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BOOK REVIEWS

A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World, by Bobo Lo. London: Penguin, 2017, pp. 224.

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A wary embrace: What the China–Russia relationship means for the world is a useful and concise tool to understand the multifaceted relationship between Moscow and Beijing. Drawing on what he previously labelled as a “Russian-Chinese axis of convenience,” Bobo Lo elaborates on the trajectories undertaken by the two countries and disentangles a plurality of exogenous factors that pushed them towards a deeper integration.

The book is divided in four chapters: in the first one Lo traces the relations between the two countries back to the birth of the People’s Republic of China in 1949 and the “unbreakable friendship” between Mao and Stalin. In the second and third chapters, the core of his analysis, the author explores the bilateral economic, military and political ties and the different understandings that China and Russia have of the world order. Finally, he outlines multiple likely scenarios that could materialize as a consequence of Donald Trump’s election at the White House.

From the historical overview it emerges that despite the ideological affinity, the diplomatic relations between Moscow and Beijing soon deteriorated. The nega-

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tive peak was reached with the border clashes between Soviet and Chinese troops along the Ussuri River in 1969 and the so-called Ping Pong diplomacy, with the alliance between the US and China that definitely split the Communist bloc.

Without being historically deterministic, Bobo Lo wants us to keep in mind that over the last fifty years the moments of divergence between Moscow and Beijing clearly outnumbered those marked by common purpose. This aspect is key to put in perspective and relativize the strength and solidity of the current alliance. The dynamics positively changed in the 90's when, in contrast to the scenario depicted by Fukuyama in *The End of history* (1992), Boris Yeltsin and Jang Zemin jointly invoked for a "Multipolar world. Later on, Russia and China – among others – established the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, solved border disputes, and agreed on the "One China Policy". Multiple exogenous factors more prominently pushed China and Russia towards a greater integration: first the NATO enlargement in Eastern Europe in the early 2000's and the "Pivot to Asia" doctrine of Obama, both perceived as two forms of containment by the US against Russia and China respectively. Secondly, the 2008 economic crisis which reshuffled the hierarchies and economic flows in the international system. The (relative) fall of the European demand of energy, combined with the EU sanctions after the Crimean war, brought Russia to partly re-orient the pipeline networks towards China that also launched the well-known infrastructural project of the Belt and Road Initiative across Eurasia. Nevertheless, under the surface of an economic complementarity, with Russia providing energy and arms and China selling products and building infrastructures, there are latent contradictions. The Popular Republic of China is trying to diversify its energy suppliers, especially after the fall in Liquefied Natural Gas prices, by importing gas from Middle East and Central Asia and reducing the importance of Russia for the Chinese economy. Furthermore, it reduced its foreign direct invest-

ments to Russia in favor of other countries like Kazakhstan. For its part, Moscow is trying to contain China and opts for balance of power strategies by taking sides with China's regional competitors within multilateral frameworks such as the BRICS or the SCO. In the Pacific, Russia also tries to cultivate ties with China's rivals, India and Vietnam, and play a "swing power" role in the triangle China-Russia-Japan: on the one hand it often carries out joint military exercises with China; on the other "it played-off Beijing and Tokyo against each other in negotiations over the routing of the East Siberian-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline" (p. 100).

Remarkably, China and Russia have different understandings of the future world order. Moscow strives for upgrading its "swing power" role also at the systemic level by enacting a triple-pole system where Russia fluctuates between Washington and Beijing. Differently, Beijing looks for a "new bipolarism plus" with China and the US as the two superpowers and other regional powers like Germany, Turkey or Russia.

In depicting this ambivalent relationship between Russia and China, Bobo Lo can be placed in the middle of two opposite poles within a growing and open debate in International Relations. At the extremes, some scholars argue that the alliance between Russia and China is a mere illusion (see, for instance, Friedman 2018); others maintain that these relations are increasingly consolidating (Mações 2018, Trenin 2019). The oxymoron *A wary embrace* perfectly condenses Lo's thought in between, though closer to a skeptical position.

In cautiously foreseeing different future scenarios, Lo predicts how institutional constraints, such as the Cold War interpretative schemes of the diplomatic corps and the idea of path-dependency would have hindered president Trump's potential positive attitude towards Putin. If we consider current dynamics, Putin seems to play exactly within the framework outlined in the book, trying to position Russia

as a swing power between the East and the West. On the one hand he searches for geopolitical and ideological contact points with European countries such as with president Macron's France. On the other, Xi Jinping is the counterpart that Putin has met the most during his office.

To conclude, this book is useful to understand the different layers and the complexity of the Russian-Chinese relationship. Nevertheless what could have been further elaborated is the interplay with regional dynamics, such as the cooperation/competition in Central Asia and the Arctic.

Furthermore, probably influenced by his background as diplomat in the 90's, Bobo Lo implicitly sees the Russian-Chinese ties with typical Cold War lenses and compares them with strategic alliances such as the US-UK relations in that period. In so doing, he pays less attention to the structural changes occurred in international system in transition towards a multipolar order where the interactions have more diversified and fluid. Against this backdrop, one could imagine that Russia and China will continue to pursue their own foreign policy independently, without binding themselves in a traditional Cold-War-like strategic alliance, thus staying firmly connected in their "wary embrace". The changing nature of alliances has to be a key concern for Western decision-makers in order to deal with new international scenarios.

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