Book Review

Thomas Stephan Eder. (2014). *China–Russia Relations in Central Asia: Energy Policy, Beijing’s New Assertiveness and 21st Century Geopolitics*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 151 pp.

This is a relatively thin volume by a young scholar, but it offers interesting insights for researchers in the fields of Chinese foreign policy, Russian foreign policy and Central Asian studies. The author focusses on the rise of China as a world power and its related re-negotiation processes with other major powers. In the case of Sino-Russian relations, energy figures prominently in both countries’ respective foreign policies, and Central Asia with its vast energy reserves emerges as a significant factor in the bilateral relationship.

Eder believes that the neglect of Chinese language sources often leads to a pessimistic realist outlook on Sino-Russian relations, and he proposes a two-pronged neoclassical realist-perception theoretical approach. Eder considers that the perception of Russia within the Chinese foreign policy elite has substantial influence on strategy formulation in Beijing, but one has to appreciate that the publications and public statements of this elite reflect the thinking of the leadership and serve to rationalize the leadership’s policies.

The author’s most important contribution lies in his careful analysis of the Chinese literature on the bilateral relationship, but unfortunately there is no corresponding analysis of the related Russian literature. Hence the neoclassical realist-perception theoretical approach is largely one-sided, not two-pronged.

Eder is probably right in suggesting that the Chinese foreign policy elite’s perception of Russia is that it is a fickle and unreliable partner in opposing American unipolarity, but the Chinese authorities have no intention to strongly oppose American hegemony either; since the early 1980s they have wanted to maintain a peaceful international environment to concentrate on China’s modernization, and the cultivation of a friendly relationship with the US is the most significant part of this foreign policy
line. So the Chinese authorities understand Russia’s vital interests well, and do not consider that they contradict China’s core interests.

Eder’s volume also provides a good summary of energy projects involving China, Russia and Central Asia in the context of their respective policies. The troubled energy ties between China and Russia had the former developing a strong interest in co-operation with Central Asia, as Russia refused to allow Chinese companies to enter its upstream market. China props up Central Asia’s banking system with low-interest loans, and its exports to the region have skyrocketed too.

On the other hand, after Russia had been hit hard by the international financial crisis in 2008–09, it began to seek co-operation with China, especially to secure loans and investment. Meanwhile, its difficulties with the Central Asian countries facilitated China’s pipeline projects with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, as well as their projects in the nuclear and hydro power sectors despite Russian opposition.

Following Yu Bin’s study of Sino-Russian relations, the author groups the available literature into three schools: limitationists, alarmists and identity literature. The former appears to be the mainstream one, and tends to emphasize the differences and problems in the bilateral relationship. The alarmist school is concerned with the themes of the “China threat” and “Russian bashing”, and therefore anticipates a smooth development of Sino-Russian relations leading to a security alliance. The identity literature focusses on the importance of the changing socio-political-economic identities in both countries, after comparing the reform processes of the two transitional economies.

Finally, Eder attempts to develop a chronological scheme on the Chinese foreign policy elite’s analyses of the impact of Central Asia’s energy on Sino-Russian relations. This scheme begins in 1997 when the Sino-Kazakh oil pipeline was agreed upon and China’s national oil companies made several acquisitions in Kazakhstan. From December 1991 to September 1997, there was an earlier phase of “forming good-neighbourly relations”. The second phase, from September 1997 to June 2001, was one of “strengthening co-operation in the field of energy”. The third phase since June 2001 has been one of “developing comprehensive co-operative relations under bilateral and Shanghai Co-operation Organization frameworks”. One may also consider that the most recent phase began with the international financial crisis in 2008.

Up until 2001, energy relations and Central Asia did not feature prominently as potential challenges to Sino-Russian relations. By the turn of the
century, the energy relations between China and Russia were still perceived to have a positive impact on the bilateral ties, and Central Asia was often neglected in the Chinese scholars’ study of the bilateral relationship. The US and Japan, however, began to enter into the picture.

According to Eder’s observations, in recent years, while several Chinese studies conclude that Russian and Chinese interests do collide in the Central Asian energy sector, many Chinese academics argue that Sino-Russian long-term interests are congruent including maintaining regional stability and security, promoting economic and social development, and counterbalancing the US presence in the region.

The Afghanistan situation is considered a significant factor by Yang Lei. If the US succeeds in pushing Hamid Karzai and the Taliban to form a joint government, the permanent US presence would be likely to damage US–Russian relations and induce closer Sino-Russian co-operation. However, in the context of an American withdrawal and expanding Chinese influence in Central Asia, sharpening frictions between China and Russia would probably occur.

So far, China has deferred the Russian interests in Central Asia to maintain their strategic partnership. Eder, however, considers that Central Asia’s centrality to China’s energy security and the inevitable closer energy relations between China and Central Asia would mean that China would eventually replace Russia as the dominant economic actor in Central Asia. It is difficult to imagine that Russia will accept this scenario.

The Chinese leadership will likely to continue to provide enough time and space for Russia to adjust to China’s rise and learn to appreciate its intention to maintain a peaceful international environment for compromises to be reached. But this may not be certain.

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