

# Domestic Politics: A Forgotten Factor in the Russian-Chinese Relationship

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## 1 Introduction

Domestic politics rarely gets substantial attention in studies on Sino-Russian relations, with Gabuev (2015), Skalamera (2018) and Wilson (2019) being notable exceptions. Strategic considerations, national interests and pragmatic benefits tend to occupy a privileged position in the process of explaining the dynamics of the post-Cold War relationship between Moscow and Beijing. For many, these relations are driven by systemic factors/systemic pressures as defined by neorealism and neoclassical realism. In other words, US material primacy and specific US policies push Russia and China closer together. But even those who do not subscribe to the (neo)realist explanation of the dynamics in the relationship are sceptical about the relevance of domestic politics. The implicit assumption is that in this particular relationship, Russia and China act as unitary and rational strategic actors. Moreover, this assumption is reinforced by the centrality of both leaders, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, to the relationship. After all, the Sino-Russian relationship has clearly accelerated since Putin and Xi's programmes of power centralization. There is almost a consensus on Putin and Xi giving an impetus to the Sino-Russian cooperation and ensuring that domestic politics works in favour of this relationship (Xu & Reisinger, 2019).

Meanwhile, scholarship on Russian foreign policy recognizes the variety of domestic political factors as increasingly relevant in shaping Moscow's activities in the international realm (Marten, 2015, 2019; McFaul, 2020; Stoner, 2021). With regard to China, the role of domestic politics in shaping external activities has also attracted scholarly attention (Breslin, 2021; Takeuchi, 2019), with the Belt and Road Initiative flagship project coming under particular scrutiny (Ye, 2019). These shifts

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coincide with the growing popularity of state fragmentation theory (Hameiri et al., 2019) on the one hand and the growing insight into the role of regime survival on the other (Weiss, 2019).

This chapter argues that domestic politics plays a significant role in shaping Sino-Russian relations. Domestic political factors strengthen certain trends in the relationship and, more occasionally, generate obstacles. In structural terms, the growing similarity of political systems, characterized by a high degree of centralization of power in leaders' hands and the rising crackdown on dissent, shapes the threat assessment. It is more acute in the case of Russia, a weaker side. The Russian ruling regime is not challenged by Beijing, hence an increase in China's power and influence. While disadvantageous geopolitically, it does not pose a threat to regime security and regime survival in the Kremlin. Domestic actors have contributed to Russia's policy towards China in two ways: by influencing the leadership's threat assessment and by implementing particular policies. In some areas, such as energy cooperation, a privileged position on behalf of certain actors enables them to promote closer cooperation with China. There is no openly anti-Chinese lobby within the ruling elite and its supporters. In a couple of cases, domestic politics has trumped the drive for cooperation. More often than not, domestic politics acts as a facilitating factor, which mitigates systemic pressures related to China's rise and growing asymmetry between Russia and China and creates a conducive environment for bilateral cooperation with China in certain sectors.

This chapter does not aspire to create *causal* links between domestic politics and the developments in the relationship. Its aim is more modest—to map relevant domestic players and the domestic setting, which may either facilitate cooperation or slow it down. The aim of this chapter is neither to deny that Russian policy towards China tends to be formulated in the Kremlin within a narrow circle of Vladimir Putin and his trustees, nor do I claim that strategic considerations do not matter for this policy. It instead aspires to demonstrate how domestic politics has created conducive conditions for Russia's rapprochement with China and how it continues to moderate power asymmetry between the two states that otherwise could have generated more cautiousness on the part of the Kremlin.

The rest of the chapter is arranged as follows. The next section discusses the issue of regime survival and its role in providing a shared background for China and Russia to cooperate. The third part focuses on the Russian case and the role played by domestic actors in shaping Russia's policy towards China. The penultimate section explores domestic politics as an obstacle to closer cooperation. The final section summarizes the chapter's findings.

## 2 Regime Survival: Domestic Structural Conditions

The authoritarian nature of the Chinese and Russian political regimes (with particular acuteness after 2012 in the latter case) makes regime survival a top priority for both Beijing and Moscow. The possibilities offered by bilateral cooperation, both

directed against the United States and concentrated on mutual learning and sharing best practices in strengthening one's resilience vis-à-vis the opposition and popular dissent, create a powerful incentive for Moscow and Beijing to deepen their mutual ties.

The regime's survival considerations are of particular importance for the Russian ruling elite. As the Russian elite does not perceive China as a threat to regime security and regime survival, it is easier for Moscow to interpret China's rise as non-threatening and accept the growing asymmetry with China in terms of material capabilities and influence. The Russian ruling elite does not consider China a threat to its domestic power. Unlike the West, which—according to the reasoning prevalent in the Russian elite—is keen on regime change in Russia, China does not intend to undermine Putin's regime legitimacy or interfere with domestic politics. Taking regime survival into account may influence the Russian leadership's threat assessment and contribute to the downplaying of the power asymmetry. In the case of Russia's relations with the United States and the West in general, meanwhile, the power disparity is amplified by the lack of political security.

Whereas many scholars identify regime security and the consolidation of the domestic regime as the main driver of Russia's assertive foreign policy (Adomeit, 2019; McFaul, 2020; Stoner, 2021) and interpret foreign policy as the continuation of domestic politics (Cadier & Light, 2015), the factor of regime survival plays an important role in shaping Russia's policy towards China. It cannot be considered a direct cause behind Moscow's constant rapprochement with Beijing, but it provides conducive conditions for such a rapprochement.

Mutual fears of the West's alleged attempts to weaken and even overturn their regimes have the potential to lead to convergence in the Russian and Chinese elites' worldviews. Both ruling elites have perceived 'colour revolutions' as being inspired by the West since the mid-2000s (Wilson, 2010). The revolution in Ukraine in 2014 and the protests in Hong Kong in 2019–2020 have only reinforced this perception. The 'colour revolution' factor helps explain why Beijing was willing to tacitly accept Russia's annexation of Crimea, a move which challenged a number of China's long-established positions in international politics. The Russian action undermined the principle of not supporting separatist forces. The referendum, however skewed, signalled that it is the people that can choose their own statehood, a dangerous precedent from the perspective of Beijing's policy towards Taiwan. At the same time, Beijing seems to consider Russia's moves as a proper response to Western-led 'colour revolutions' (Cole, 2016, August 2). Thus, Moscow's support for Chinese statements about the Western 'hand' behind Hong Kong's protests can be seen not only as an opportunistic move, aimed at scoring points with a partner, but also as a reflection of a deeper—and shared—suspicion about Western motives.

The converging worldviews seem to lead to sharing 'best authoritarian practices'. The legislation related to banning foreign funding, limiting the manoeuvring room for NGOs as well as other instruments used by the governments to crack down on the opposition, strongly resembles each other. Regular consultations provide an institutional venue for sharing both regimes' experiences of stifling dissent. Both states' internal troops—Russia's National Guard (Rosgvardiya) and China's People's

Armed Police—have organized several rounds of joint exercises. This may imply increasing cooperation.

### 3 Domestic Actors: The Case of the Russian Federation

The political-economic system that has matured in Russia in the 2010s privileges a number of domestic players, including security communities, state monopolies and oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin (Dawisha, 2015; Miller, 2018; Sakwa, 2020). While those actors ultimately remain controlled by the Kremlin, they still have substantial room to manoeuvre, especially in terms of their role in the implementation of broad-brush directives issued by the Kremlin.

In terms of Russia's policy towards China, domestic actors who take part in shaping and implementing the policy represent a spectrum of attitudes. However, there are no major players who would perceive China as a threat to their political and economic interests. Even those who have not benefitted from closer cooperation as they expected in the wake of the Russian-Western post-2014 crisis—partly due to Chinese companies' unwillingness to risk secondary sanctions from the United States—have not formed an active anti-Chinese lobby.

The actors analysed in this section have been selected on the basis of their relevance for either the political system (e.g. intelligence and security services), the Russian economy (e.g. energy companies) or Russian foreign and security policy (e.g. the military-industrial complex). In addition, the (alleged) closeness of particular actors/leaders/CEOs to Vladimir Putin has been taken into consideration. All actors that have been chosen constitute the pillars of Putinism and Putin's political-economic power.

For the purpose of analysis, the chapter proposes a typology of the attitudes of particular players towards China. The first category, termed *beneficiaries*, includes those actors who have benefitted economically from closer cooperation with China and who can be seen as in favour of strengthening those ties. These actors are the most plausible candidates for the 'China lobby'. The *caught in-between* category refers to those actors who on the one hand benefit from cooperation with their Chinese counterparts but whose economic interests are also undermined by competition from China on the other. The third category, *converts*, includes those actors who have changed their attitudes towards China, from sceptical/cautious to positive, and engaged in cooperation with China, but often under the pressure from the Kremlin.

There are two main ways in which the domestic actors analysed below may influence Russia's policy towards China. First, their views have a bearing on threat perception and the threat assessment of their leadership. The absence of strong players within the Russian political-economic system who would regard China's rise as a threat to their parochial interests and thus would try to enrol the state's assistance makes it easier for the Kremlin to pursue a policy of rapprochement with Beijing. Thus, these actors partially at least 'filter' international pressures and

opportunities, such as power asymmetry, and mitigate factors such as historical grievances or suspicions. Second, domestic actors are of primary importance in the implementation process, in the course of which they can modify policies' outcomes compared to the original intentions of the leadership. While they are obliged to follow general directions from the Kremlin, in many cases the details of a policy are left to their own discretion.

### ***3.1 Beneficiaries***

*Beneficiaries* include those domestic actors who have systematically benefitted from cooperation with China and can be expected to act as an informal 'lobby', making a case for ever deeper ties. The two biggest beneficiaries—Rosneft and Novatek—represent the energy sector, oil and liquefied natural gas (LNG), respectively. Other players that have also benefitted from Sino-Russian cooperation include Russian Railways, a state-owned monopoly; Roskomnadzor, a state cyberspace watchdog; and Rosgvardiya, a militarized internal security agency.

Rosneft, Russia's leading state-owned oil company, can be considered the oldest and most consistent beneficiary of China's rise and of closer collaboration between Russia and China. As early as 2004, Chinese banks provided the US\$6 billion loan that allowed Rosneft (with the help of Vneshekonombank acting as intermediary) to take over Yuganskneftegas and thus profit from dismantling Yukos, the company owned by Mikhail Khodorkovsky (Meidan, 2016, p. 11). In return, Rosneft entered into a long-term oil supply contract ('Russia And China Strike A Deal', 2009, November 2). Several years later, in 2009, as part of negotiations over the route of the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) pipeline, Rosneft received a US\$15 billion loan from the China Development Bank and entered into another long-term oil supply contract (Sotiriou, 2014, p. 220). Even temporary setbacks did not discourage Rosneft from increasing cooperation with China. In 2011, a dispute over pricing took place, as a result of which Rosneft agreed to reduce the price for oil sold to China. Regardless of this dispute, Rosneft chose to conclude another long-term contract in 2013 (Rosneft, 2013, June 21). Following that deal, Rosneft's Chinese partner, China National Petroleum Corporation, CNPC, provided it with US\$70 billion prepayments, which initially enabled Rosneft to complete a takeover of the TNK-BP joint venture ('Rosneft Says China Starts', 2014, January 15) and later allowed for debt repayment despite Western sanctions (Farchy, 2015, November 25).

The unintended outcome of Rosneft's close ties with Chinese counterparts has been the de facto revision of Russia's energy strategy. Since 2003, the Kremlin planned to diversify oil exports to Asia, including such customers as China, Japan, South Korea and Southeast Asian states, having hoped to reach the level of 1/3 of its oil and gas resources to be sold in the eastern markets. The construction of two branches of the ESPO pipeline—one to China and one to the Pacific coast—was supposed to ensure that diversification. However, as a result of Rosneft's activities,

China has emerged as the dominant buyer, purchasing between 70 and 80% of the oil sent to Asia ('Viewpoint: China to maintain', 2018, December 28).

What adds to Rosneft's weight in the Russian political-economic system is the position of Igor Sechin, its CEO, and the de facto *kurator* of the Russian oil industry. Sechin is considered to be one of Putin's most trusted allies, which may also explain why Rosneft's setbacks (such as the failed investment deal with the Chinese company CEFC) have not weakened his position. With Rosneft as his main instrument, Sechin can be considered the most powerful proponent of close cooperation with China in Putin's entourage.

Novatek, a publicly listed company, has emerged as the key player in the Russian LNG sector. Novatek began its cooperation with China in 2013. At that time, having faced a stalemate in talks with Gazprom over a gas pipeline route, Beijing decided to engage with the nascent Russian LNG sector. Chinese energy company, CNPC, purchased a 20% stake in Novatek's Yamal LNG project. China's Silk Road Fund, created to help with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, bought another 9.9% of the project's shares in 2016 (Novatek, 2016, March 15). This move was followed by \$12 billion in loans provided to Novatek by the Chinese banks ('China Lenders Provide \$12 bln', 2016, April 28). This financial injection enabled the company to start the Yamal LNG project ahead of schedule and avoid the fallout from Western sanctions. In 2019, two Chinese energy companies, CNOOC and CNODC, acquired 20% of the shares of another Novatek LNG project, the Arctic LNG-2 (Novatek, 2019, July 22).

While Novatek remains a privately owned energy company, its owners, Leonid Mikhelson and Gennady Timchenko, are considered to belong to Putin's circle of friends. They both vehemently deny the connection, although Novatek's successes in the tight-knit Russian political economy are difficult to explain without receiving some support from the Kremlin. The US government recognized Timchenko's links with the Kremlin when it included him on the sanctions list in July 2014 (Belton, 2020).

Russian Railways, even before the ESPO pipeline was built, profited from links with China as the company delivered oil sold by Rosneft to China. The monopolist joined the circle of beneficiaries with the establishment of China-Europe cargo railway connections. What is now part of the overarching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) began in 2011, with cargo trains sent from China's central and western provinces to Germany and Poland. The route via Kazakhstan, Russia and Belarus offers the most convenient, shortest and cheapest connection. Russian Railways acts as the operator on the territory of the Russian Federation, benefitting from the surging number of trains travelling in both directions. The Russian company also established the Eurasian Railway Alliance with railway operators from Kazakhstan and Belarus.

Roskomnadzor, the Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media, has increasingly been tasked with stricter control over Russian cyberspace. For the last couple of years, Russian authorities have been exploring different options for Internet and cyberspace control, with informal censorship hidden behind the façade of laws against extremism and the

concept of the sovereign Internet as the most recent iteration of these plans. In this area, its Chinese counterpart, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), seems to have the most to offer among potential international partners. Formal and informal cooperation with China offers the opportunity to exchange ‘best practices’ and transplant at least some Chinese solutions—both legislative and practical-technical—onto Russian territory. Both commercial cooperation, in particular in the area of 5G, and international collaboration in international fora will strengthen this link.

Rosgvardiya, the Federal Service of the Troops of the National Guard, was created in April 2016 with the major, albeit unofficial, task of protecting regime security. Its Chinese counterpart, the People’s Armed Police, can share authoritarian ‘best practices’. Less than a month after it was established, Rosgvardiya signed an agreement with its Chinese counterpart to conduct joint ‘anti-terrorist’ exercises. The first edition, codenamed ‘Cooperation 2016’, took place in the summer of 2016, with subsequent joint drills in 2017 and 2019.

### 3.2 *Caught In-Betweens*

*Caught in-betweens* include actors who face contradictory incentives in terms of their engagement with China. On the one hand, cooperation with China provides them with tangible economic benefits. On the other hand, their Chinese counterparts have emerged as potential competitors in third markets. This group includes Rosatom, Rosoboronexport and Russian United Aircraft Corporation (OAK).

Rosatom, a state-owned corporation and major exporter of civilian nuclear technology, has been present in the Chinese market since the 1990s. It constructed four nuclear units at the Tianwan nuclear power plant: the first two by 2007 and the other two by 2018–2019 (NS Energy, n.d.; Thomas, 2018, p. 238). Rosatom entered the Chinese market before the domestic nuclear boom. Since then, Chinese companies have gained expertise by collaborating with all major nuclear energy producers. However, despite what might look like a saturated domestic market, in 2018 Rosatom managed to sign a contract for an additional four blocks: two at Tianwan NPP and two at a new location, Xudapu NPP. In May 2021, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping witnessed (virtually) the ceremony of laying the foundations for two blocks at Tianwan and Xudapu (‘Xi, Putin Witness Launch’, 2021, May 20).

Rosatom has managed to maintain its presence in the Chinese nuclear market despite its Chinese counterparts’ making enormous progress in the last decade. It is impossible to say with certainty to what extent China still needs Russian-made reactors and how much it is a gesture towards Russia, an element of transferring benefits to key players in the Russian economic system. At the same time, Chinese companies have the potential to emerge as competitors in third markets, even though they are still newcomers. So far, China has been building nuclear power plants only in Pakistan and Argentina, but its prospects in the market are growing in tandem with its impressive domestic economic developments. Its cooperation with France has

made its entrance on the British nuclear market highly plausible (Hinkley Point project), whereas the UK market remains practically closed for Rosatom.

The Russian military-industrial complex began to cooperate with China in the early 1990s. At that time, orders from the People's Liberation Army (PLA) literally saved the Russian arms producers from collapse. Following the consolidation of the sector in the 2000s under the aegis of Rostekh, a state-owned enterprise, cooperation with China has waxed and waned. Rosoboronexport, a subsidiary of Rostekh and an arms exporter monopoly, however, regarded China as both a potential buyer and an actual competitor. In the mid-2000s, Russian exports to China were brought to a halt due to accusations of reverse engineering and intellectual property theft. Rosoboronexport gradually revived its exports to China, with major contracts on Su-35 fighter jets and S-400 anti-missile systems concluded in 2014 and 2015, respectively. China remains a potential buyer of other high-end weapons systems (including fifth-generation fighter jets) as well as a customer for their servicing. China's defiance of US sanctions on Rosoboronexport raised the importance of Beijing as a customer unwilling to bow to US pressure (even though India and Turkey have challenged the United States on this point as well).

However, the number of weapons systems in which the PLA could be interested is tending to decrease (see Chapter "Russian-Chinese Military-Technological Cooperation and the Ukrainian Factor" by Sarah Kirchberger). China's growing military-industrial complex has matured over the last decade and has emerged not only as a reliable supplier of its own armed forces but also as a serious competitor to Rosoboronexport in third markets. Chinese corporations offer comparable equipment for lower prices, including weapons systems constructed on the basis of Russian originals (see Chapter "Russia-China Naval Partnership and Its Significance" by Alexandre Sheldon-Duplaix). While the Russian military intervention in Syria showcased and advertised Russian weapons—a feature the Chinese companies are not able to replicate — the Chinese military-industrial complex has excelled in certain types of technologies where its Russian counterpart lags behind, such as drones (see Chapter "Chinese and Russian Military Modernization and the Fourth Industrial Revolution" by Richard A. Bitzinger and Michael Raska).

Whereas Rosatom and Rosoboronexport have long had experience in dealing with China, the Russian United Aircraft Corporation (OAK) is a relative newcomer to the world of Sino-Russian politics. The Russian state-owned enterprise (SOE) is engaged in a joint venture with the Commercial Aircraft Corporation of China (COMAC), named China-Russia Commercial Aircraft International Corporation Limited (CRAIC). Both companies aim at producing a wide-body passenger jet (CR929) that aspires to challenge the Boeing-Airbus duopoly (Reid, 2019, August 20). At the same time, both states can be expected to compete in the market of narrow-body passenger jets. OAK is attempting to launch MC-21 while COMAC the C919 (Pask, 2020, April 8). While both states' domestic airlines may be forced to purchase their local types of planes, fierce competition in third markets can be expected. Thus, OAK is an exemplar of a domestic player both benefitting from cooperation with China and potentially suffering from competition.



### 3.3 *Converts*

*Converts* refer to those actors whose attitudes towards China have evolved from distrust and suspicion towards greater openness for cooperation, but often under pressure and on direct orders from the Kremlin. This category includes domestic security services and the armed forces as well as Gazprom.

The Federal Security Service (FSB), whose responsibilities range from counter-espionage to preventing illegal migration and border security, used to regard China as a potential challenge in a number of respects. Industrial and traditional espionage used to be a major threat emanating from China. In the Russian Far East, illegal migration prevailed as a key problem (regardless of its real scale). These two problems stood out in the mid-2000s. Since then, a number of factors seem to have led to changes in the FSB's attitudes. Legislative solutions and heavier policing have led to the stabilization of the situation in the Russian Far East. The rise in anti-Western attitudes, coupled with the authoritarian turn since Putin's return to the presidency in spring 2012, has paved the way for closer collaboration with China. As in the case of Rosgvardia, Chinese domestic security structures have a lot to offer in terms of sharing experiences and 'best practices'.

The General Staff and the armed forces have cooperated with their Chinese counterparts on a number of occasions. The scenarios of the 2010 and 2014 editions of the *Vostok* strategic exercises still indicated China as a potential military threat. Thus, the Eastern Military District was provided with modernised equipment on par with other military districts. The most visible sign of changing attitudes on the part of the General Staff and the armed forces was a shift in the scenario of the *Vostok* strategic military exercise. The Chinese troops were invited and participated (3000 troops) in the 2018 edition of the exercises, the largest strategic exercise since the 1980s (Boulègue, 2018). However, as the majority of observers agree that the armed forces follow political directives and do not play an independent political role, this shift can be the result of a political decision by the Kremlin rather than a sign of evolving perception on the part of the military. It is difficult to assess to what extent internal assessments of Chinese power and intentions have mattered. The consideration of the Chinese armed forces as a necessary partner and the experience gathered in the course of joint exercises and contacts might have played a role in this regard.

These actors would prefer to remain on the sidelines of Russian-Chinese cooperation, but have been incorporated as a result of pressure from the top leadership.

Gazprom's cooperation with China can be interpreted as mostly politically driven, especially when compared to other players in the energy sector discussed earlier. While Gazprom attempted to enter the Chinese market throughout the 2000s, many of these attempts could be considered either half-hearted or insincere. Both Gazprom and the Kremlin attempted to convince China to construct the *Altai* pipeline, which would have linked West Siberian gas fields with northwestern China (Henderson, 2014). From the Russian perspective, such a solution would have allowed the exercise of leverage over the European Union, as these fields supply European customers. From the Chinese perspective, the proposed pipeline

made much less sense, especially since the successful construction of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline from Turkmenistan. In addition, China was not ready to pay the European prices that Gazprom had expected.

Against the backdrop of Gazprom's failures, the conclusion of the contract on the eastern gas pipeline, *Power of Siberia*, in 2014, was a game changer. The very signing of the contract needs to be ascribed to pressure from the very top, i.e. Vladimir Putin's personal engagement in the last phase of negotiations. Gazprom seemed to oppose the conditions offered by its Chinese counterparts, but following the crisis in relations with the West over the annexation of Crimea, Moscow needed a highly publicized success. However, even this contract did not lead to the expansion of cooperation on a scale that could be compared to that of either Rosneft or Novatek. Following the conclusion of the contract, Gazprom refused the Chinese offer of prepayment for gas deliveries and invested its own capital in the construction of the pipeline and the necessary accompanying infrastructure. The pipeline began its operations towards the end of 2019, and Gazprom insisted on constructing additional pipelines, the *Altai*, renamed *Power of Siberia-2* and the *Power of Siberia-3*, which is supposed to go through Mongolia. The future of both projects remains uncertain, however, especially when compared with other projects pursued by Gazprom more successfully in Europe (namely, Nord Stream 2 and Turk Stream).

#### 4 Domestic Political Obstacles

While domestic politics tends to be conducive to the Sino-Russian relationship, at times it constitutes the key obstacle to Moscow and Beijing advancing their ties. The most acute example has been the case of the failed investment of CEFC in Rosneft.

In 2017, CEFC, a private Chinese company that quickly and unexpectedly rose to prominence in the oil sector, was about to purchase 14% of the shares of Russia's oil behemoth Rosneft for the sum of US\$9 billion. The shares were to be bought from a joint venture established by Glencore and the Qatar Investment Fund (Kaczmarek et al., 2017). This transaction would have made CEFC a major player in the global oil market and China a major stakeholder in the Russian state-owned oil giant. However, before the deal was finalized, the CEFC chairman was arrested for suspected 'economic crimes' and his company effectively nationalized (Zhdannikov, 2018). The reasons behind this move remain unknown. The ultimate result, however, was that China lost an opportunity to become a major shareholder in the key Russian oil sector corporation. Domestic politics seems to have taken precedence over strategic considerations and the cooperation hailed with Russia.

Russian domestic politics have also occasionally intervened in the relationship. On 25 February 2021, the Russian court convicted Vladimir Vasilyev to 8 years for handing over 'information that constituted a state secret to China's intelligence services' ('Russia jails man', 2021, February 25). This was one of several cases made public in 2020–2021. Prior to that, the Russian authorities appear to have kept sensitive cases concerning China under the radar. This event and the publicity

surrounding the case can be interpreted either as a clear signal sent to China, or as proof of the existence of Sino-sceptic factions in Russian power structures (such as the FSB) and of Sino-sceptic individuals in the leadership (as one of them would have to agree to making the information about the spy case public).

## 5 Conclusions

The literature is dominated by widespread scepticism towards the role of domestic factors in Sino-Russian relations. As this chapter illustrated, while not often the main driver behind the Sino-Russian rapprochement, domestic politics cannot be ignored. Domestic politics has provided a fruitful backdrop for Sino-Russian cooperation. The fears of regime survival are bringing Moscow and Beijing closer together, regardless of a growing asymmetry between the two powers. As this chapter has demonstrated, a number of key Russian domestic players have benefitted from closer ties with China, and a pro-Chinese lobby seems to remain prevalent in the corridors of the Kremlin.

This conducive domestic backdrop to bilateral collaboration makes Sino-Russian ties more durable and more resilient to potential changes. They go beyond geopolitical and strategic considerations, becoming entrenched in the political-economic structures of both states' ruling regimes.

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