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To cite this article: Vladimir Kolosov & Maria Zotova (2021): The 'Pivot to the East' and China in Russian Discourse, *Geopolitics*, DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2021.1952184](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1952184)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1952184>



Published online: 20 Jul 2021.



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# The 'Pivot to the East' and China in Russian Discourse

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## ABSTRACT

Using the approaches of critical geopolitics, the authors compare Russian official, expert and media discourses on Russian-Chinese relations and China including such issues as its domestic and foreign policies, its role in the world, economic development and military potential. To study the official political discourse, more than 300 official documents were collected, including speeches, presentations and interviews by Russian leaders from 2012 to 2019. The screening of the *Vesti* news programme at the "Russia-1" state federal TV channel served a basis for the media discourse analysis. A scrutiny of about 2,900 articles on China and Russian-Chinese relations found in course of screening of 2012–2019 issues of the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, a daily federal "intellectual" newspaper destined to highly educated audience that pays much attention to foreign policy, was selected as a source of information on the expert discourse. The authors conclude that there is a clear gap between the official and expert discourse on China. While most of the participants agree that there is no alternative to a partnership with the great eastern neighbour, many experts express their concerns about the growing asymmetry in the two countries' potential. This difference arises from the lack of confidence at the grassroots level as well as from the fact that some Russian partners seek to excuse their failures by blaming them on China's unwillingness to compromise. In conclusion the authors consider the influence that different discourses have on Russian public opinion using the results of national surveys and focus groups. They show that part of the elite itself, accustomed to certain doubts about the possibility of strategic cooperation with China, reproduces a sceptical attitude towards the Chinese partners.

## Introduction

In the late 2000s, the relations between Russia and Western countries began to cool down. The geopolitical crisis of 2014, caused by the events in Ukraine, the joining of Crimea to Russia and the war in the Donbass, led to a new sharp deterioration in relations, sanctions and Russian counter-sanctions. These events accelerated Russian "pivot to the East", which began in the second half of the 2000s and reflected the need to diversify the country's external

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sources of development. In this context, the strategic interaction with China, with which Russia shares one of the longest land borders in the world, becomes of particular importance. It means primarily an attempt to use the relations with China for economic modernisation, attracting new direct foreign investments, accelerating structural changes in the economy of the Far East and Eastern Siberia, benefiting from exporting the country's rich natural resources to the vast Chinese market. In addition, the "pivot to the East" is in line with Russia's foreign policy's fundamental drive to create a multipolar geopolitical order and to prevent the hegemony of any single country or a group of countries.

This trend is in line with the China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Vardomskiy 2018). Russia promoted the idea of the conjugation of integration processes in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the BRI.

Relations with China are subject of many speeches and interviews of the President and other Russian officials. Events in a neighbouring country are constantly in the spotlight of federal TV channels and other media. Interactions with a great neighbour, which are of paramount importance for Russia, are widely discussed in the expert community. The aggravation of relations between China and the United States under President Trump has become an additional incentive for discussions about the future world geopolitical order and Russia's place in it. Despite the course on long-term strategic cooperation with China firmly declared in the official discourse, the expert community is by no means unanimous in assessing the success of the "pivot to the East".

The objective of this paper is three-fold: first, to compare the Russian official political discourse about relations with China with the expert one in the context of the declared "pivot to the east"; secondly, to analyse the ways of broadcasting 'high geopolitics' to a mass audience; thirdly, to compare the views on China and Russian-Chinese relations in the official, expert and media discourses with public opinion.

The authors start with a brief theoretical background, the description of the methods and the sources of information. In the following sections they consecutively consider the official, expert and media discourses about China. In the last section, the results of the recent sociological studies regarding China and Russian-Chinese relations are summarised.

## **Methods and Data**

The paper is based on the concept of critical geopolitics. According to this concept emerged in the early 1990s, the global political space is constructed in the process of political discourse shaped by political and social institutions – political parties and their leaders, experts and ideological movements, academia and observers from leading media (Dalby 1990; O'Tuathail and Agnew

1992). Later not only the texts themselves (speeches, interviews and statements by political leaders, and various publications) but also a wide range of audio-visual information was used in discourse analysis. It included fiction, advertising, comics, movies, cartoons, etc., producing and disseminating sets of myths and stereotypical geopolitical representations (Berg and Saima 2000; Carter and Dodds 2011; Dodds and Pinkerton 2009; Sharp 2000). The concept of the world geopolitical vision, a normative mental political map of the world has been developed (Dijkink 1996). Social representations about the countries of the world, their place in the global economy and politics are an integral element of the world geopolitical vision.

A world geopolitical vision is a product of national history and culture, a synthesis of views professed by various strata of the political elite, academic experts, creative intelligentsia and public opinion in general. As a result, a specific geopolitical culture arises – a set of traditions of the country's interaction with the outside world, including dichotomous markers of political space – such as *East – West, backward – developed, ours – alien*. However, the media, and especially television, play a key role in the ongoing transformation of “low” geopolitics (Dittmer 2010).

In course of political discourse, social representations are created about countries and political forces associated with the regions in which they operate, the ideas about external threats to national security, allies and rivals, the advantages and shortcomings of foreign policy strategies. A system of such representations is called popular or “low” geopolitics. An analysis of the relationship between “low” and “high” geopolitics (the concepts developed by political leaders and experts) are in the focus of critical geopolitics.

The success of political leaders depends on the ability to convince citizens of the correctness of their geopolitical vision of the world and the accuracy of the foreign policy strategy based on it, to “translate” the concepts they profess into a language understandable to the *uomo qualunque* (the ordinary man). These tasks are becoming more complex and with the growth of individualism, the spread of Internet and social networks require more consideration of the increasingly complex social structure of society.

At the same time, control over telecommunications and in particular the main television channels made it easier for the authorities to manipulate public opinion, made the citizens' views and preferences extremely volatile. The inability of the majority of the population to navigate the complex problems of world politics makes public opinion highly susceptible to the dominant (usually official) discourse. In Russia, no more than 15% of the population shows an active interest in events abroad (Garusova 2012; Volkov 2016). The majority of citizens share simplistic, stereotypical ideas about the world economy and international relations. These representations are mainly formed by federal television channels controlled by the authorities, directly or indirectly. For 74% of Russian citizens, television remains the main source of

information, although the role of Internet sources and social networks is growing (Volkov and Goncharov 2017, 2020).

The mass media addressing a wide audience form in public opinion a world geopolitical vision comfortable for most citizens. In Russia, it is based, firstly, on the idea that the country is regaining its historical status of a great power and is playing one of the most important roles on the world political scene. As sociological polls show, the self-association with a large and influential country gives an ordinary person a sense of his/her importance, makes him/her close his/her eyes to the problems in the domestic life (Volkov 2016). Secondly, in the media controlled by the authorities, Russia is pictured as a powerful force advocating peace, justice, observance of international law and non-interference in the internal affairs of sovereign states.

There are certain constants in the political discourse of many countries – stable ideas about threats to national security, “natural” or desirable allies, big players or neighbours. For instance, in Finland these are ideas about Russia. In the Finnish media the discourse about the southern neighbour was based on the presumption of negative, if not outright hostile, attitude of their audience towards Russia. Focusing on the real and perceived views of citizens, the media adhered to the appropriate tone of publications about Russia. As a result, a priori negative perceptions based on the historical experience and its interpretation were reproduced in public opinion from generation to generation. These views also took root in the minds of the elite, which itself is a natural product of its time and, in turn, reproduces the traditional political discourse and the politics corresponding to it (Laine 2014). Collective views and beliefs that have long been formed in certain historical circumstances are perceived as natural and self-evident.

In Russia, anti-American sentiments of the elite, which are constantly reproduced in political discourse, and the mass perceptions coincide to a large extent. Throughout the post-Soviet period, the United States has led the list of countries that Russian citizens consider hostile to Russia. The share of respondents who believe that the United States is a hostile country has not dropped below 23% since 2005, and in 2014–2019 ranged from 67 to 78% (Public Opinion 2019 2020). Such perceptions cannot be explained solely by propaganda. Political discourse uses stereotypes that already exist in the minds of both elites and the population. In their view, Russia appears as the only country that has openly challenged the United States, the main obstacle to American world domination, a stronghold of fundamental moral values. This vision of the confrontation with the United States serves as a means of self-assertion, an embodiment of a high national mission and a justification of unfavourable trends in the economy and decreasing real incomes of the population. Ultimately, such vision is intended to contribute to the legitimacy of the authorities (Volkov 2016). Thus, even in countries where the most influential media (television) are controlled by the state, the relationship

between “high” and “low” geopolitics is not as obviously asymmetric as it might seem at first glance. The main features of the world geopolitical vision have a noticeable inertia, which, in turn, affects the “high” geopolitics – the aggregate position of the political elite.

Any discourse unfolds in a specific political and social context. One can distinguish between a *proximate context*, that is, circumstances, types and characteristics of interactions to which the discourse belongs, and *distal context* – the social characteristics of the initiators and participants of the discourse (Müller 2010). The *contemporary proximate context* has a decisive influence on the discourse about foreign countries – the partners’ interest in political cooperation, the nature and correspondence of economic relations to the subjectively perceived interests of various actors, the personal experience of citizens, etc. However, of considerable importance, especially for the discourse about neighbouring countries, is also the *proximate context of the past* – a collective historical experience that usually combines the memory of both periods of good-neighbourliness and peaceful development and of acute conflicts (Zabiyako, Kobyzov, and Ponkratova 2009).

In the centuries-old history of Russian-Chinese relations, the stages of cooperation in the development of the Far East<sup>1</sup> and the construction of the Sino-Eastern Railway, close interactions during the years of emigration of Russians after the 1917 revolution, massive economic aid from the Soviet Union to communist China, and the rapid development of small border trade in the 1990–2000 alternated with the periods of sharp conflicts and tensions. Among them are the Russian-Chinese clashes in 1900 and especially the period of political and military confrontation in the 1960s–1980s. At that time, the Soviet Union took the Chinese military threat very seriously: along the border, numerous military units were deployed and fortified areas were built. This period left a significant mark both in the public consciousness and in the perception of the neighbour by the intellectual elite, which is partially reflected in political discourse.

A country’s foreign policy is influenced not only by the dominant (official) discourse, but also by alternative discourses developed by opposition or social groups, including gender (Pickering 2017) or regional (see, for instance, O’Loughlin, Tuathail, and Kolosov 2006). In a pluralistic society, ‘high geopolitics’ is formed by several scripts of each story – the ways of its presentation and mediatisation (Müller 2008; O’Tuathail 2010). Both the official and alternative discourses are significantly influenced by the expert discourse, which involves professionals – specialists in international relations and the world economy, working in universities and research institutions, including “independent” think tanks sponsored by various foundations, prominent journalists. Expert discourse as a part of “high geopolitics” is reflected and enacted through particular situated practices, among which are publications in so-called quality newspapers focused on a highly educated audience and decision-

makers. In Russia, the initiators and participants of the expert discourse are often leading researchers of the “regional institutes” of the Academy of Sciences (in case of China, the Institute of the Far East), the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), etc. Although, according to surveys of members of the Russian elite, the influence of the expert community on the formation of Russian foreign policy is relatively limited and, moreover, has recently decreased (Kaczmarska 2018; Petrov and Gel'man 2019), channels for leading experts to influence international relations undoubtedly exist. This is evidenced, for example, by the activities of the Council on Foreign and Defence Policy, a non-governmental organisation that brings together academic experts, public figures, entrepreneurs, journalists, the majority of whose members actively advocate for the strengthening of strategic partnership with China. Since there are relatively few deep experts on this country, it seems that in the case of Russian-Chinese relations, such an influence is more noticeable.

Martin Müller noted that there was no shared understanding or established methodology of “doing a discourse analysis” (Müller 2010, 4). It includes three elements: a study of its initiators, the discourse itself and the practice of communication between its authors (Koch 2018). It is also important to evaluate the impact of a discourse on public opinion. As a rule, any discourse is considered against other discourses by the means of quantitative and qualitative assessments, including semantic methods (Boyle 2017; Laine and van der Velde 2017). A vivid example of a high semantic load of the language used in a discourse are the narratives on the *annexation* of the Crimea or its “*reunification*” with Russia.

Applying the methods developed in critical geopolitics, we compared the official and expert discourses as fundamental elements of “high geopolitics” with each other and with the discourse on the state TV “translating” the official discourse to the language of a wide audience and shaping its opinions revealed by mass surveys (“low geopolitics”). The image of China among the majority of the population is to an even greater extent than that of Western countries determined by television broadcasts (Zabiyako, Kobyzov, and Ponkratova 2009). We used some quantitative estimations in comparing the number of publications on China by year and qualitative assessments based on the screening of different sources and the content analysis. Then we studied the dynamics of the attitudes of Russian citizens to China revealed by mass surveys regularly conducted by three leading national sociological agencies and focus-groups held by the authors in a small town at the border with China.

To study the official political discourse (“high geopolitics”), more than 300 official documents were collected, including speeches, presentations, interviews by Russian leaders, news reports on their meetings with Chinese counterparts from the website of the President ([www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)) and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([www.mid.ru](http://www.mid.ru)) since 2012 (period before the announcement of the BRI and the “pivot to the east”) till 2019.

The information base for the analysis of the expert discourse is a result of the screening of the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta (NG)* in 2012–2019 (approximately 2,900 articles devoted to China). The *NG* was chosen to represent the expert discourse as a daily federal “intellectual” newspaper, paying much attention to external relations and representing a wide range of opinions. Most of the *NG* materials on China are analytical, as their authors are experts from academic institutes and universities of Moscow and other cities. The flow of expert publications on China can be divided into two parts. The first group of authors (“optimists”) not only supports the official position, considering the policy of rapprochement with China as uncontested, but even sometimes reproaches the leadership for insufficient activity in this direction. Another group of experts (“sceptics”), on the contrary, views the prospects for strategic cooperation between Russia and China much more critically. Of course, analytical materials are rarely unambiguously negative or positive, as they consider different arguments. Nevertheless, as a rule, the general tone is clear.

The media discourse analysis is based on the results of screening of the *Vesti* news programme at the “Russia-1” federal state TV channel for 2017–2019. This period was limited because a qualitative analysis of these scripts required reading of the entire array of 3500 pages. They were taken from the *Integrum* database.<sup>2</sup> The content and tone of international news reports on other federal channels, also controlled by the state, are not much different. The selected materials include all of those containing the words “China”, “PRC” and “Beijing”.

“Low geopolitics” was examined from the perspective of “social representations” of Russian citizens that were collected on the sites of three leading sociological agencies: Yuri Levada Analytical Centre, Public Opinion Foundation (FOM), Russian Public Opinion Research Center (VCIOM). An analysis of mass surveys was complemented by the data of a qualitative sociological survey (focus groups) conducted in 2018 in Zabaikalsk, a small town with located on the very border with China.

### **“High Geopolitics”. Official Discourse and “Optimistic” Expert Opinions**

The official discourse is characterised by an exceptionally high appreciation of relations with China. It views the current state of affairs as the best in the history. It emphasises that they are based on the principles of mutual respect, equality, non-interference in internal affairs and the commonality of strategic interests, as well as on the solid multilateral legal framework. It represents China as Russia’s main partner in the Asia-Pacific region. “*We have been interacting for centuries, and our historical ties and roots go very deep. It is not by chance that in recent decades, as neighbours, we have built a relationship that probably cannot be compared with anything in the world*”, Putin assessed Russian-Chinese relations in June 2018.<sup>3</sup> The President of Russia has



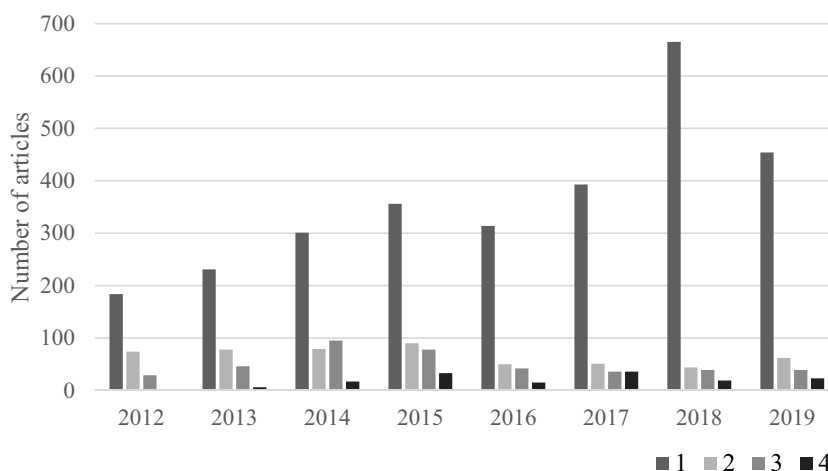
repeatedly noted the impressive dynamics of Russian-Chinese strategic partnership in all areas.

In 2015 the leaders of the two countries announced the possible integration of the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) projects. Later, V. Putin has repeatedly declared his support for the Chinese initiative: “... *Russia has not just supported the Belt and Road Initiative but will actively contribute to achieving it with our Chinese partners and the other concerned parties*”.<sup>4</sup>

He announced an intention to deepen integration in the transport sector by upgrading the existing transportation links between the Pacific coast of the two countries and major European cities and creating new transport corridors, including a high-speed railway between Moscow and Kazan and its further extension to the East. At the highest level, Russia has repeatedly expressed its interest in diversifying Russian exports to China with machinery and other high value-added products, as well as agricultural goods. Russia did not hide its hope for an influx of Chinese investment in the eastern regions of the country.

However, there a real conjunction of Eurasian integration and the BRI has not been reached so far. The inflow of Chinese investments remained insignificant, ambitious transport projects in Russia – mostly unfulfilled. The main obstacle for increasing the economic base of cooperation – the raw material nature of Russian exports and a weak complementarity of the economies – was not overcome (Ma 2017; Nosov 2020).

However, reflecting the initial hopes, the number of publications on China in the *NG* increased from two to six hundred a year in 2012–2019 (Figure 1). Most articles consider China not only as a neighbour and partner but also as

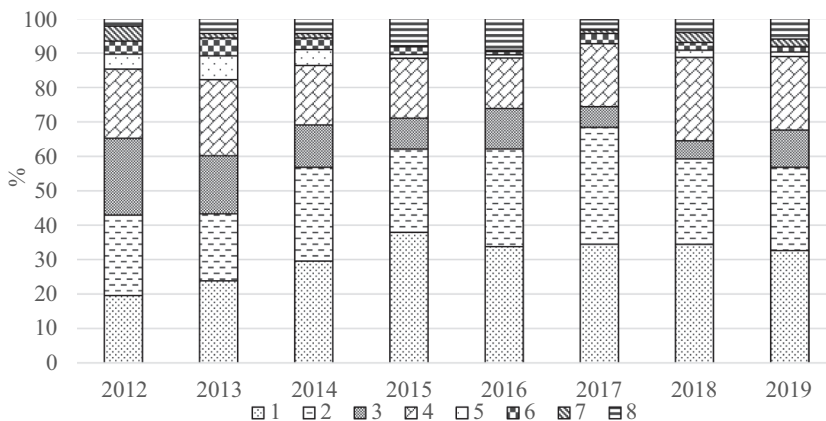


**Figure 1.** Proportion of articles on China, its internal life, Russian-Chinese relations and the BRI in the *NG* (1 – all articles on China, 2 – articles on China’s internal life, 3 – articles on Russian-Chinese relations, 4 – articles on the BRI). Source: data of the *NG*.

one of the major players in the international arena. The news flow is dominated by economic and foreign policy topics. However, the information on China's domestic affairs is also widely represented.

The share of publications on Russian-Chinese relations in *NG* as a mirror of the expert discourse was increasing and became particularly noticeable since 2014, when the “pivot to the east” was declared (32% of articles), partly due to the gas contract signing. The expert discourse in general is consistent with the political one in what objectives Russia is to achieve in its economic cooperation with China. The priorities are improving the country's export structure, 60% of which are hydrocarbons, while imports from China are predominantly machinery and equipment; increasing Chinese investment in the high value-added industries. The share of articles covering the expansion of the Chinese naval presence and arms build-up programmes, the development of new weapons and “smart” weapons systems, the technical and staff modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), the construction of new military bases abroad, as well as Russian-Chinese defence and military-technical cooperation, reached 22–24%. Articles covering other topics (sports, culture and religion, the social sphere, science and education, emergencies and natural disasters) make up only a small part of the information flow (no more than 4–6%) (Figure 2).

The main point of a large group of academics and public figures conventionally called “optimists” is that “*Russia urgently needs to deepen its cooperation with China*”<sup>5</sup> and that its relations with the great neighbour should be steadily developing. They advocate the pairing the BRI and the EAEU integration projects (Lukin 2018; Uyanaev 2016). Some experts consider the pairing of the two integration projects only as the first step towards the creation of the Greater Eurasian Economic Partnership, which



**Figure 2.** Thematic structure of the *NG* publications on China (1 – economy, 2 – foreign policy, 3 – internal policy, 4 – security, conflicts, military actions, weapons, 5 – extraordinary incidents, 6 – social sphere, 7 – science, education, 8 – culture, religion, sports). Source: data of the *NG*.

should accelerate economic development on the continent and strengthen the international position of the country.<sup>6</sup> They see it as the opportunity to revitalise the economies of Siberia and the Far East, as an impetus for the development of communications and more efficient use of transit opportunities. Their arguments are China's interest in cooperation with Russia in the current geopolitical situation, their common economic and political agenda, including regional security and resistance to external pressure. As it is impossible to change the emerging global balance of forces, at least it is necessary to use the opening opportunities.

The "optimists" approve China's growing economic, political and military power, and its overseas expansion. They believe that it can be a driving force for the transformation of international economic and political relations and the basis for the formation of a multipolar world and that Beijing takes global responsibility in a difficult period when there is a clear trend towards growing national egoism, protectionism, "enclosure" by means of customs and other barriers as well as physical walls designed to protect states from the influx of migrants (Kolosov 2018). They also note that, despite the rejected obligation of mutual military assistance, the level of cooperation between the armed forces of the two powers has raised to that of allies.

Analysing domestic political events in China, especially the results of the 19th CCP Congress, the "optimists" commend president Xi's strategic thinking and his "*contribution to the "great revival of the Chinese nation"*",<sup>7</sup> especially to the strengthening of the sovereignty and the protection of "national interests" matching the dominant views in Russia, as well as the development of the BRI. The NG states that "*the highest intellectual achievement of President Xi in his first five years in office is China's global leadership strategy*"<sup>8</sup> requiring modern armed forces. The newspaper emphasises his progress in the recovery of economic growth and in social policy as well as its humane goal of eradicating poverty and creating a "middle-class society".

Therefore, the official political discourse and the discourse of the "optimists" are based on the following "moments", or signifiers with partially or temporarily fixed meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 1985): 1) the common interests of Russia and China have an objective and long-term character; 2) cooperation with China and coordination of "two integrations" – BRI and EAEU – are a guarantee of stability in a vast region of the world; Chinese military power is a stabilising factor in international relations; 3) the growing economic, scientific and technological potential of China makes it a necessary partner for Russia, especially in the context of Western sanctions; 4) the experience of China's domestic policy, which demonstrates high rates of economic growth and political stability, is important for Russia.

## “High Geopolitics”. Expert Discourse: “Sceptic” Voices

In contrast to the “optimistic” discourse in the media, the “sceptic” experts’ leitmotif is deep concern over the growing gap in economic potential and resulting sharp asymmetry of economic ties between the two countries, the discrepancy between strong mutual understanding at the political level and the lack of tangible results of economic partnership, slow progress in implementing Russia’s “pivot to the East” strategy, the weak economy of Eastern Siberia and the Far East (Ostrovsky 2016).

The “sceptics” question the stability of the current unprecedented cordial political relations between Russia and China. They wonder whether they are situational and could be explained by the common interest in “allying against the United States”, extreme dissatisfaction with its attempted intervention in their internal affairs by supporting opposition under the banner of democracy considered by their governments as only a foreign policy instrument. The common foreign policy interests also stem from ingrained historical grudges harboured both by the elite and general public. For China, it is the humiliation by the West in the 19th and 20th centuries, for Russia, it is the loss of great power status resulting from the demise of the USSR, and the non-recognition of its role in World War II, etc.

The “sceptical” discourse clearly reflects the anxiety of Russian experts caused by China’s growing global ambitions, its emergence as a hegemonic power, increasing economic pressure not only on neighbouring countries but also on remote regions reinforced by the reform of the armed forces, an unprecedented increase in power. “*But you should be careful about Chinese investments, because if you do not establish strict control over them, then soon, so auspicious at first glance, they can turn out to be disastrous, as has already happened in South Africa*”.<sup>9</sup>

The sceptics emphasise that a sharp deterioration in relations between the West and Russia has weakened its position in cooperating with China. They attribute their cautious attitude to the prospects of partnership with China to the unfavourable prospects for the Russian economy due to its dependence on the export of oil and gas, sanctions and the country’s involvement in intractable international conflicts (Sazonov and Chen 2017). Many Russian authors emphasise that in its relations with China, Russia is objectively doomed to play the role of a junior partner (Lukin 2011; Riazantsev 2012). Therefore, from their perspective, it is not surprising that China is building contacts with the country as with an ordinary commercial counterparty requiring exceptional investment terms, high interest on loans, while pushing down the prices for Russian exported goods.

In contrast to political discourse paying a lot of attention to the BRI, only 5–10% of publications on China mention it. In 2015–2016, the rhetoric was mostly positive. The New Silk Road projects were seen as “*important and*

*beneficial for Russia, contributing to the development of economic relations between the APR and EAEU countries*".<sup>10</sup> The next surge in publications on the BRI in 2017 was the result of the analysis of its first results, which fell short of expectations. The general sentiments were wariness, mistrust, concerns of unfair competition. Some authors are tough on the Chinese BRI believing it is a tool for realising China's global ambitions disguised by nice rhetoric (Safronova 2017). In 2019, experts stressed that Russia has not formally become a participant of the BRI project, and the declared integration of the BRI and the EAEU projects is not yet occurred. There are increasing statements that the concept of the BRI is becoming less clear, since any interaction with China can be written into the implementation of its idea. They emphasise that Russia is not ready to open up completely and becomes just a transit territory, but prefers to create high-tech startups and joint production to sell products to third countries. Vladimir Putin's proposal to coordinate the development of the Northern Sea Route with the Chinese Sea Silk Route was considered, on the one hand, as an impossibility to maintain a Russian monopoly, on the other – as a declaration of independence, implying the construction of its own part of infrastructure, without disobeying to the Chinese.<sup>11</sup>

In the experts' opinion, through tied loans and unequal treaties, China seeks to bring sources and raw materials it needs under its economic control, to ensure access to export markets, to move "dirty" industries abroad and to preserve jobs by deploying Chinese hands overseas, etc. (Larin 2016). The BRI had so far a marginal effect on the Russian economy: only 1.6% of the Chinese goods transit through the territory of Russia.

The discourse clearly shows the disappointment in the level of Chinese investments in Russia (mainly in the production of raw materials) still accounting at the end of 2019 for just over 20 USD billion, that is, only about 2% of the total volume of accumulated Chinese investments abroad.

*"Chinese investments in Russia are relatively modest. Russia has nothing to refuse, since there is practically no capital inflow within the framework of BRI"*.<sup>12</sup> Experts also estimate the scale of trade with China differently from TV. Trade turnover between Russia and China in 2017–2019 was increasing at a record pace and amounted to 110.75 USD billion in 2019.<sup>13</sup> However, it is almost five times less than that between China and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The experts are critical of joint projects in the aviation industry.<sup>15</sup> They believe that China gains access to Russian technologies for the production of wide-body aircrafts and heavy helicopters (for example, the unique Mi-26), while the joint production will be located in China, designed for the markets of China and Southeast Asia, its products will be perceived as Chinese, therefore very soon China will produce planes and helicopters without Russia's participation. Many authors recall the well-known Chinese practice of copying technology and its production without a licence: *"The entire Chinese military-*

*industrial complex and the entire Chinese cosmonautics are built with Soviet and Russian assistance. Moreover, in the post-Soviet period, they were either about buying “brains” and technology for nothing, or just stole them*<sup>16</sup> (an example is the production of the J-11 fighter, an unlicensed copy of the Su-27).

In the expert discourse, the prospects of Chinese tourism to Russia are not as bright as Russian regions have expected. On the one hand, the number of Chinese tourists has increased significantly. On the other hand, they travel mainly to Moscow, Saint Petersburg and border areas, and almost never make repeat trips. Most importantly, in eastern Russia, tourists from China stay in Chinese hotels with Chinese staff and guides, so it is Chinese investors who make a profit.

The litmus test of the cooperation with China was the plans for constructing high-speed railways in Russia, including the highly publicised Moscow-Kazan line. Russian experts talked about unacceptable demands from the Chinese partners. Russia should have taken a tied loan of 400 billion roubles (a third of the total cost), but the lion’s share of the work would have to have been done by Chinese contractors using their workers and equipment. At the same time, the Russian government would be obliged to cover losses, since the line would hardly become profitable soon (Morozov 2017).

Special attention in the expert discourse is paid to the actions of China in the post-Soviet space, which is still perceived as a traditional zone of influence of Russia. The BRI aims to ensure sales of Chinese products, open up new distribution channels to Europe, establish control over natural resources and prevent the re-orientation of the former Soviet republics towards the West. An important subject of the expert discourse is the conflict of interests in Central Asia. China’s loans to Central Asian states burden these states with crippling debts and making them more Beijing-oriented (Sharyshev 2016). The authors of *Nezavisimaya gazeta* emphasised that *“in many countries the Belt and Road proposals provoke backlash. They are cancelled, postponed or revised. It turns out that loans are issued on onerous conditions and pose a security risk to some recipient countries”*.

Commenting on the document “China’s Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation” adopted by the State Council, the newspaper bluntly concludes: *“Both countries need the demagogy about the “strategic partnership” just to pull the wool over the eyes of other countries, the “partnership” has no substance . . . Beijing only understands and respects force.”*<sup>17</sup> Russia and China refrain from mutual support in territorial disputes. China has not recognised the joining of Crimea to Russia.

The military threat emanating from China, in particular, the deployment of intercontinental ballistic missiles on the border with Russia, is a separate important theme of the expert discourse. The *NG* argues that the overwhelming superiority of Russia over China in strategic arms remained in the past, and 90% of Beijing’s nuclear missiles are directed towards Russia. However, at

the same time, Russia, after more than a decade's break, resumed advanced weapons sales to China.

The topic of China's growing military power intertwines with the discussion of its desire to dominate the world. With reference to Western publications, the experts interpret the officially declared goal of absolute technological independence, intensive efforts to create a transcontinental marine and land infrastructure as a strategy for China's economic conquest of the world. Some experts emphasise that Beijing has taken a tough stance in territorial disputes with Hanoi, Tokyo, Manila and other neighbouring countries and opened a military base in Djibouti on the routes from the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean.

The relationship within the China-USA-Russia "geopolitical triangle" is a constant topic of expert discussions. Most *NG* experts stress a significant discrepancy, on the one hand, between the nature and variety of political ties between the Russian Federation and China and their limited economic cooperation, and on the other hand, between the political tension in between China and the United States and the scale of their trade and financial interactions. The United States is still the main food supplier to China, including 40% of grain and 25% of meat. The volume of trade between the United States and China in 2019 amounted to 541 USD billion, with China's surplus reaching 296 USD billion. This is a reason why China cannot enter into too close alliance with Russia as it could challenge its strong economic ties with the United States.

In China's internal life, "sceptics" are concerned about the reinforcement of Xi Jinping's authority and consolidation of the vertical power structure, as well as China's constitutional changes allowing to run for president for an unlimited number of terms. They see this as strengthening authoritarian tendencies which also include new restrictions on civil society and stricter Internet censorship under the banner of "network sovereignty". The *NG* authors were concerned with Chinese social engineering projects encouraging socially and politically "right" behaviour of citizens. Publications on human rights violations in Hong Kong and religious or ethnic violence in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous region occupy a prominent place in the discourse on China's internal life.

The sceptical discourse can be summarised in the following "moments": 1) close cooperation with China is associated with a temporary and partial coincidence of foreign policy interests; 2) economic interactions with the Celestial Empire are immanently asymmetric and unequal due to differences in the potential of partners and the weakness of the Russian economy; 3) hopes for a positive structural effect from cooperation with China for the Russian economy are not justified, since the Chinese are tough, cunning and uncompromising partners, always pursuing only their selfish interests; 4) there are significant particular and local potential threats to relations with China, for example, a possible conflict of interests in the post-Soviet space; 5) the main

potential threat is China's claims to global hegemony and the already emerging tendency to dictate its terms to partners and neighbours; 6) the experience of China's domestic policy is not applicable in Russia, since it is aimed at establishing a "digital dictatorship".

### Translating the Official Discourse to the Language of Popular Geopolitics

Along with Ukraine and the USA, China receives the greatest attention of the news programs on federal TV channels. They have a warm attitude to the "Celestial Empire". One of the main topics is the development of multilateral cooperation between China and Russia. The *Vesti* call it exemplary. In demonstrating its benefits for different branches of economy, regions and fields, federal TV develops such topics as the growth of trade, new transport corridors and the joint construction of various facilities in Russia. The presenters tell about the bright prospects of agricultural exports to China: "*Buckwheat, pearl barley and kefir (fermented milk drink) are well on the way to winning Chinese consumer market*".<sup>18</sup>

Being considered a priority field of cooperation, energy projects naturally hold a special place here. They include growth of oil sales to China, building the *Power of Siberia* gas pipeline, and China's participation in the construction of liquefied natural gas export terminals. The geopolitical significance of the launch of *Power of Siberia* in December 2019 was highlighted in the media as "*the most significant Russian energy project . . . , which literally embodies a new era of cooperation between two powers that each in its own way challenges the United States*".<sup>19</sup>

The Russia-China-USA geopolitical triangle, in other words, "*how Russia and China can resist the pressure from the West*" is another major theme on TV.<sup>20</sup> Beijing's resistance to the pressure of the Trump administration and the US-led trade wars are interpreted as proof of the correctness of Russian foreign policy.<sup>21</sup> The topic of joint resistance to American hegemony organically confirms the cornerstone thesis of Russian foreign policy discourse on the multipolarity of the modern world and serves as proof of the need for cooperation with China in ensuring international security. Against this background, the assessment of the Chinese naval parade and the grand military exercises as "*peaceful in nature*" and the admiration for them, indicating that Xi Jinping set the task of creating the strongest fleet in the world, looks quite logical.<sup>22</sup>

The programme occasionally included reports on daily life in China (which it normally does not do for other countries): the celebration of the Chinese New Year, ballet courses for grandmothers, etc. Such reports are destined to improve the image of the Chinese state and the Chinese, soften its contradictory features in the eyes of the Russian audience, and reduce the cultural distance.



News on China's domestic policy is held up as an example for Russia to follow. Widely criticised by international and Russian media, China's Internet restrictions were seen by the *Vesti* as a justification for blocking the Telegram messenger in Russia: "*Formation of borders in the limitless space of the web is probably only a matter of time. China is a perfect example of that*".<sup>23</sup> As well as they did to the fight on extremism, the *Vesti* responded favourably to the introduction of censorship of rap and hip-hop in China and to a ban on performances by artists with tattoos, as the forbidden songs "*propagated violence and threatened public safety*".<sup>24</sup> The series of reports on the 19th Chinese Communist Party Congress were leading the audience to the conclusion that "*China will consistently pursue the chosen path*", which was guaranteed by the amendments to the Party's Charter giving Chairman Xi Jinping the right to remain in power indefinitely.<sup>25</sup>

The main goal of the news programs of federal television channels was to legitimise the foreign policy of the Russian leadership – to convince viewers of the inevitability of a "pivot to the east". The way to achieve this goal was the unambiguousness of statements, the almost complete absence of criticism of China's actions and the use of the main feature of Russian citizens' perceptions of the world – priority attention to cooperation with countries that have significant economic, scientific, technical and military potential (Kolosov 2003a). China's image as Russia's most important and, in any case, unconditional ally is reinforced by regular messages on its role in the modern world. For instance, the *Vesti* viewers could find out that China accounts for 70% of the global production of mobile phones, that the country ranks first in the world in the production of coal, steel, cement, wheat, solar panels, ships and more. The *Vesti* reported the development of artificial intelligence in the PRC, "robot oncologists", a giant bank of genetic information, etc.

On this basis, one of the main points of the television discourse is logically built – the utility of Russian-Chinese cooperation for every citizen of Russia due to the accelerated economic growth and modernisation of the economy, the opening of a huge Chinese market, an increase in the influx of Chinese tourists, and, consequently, incomes of the population. Another basic point was the coincidence of fundamental national interests of Russia and China – the stabilisation of the geopolitical situation, the construction of a multipolar world, and especially the resistance to the US claims to global hegemony.

### **"Low Geopolitics" and Its Relationship with "High Geopolitics"**

The change in the official position and tone of political and media discourse, highlighting the colossal power and overwhelming economic success of China resonates with the position of the population. After 2013, the share of positive assessments of China began to significantly prevail over negative ones (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Index of the attitude to China (difference between positive and negative assessments). Source: (*Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2019*. 2020.)

Moreover, in 2003, according to the Levada Center, a renowned Moscow-based sociological agency, only 9% of respondents believed that relations with China should be strengthened, while in December 2014, 46% of respondents thought so. In 2019, 42% of respondents named China among the five countries that are close friends and allies of the Russian Federation (*Obshchestvennoe mnenie-2019* 2020). The surveys of FOM, another large sociological institution, confirm these data: China ranks first in the representations about Russia's most important economic cooperation partners. In 2018, 62% of respondents considered China a friendly nation.<sup>26</sup> According to VTsIOM data, the federal governmental agency, in recent years the attitude of Russian citizens to China has improved significantly. In 2018, 45% of Russians called the PRC a strategic partner and ally.<sup>27</sup> 30% of respondents believed that relations with China were more important than those with the West (20% held the opposite opinion).<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, sociological data confirm a high similarity of public opinion ("low geopolitics") with the position of at least a part of the elite – "sceptic" experts. There is a certain wariness and mistrust in public opinion about China, although smaller than 10–15 years ago. According to the FOM, 26% of respondents saw the rise of China as a threat to Russia, while 55% believed there was no reason for concern. The Russians were also alerted by the information on China's deployment of strategic missiles along Russia's border. The cultural difference between Russian and Chinese is yet another factor undermining confidence. It is noteworthy that this difference is felt stronger by those who have actually communicated with the Chinese. In the total number of respondents, 65% perceived the differences between Russians and the Chinese as considerable, among those who had contacts with the Chinese this rate was 71%. European culture is more congenial to Russians. In this vein,

28% of respondents wanted to visit China, while 49% wanted to visit a European country.<sup>29</sup>

An immanent feature of geopolitical representations as part of low geopolitics is the inconsistency and constant conflict of interpretations in the individual mind. In a bizarre way, directly opposite ideas about the same country coexist in it, actualised depending on the circumstances. This feature of geopolitical representations is organically intertwined with their multi-layered nature. The image of a country contains many layers because it can be viewed at different spatial levels – not only as an actor in world politics, but also, for example, as a neighbour, or as a partner in some fields and a rival in others (Kolosov 2003b). The “surface” highly dynamic layer is associated with emotional reactions to incoming information, especially to public statements by politicians and discourse in the media. The deeper layers are a product of socialisation and are based on collective historical experience – the *proximate context of the past* in M. Müller’s terms. These strata have great inertia and are reflected both in the low geopolitics – the opinions of citizens, and in the high geopolitics – the discourse of the intellectual elite, reproducing ideas that seem self-evident. Thus, geopolitical representations act as a connecting element between high and low geopolitics.

The features of geopolitical representations, on the one hand, as mirrors of media discourse, and on the other, as manifestations of deeply rooted stereotypes, are clearly reflected in the opinions of Russian citizens about China. To better assess the relationship between “high geopolitics”, especially the official discourse about China, and a set of public perceptions about this country (“low geopolitics”), studies in the Far Eastern towns located near the border are of interest. Their inhabitants have experience of direct contact with Chinese culture. In 2018, the authors conducted focus groups in Zabaikalsk, a small town with about 13 thousand inhabitants located on the very border with China. One of them comprised local small entrepreneurs and the other – employees of budgetary organisations, the main employers in the border town.

On the one hand, pursuant to the official discourse, the great neighbouring country is considered friendly. Most of the definitions of China expressed by the respondents were positive: “*bright*”, “*beautiful*”, “*developing*”, “*flourishing*”, “*hardworking*”, “*wise*”, “*cozy*”, “*purposeful*”. Focus group participants admired China’s economic growth and living standards:

- “*It went away with leaps and bounds . . . It got up, it got up!*”
- “*What kind of apartments they have, what kind of cars they have . . . !*”
- “*What kind of construction is going on there!*” (entrepreneurs).

On the other hand, China inspires apprehension, mistrust and scepticism. Political events and the difficult history of relations between Russia and China largely determined the nature of interethnic contacts between Russians and Chinese, formed ethnic memory, stereotypes and attitudes, more than once provoking hostility and introducing ideological clichés into ethnic

consciousness (Zabiyako, Kobyzov, and Ponkratova 2009). In addition to television programs, attitudes towards China are influenced by both collective historical experience and personal practices of communication with the Chinese. On the local level, the modern realities of interethnic interaction are primarily determined by the dominant trade, economic, cultural, everyday life and situational factors, which shape the basic patterns of the perception of “us” and “them”. Many respondents paid attention to the risk of dependence and simply absorption over by a giant, economically super-active and complex country:

*“- And if there is no border, in general there will be no Russians here at all . . . , you will not find them. Only Chinese”.*

*“- We think sometimes that we have probably been sold already. We already think we are working for the Chinese” (entrepreneurs).*

The role of collective historical memory remains essential in shaping attitudes towards China. Focus group participants broadcast memories of past relationships with their neighbours and attitudes formed during the Soviet era:

*“- And there will be a war with China . . . We grew up with this thought . . . There was a bomb shelter . . . And there were such conversations . . . if we were attacked, something happened - you should go there”(employees).*

*“- Well, initially it was Otpor (Repulse) station<sup>30</sup> . . . Rebuffing the Chinese, the Chinese aggressor” (entrepreneurs).*

The focus group participants’ doubts about the honesty and sincere intentions of their neighbours fit well into this context:

*“- With the Chinese, I think you have to keep your ears open all the time”.*

*“- These people are very cunning. They speak beautifully, but in reality, they are not friends, they are cunning . . . ”*

*- Well, they pretend that . . . supposedly we are friends” (entrepreneurs).*

Such characteristics of the Chinese are surprisingly similar with those that existed in the Russian-Chinese borderland more than a century ago (Diatlov 2000). Inertia of traditional representations about the neighbouring country and its inhabitants indicates a deep rootedness of ethnic stereotypes and a weak chance to build arbitrarily an image of a neighbour.

## Conclusions

It seems that critical geopolitics has never been more relevant than now. Foreign policy is now subject of wide public debates, including social networks. As a result, it looks more and more like “constant attempts to control

public moods”,<sup>31</sup> the desire to cater to the tastes of the crowd, to rely on long-standing stereotypes of mass consciousness turned into show using bright colourful shell to conceal the lack of purpose and the inability to anticipate events and make even one-step-ahead forecasts.

Using approaches of critical geopolitics, of course, it is always necessary to bear in mind the nature of the political regime. In Russia, especially in recent decades, they can hardly serve for a better understanding of current foreign policy decisions. Nevertheless, the relationship between high and low geopolitics certainly exists, and, as we tried to show in our paper, it is far from straightforward.

After the events of 2014, the Russia’s “pivot to the east” declared in the “high” geopolitics” discourse involved, in particular, the development of economic relations with the Asia-Pacific countries and support for the strategic Chinese Belt and Road initiative. The reasons behind strengthening relations between Russia and the Asia-Pacific countries are both objective and subjective. They include the region’s dynamic development, the need for structural changes in the economy of the Far East and Eastern Siberia, and the benefits of developing and exporting the country’s rich natural resources demanded by neighbouring states. The “pivot to the East” is in line with Russia’s foreign policy’s fundamental drive to create a multipolar geopolitical order and to prevent the hegemony of any single country or a group of countries. Finally, Russia and China are neighbours. Sharing one of the longest land borders in the world, they are “doomed” to mutually beneficial cooperation.

Not surprisingly, Russian federal TV channels targeting a broad audience constantly broadcast a simplified message of the official discourse: China is one of Russia’s main strategic allies, relations with it are stronger than ever, are developing in all areas and beneficial for Russian citizens. The official propaganda pictures China as a powerful and prosperous country with a quickly developing economy reasonably managed by the wise leadership.

The political rhetoric is designed to successfully convince Russian citizens of the correctness of the course pursued, to assure Chinese and other foreign partners that the relations with China are strong and strategic. A significant part of the Russian political elite sees the PRC’s achievements and the state of its domestic affairs as a model for conservative social policy. Indeed, China pursues an independent course and at the same time takes advantage of globalisation successfully trading with the whole world, including its main geopolitical rival, the United States, having avoided any serious sanctions, and protects its citizens from the negative consequences of global interdependence. As compared with China, having an independent policy is much costlier for Russia. The policy of economic openness allows the PRC leadership to ensure the increasing well-being of its citizens, carefully safeguarding the foundations of society by maintaining social stability and firmly suppressing any outside

interventions into domestic affairs.<sup>32</sup> It is just what the Russian ruling circles are striving for.

However, there is a clear gap between the official and expert discourse as parts of “high geopolitics”. All participants agree that there is no alternative to good neighbourly and partnership relations with the great eastern neighbour. Nevertheless, many experts express disappointment with the tough attitude of the Chinese partners towards cooperation with Russia as well as the fact that they seek unilateral advantages. They voice concerns about the growing asymmetry of the two countries’ economic potential, Russia’s weak negotiating position, China’s increasing military power and possible changes in its policies. The opinions of this part of experts stands in contrast to the good relations between the current leaders of the countries. At the same time, complaints about the Chinese unwillingness to compromise often serve as a cover-up for the Russian partners’ failures, their inability to defend their interests, to overcome corruption, eliminate loopholes for “grey” exports, outright smuggling, create political, legal and economic conditions for truly equal economic relations.

Remaining the main source of information about the foreign world, state television broadcasts certainly have a great influence on the views of citizens and have contributed in recent years to broad support for the policy of rapprochement with the eastern neighbour and a significant improvement in public perceptions about China and, in general, the correspondence of “high geopolitics” to “low geopolitics”. Russian citizens appreciate China’s economic achievements and consider it a friendly country and strategic partner. The positive attitude of public opinion towards the eastern neighbour has generally increased in recent years.

At the same time, the impact of television has certain limits, since ethnic stereotypes and wariness towards China, inherited from the Soviet era and more distant periods, remain in the collective historical memory. In the perception of many Russian citizens, there is a significant cultural distance between them and the Chinese. There are fears of the growing power of the neighbouring country, potentially threatening Russia’s interests. The contradictory nature of the mass perceptions of China (“low” geopolitics) and the lack of confidence is clearly reflected in the results of focus groups conducted in a small town on the Russian side of the border with China. Its residents have experience of everyday contacts with the neighbouring country. Their representations revealed the collective historical memory of the periods of acute conflicts in relations between the two countries. Moreover, as the analysis of the expert discourse shows, the elite itself, socialised used to the dominance of these ideas, partly shares and reproduces scepticism and distrust towards Chinese partners. Lack of trust at the grassroots level is a serious factor inhibiting rapprochement between Russia and China.

## Notes

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## Funding

This work was supported by State Assignment IGRAS under Grant “Problems and prospects of the territorial development of Russia in the conditions of its unevenness and global instability” No. 0148-2019-0008, No. AAAA-A19-119022190170-1.

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