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STRATEGIC CHALLENGES IN THE CENTRE/PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN CHINA

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C enter, periphery ... those are concepts saturated with meaning ... The alliance between the technology and the speed, or what constitutes, according to Paul Virilio's, a "dromosphere"¹, has considerably reduced the distances separating one point from another in the world. On the scale of China, three days were needed to link Beijing and the Kazakhstan border in the last century. Nowadays, it has become a matter of hours. But far from bringing people together, this sudden acceleration of the exchanges has provoked - in China and elsewhere - tensions, and even rift phenomena, as well as identity and religious claims². In sum, the link can be, at the same time, source of accession or source of reject. To that extent, the new silk roads are much more than mere terrestrial or maritime communication channels, only intended to the commerce of material goods. They have been for a very long time, and are still, "faith" roads. A purely realistic lecture of the international relationships might suggest that this phenomenon is very marginal. It is true that faith designates, in a multi-secular context, the innumerable exchanges that occurred, between Buddhist missionaries, in particular, or between merchants. Yet, one should not forget that the word "*fides*" means first and foremost, by its Latin etymology, the "trust". It is at the origin of any *credo*, whether it is religious, political, or even both.

Bolstered by his colossal ambitions, but still ready to endorse the Great Helmsman's "new clothes"³, Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), is well aware, in his rhetoric choices, that replacing the *President Mao Zedong citations*, the famous Little red Book, by the Confucius *Talks* isn't enough. The ideological corpus has to live up the challenge. Hence, we are seeing an unprecedented synthesis between Marxism and the Chinese tradition

¹ Paul Virilio, *The Great accelerator*, Paris, Galilée, 2010

² Arjun Appadurai, *Geography of Anger: Violence at the age of globalization*, Paris, Payot, 2009

³ Simon Leys, *The new clothes of President Mao*, Paris, Champ Libre, 1971

illustrated by Confucius (VI° century before our era) or Mencius (IV° before our era), but also by Han Feizi (III° century before our era). This rehabilitation of Xi Jinping's favourite philosopher thought, founder of the legalism, which advocates the primacy of fear, strength and control at the service of the authority, goes hand in hand with the integration within the national pantheon of the patriotic figures of some of the greatest names of Chinese explorers like Xuan Zang (VII° century) or Zheng He (XV° century). This hybridity of the referents participates in the creation of new political mythologies. Among them, both the New Silk Roads and the "Chinese dream" (Zhongguo Meng) constitute a strategic project, but also a motto, which as the value of political religion. Here lies an essential dimension of Xi Jinping's mandate. It is the expression of a "faith" in new values and in the viability of a very long-term program. This program presents itself as an alternative to the conception of the world inherited from the Second World War, and recognizes China's western regions as an absolute priority.

TO A NEW WORLD ORDER

During his speech in Astana (2013), which officially launch the OBOR project (One Belt One Road – *Yidai Yilu*), Xi Jinping undertakes a truly profession of "faith". It is based on the trust which aims to subordinate the future of the Chinese economy to a more than 1000 billions of dollars international investment project in the domain of infrastructures; the success of this project not only depending on the solvency of borrowing countries⁴, but also on the securing of Muslim regions facing a strong instability⁵. "Trust" in the certainty, by 2049 – in a symbolic way, a century after the Communist takeover –, to reap the benefits of

⁴ Minxin Pei: "The anti-corruption campaign of Xi Jinping only scratches the surface of the problem", *Le Monde*, February 17th 2017: "If you lend to poor countries that cannot repay, you will lose." You know the banker's proverb: 'If I lend you a dollar, you owe it to me. If I owe you a million dollars, it's me who owns you. There are no examples in the history of creditor countries taking military or political control of debtor countries'".

⁵ Emmanuel Lincot, *Chinese power facing new challenges*, *Asia FOCUS #34*, *Asia PROGRAM*, launched on June the 8th of 2017: <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ASIA-FOCUS-34.pdf>.

its investments. “Trust”, finally, in an interventionist and sovereign policy focusing on development; the latter alone allowing to buy, according to Xi Jinping, the social peace. With this in mind, the Party-State appears as the only guarantor of this success. It is a sovereign entity whose power could not be shared⁶. It is supposed to ensure, in an inclusive logic, not only the durability of relations between the centre and the periphery, but also the unity and peace between the nations, as long as their sovereignty is respected. This approach – reminiscent to the one that defended the sovereigntist Carl Schmitt⁷ – is completed by another, and purely Chinese one, that promotes the philosopher Zhao Tingyang⁸.

Rehabilitating a notion borrowed to the antique Chinese philosophy, the “World” or *Tianxia* envisages a globalization transcending cleavages in order to build a universal political space. The *Tianxia* opposes to the modern Europeans theories on the State, the nation, the war, the peace, the conflict of powers and the domination of the new networks, an antique system which was able to integrate and harmonize, during the Chinese imperial dynasties, people and foreign cultures. For the critics of the thesis defended by Zhao Tingyang⁹, the *Tianxia* concept is only a powerful lever of the Chinese nationalism. It excludes *de facto* the recognition of a decentralized citizen responsibility and the dynamic participation of ethnic minorities, situated for the most in the periphery of the Chinese territory, to a national debate which yet engages their future. The Zhao Tingyang reading does not leave much of a doubt about it. Let’s hear him:

“The fundamental nature of Tianxia is its total inclusivity. In direct semantic, this means that the entire world is in the inside and that there is no outside, the world is therefore only inclusive and does not have any exteriority. Here, the total inclusivity

⁶ François Bougon, *In the head of Xi Jinping*, Arles, Actes Sud, 2017

⁷ Jean-Werner Müller, Carl Schmitt. *A dangerous spirit*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2007; Sandrine Baume, Carl Schmitt, thinker of the state. *Genesis of a doctrine*, Paris, Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2008

⁸ Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia Tixi*; Shijie Zhidu Zhexue Daolun (Tianxia system: Introduction of the Philosophy of The world institution), Nanjing, Jiangsu Jiaoyu Chubanche, 2005. The thesis defended by the author is available in French: Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia all under one sky*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2018

⁹ Jie Zhe, “*Tianxia, back in force of a forgotten concept*” (www.laviedesidees.fr), 3rd of December 2008

raises the political question of the total incorporation of the world: it's only when all the world's regions become interne parts of the Tianxia, when every human being enjoy the compatibility and the coexistence that the world becomes the Tianxia.¹⁰

It's hard to know if, so far, Xi Jinping is an avid reader of Zhao Tingyang. One thing is certain though, the thought of this searcher from the Academy of social sciences sounds like an alternative to the contemporary deadlocks, and is part of a context whose stakes must be remembered.

“GREAT GAME” AND SINO-INDIAN TENSIONS

This debate is largely subordinated to the foreign policy challenges that Pekin has redefined while taking into account major events: one is cyclical (the collapse of the USSR in 1991), the other one is economical. China's increasing imports in hydrocarbons (that it will one day probably counterbalance with its richness in rare earths) have engaged its leaders in an enhanced cooperation with neighbouring Pakistan, in order to connect the harbour area of Gwadar to the Kachgar oasis in Xinjiang. This strategic corridor could be an alternative to an eventual embargo imposed by the United States and their allies against China in the Strait of Malacca. This circumvention logic takes, equally, into accounts the strategic emergence of India which, by an alliance from the rear, covets Central Asia and Iran, on the one hand, and is about to control the Indian Ocean, where transit 77% of hydrocarbons bound for East Asia, on the other hand. The invitation by the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi of the Quad admirals, in January 2018, under the “Raisina Dialogue”, does not bode any improvement in relations between China and India. In sum, the “Great game”¹¹ which had designated, during the XIX^e century, the rivalry between Great Britain and the

¹⁰ Zhao Tingyang, *Tianxia all under one sky*, Paris, Les Éditions du Cerf, 2018, pp. 86-87

¹¹ Peter Hopkirk, *The Great game: Officers and spies in Central Asia*, Brussels, Nevicata, 2011

Czarist power seems to pursue by other ways, with other actors and on a much larger range.

For sure, the two countries share a certain form of “non-occidental experience” (*fei xifang de zhengzhi linian*)¹² because of the participation to common international institutions (OCS, BRICS), and their elites are convinced that the gravity centre of global economy has “switched to the East” (*quanli dongyi*)¹³. Nevertheless, their border disputes remain numerous¹⁴. Since their conflict in 1962, the annexation by the Chinese army of Aksai Chin to the autonomous province of Tibet and the still not resolved quarrels of the Arunachal Pradesh and Kashmir frontiers, the Sino-Indian relationships are still tense¹⁵. In the summer of 2017, the two armies were on the verge of confrontation in the Doklam region. What does it mean? The relationships of China with its, more or less close, periphery are compartmented and marked by the well-understood interest of trade and good shared deals. However, if we refer to the only example of the relationships between China and India, the singularity of their relations do not exclude localized strategic rivalries. One of the most important of these rivalries directly exposes China’s Great West, and more particularly the Xinjiang. This Turkic-speaking region controlled by Beijing gives it access not only to Central Asia¹⁶, but also to a whole part of the Himalayan Arch¹⁷.

¹² Yang Jiemian, *Considerations on the four groups of nations and the particular features present in the restructuring of international power in Shijie jingyi yu zhengshi* (Économie et politiques internationales), n°3, march 2010, p. 4-13

¹³ Li Limin, *Global geopolitical changes and China’s strategic choices in Xiandai guoji guanxi* (Relations internationales contemporaines), n°4, avril 2010, p. 1-10. These observations echo those of the Indian elites as it is recalled in substance in this book: Jean-Luc Racine (dir°), *India and Asia. New balances, new global order*, Paris, CNRS éditions, 2009

¹⁴ Olivier Guillard, *Geopolitics of India. The Shattered dream of unity*, Paris, Puf, 2012

¹⁵ Yoann Monfort, *The Doklam: A strategic region at the heart of the rivalry between India and China*, ASIA FOCUS #60, ASIA PROGRAM, February 2018: <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Asia-focus-60.pdf>

¹⁶ Reza Djalili and Thierry Kellner, *Geopolitics of the new Central Asia*, Paris, Puf, 2001

¹⁷ The case of Nepal is symptomatic of the tensions that are developing at regional level. Read about this: Brigitte Steinmann (dir °), *the Maoism in Nepal. Readings of a revolution*, Paris, CNRS Editions, 2006

THE XINJIANG AND ITS CENTRASIATIC PERIPHERY: THE PIVOT AXIS OF THE CHINESE CONTINENTAL DIPLOMACY

Strategic glacis, reservoirs of resources, Central Asia offers a depth of field that China as well as the neighbouring Russia have never stopped to covet¹⁸. Both powers have sometimes met to denounce the United States and NATO entryism in this part of the world. Imposed western sanctions have contributed to reinforce the nature of their relation¹⁹. Hence, the two leaders concluded in 1996 a strategic partnership. Then, they signed a friendship treaty in 2001, and resolved their territorial conflicts in 2004²⁰. In many ways, Russia and China have not only a common revolutionary past, but they also share numerous characteristics in governance²¹. They are constantly trying to thwart the centrifugal forces that drive them. This tendency explains the crucial linkage established between their internal and external policies. Russia's considerable asset is to represent for China, in Central China itself and beyond, an option for a securing and stabilizing action, by means of its armed forces. The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), created in 2002, but also its nuclear umbrella can provide it, even if China keeps increasing each year its own military budget²². For the remainder, the Russian and Chinese officials regularly insist – talking about themselves or other countries, like North Korea – on the fact that they have legit interests in security, which neglect to take into account, according to them, the western countries.

Ultimately, in Central Asia, China and Russia share a common goal: to limit the American presence in Central Asia (enclosure of the American air bases in

¹⁸ Emmanuel Lincot, *Uighurs notebooks of China (preface by Thierry Zainal)*, Paris, Koutoubia, 2009; Lorraine de Meaux, *Russia and the temptation of the Orient*, Paris, Fathi, 2010.

¹⁹ *Geopolitics of Russia*, magazine Hérodote, n° 166/167, 3rd and 4th quarters 2017

²⁰ Isabelle Facon, *The unpublished foundations of the Sino-Russian partnership in the XXI Century* in: French Directory of International relations, Université Panthéon-Assas, Centre Thucydides, 2017, Volume XVIII, pp. 693-707

²¹ Lucien Bianco, *The Relapse. Russian Revolution, Chinese Revolution*, Paris, Gallimard, 2014

²² Emmanuel Lincot, China's military budget increase of about 7% in 2017, China-Info.com (the News from Europe), released online on March 6, 2017. <http://www.chine-info.com/french/columnist/emmanuelincot/20170306/256898.html>.

Uzbekistan and in Kirghizstan in 2005) and as the natural follow-up of it, in Middle East. In fact, however, facing the demographic and economic weight of China, Russia doesn't weigh a lot and the hydrocarbon needs of China aren't enough to rebalance the economic balance of power, which, in the long run, promises to be even more unbalanced. Indeed, as Béatrice Giblin specifies, "*Xi Jinping's project to build new silk roads (in Central Asia and South East Asia), a gigantic project of approximately 1000 billions of dollars, sometimes seen as the expression of a hidden hegemony, is likely to subject the Central Asian republics, and as consequence, to cause tensions within the Russo-Chinese Alliance*"²³. Because it is ultimately Pekin, which by inaugurating a first Kazakhstan oil pipeline to China (2005) and then a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan (2009), has really initiated the opening up of Central Asia, outstripping, at the same time, Westerners and Russian. As highlighted by Jean Radvanyi, "*these different realizations are all elements that come to break the Russian monopoly of influences: by creating alternative pathways, it permits to these countries to renegotiate more advantageously the bilateral transit agreements with Moscow, and even partially, forgo the Russian intermediary*"²⁴. However for the time being, Moscow and Beijing see in their "*interaction in the international affairs... an element of growing importance in international politics*"²⁵. Shared views and common objectives, but for how much longer?

A SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION THOROUGH UNDER DURESS

According to a doctrine initially expressed by the chief of the Russian diplomacy from 1996 to 1998, Ievgueni Primakov, Russia and China clearly call for the

²³ Béatrice Giblin, *Editorial in: Geopolitics of Russia*, magazine Herodote, n° 166/167, 3rd and 4th Quarters 2017, p. 5

²⁴ Jean Radvanyi, *When Vladimir Putin is geographer...in: Geopolitics of Russia*, magazine Herodote, n° 166/167, 3rd and 4th Quarters 2017, p. 5

²⁵ Sergei Lavrov, Russian Minister for Foreign Affairs, at a press conference in the presence of his Chinese counterpart in Moscow, March 11th of 2016.

establishment of a “multipolar” world, a less Western-centred international order²⁶. In this perspective, Moscow naturally stresses the “Chinese card”. It’s “co-leadership” of the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) with China “confers it a success by association” especially as this group asserts itself as an alternative to the western financial system inherited from Bretton Woods²⁷. In addition, the security issue that both of the States have to face is an essential component of their cooperation, in the domain of the fight against Islamic terrorism. This challenge is consubstantial to their domestic and foreign policy issues. Let’s remember that, as well as Russia²⁸, China is a Muslim power²⁹. If the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) allows a large cooperation between its members in terms of counter-terrorism with its centre based in Tashkent, capital of Uzbekistan³⁰, the collapse of the Islamic State and its consequences – the return of hundreds of jihadists and Uyghurs fighters respectively to the Caucasus and to the Xinjiang – foreshadow the development of new hotbeds of crisis, to which Russia, but also China, will be directly confronted³¹.

To this risk is added another one: that exercised by the USA and their allies. The high frequency of meetings between Russian and Chinese officials, such as of Russian Prime Minister Medvedev in Beijing on November 1, 2017, responds to repeated considerations of counterbalancing the western leadership. Moreover, the sanctions applied by the United States and the European Union to Russia are perceived as so many hostile signals that may, eventually, equally apply to China. The Chinese diplomacy has, indeed, entered a logic of confrontation with the countries of its nearest periphery. Its reject of the decisions taken by the Hague

²⁶ Jeanne L. Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet Era*, New York, M.E. Sharpe,

²⁷ Bobo Lo, *The illusion of convergence – Russia, China, and the BRICS*, Russie. NEI. Visions, IFRI, n° 92, march 2016, p. 8

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²⁸ Second religion of the country, the majority Islam in seven republics of the Federation.

²⁹ Emmanuel Lincot, *Uighurs notebooks of China*, Paris, Koutoubia, 2009

³⁰ Mathieu Duchâtel, *Terror overseas: understanding China’s evolving counter-terror strategy*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Brief Policy, October 2016: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR_193_-_TERROR_OVERSEAS_UNDERSTANDING_CHINAS_EVOLVING_COUNTER_TERROR_STRATEGY.pdf

³¹ Emmanuel Lincot, *China facing international terrorism*, *China-Info.com (the European News)*, put on line in November the 17th, 2016: <http://www.chine-info.com/french/columnist/emmanuel-lincot/20161117/247746.html>

Tribunal regarding the island disputes – those oppose to the Philippine namely– augurs the development of the crisis that could be even more serious. However, isn't it possible that this strategic unity that seems to link Moscow to Pekin could be just a facade?

Despite their apparent agreement, tangible signs evince that Moscow doesn't hesitate to sell military materials to countries in trouble with Beijing. The selling of Kilo submarines to Vietnam is just one example³². Commenting on the sell, the ambassador of Vietnam to Moscow recalled the strength of the links that still attached the two former allies: *"Although the United States has partially lifted its arm embargo in Vietnam, Russia remains our main partner in this sector"*³³. Since January 2014, Russian strategic nuclear bombers conducting regular reconnaissance over the Guam base were refueled in flight by some Ilyushin 78 temporarily based in Cam Ranh, Vietnam³⁴. Moreover, to mark his return to Asia and his dissatisfaction with Tokyo, which had supported the sanctions against Russia after the annexation of Crimea, in January 2016, Vladimir Poutine decided to fly a strategic bomber TU 65 over Japan. Besides this provocation, as Tokyo interpreted it, the desire for Moscow to pay increasing focus to North Korea is becoming clear, while Beijing clearly shows it will distance itself from its ally, Pyongyang. As a matter of fact, a Russian military delegation has visited the North Korean capital city in November 2015³⁵. If China doesn't deny its persistent authority over Pyongyang, and remains the obligatory passage for a peaceful settlement of the issue, Russia recalls, in a no less recurrent way to whoever wants to hear it, that the outcome of the Korean crisis will not happen without it.

³² "For the most recent contracts, we quote the acquisition in 2009 by Hanoi of 6 submarines Kilo at a price of \$2 billion and of 12 hunters SU-30 MKK paid 600 million of \$. To what are added 4 frigates of the type "Gepard", commissioned in 2006 and 2010, each equipped with 4 anti-submarine torpedo tubes and 8 SS-N-25 anti-ship missiles in: François Dande and Jean-Paul Yacine, *Serious discords in the China – India – Vietnam Triangle*, Question China, October 31st 2014: <http://www.questionchine.net/serieuses-discordes-dans-le-triangle-chine-inde-vietnam?artpage=3-3>

³³ Jean-Paul Yacine, *the "Great Game" of the western Pacific*, Question China, 21 March 2015: <http://www.questionchine.net/le-grand-jeu-du-pacifique-occidental>

³⁴ Ibidem

³⁵ Jean-Paul Yacine, *Military Incidents on the outskirts of China and Japan*, Question China, June 11th 2016: <http://www.questionchine.net/incidents-militaires-aux-abords-de-la-chine-et-du-japon>

Sign of the times, Moscow has cancelled 90% of North Korea's debt and since 2013, the two countries have completed the renovation of the railway line that connects them. Last May, ships from Vladivostok reached the North Korean harbour of Rason³⁶. Russia seeks not only to lift North Korea out of international isolation, but to consolidate a position that could eventually be more favourable to Russia than China. From an economic point of view, the Sino-Russian relationships are deeply asymmetrical. Since 2010, China is the first commercial partner of Russia, but the latter is just the ninth partner of China. Trade even registered a sharp decline in 2015 - 64, 2 billion dollars against 95 the previous year under the pressure of the Russian economic crisis and the fall in the price of hydrocarbons³⁷. While market conditions are currently favourable to Chinese interests, its leaders know, however, the extreme dependence of their country in this area.

They impose themselves a planning and centralization of access strategies, they build international relations dedicated to these accesses. From this point of view, Russia is not in the same situation as China. As Didier Julienne observes, "*Russian resources are superior to the needs of its development; its needs are less centralized, less planed*"³⁸. Their economic priorities are furthermore, substantially different. The radical transformations of China's socio-economic landscape seem much faster than those experienced by Russia, which major asset has been, is and will remain that of the richness of its soils and subsoils. In the long run, the access to this richness will be achieved with a land and a people, and not against them. The combination of a need for China to project outward to fuel growth, on the one hand, and the nationalist push that moves it, on the other hand, leads to a

³⁶ Leonid Bershidsky, *The Key to North Korea is Russia*, Bloomberg view, May 18th 2017 : <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-05-18/the-key-to-north-korea-is-russia>

³⁷ Alicia Garcia Herrero et Jianwei Xu, *The China-Russia trade relationship and its impact on Europe*, Bruegel Working Papers, n°4, 2016, p. 3

³⁸ Didier Julienne, *Russia and critical topics in: Strategic ore rush*, Goeconomy Review, Institute Choiseul, 2011, pp. 109-117

dangerous logic of predation. Its room for maneuver is all the greater as it benefits from the general weakness of Russia and more particularly from that of a territory it has never ceased to covet: the Russian Far East it benefits of Russia and more particularly from that of a territory it has never ceased to covet: the Russian Far East.

THE QUESTIONS OF THE CHINESE DIASPORAS OF RUSSIA AND THE RUSSIAN FAR EAST

“It should be noted at the outset that the term Russian Far East is here used to describe a geographic area covering nearly 6,2 million square kilometres, which represent about two third of the Canadian territory and eleven times France. The Russian Far East can be divided into two regions: the north, including among others the Republic of Yakutia, the Koryak Republic, the autonomous region of Chukotka, which remains a sparsely populated region ; and the south which includes the Amur Oblast and the Sakhalin Oblast, the Jewish autonomous region, but especially the Khabarovsk Krai and the Primorski Krai. The south is home to 70% of some eight million of people living throughout the Russian Far East”³⁹. Signification of this vast underpopulated region, with a long-term risk of annexation by China of these territories, long neglected by Moscow, are fears deeply rooted in the Russian political imagination. Although the border disputes between the two States founded a diplomatic solution, Russians and Chinese remember the sentence pronounced by Mao Zedong in 1964, in front of Japanese communist sympathizers. It could take another meaning in the years to come: “Hundreds of years ago, the east region of Baikal has become a Russian territory and since, Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, the Kamchatka and other places are USSR territories. We

³⁹ Philippe Bourbeau, *China and the Chinese diaspora. The coveted Russian Far East*, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2002, p. 88

*have not presented the bill in the matter*⁴⁰. Isn't it possible that China would be presenting it now?

As a matter of fact, China “bites” on Russia: 150 000 hectares (the surface of Hong Kong or that of Martinique) were allocated for 4 euros per hectare over of 49 years. According to the governor of Transbaikalia, 40% of arable lands is not exploited. Hence, the region must attract investors and workers too: about a thousand people, “local people in priority, but also Chinese”, specifies Konstantin Ilkovski, to exploit these gigantic surfaces. The contract stipulates that 75% of managers employed to manage these lands will be Russians, and that the companies concerned will pay taxes to the Russian State. Despite these precautions, the agricultural laws appear more and more favourable to the Chinese neighbour – and it was not for lack of protests. “Russia opens its doors to the Chinese farmers *instead of supporting its own farmers*”, denounces the vice-president of the Agricultural committee of the Russian Chamber of commerce and industry. “*In the last 7 years, it has become easier for officials to conclude such transactions in Eastern Siberia and the Far East*”, writes the online magazine *Slon*, while on Twitter, Vladimir Poutine is accused of “selling Siberia”⁴¹. Agricultural lands and forest estates exploitation⁴², building of road infrastructures, of high-speed rail lines which connect Chinese cities to Vladivostok⁴³, freight transport to Yekaterinburg⁴⁴, or other destinations further west in Germany, France, Iran, lifting borders on the Sino-Russian highway system⁴⁵ which permit direct roads

⁴⁰ Francois Jewels, *The Imperial temptation. China's foreign policy since 1949*, Paris, National printing, 1994, p. 40

⁴¹ Miriam Palisson, *Russia: The Future of Eastern Siberia goes through China*, Geopolis, July 3rd 2015: <http://geopolis.francetvinfo.fr/russie-lavenir-de-la-siberie-orientale-passe-par-la-chine-68347>

⁴² Nathalie Ouvaroff-Blime, *Chinese farmers in the onslaught of eastern Siberia*, the Huffingtonpost, October 5th 2016

⁴³ *China offers to build Hunchun-Vladivostok high-speed railway*, Russia Beyond, MAY 22, 2015: HTTPS://WWW.RBTH.COM/NEWS/2015/05/22/CHINA_OFFERS_TO_BUILD_HUNCHUNVLADIVOSTOK_HIGH-SPEED_RAILWAY_46251.HTML

⁴⁴ *All aboard! Russia, China launch new railway route for container shipments*, Sputnik International, February 27th 2016 : <https://sputniknews.com/world/201602271035450791-russia-china-railway/#ixzz45cuN9ikv>

⁴⁵ Simplification of formalities for direct road transport between China and Russia, Xinhua, February 18th 2016: <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/VieSociale/n3/2016/0218/c31360-9018079.html>

between China and Russia to be drawn, bypassing Mongolia or unsure countries such as Kirghizstan or even Kazakhstan, multiplication of border areas frank of commercial transactions⁴⁶, massif investments in the building of pipelines and gas pipelines which ensure the transport of Russian oil and gas to China, but also direct exploitations of energetic resources through stupendous contracts⁴⁷, real-estate constructions: China doesn't run out of resources to ensure its expansion. A policy largely supported by banks and Chinese institutions through financial transaction agreements in rubles⁴⁸, bank loan to individuals and Russian companies, and even the swap agreement between central banks⁴⁹.

Those commercial aspects are not the only one targeted. As Christophe-Alexandre Paillard recalls, *"Russia had 16% of the world reserves of beryllium, 11% of chromium, 22% of copper, 38% of manganese, 79% of mercury, 15% of nickel, 16% of niobium, 10% of platinum, 7% of tantalum, 49% of vanadium, 24% of zinc, as well as important reserves of rare metals such as rhodium. These deposits are widely dispersed. Major basins include the South of the Ural, the Trans-Baikal and the Kamchatka, the Kola Peninsula with the Khibin Mountains rich in rare metals like columbium and tantalum, or the Oudokan mountains in central Siberia north of Tchita"*⁵⁰. These ores are critical for the global industry because they are used without a truly cost-effective alternative in numerous products and industrials components. *"By comparison, steel, which is not a mineral, sometimes has similar market issues, including the supply of special steels used in the arms industry"*⁵¹.

⁴⁶ *Sino-Russian Trading Zone (Hunchun): Exports to Russia reach 500 million Dollars*, Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, 27 December 2012: <http://french.mofcom.gov.cn/article/actualite/201212/20121208501633.shtml>

⁴⁷ *Russia. Moscow opens its fields to the Chinese*, Courrier International, September 03rd, 2014:

<https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/2014/09/02/moscou-ouvre-ses-gisements-aux-chinois>

⁴⁸ *China allows usage of ruble in Sino-Russian border city*, The Economic Times, August 9th 2015:

<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/business/china-allows-usage-of-ruble-in-sino-russianborder-city/articleshow/48412754.cms?intenttarget=no>

⁴⁹ *Sino-Russian investment and finance: better than ever*, International network, June 19th 2015:

<http://reseauinternational.net/investissements-et-finances-sino-russes-mieux-que-jamais/#t5P3HmcRpRdy25ZB.99>

⁵⁰ Christophe-Alexandre Paillard, *The issue of strategic ores, a major issue of the global geoeconomy in: Strategic ore Rush*, Geoeconomy Review, Institut Choiseul, 2011, p. 22

⁵¹ Christophe-Alexandre Paillard, op. cit, p. 21

The Sino-Russian partnership could, eventually, extend to the exploitation of these sectors considered strategic. The economic leverage is stronger than the political one. Chinese Diasporas are the cornerstone of this strategy.

Phenomenon to conjugates in the plural, the Chinese diaspora constitutes a multifaceted reality, which variates according to the regions and the categories of population concerned (migrants, students, businessmen...). Several issues can be associated to them: does the viability of the “strategic partnership” signed between China and Russia transcend the relationship between China and these populations? Is Russia’s place in the geostrategic space of North-East Asia compatible with the presence of these populations, which have emigrated especially to the Russian Far Eastern? An outline answer can be provided through the study that a number of researchers have been able to conduct on this question⁵². With regards to Chinese students, who can be considered as one of the driving forces of bilateral relations for the future, and it should be recalled that Russia is right behind the United States, Japan, the European Union and Australia as university destination for the Chinese students. Russia is a long-time host country for Chinese students; tradition that goes back to the nineteenth century. However, according to Olga V. Alexeeva, *“(these students) feel downgraded, forced into non-qualified jobs, confronted to xenophobia and to humiliating local administrating procedures. In this situation, few of them plan to stay in Russia for a long time. Russian society, which has generally a hostile attitude towards immigrants, despite the gradual depopulation of the country and the chronic lack of manpower jeopardizing the development of the national economy, is making little effort to ensure economic and socio-cultural insertion of the Chinese students”*⁵³. However, it may be important to qualify these words. Russia is experiencing a

⁵² Carine Pina-Guerassimoff and Eric Guerassimoff, *The “Overseas Chinese” from the years 1890 to the years 1990* in: Nancy L Green and François Weil (dir °), *Citizenship and emigration. The policies of departure*, Paris, EHESS, 2006, pp. 137-156; Olga V. Alexeeva, *The migration of Chinese students to Russia at the turn of the XXI century: The case of Saint-Petersburg* in: *Chinese Studies*, vol. XXIX (2010), pp. 243-258

⁵³ Olga V. Alexeeva, op. cit, p. 258

real fever for Chinese learning. The very perception of the Chinese student could be changed. A report from the Yaroslavl State University indeed foresees that *“by 2027, the number of Russian secondary schools students learning Chinese should at least double in comparison to the actual 17 000. It also estimates that by 2020, Russia is likely to include Chinese as a foreign language in the unified national exam”*⁵⁴.

CONCLUSION

Sino-Russian relations correspond to a bloc logic designed to resist pressure from the West, and especially from the United States. On the long run, the NATO expansion to eastern Europe, the bombing of Yugoslavia by the NATO in 1999 without the endorsement of the United Nations Security Council, the American support for the “colour revolution”, the stubbornness of the USA in installing THAAD batteries in South Korea, the rapprochement between New Delhi and the American capital, as well as the strong support reaffirmed by the president Donald Trump during his diplomatic tour in Asia, in November 2017, to the strength of the alliance between Washington and Tokyo, are just a few examples of events interpreted by Russia and China as a strategy of encirclement, stimulating thus their rapprochement. Although the circumstances seem favourable to the deepening of a pragmatic cooperation between Russia and China, the foreign policy choices of Moscow towards Asian countries do not necessarily converge with the Chinese interests. However, the benefits they derive from this constrained alliance remain, for now, greater than many inconveniences, such as those namely expressed by the Siberian inhabitants.

⁵⁴ In Russia, Chinese language makes a real tobacco, The Daily of the People online, July 25th 2017: <http://french.peopledaily.com.cn/Culture/n3/2017/0725/c31358-9246175.html>

Spirit of Russia seems today acquired to the development of an all-out relationship with China, without stopping to the still latent disputes that could oppose them, among other examples, in central Asia. Nevertheless, the heart of Russians is, on the other hand, basically anchored on the European side. Brussels remains indifferent to this reality. By contrast, some American officials like William J. Burns, former Deputy Secretary of State and former ambassador to Moscow, would be inclined to believe in a possible rapprochement with Russia to “contain” China⁵⁵. Obviously, the White House doesn’t seem to want to take this path. As stipulated by Isabelle Facon, between Moscow and Washington, “*the potential for mutual trust is permanently undermined*”⁵⁶. In any case, the USA has every reason to believe that a Eurasian glacis is being formed, which is led by a magisterium shared between Russia and China. This glacis is believed to rely on an ideology that is reactionary to the Western democracies, and which no longer hesitate to use strategies based on systematic use of force, as shown by this widespread use of the “denial of access” to areas considered highly strategic⁵⁷.

More fundamentally, the China’s interest for central Asia and especially Xinjiang brings us back to three facts. The first one, of an historical nature, recalls that this occidental part of China has been reinvested in its strategic depth at the very moment when the Empire – under the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) – was essentially threatened, in its eastern part, by the Western imperialist powers⁵⁸. A block of jade donated by the Turkic-speaking populations to Emperor Qianlong (1711-1799) is still visible in the Forbidden City and testifies to this strategic annexation, overall fairly recent, of the great west territories⁵⁹. This period marks a break in the Chinese political imagination. Since the time of the Wei (fifth

⁵⁵ William J. Burns, *How we fool ourselves on Russia*, The New York Times, January 7th 2017

⁵⁶ Isabelle Facon, op. cit, p. 707

⁵⁷ Sam Tangredi, *Anti-Access Warfare. Countering A2 / AD Strategies*, Naval Institute Press, Anapolis, 2013

⁵⁸ Peter C. Perdue, *China Marches West: the Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia*, Cambridge, Belnap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005

⁵⁹ Emmanuel Lincot, *Uighurs notebooks of China*, Paris, Koutoubia, 2009, p 33

century AD) indeed, the invaders were coming from the north or the west and not from the east. The modern period portends a profound reversal in the history of the centre vis-à-vis its periphery. The second fact refers us back to conceptions of the world, highlighted by the project of the new silk roads. One is, as we have seen, Chinese, and inclusive by the convening of the *Tianxia* principle; so inclusive that the sovereignty of the States, however, defended by China since the advent of the communist regime, is transcended. The other is Western and recognizes the primacy of the borders in how the relations between the States are designed. This schema is distantly inherited from the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), on which rely all the architecture of the international relations since the modern era.

But there is another one – “One god, one earth” in the “House of Islam” (*Dar al-Islam*) – which only Muslims recognize – and which contradicts the very name of “China”, *Zhongguo* (literally: “the middle of the country”). This situation is equally important to understand the challenges between China and Islam. In sum, the divergence between each of these conceptions makes Xinjiang the living laboratory of the political contradictions engendered by globalization. Finally, in the vast reorganization of the armed forces decided in 2016 by Xi Jinping, everything suggests that the gigantic Western zone (40% of the territory) including the provinces of Xinjiang, Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, Chongqing, Gansu, Guizhou and Yunnan became a priority. Close to the terrorist hotbeds of Central Asia and Afghanistan, populated by minorities, this new theatre will be instructed to deal with internal threats from Tibet and Xinjiang, with military personnel that will gather more than one third of the Chinese armed forces. The new territorial and structural image of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) thus envisaged is part of the project to modernize the Chinese armies, which is due to be completed in 2020⁶⁰. What does it mean? Even if China is far from wanting to abandon the

⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Yacine, *Extensive reorganization of the armed forces*, Question China, 3 February 2016: <https://www.questionchine.net/vaste-reorganisation-des-forces-armees>

maritime option of its new Silk Roads project, this one is constrained by a true strategy of containment that refine Americans, Indians, Japanese, and Australians. In this new configuration of the “Great Game”, Mackinder’s “Heartland” theories, opposed to those of “Rimland” dear to Mahan, resurface. To date, these theories seem complementary in the strategic choices initiated by Beijing. ■

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STRATEGIC CHALLENGES IN THE CENTRE/PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN CHINA

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