authors do not believe in a real possibility that Chinese and Russian projects can be reconciled in the implementation of the strategic interests of the Russian Federation, referring to the different interests of the two countries. It is noted that the fears of unequal competition are encouraged by the approach of the Chinese side approach to joint projects focused primarily on the needs of China, as well as by the obvious difference in the interests of the two States. The main obstacle to a further development of bilateral cooperation is a credibility gap on either side of the Russian-Chinese border. Field studies in the Russian-Chinese borderland in Zabaikalskii krai confirmed this conclusion, showing that at the regional and local level the Russian-Chinese relations are sharply asymmetric.

DOI: 10.1134/S1875372819040024

Keywords: China, Russia, Russian-Chinese relations, discourse, border regions, public opinion.

INTRODUCTION

A cooldown in relations of Russia with western countries that emerged as early as the latter half of the 2000s and became dramatically more acute after Crimea’s reunification with Russia and as a result of the crisis in Ukraine required a strengthening of the eastward vector in Russia’s foreign policy. The need for the expansion of the ties of Russia with countries of the Asia-Pacific Region (APR) is dictated by objective reasons: by their dynamical development, the need for the structural transformation of the economy of the Far East and Siberia, and by the advantages of exploiting and exporting their rich natural resources required by neighboring States. Furthermore, the “pivot to the East” is consistent with a fundamental orientation of Russia’s foreign policy focusing on the creation of the multipolar geopolitical order and on the prevention of the hegemony of any one country or a group of countries.

Of particular significance in this context is the strategic interaction with China with which Russia has one of the world’s longest land borders, interfacing the integration projects in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the strategic Chinese “One Belt – One Road” (OBOR) Initiative that combined the “Silk Road Economic Belt” (SREB) project and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” Project.

An accelerated development of the trade and economic relations with China is characteristic for most of post-Soviet countries. This trend also applies for “One Belt – One Road” Megaproject [1]. In a narrow sense, the idea of China to restore the historical “Silk Road” signifies the creation of modern transport-logistic corridors of latitudinal extent connecting all regions of the country with the markets of Eurasia which is characterized by the fact that the more advanced countries and their regions are located

in the oceanic coastal zones and the less advanced countries are concentrated in deeper, inland parts. In a broad sense, this idea implies the establishment of some type of Eurasian partnership of countries with economic leadership of China [2]. In this context, the partner countries, while sharing the idea of OBOR, have to subordinate, in a certain sense, their national development to the interests of the PRC, for the reason alone that its economic power is dramatically larger.

THE INFORMATION BASE AND METHODS

The objective of this paper is to study, on the basis of discourse analysis, the attitude of the Russian society to China and to the “One Belt – One Road” Megaproject. Drawing on the approaches of critical geopolitics, we analyzed Russia’s scientific (academic) official political and expert discourse concerning China’s OBOR Initiative.

Academic discourse has been summarized by analyzing national and foreign scientific publications on the place of Russia in the Chinese strategy. For studying official political discourse we made use of more than 300 official documents: speeches, presentations, interviews with Russian leaders and information on their meetings with Chinese leaders posted on Russian President’s website (www.kremlin.ru) and on the website maintained by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of RF (www.mid.ru) since 2012 (the period preceding the official announcement of the Initiative) through 2017.

The information base used in the analysis of Russian expert discourse consisted of publications in “*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*” (NG) (1800 articles devoted to China, for the period from 2012 to 2017). NG was selected as being a daily “high quality”, or “intellectual” newspaper paying a great deal of attention to foreign policy and representing a broad spectrum of opinions. It serves as a forum for testing new political ideas which become topics of public debate and discussion of major political events. The editorial policy is largely liberal in character but, on a regular basis, the newspaper publishes authors of a different political orientation, including those who expresses the official position. In addition to analyzing the publications in NG, discourse was examined in a further three newspapers: “*Zavtra*” that represents the “national-patriotic part” of the political spectrum; “*Novaya Gazeta*” that expresses the views of today’s Russian “Westerners”, and “*Sovetskaya Rossiya*” that is known as the unofficial edition of the Communist Party of RF. Comparison of different discourses

has given us an insight into the position of the main political forces with respect to China and the prospects of the Russian-Chinese relations. We have analyzed the correspondence of political and expert discourse with a public perception of China according to public opinion polls conducted by ANO “Levada-Center” and the “Public Opinion” Foundation (POF). The discourse analysis was complemented by field investigations in a section of the Russia-China border in Zabaikalskii krai where in 2018 these authors conducted a series of focus groups and interviews with representatives of authorities, experts, business people, public figures, employees and workers of the budgetary sphere.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Academic discourse. The flow of national and foreign scientific publications on the place of Russia in the OBOR Megaproject can be subdivided into two parts. One group of authors are very critical of the prospects of strategic cooperation between Russia and China, including in the implementation of the OBOR Initiative. Their rationale is based on the ever increasing (because of the dramatic differences in the growth rates) incomparability of the economic potential of the two countries [3], a slow progress in the implementation of the “pivot to the East” strategy of Russia, and the weakness of the economy of Eastern Siberia and the Far East [4]. The authors sharing such views also explain their skepticism by the unfavorable prospects of development of the Russian economy in connection with its gearing to raw materials, the escalating sanctions, and by the involvement of the country in intractable international conflicts [5]. Many Russian as well as foreign authors emphasize that, as regards the relations with China, Russia is objectively destined to play the role of a younger partner and, therefore, the Russians fear the Chinese economic and demographic expansion [5–7]. According to the “skeptics”, objectively, Russia has been and is a European country because, in spite of a dramatic worsening of its relations with the West, its economic ties are, as before, strongly oriented mostly to Europe [8]. Additional justification for this is also provided by the cultural benchmarks: Russia is a country of European culture, whereas Siberia and the Far East have been and are perceived by many Russians as a resource colony [9]. Some authors have cast doubt on the implementation of the particular projects discussed in the light of the OBOR Initiative, including on the creation of new transport corridors on the Russian territory because of the unacceptable conditions for the participation of the Chinese side in

large-scale construction projects and its unwillingness to compromise [10]. Emphasis is placed on significant divergences of the interests of the two countries in Central Asia and in other regions to play an important role in the OBOR Project, which would lead to conflicts [11]. And, finally, some authors assess the Chinese Initiative with extreme rigidity by considering it as the instrument of implementation of China's global ambitions cloaked in the attractive rhetorical language [12]. In their opinion, China, by granting tied credits and signing inequitable agreements, tries to put under its economic control the sources of fuel and raw materials which it needs, assure the external sales markets, impose on neighboring countries its advantageous specialization, relocate ecologically "dirty" production facilities beyond its territory, preserve jobs through implementation of projects abroad by Chinese workers and specialists, etc. [13].

On the contrary, the second group of authors, including leading specialists in China, despite the reservations, advocate the need for an active involvement of Russia in the realization of the idea of interfacing the EAEU and OBOR integration projects [14, 15]. In this, they see a possibility of reviving the economy of Siberia and the Far East, a stimulus for a further development of communications and a fuller and efficient exploitation of the potentialities of transit as well as the driving force for the transformation of the system of international economic and political relations and the basis for formation of a multipolar world. Scientists appeal to the interest of China (given the current geopolitical situation) in cooperation with Russia, to the common economic and political interests of the two countries, including the provision for regional security and withstanding external pressure. There have been increasing statements concerning the need to integrate Russia into the new Silk Road. If the existing balance of world forces cannot be changed, then it would be appropriate to at least take advantage of the window of opportunity. According to some scientific experts, the interfacing of the two integration projects is considered in Russia only as the first stage toward the creation of Great Eurasian Economic Partnership which must become the accelerator of economic progress on the continent and strengthen the international position of Russia. The standpoint of this group of authors is in line with the official position of authorities [16].

Political discourse. Official discourse is characterized by an exceptionally high appraisal of today's relations with China. It is emphasized that they are based on the principles of mutual respect,

equality, non-interference in the internal affairs and commonality of strategic interests as well as relying on the multilateral contractual-legal basis. China is represented as the main partner of Russia in the APR. In this context, the OBOR Initiative that appeared in NG discourse in October 2013 was perceived with a high degree of apprehension because, first, the place of Russia in it was not indicated. Second, at the official level there was no mention of the relationship of the new project with Eurasian integration. Initially, the official mass media of China opposed each other the plans for the creation of the Silk Road and the EAEU project. It was not until 2015 that the leaders of the two countries announced the possible ways of interfacing the SREB and the emerging EAEU.

Later, a deepening of integration in the transport sphere was announced to be achieved through modernization of the existing routes between the Pacific coast of the two countries and European centers as well as by creating new transport corridors, including the high-speed railroad from Moscow to Kazan and further to the east. Important areas of implementation of cooperative projects included, in particular, trilateral cooperation with Mongolia, cooperation in the Russian Far East, and cross-border interactions. At the highest level the interest of the Russian side was announced in the diversification of exports from Russia to China through machine-engineering and other products with high added value as well as agricultural goods. The Russian side did not conceal the hope for the inflow of Chinese investments in the country's eastern regions.

On the other hand, the motives of official discourse at a lower level were the difficulties in filling the frame agreements with realistic economic content, and a diversity of political statements from practical interactions. There was some dissatisfaction with the modest size of Chinese investments in the cross-border regions of Russia and in this country as a whole, slow changes in the trade structure, a lack of readiness of the Chinese side to make compromises, and with the continuing restrictions from the Chinese side (on imports or Russian agricultural produce, for example) [17]. And the officials also recognized a shortage of the potential of economic cooperation from the Russian side, including the objective factors presenting obstacles to the "upclassing" of exports [18]. In addition, there was recognition of a lack of proper confidence between the parties which prevented the formation of a favorable business climate, and of a "shade of leniency" in the attitude of Russians to China having nothing to do with today's level of development of China.

Expert discourse. The PRC as the State with the world's first economy in terms of scale is a very important newsmaker in the Russian media space: during five years (2012–2017) the number of publications in NG devoted to China increased from 2 to 400 articles per year. Most articles in NG consider China not so much as a neighbor and a partner but rather as one of the key international players. The news flow is dominated by subjects on economic and foreign-policy issues; the domestic affairs of China also generate considerable interest: 40% of publications were devoted to them in 2012 (Fig. 1).

A surge in the number of articles in 2012–2013 was associated with the delegation of power and with the new leader. Such a number of publications in the Russian information field devoted precisely to the country itself and to its domestic affairs can only compare with the USA. And the Russian-Chinese relations did not occupy a central position in discourse. The share of relevant publications became relatively noticeable in 2014 only (32% of articles), which was due to the signing of the gas contract (see Fig. 1). The articles dealing with the other subjects (sports, culture and religion, the social sphere, science and education, emergency situations and natural disasters) constitute only an insignificant part of the information flow (no more than 4–5%) (Fig. 2). Very few publications are devoted to Chinese culture, which reflects a marked cultural distance between the two countries. Chinese culture is much

less known to the Russian reader, which is confirmed by FOM polling data, according to which 57% of the Russians think that the culture, lifestyle and values of the Chinese and Russians differ greatly [19].

The focus on the increasing significance of China as a new superpower obscures the country's internal diversity: almost always the case in point if the country in general, and only rarely are separate provinces mentioned: Heilongjiang and Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as well as the cities in the border region with Russia: Manchuria, Heihe and Suifenhe.

Expert discourse on China in NG is distinguished by high criticality and a predominance of a certain alarmism. Its tone corresponds with the conclusions drawn by the authors of scientific articles of the first group (“skeptics”). By 2016–2017, there was an increase in the share of publications devoted to the arms build-up programs, an increase in military spending, including the strengthening of the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA), military exercises, conflicts, and espionage.

Furthermore, NG discourse is characterized by caution and indication of pitfalls in the Russian-Chinese relations. Most articles are dominated by the idea that the focus of the Chinese policy is on safeguarding its interests and deepening its dominance in the region [20]. The share of negative and critical publications is high; this is especially true for the years 2012 and 2016 (Fig. 3). In spite of a frank admiration of the achievements of China in the economy and

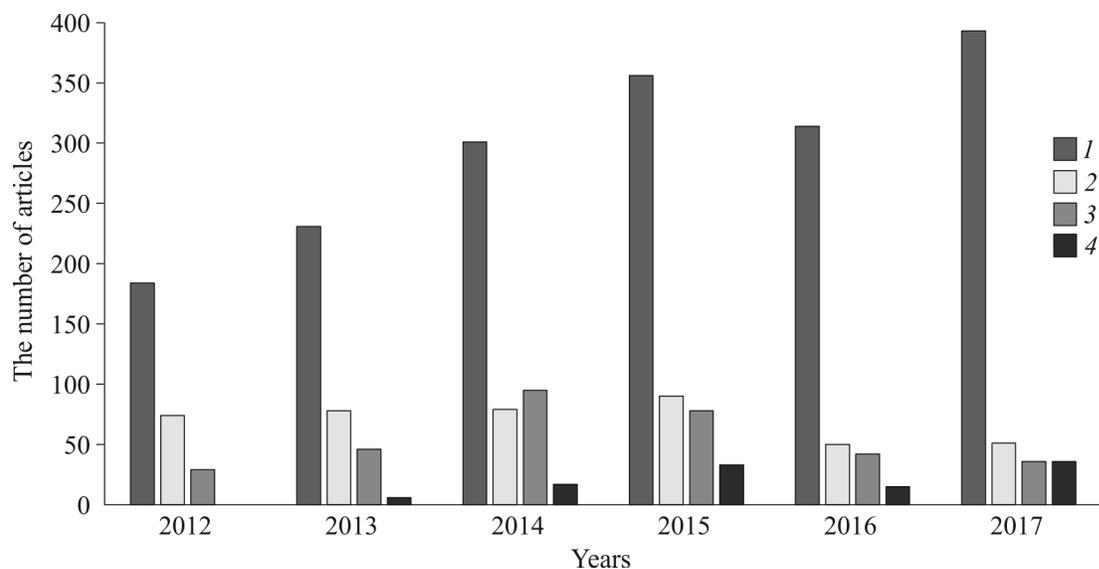


Fig. 1. Relationship of the articles in “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” devoted to China.

Articles: 1 – everything about China, 2 – on the internal affairs of China, 3 – on the Russian-Chinese relations, 4 – on the OBOR Initiative.

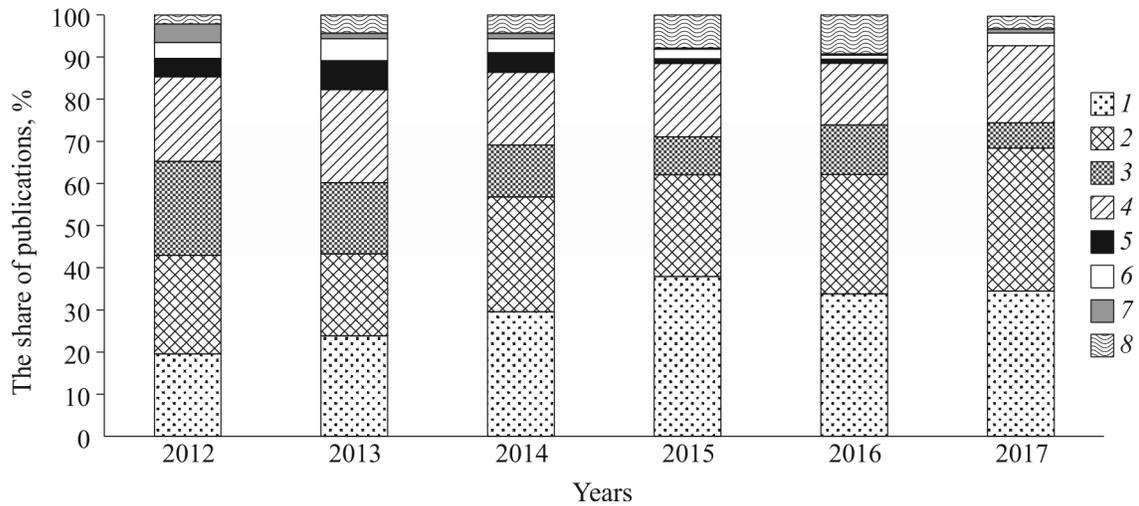


Fig. 2. Thematic structure of publications in “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” devoted to China.

Topics: 1 – economy, 2 – internal policy, 3 – external policy, 4 – security, conflicts, 5 – emergencies, 6 – social sphere, 7 – science, education, 8 – culture, religion, sports, спорт.

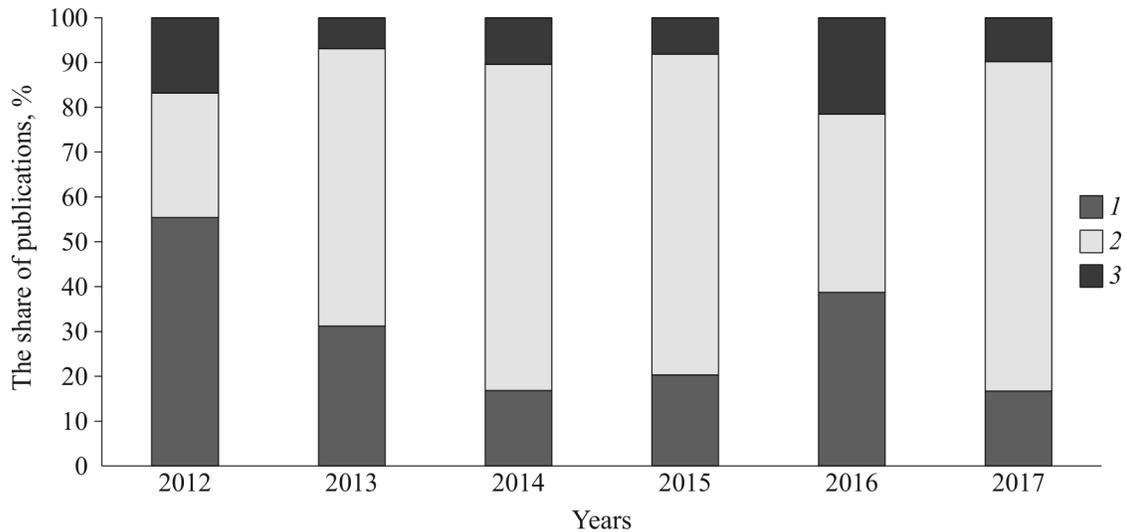


Fig. 3. Character of publications in “Nezavisimaya Gazeta” devoted to China.

Character of publications: 1 – negative, 2 – neutral, 3 – positive.

social policy, a clear concern is expressed about the economic expansion of Beijing [21]. The actions of the Chinese side are usually examined through the lens of a typical policy of China: the economic expansion, and access to resources and markets [22].

The articles devoted to the OBOR Project make up no more than 10% (see Fig. 1). The period 2015–2016 was dominated by a positive rhetoric: the new Silk Road projects were treated as useful and important for Russia contributing to a further development of economic relations between countries of the APR and EAEU [23]. A next surge in the number of

publications on OBOR in 2017 was caused by the analysis of the first results of the Initiative which fell short of the expectations. Expert discourse began to be dominated by analytical publications but the number of negative and neutral publications exceeded the number of positive ones. And caution, distrust and fear of unequal competition became a general background. Mention was made of a minimal effect from OBOR for the Russian economy, the paucity of information on the particular economic projects, and a low proportion (1.6%) of the transit of Chinese cargo across the territory of Russia. According to some

experts, the agreement on interfacing the projects of SREB and EAEU for Russia is more likely a shotgun marriage than the result from analyzing the actual compatibility of the two projects [24].

Unlike centric discourse of NG, “left” discourse on the OBOR Initiative in the mirror of publications in “Sovetskaya Rossiya” has a relatively neutral character. On the one hand, the attitude of the CPRF to the project is determined by its focus against world domination of the American superpower. In this context, the initiative of China as the State that has challenged the political, economic and cultural-ideological hegemony of the USA receives support from communists [25]. On the other hand, the newspaper discusses widely the contradictory features of the Megaproject associated with risks preventing implementation of the Chinese infrastructure projects and with doubts as to their actual profits for local residents [26].

National-patriotic discourse as provided by the “Zavtra” newspaper is most critical in character. It is pointed out that the Chinese doctrine gives unenviable secondary status of the source and transiter of raw materials [27]. It is emphasized that the Russian interests in the OBOR Project are ignored, which is explained by the uncertainty of the Chinese political elites regarding the stability of Russia as the transit territory [28].

In right-wing, liberal discourse as reflected in “Novaya Gazeta”, the attitude of China to Russia is presented solely in the context of the economic expansion and aggressive foreign policy of Beijing. The pragmatism of the Chinese partners is treated as a major impediment to an intensification of cooperation between the two countries [29]. Moreover, the authors of the newspaper very skeptically appraise the prospects for the “pivot to the East” which is examined through the lens of prudence and calculating nature of the Chinese investors [30].

The attitude to cooperation with China in the Russian border regions was reflected in the results of focus groups conducted by these authors in summer 2018 in the settlement of Zabaikalsk, and in expert interviews with representatives of administrations and specialists of Zabaikalskii krai and the neighboring city of Manchuria (Inner Mongolia). At the regional level there are clearly pronounced contradictions in the Russian-Chinese relations, primarily their asymmetry. The respondents fear the persistence of the role of the Russian regions as the raw-material appendage of neighboring Chinese provinces. In Zabaikalskii krai, for example, Chinese investments in the timber

industry, agriculture and tourism are subordinated to the interests of the Chinese side and yield a minor effect for the Russian economy. Trans-border movements of financial resources are not transparent, because Chinese banks and contractors are used and Russian entrepreneurs are almost not admitted to these closed systems. Experts make mention of the tough conditions of the Chinese side at the time of discussing projects and the necessity of taking on tied credits, in which case most of the work is done by Chinese contractors. The Chinese, in turn, complained of the slowness of the process of taking decisions by the Russian side. Agreements signed at a high level are of a framework nature, and most of them are not filled with any realistic content. The border infrastructure and a part of communications on the Russian side are obsolete, although electrification was completed and the second track was commissioned on the Karymskaya – Zabaikalsk line leading to the border from Transsib where the container terminal was constructed. Zabaikalsk still remains a precarious settlement with broken streets, which is in stark contrast with the fast-growing Manchuria of 300 thousand inhabitants.

Chinese authorities attach great importance to the border as a showcase of a rich and mighty nation. The cyclopean entrance gate to China, the crossing point clad in radiant marble and crystal, the giant pagodas, and other monuments and symbolic structure emphasize the greatness and size of the country. The city of Manchuria has grown considerably due to processing of round wood and sawlogs, the distribution of liquid gas from Russia and the annual influx of more than five million tourists from the inland provinces. Visitors to Manchuria are attracted mainly by Russian exoticism: the park of giant Matryoshka dolls, the Museum of History and Culture of Russia, shops and marketplaces of Russian food commodities, restaurants of Russian cuisine, etc. Hence, rent money from the border location remains on the Chinese side. Because of the extreme paucity of the material base of tourism in Zabaikalskii krai, less than 40 thousand citizens of China cross the Russian border every year.

The residents of not too wealthy Zabaikalskii krai are aware of the dominance of their neighbor and perceive China as a more fortunate country. The symbolic objects clearly announce the intentions of the neighboring State. The view from the Chinese side of the border leaves no doubt about the supremacy of the PRC.

Nevertheless, the difference in scales in good-neighborly relations would not necessarily create obstacles to cooperation. The theme of the “Chinese

threat” was actualized in a regional center (Chita) but it is of secondary importance at a local level. It arose only when the general issues concerning the characteristic features of border security was discussed. None of the participants of the focus groups believed in the possibility for some aggressive actions of the other side and, as the risks, they indicated contraband and shadow trade. The main instrument for border protection in this case would be the stability of political relations rather than military force.

A cautious attitude of experts is not shared not only by the residents of the Russian-Chinese border region but also by most of Russia’s population. More likely the mass views of China and the Russian-Chinese relations correspond with official political discourse, because they are shaped under the influence of news programs of central TV channels broadcasting the official standpoints of the political elite. Therefore, the attitude to China and its image are constantly improving in public opinion. While in 2003, according to data of Levada-Center, only 9% of the interviewees thought that it was necessary to strengthen the relations with China, the percentage became 46% in December 2014. In 2017, 40% of the respondents placed China among the five countries – close friends and allies of RF [31]. These data are also confirmed by the opinion polls of the POF, according to which China heads the list of countries and cooperation with them is of utmost importance for the Russian economy. In 2018, 62% of the respondents thought that China was a friendly State as to Russia [32]. Such a positive picture is the key to an improvement on the situation and opens up the possibilities for increasing the confidence in the bilateral relations.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the ways to implement the OBOR Initiative are far from clear, in neighboring countries it causes excessive expectations as well as giving rise to concerns. The OBOR is for Russia an institutional and discourse challenge which would determine the ways of interfacing the interests of the two countries, including in the border region. The enhancement in the Russian-Chinese relations at the interstate level is inadequately reinforced by interactions at the regional and local levels. The prospects for coordination of the OBOR Initiative with integration into the EAEU still remain unclear because of the difference in the interests and guidance of development of the main participants. The EAEU countries seek to move away from their dependence on raw materials sectors and switch over to the innovation and digital economy.

China, on the contrary, is interested in providing its economy with resource-, energy- and environment-intensive products of first-level processing and in wide access to its goods in domestic markets of the EAEU countries. The expectations of the Russian side about the implementation of the particular projects are not being met. In the opinion of the expert community, the process has stalled at the level of intentions and polite gestures and has detached itself from practical ground.

Analysis of political, scientific and expert discourses on the development of the Russian-Chinese relations was instrumental in assessing the views of the Russian politicum concerning the prospects for the implementation of the OBOR Initiative. An exceptionally high appraisal of the relations with China at the official level combines with a high criticality of expert (and a significant part of scientific) discourse and the skeptical tone of opposition discourse. The nature of expert discourse reflects the fears of unequal competition associated with the incomparability of the demographic and economic potential of the two countries and with increasingly clearly pronounced ambitions of China’s leadership striving to become a worldwide leader.

Experts often see in the OBOR Megaproject a rhetorically hidden instrument for the realization of the global ambitions of China’s leadership, the aspirations to put under their control the sources of fuel and raw materials needed by China and supply its products to external markets as well as imposing a profitable (for China) specialization on neighboring countries. Concerns of unequal competition are being fueled by a tough approach of the Chinese side to cooperative projects with a primary focus on the needs of China as well as by an obvious difference in the interest of the two States. On either side of the Russian-Chinese border there is some deficit of political confidence which impedes a further deepening of cooperation.

The cautious views of the elite are in contrast with positive mass discourse and a positive attitude to China expressed by the population living in the border regions. Therefore, in spite of a predominantly negative background in expert discourse, the year 2017 saw an enhancement in understanding of the need for cooperation and participation in the OBOR Initiative. Progress in the development of bilateral cooperation can only be facilitated by taking into account the mutual interests, seeking compromises, sharing responsibility, introducing a clearly defined system of rules based on existing institutes, and increasing transparency and publicity of the policy pursued.

This work was done with the financial support from the Russian Geographical Society and the Russian Foundation for Basic Research (24/2018/RGO-RFFI); the research was done within the framework of the budgetary topic “Problems and prospects of territorial development of Russia in conditions of its unevenness and global instability” (0148-2019-0008, AAAA-A19-119022190170-1) as well as by using funds of a subsidy appropriated for implementation of the Program of improving competitiveness of Emmanuel Kant Baltic Federal University.

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