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Theoretical rigor and the study of contemporary cases: explaining post-cold war China–Russia relations

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Abstract

It has been widely noted that China and Russia have grown progressively closer over the last two decades. Although the scholarly literature has offered detailed descriptions and various ad hoc explanations of this trend, the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship has been the subject of very little scrutiny using rigorous theory, which has obstructed hypothesis formation and evaluation. Moreover, the cooperative post-Cold War trend in the bilateral relationship seems puzzling for baseline versions of each of the major paradigms of international relations theory: realism, constructivism and liberalism. For realists, China's rising power, coupled with its geographic proximity and longstanding border disputes with Russia, made it a present and growing threat to Russian security at the end of the Cold War. Why did China's rise not incur balancing from Russia and increasing bilateral hostility, rather than reconciliation? For constructivists, the stark differences in political ideologies and national cultures, as well as a long history of antagonism, presaged continued post-Cold War animosity. How have these historical animosities and ideological rifts been mitigated or overcome? Finally, both countries were increasingly integrated into the US-led international order immediately following the Cold War, with relatively low interdependence in their bilateral relationship. From a liberal perspective, why did this not prompt the two countries to improve political relations with the West while holding each other at arm's length? The papers in this special issue develop and apply nuanced theoretical arguments to derive testable hypotheses for the cooperative trend in China–Russia relations. In contrast to existing scholarship, these papers offer generalizable insights that both improve our understanding of a crucially important contemporary case, while also advancing IR theory in substantial ways.

Keywords International relations theory · China-Russia relations · Causality · Qualitative methods · US-China relations · US-Russia relations

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It has been widely noted that China and Russia have grown progressively closer over the last two decades, with some going so far as to suggest that the two are already informal allies or that formal alliance is imminent. Experts on the bilateral relationship have documented dramatic increases in cooperation on virtually all dimensions. Diplomatically, China and Russia have signed numerous treaties and issued several joint declarations proclaiming that their relations have grown increasingly positive,[1] and face-to-face meetings among their top leaders have become quite frequent (Fu 2016). Their economic cooperation, though still not extraordinary by global standards, has increased rapidly, most recently through a $400 billion energy agreement. China is now Russia's largest trade partner, and there remains plenty of untapped potential for cooperation, e.g., in the Russian Far East and in Central Asia through the China-led Belt and Road Initiative (Lotspeich 2010; Brenton 2013; Fu 2016; Charap et al. 2017). Relations have also steadily grown more institutionalized, characterized by increasingly structured and binding bilateral treaties, and by the two countries jointly occupying key positions in emerging international groupings such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICs (Glosny 2010; Cox 2016; Ambrosio 2017). And militarily, China and Russia are increasingly coordinated, conducting joint exercises, extensive exchanges of technology and personnel, and high-level consultations that have moved substantially toward integrated military command (Yuan 2010; Ryan 2010; Fu 2016; Korolev, this volume).

Understanding the causes of this cooperative trend is of critical practical importance. Given the combination of China's massive and growing economic power, Russia's still-formidable military power, and the two countries' geographic and demographic gravity, a China–Russia "axis" is uniquely capable of challenging the power of the USA and its allies or revising important aspects of the US-led international order. Yet whether and to what degree China and Russia will do so, and the resulting effect on the shape of the international order, depend greatly on the depth, breadth and durability of their partnership. This, in turn, depends on the two countries' motivations for their cooperation: what are the national goals, beliefs and external incentives that have pushed them increasingly closer over the last 25 years?

There remains a great deal of dissonance on these questions in the literature on China–Russia relations. Some see China–Russia cooperation as an "axis of convenience" that belies preferences and values that conflict more than they accord (e.g., Lo 2008, 2017; Kotkin 2009; Menon 2009). Others see it as a deep and enduring relationship based on common identities, economic interests, and/or geopolitical goals (e.g., Rozman 2014; Cox 2016; Wishnick 2017). Yet these disagreements have been largely unproductive: despite a wealth of excellent scholarship on this case that has thoroughly documented the evolution of the relationship and identified

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[1] The two countries' official characterization of their relationship in treaties and joint declarations has progressed from one of "good-neighborliness" in the early-1990s, to "constructive cooperation" in the late-1990s, to "comprehensive strategic partnership" in 2001, to "comprehensive strategic partnership and coordination" in 2012, to "comprehensive strategic partnership of equality, mutual trust, mutual support, common prosperity and long-lasting friendship" in 2016.

many potential factors at work, little progress has been made in reaching consensus regarding the character and causes of China–Russia cooperation.

This article argues that answering these questions requires careful attention to theory. Yet theory has been sorely lacking from existing scholarship on China–Russia relations. This has caused scholars to talk past each other, basing their arguments on unstated assumptions and unspecified causal mechanisms that inform which evidence is considered and how it is interpreted. This lack of explicit theory precludes the evaluation of competing hypotheses against the empirical record, and thus the formation of logically coherent and empirically supported explanations for increasing China–Russia cooperation.

The papers in this special issue develop and apply well-specified theories to post-Cold War China–Russia relations to explain empirical phenomena that are puzzling for baseline versions of the three main theoretical approaches in IR: realism, liberalism and constructivism. Importantly, this volume is not intended to be the last word on the China–Russia relationship, but rather as a first step toward productive, theoretically informed scholarly debate. It both builds on the previous work of area specialists by introducing theories of international conflict and cooperation, which can then inform subsequent empirical work. The papers in this volume present hypotheses for increasing post-Cold War China–Russia cooperation, and test them against the default alternative, structural realism. This lays the groundwork for subsequent scholarship to test these hypotheses, and others, against each other in order to assess the applicability, compatibility and causal weights of alternative causal mechanisms. Furthermore, the novel theoretical contributions in this volume advance IR scholarship more broadly, and introduce important mechanisms that may generalize to other cases.

This introductory article first reviews the scholarship on China–Russia relations through the lens of the methodological literature on causal inference and explanation in qualitative research, to demonstrate the necessity of theory for explaining outcomes in a single case. Next, it shows that baseline versions of the major IR paradigms are inadequate to explain increasing China–Russia cooperation over time, and lays out the special issue's goals in introducing novel theories to explain this case. Finally, the article summarizes the individual papers in the special issue, and, while acknowledging their limitations, argues that they collectively represent a major contribution to scholarship on China–Russia relations and IR theory more broadly.

Scholarship on China–Russia relations and the necessity of theory

Despite its centrality to contemporary international politics and the extensive attention devoted to it by area specialists and policy experts, the post-Cold War Sino-Russian relationship has been the subject of very little scrutiny using rigorous theory, and has been virtually absent from the leading IR journals (a rare exception is Kerr 2005).[2] The existing literature has offered detailed descriptions of the case,

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[2] Two theoretically informed works on China–Russia relations are not discussed below because they attempt to explain a different outcome than do the papers in the current volume. First, Andrej Krickovic (2017) applies the theoretical logic of power shifts developed by Dale Copeland (2000) to explain why

characterizing and categorizing the nature of the China–Russia relationship, and documenting significant events and developments to illustrate the extent to which it has improved over time. However, myriad ad hoc explanations of this cooperative trend have also been advanced, with correspondingly diverse predictions about the durability and implications of Sino-Russian cooperation. Many of these explanations center on the role of the USA, which has adopted several policies that have been purported to drive China and Russia closer together, including NATO expansion, democracy promotion abroad, the development and deployment of US missile defense systems in Europe and Asia, and American denial of Chinese and Russian identity goals by insisting on a "unipolar" rather than a "multipolar" international order (e.g., Kerr 2005; Kuchins 2007; Deng 2007; Li 2007; Lo 2008; Menon 2009; Weitz 2012; Lukin 2015; Cox 2016; Charap et al. 2017). But additional causes of increasing China–Russia cooperation have also been put forward. These include shared illiberal regime types and common preferences regarding norms of sovereignty and human rights (Menon 2009; Rozman 2014; Lukin 2015; Cox 2016; Charap et al. 2017), compatible political models and national identities (Kerr 2005; Ferdinand 2007; Kuchins 2007; Rozman 2014; Trenin 2012; Wishnick 2017), mutual concerns about ethnic separatism (Kerr 2005; Lo 2008; Weitz 2012; Odgaard 2017), prospective gains from economic cooperation (Kerr 2005; Wilson 2004; Swanström 2014; Lukin 2015; Trenin 2012; Gabuev 2016; Charap et al. 2017), and personal affinity among national leaders (Ferdinand 2007; Lo 2008; Gabuev 2016).

Problematically, however, few of these explanations for increasing China–Russia cooperation are grounded in explicit theoretical terms, and those that are gain little explanatory leverage from the theories upon which they draw (see below).[3] Yet theory is a logically essential component of explanation.[4] Thus, any claim about the causes of increasing China–Russia cooperation necessarily rests upon a theoretical framework, even if the underlying theory is left implicit or underspecified. Theories are general statements about the causal relationship between two (or more) variables, which specify how change in the causal variable(s) produces change in the outcome (Van Evera 1997). Theories allow observers to simplify an infinitely complex reality that could not otherwise be understood (Geddes 2003, 5, 20, 32,

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Footnote 2 (continued)

Russia is challenging the status quo order and China is not, despite their bilateral cooperation, but does not attempt to explain that cooperation itself. Second, Chaka Ferguson (2012) argues that China and Russia are engaging in "soft balancing" against the USA through the institutional norms of the SCO, but his argument does not attempt to explain the increase in China–Russia cooperation over time and is limited to Central Asia in its scope.

[3] Merely referring to theory explicitly is obviously no panacea—it must be done in a way that carefully specifies causal mechanisms and observable implications of competing theories, so that their hypotheses can be appraised against the empirical record. Although there have been a handful of works that advance explanations of post-Cold War China–Russia cooperation that draw explicitly on IR theory (Kerr 2005; Ferdinand 2007; Li 2007; Odgaard 2017; Wishnick 2017), these attempts share the shortcomings of the atheoretical literature, as discussed in detail below.

[4] This claim is axiomatic in the philosophy of science literature. For particularly trenchant explications of the logical necessity of theory for explanation in social science, see Brady 1995; McKeown 1999; Waldner 2007; Clark and Primo 2012).

38). In other words, facts cannot simply "speak for themselves" in explaining events, as practitioners who reject theory often assert.[5] Theories are necessary to identify which of an innumerable number of potential causal factors are likely to affect the outcome of interest, and, just as importantly, to specify causal mechanisms: *how* particular factors generate their effects, individually or in combination. An explanation, as opposed to an inference, must identify the causal mechanisms by which one set of variables affects another, not simply establish that a causal relationship exists (Miller 1987; Brady 1995; Waldner 2007).[6]

In principle, there is no reason that these essential functions of theory for explanation cannot be accomplished implicitly, and thus no inherent reason to disqualify explanations that leave theory implicit. As detailed above, scholars of China–Russia relations have clearly been able to identify many plausible causes of increasing bilateral cooperation. Moreover, it is certainly possible that the mechanisms by which these hypothesized causes have produced Sino-Russian cooperation can be specified in terms specific to the China–Russia relationship, without reference to the general theory from which they are derived. In practice, however, when theories are left implicit it tends to be because analysts are not conscious that they are employing theory at all, and thus are doing so non-rigorously via analogy or "folk wisdom" (Krugman 1994; Walt 2005).[7] Correspondingly, explanations built on implicit or underspecified theory tend to suffer from two major problems, each of which is manifested in the literature on China–Russia relations: (1) biased or arbitrary selection of causal factors and (2) underspecification of causal mechanisms. Each of these practices results in failure to critically evaluate proposed explanations against alternatives, and hinders convincing explanation of the observed outcome: increasing China–Russia cooperation.

The first of these problems—arbitrary consideration of causal factors—can be manifested in two ways: omission and overdetermination. The former refers to explanations that focus on a single causal factor while failing to consider alternatives or to seek falsifying evidence. Examples from the China–Russia literature include explanations that privilege, *inter alia*, status motivations (Deng 2007), balance of power (Li 2007), international norms (Kaczmarski 2015; Odgaard 2017),

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[5] On the widespread resistance to theory in both policy and academic circles, see Walt (2005), Mearsheimer and Walt (2013).

[6] An explanation accounts for a specific outcome in a particular case, and includes a complete causal mechanism that explicates how the independent (causal) variable(s) produce the outcome. In contrast, inference means establishing that a causal relationship between independent and dependent variables exists in general terms, but it need not account for the outcome in any particular case, nor identify the mechanism the underpins the causal relationship.

[7] As Paul Krugman (1994) writes, "there is no alternative to models [theories]. We all think in simplified models, all the time. The sophisticated thing to do is not to pretend to stop, but to be self-conscious." Of scholars who convince themselves that they can transcend theorization, he writes, "Invariably they are fooling themselves…anyone who claims to be able to write about social issues without stooping to [theorizing]" derives insights "based essentially on the use of metaphor. And metaphor is, of course, a kind of heuristic modeling technique. In fact, we are all builders and purveyors of unrealistic simplifications. Some of us are self-aware: we use our models as metaphors. Others, including [some] people who are [otherwise] brilliant and sophisticated, are sleepwalkers: they unconsciously use metaphors as models."

economic complementarity (Swanström 2014), and national identity (Rozman 2014; Wishnick 2017) to the exclusion of any alternative hypotheses. Yet much of the evidence cited in such works—e.g., China's and Russia's common dissatisfaction with the status quo order, joint membership in the SCO and the BRICS, concerns over NATO expansion, "non-zero sum" characterization of their strategic partnership, opposition to American hegemony, and increasing bilateral trade and investment—is observationally equivalent; that is, it supports multiple alternative hypotheses. These authors vindicate their favored arguments by fiat, not by contested evaluation of their causal propositions against the empirical record. The latter would require specification of the theories underpinning both their favored explanations and competing alternatives.

A related manifestation of omission bias is the invocation of an overly broad causal factor that is consistent with multiple competing explanations. For example, Bobo Lo famously refers to the increasingly cooperative China–Russia relationship as an "axis of convenience," arguing that China and Russia are cooperating primarily due to a shared interest in "countering American 'hegemonism'" rather than to compatible identities or ideologies (Lo 2008, 16, see also 5–6, 43–44, 180–182). Yet, as the contributions of John Owen and Deborah Larson to this volume illustrate, from a constructivist point of view the impetus for China and Russia to cooperate in opposition to American power can be intimately linked to their identities and ideologies. For Larson, China and Russia are cooperating to satisfy their identity goals of regaining great power status, which the USA has denied them, while for Owen their shared illiberal ideologies have constituted the liberal USA as a common threat, and impelled Sino-Russian balancing. Furthermore, joint Sino-Russian opposition to US power could also result from either commercial factors identified by liberalism (i.e., a desire to revise the rules of the international economic order), or realist security concerns, which can be further disaggregated into concerns about American power and American intentions. Lo states his argument in a way that does not differentiate between alternative motivations for China–Russia cooperation, and therefore does not permit adjudication between competing hypotheses. Explicit attention to theory makes this problem clear.

The second way in which arbitrary selection of causal factors is manifested is overdetermination. This refers to "kitchen sink" explanations, which assign causal salience to a litany of factors without attempting to adjudicate between these potentially competing hypotheses or assign them relative weights. In other words, these kinds of explanations present laundry lists of plausible hypotheses and imply, without rigorous specification or evaluation, that "everything matters."[8] For example, Alexander Lukin (2015, 32–34) lists eight factors that have motivated China–Russia cooperation (shared preferences for multipolarity over unipolarity, strict Westphalian sovereignty, outcomes regarding Korea, Syria and Iran, revision of international

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[8] Vidya Nadkarni (2010) attempts to lay out versions of systemic-level realist, liberal and constructivist hypotheses for increasing Sino-Russian cooperation, but dismisses each as incomplete and proceeds to advance an essentially atheoretical "kitchen sink" argument that does not weight or adjudicate between competing causal factors.

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financial rules, expanded bilateral trade, development of their eastern borderlands, stability in Central Asia, and resistance to liberal values). Rajan Menon (2009, 107–110) asserts that China and Russia are driven together by shared illiberal values and Russian exports of arms and energy, but are also balancing the USA for a variety of reasons, including the USA's expansion of NATO, democracy promotion, missile defense development and denial of Chinese and Russian status goals. Charap et al. (2017, 29–37) cite the prospective benefits of bilateral economic cooperation and multilateral initiatives such as OBOR and the SCO, as well as shared authoritarian domestic values and multipolarization of the international order. None of these works specify how much each of the factors they cite have mattered, how they relate to each other (e.g., whether they are complementary or competing, their causal status in terms of necessity and sufficiency, and whether they interact to enhance or mitigate each other's effects), or what other potentially competing hypotheses might exist. These tasks require disciplined attention to theory, and are crucial for the initial step of merely establishing causal hypotheses, let alone the subsequent evaluation of those hypotheses against empirical evidence.

Importantly, this criticism of overdetermined "kitchen sink" explanations should *not* be confused with a rejection of multicausal explanations. Of course it is possible, and indeed is almost certainly true, that multiple causal factors are at work in the case of China–Russia relations. The real world is overwhelmingly complex, and thus it is likely that "lots of stuff matters." But it is precisely *because* of this overwhelming complexity that rigorous theory is needed to simplify reality, and get at the causal factors that are most important in explaining the outcome of increasing China–Russia cooperation. "Kitchen sink" assertions do not explain because they do not simplify; they do not make choices about which causal factors to focus on and why, and therefore merely reproduce a reality that is too complex to be understood. Such "explanations" that lack theoretical underpinnings are little better than pure description for advancing our causal understanding of China–Russia relations. Moreover, we do not want to presume, without careful examination, that every plausible explanation for China–Russia cooperation is necessarily correct, as kitchen sink arguments implicitly do. Rather, we want to examine which factors matter and which do not, and among those that do matter, how much. Most importantly, we want to know *why* each factor matters, i.e., the causal mechanisms underpinning the causal effects.

Rigorous specification of causal mechanisms is crucial for both adjudicating between competing hypotheses, and for aggregating supported hypotheses to form a complete multicausal explanation for an outcome in a particular case (Waldner 2007). For the first function—hypothesis testing—causal mechanisms tell analysts what evidence they should expect to find if a particular causal hypothesis is correct, and, conversely, what evidence would lead them to reject that hypothesis (e.g., Van Evera 1997; Geddes 2003; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2006; Waldner 2015). In other words, mechanisms define the observable implications of a hypothesized explanation, thereby making causal claims falsifiable and allowing contested appraisal of alternative hypotheses against the empirical record. Without well-specified causal mechanisms—i.e., without rigorous theory—we cannot adjudicate between competing hypotheses for China–Russia cooperation.

Causal mechanisms are not only essential for evaluating competing hypotheses, but also for combining complementary ones into a coherent multicausal explanation for a specific outcome in a particular case—what Katzenstein and Sil (2008) term "analytical eclecticism."[9] In explaining post-Cold War China–Russia cooperation, causal mechanisms allow us to bridge the gap between non-explanatory kitchen sink arguments, on the one hand, and monocausal arguments based on a single theory that fail to account for significant aspects of the outcome, on the other. First, mechanisms identify which causal pathways are mutually exclusive and which can potentially be combined, as well as how various causal factors might interact to produce effects in combination that neither would produce individually. Thus, mechanisms distinguish which causal factors are potentially components of the same explanation, versus which are parts of competing explanations. Secondly, mechanisms define which aspects of the outcome each variable can account for, and thus which variables are necessary to explain the outcome and which conjunction of variables is jointly sufficient to explain the outcome. This allows analysts to assign causal weights in terms of how much of the outcome each factor is necessary to account for, and to avoid overdetermination by establishing when a sufficient explanation has been reached (Waldner 2015).

Existing explanations for increasingly cooperative China–Russia relations, built on implicit theory, omit or underspecify causal mechanisms, with stark consequences. Consider, For example, one of the most important works on China–Russia relations is Deng Yong's (2007) argument that Sino-Russian cooperation has been primarily driven by status concerns, and not realist balance-of-power dynamics. Yet despite presenting a deep descriptive narrative centered on status, the theoretical underpinnings of why and how states seek status and how status concerns promote cooperation are left unspecified. Moreover, the rival realist hypothesis and its accompanying causal mechanisms, which Deng (2007, 865, 881) summarily rejects, are left entirely unstated. It is therefore impossible to know what evidence would falsify Deng's status-based argument, or which aspects of Deng's descriptive narrative are observationally equivalent (i.e., consistent with both the realist and status-based alternatives). Indeed, this characterizes much of the evidence he cites—e.g., shared revisionist preferences for the international order, joint membership in the SCO, Russian concerns over NATO expansion, and a "non-zero sum" characterization of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership vis-à-vis the USA. In the absence of clearly stated mechanisms, Deng cannot adjudicate between his favored explanation and its rivals. In contrast, the contribution by Deborah Larson in this volume makes a similar overall causal claim to Deng's favoring status over material factors, but presents the mechanisms and observable implications of these two competing hypotheses. This allows Larson to convincingly marshal evidence that is consistent with her favored explanation and inconsistent with its main rival.

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[9] As defined in the philosophy of science literature, an adequate explanation must combine plausible causal mechanisms that are jointly sufficient to produce the observed outcome (Miller 1987; Waldner 2007; Mahoney 2015).

Bobo Lo (2008, 2017) advances roughly the opposite claim as Deng and Larson in his seminal work: shared interests (implicitly, *material* interests) on an important subset of issues have driven China–Russia cooperation, rather than compatible identities. But Lo likewise fails to specify the theoretical mechanisms that connect his causes of China–Russia cooperation—opposition to US hegemony, opposition to liberal domestic norms, and prospective economic benefits—to the outcome of increasing China–Russia cooperation over time that he describes. How have US hegemony, which has been diminishing, and liberal ideas, which appear to be constant, impelled increasing China–Russia cooperation? If the prospect of economic benefits has motivated greater cooperation, why did it not emerge sooner? Absent causal mechanisms, Lo has no basis for addressing these questions. But most importantly, it is also unclear why Lo sees a lack of ideological motivation for this cooperation, whereas other well-qualified area experts viewing the same evidence (e.g., Kerr 2005; Deng 2007; Rozman 2014; Trenin 2012; Kaczmarski 2015; Wishnick 2017) view ideology as a central cause (see below). Theoretical underspecification prevents these scholars from productively engaging each other's arguments and precludes adjudication of their competing causal claims.

The barriers to explanation inherent in theoretical underspecification are further illustrated by two recent works that appear, on the surface, to explicitly engage theory. In the first instance, Marcin Kaczmarski (2015, 165) states that "Realpolitik considerations cannot account" for the myriad ways in which China and Russia have increased their cooperation in the past decade. Rather, "the China–Russia relationship has to be approached as a social interaction." Yet Kaczmarski fails to lay out either a realist or constructivist theoretical framework, or concrete hypotheses specific to the China–Russia case. Although he provides six chapters of rich empirical detail documenting the ways in which China and Russia have increased their cooperation, it is unclear, without specifying the causal mechanisms and corresponding observable implications of alternative theories, what is driving this cooperation. Kaczmarski therefore describes, rather than explains, increasing China–Russia cooperation.

Finally, Gilbert Rozman (2014) advances an explanation of increasing China–Russia cooperation based on convergent national identities derived from the two countries' shared communist legacies. This appears to correspond to a constructivist theoretical framework. Yet theoretical works, constructivist or otherwise, are almost entirely absent from Rozman's book, even canonical statements such as Alexander Wendt's (1999). Indeed, Rozman's argument, as well as the alternative "interest-based" explanations he rejects, lack any sort of causal framework underpinning them.[10] Consequently, even if his descriptive inferences about the content of Chinese and Russian identities are correct, his causal claims—that national identities rather than material interests have driven China–Russia cooperation—are unfalsifiable, and supported by assertion rather than evidence-based hypothesis testing.

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[10] The innovations Rozman proposes instead concern operationalizing and measuring national identity, paralleling previous efforts by Hopf (2002, 2012).

Application of Theory to China–Russia Relations

To be clear, the foregoing discussion does not imply that any of the above causal claims are necessarily *wrong*; indeed, many of the same broad arguments are advanced in this volume. Rather, it is that they are *unconvincing*, because there are gaps in the causal logic underpinning how the purported causes produce their effects, a corresponding ambiguity about what evidence would support or disconfirm the proposed explanation, and inattention to rival hypotheses that might be equally or more consistent with the empirical record. The task at hand in the current volume is to provide the theoretical underpinnings that are necessary to (a) rigorously evaluate these competing hypotheses against the available evidence, and (b) aggregate complementary causal factors into a coherent and sufficient multicausal explanation.

As will be discussed further below, this volume does not fully achieve these goals. However, our collective enterprise—to introduce well-specified theories to the analysis of contemporary China–Russia relations—constitutes a necessary first step toward doing so.[11] The papers in this volume identify causal variables that are present in the China–Russia relationship, and lay out clear and complete causal mechanisms that plausibly link these variables to the outcome of increasing bilateral cooperation since the end of the Cold War. However, we do not rigorously test these arguments against each other or attempt to synthesize them into a complete explanation for increasing China–Russia cooperation. Nor is our primary contribution to gather additional primary source evidence or add to the body of empirical knowledge surrounding China–Russia relations. Rather, we attempt to establish the plausibility of our proposed explanations by drawing heavily on the existing empirical literature cited above, to show that they are consistent with the available evidence in ways that the default alternative—mainstream neorealism—is not.

The establishment of multiple well-specified theoretical explanations for China–Russia cooperation is an essential first cut that then lays the groundwork for more rigorous testing of these alternatives against new evidence gathered by area and policy experts, who are best equipped to gather and interpret the facts on the ground. This, in turn, will almost certainly prompt additional theoretical development and refinement to account for novel empirical findings. The current volume is not intended to "solve" China–Russia relations, but rather to engender an ongoing dialectic between theory and evidence that that will facilitate scholarly progress. Indeed, far from dismissing the contributions of area specialists such as those cited above, the theoretically oriented contributors to this issue *depend* on them, both for descriptive inferences that generate empirical puzzles and facilitate inductive theory building, and for uncovering evidence that can delimit and adjudicate between alternative hypotheses. Yet, as argued above, theorization is an equally essential

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[11] This enterprise is similar to the "analytic narratives" project (Bates et al. 1998), except that the papers in that volume each attempted to explain a different case. In contrast, this volume generates multiple alternative explanations for a single case, which can subsequently be refined, synthesized, and tested against each other.

component of the scholarly division of labor: it guides area experts and practition- ers to what causal factors they should consider, what evidence they must marshal to evaluate those causes, and how to combine them into a satisfying explanation. This role has heretofore been absent from the literature on contemporary China–Russia relations. Thus, although the papers in this special issue do not necessarily offer complete explanations of China–Russia cooperation, they make an outsized contri- bution to advancing our understanding of this crucial case by introducing well-spec- ified theories that can be productively evaluated against each other, as well as other alternatives that are subsequently proposed.

Not only does this project advance our understanding of China–Russia relations specifically, but it also makes a substantial contribution to IR theory more broadly. The cooperative post-Cold War trend in the bilateral relationship seems puzzling for baseline versions of each of the major paradigms of international relations theory: realism, liberalism and constructivism. The basic assumption of mainstream realism is that states seek to maximize their security. The primary mechanism realists have advanced for doing so is balancing: when threatened by a more powerful state, less- powerful states align with each other to balance the common threat, thereby enhanc- ing their security. Thus, realists explain state behavior primarily by the distribution of power in the international system (Waltz 1979).

The straightforward realist hypothesis is that China–Russia cooperation is a clas- sic balancing response to the threat posed by the more powerful USA.[12] In static terms, this makes sense. As an explanation of the dynamic puzzle of *increasing* China–Russia cooperation over time, however, the realist balance-of-power mecha- nism lacks surface plausibility. According to balance-of-power logic, China's ris- ing power, coupled with its geographic proximity and longstanding border disputes with Russia, should have made it a growing threat to Russian security after the Cold War, while the USA, in decline relative to China, should have become relatively less threatening. Yet China's rise has coincided with Sino-Russian rapprochement, rather than balancing from Russia and increasing bilateral hostility.[13]

In contrast, systemic-level liberalism focuses on the role of institutions in allow- ing states with imperfectly overlapping interests to overcome coordination problems and concerns about cheating to achieve mutually beneficial cooperation (Keohane

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[12] The only work to explicitly advance this hypothesis (Li 2007) exemplifies non-rigorous application of theory. Li champions a naïve realist balance-of-power argument and dismisses all alternatives solely on the grounds that Waltz and other neorealists have argued that "it is only a systemic approach that focuses on…the changing distribution of power…that can provide a sound explanation for world affairs" (Li 2007, 490). In other words, Li does not test realism against alternatives; rather, his analysis proceeds tautologically from the assumption that realism is correct.

[13] An alternative variant of realism is "balance of threat," which adds perceived intentions to the base- line balance-of-power mechanism (Walt 1987). According to this theory, Russia and China are increasing their cooperation in order to balance the USA because American intentions have become more hostile. However, as John Owen points out in his contribution to this issue, even if perceived intentions can be considered a realist variable (which is heavily contested; see Legro and Moravcsik 1999; Ross, this vol- ume), the sources of these perceptions clearly falls outside a realist framework. Non-realist theories are therefore necessary to identify when and how perceptions of intentions change, and to yield determinate hypotheses about the balance of threat in the US-China–Russia triangle.

1984).[14] The absolute gains from this cooperation, in turn, have a pacifying effect by increasing the opportunity costs of military conflict (Rosecrance 1986). Yet immediately following the Cold War, institutionalization of the China–Russia relationship was virtually non-existent, whereas both countries were (initially) increasingly integrated into the US-led international order. Moreover, China and Russia were far more economically interdependent with the West than with each other, a gap that has only grown. From a liberal perspective, China and Russia should therefore have moved steadily closer to the West politically after the Cold War, while holding each other at arm's length. Their increasing bilateral institutionalization despite meager economic ties is itself a puzzle for liberalism that its proponents have not addressed.[15]

Finally, constructivism relaxes the assumptions of realism and liberalism about states' goals, and adopts an ideational, rather than a materialist, ontology. States can pursue any ends, depending on their own national cultures (Katzenstein 1996) and their intersubjective identities vis-à-vis other states, which are informed by their past interactions (Wendt 1999). The tradeoff of this ontological flexibility, however, is that it is often difficult to conceptualize and measure ideational causes separately from the outcomes they are purported to produce, and to make *ex ante* predictions about the effects of ideas, which have many sources and take many forms. From a constructivist perspective, the stark differences in Chinese and Russian political ideologies and national cultures, as well as their long history of antagonism, presaged continued post-Cold War animosity. Existing constructivist works on China–Russia relations have struggled to account for how these historical animosities and ideological rifts have been mitigated or overcome. Consequently, these works have *described* normative convergence between China and Russia, but not successfully disentangled it from the outcome of increasing bilateral cooperation that they claim it explains (Kerr 2005; Ferdinand 2007; Wishnick 2017).[16]

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[14] This definition contrasts with the domestic-level liberalism introduced by Moravcsik (1997), which excludes international institutions while including elements of national identity that are categorized here under constructivism.

[15] Liselotte Odgaard (2017) draws on the "English School" (a close cousin of systemic liberalism) to explain that China and Russia have created institutional structures in order to advance "their common interest in peace and security" (54), particularly in Central Asia. Yet since conflict is costly, such interests presumably apply to all states at all times, and cannot explain the change in the degree of bilateral institutionalization over time.

[16] For example, Peter Ferdinand (2007, 850) argues that improvements in China–Russia relations are due to "new efforts to view their foreign policies through the lens of constructivism, rather than realism," and correspondingly, to "construct a thicker relationship, one that rests on a broader understanding of national interests…and the way they can be pursued." For Ferdinand, this change occurred due to contingent decisions made by individual leaders, decisions that he acknowledges his deductive framework would not have predicted *ex ante*. There was no popular support for closer ties, bilateral transnational organizations that could diffuse ideas were weak, the personalities of the leaders (Putin and Hu Jintao) were "cautions and enigmatic," and they and their advisors "did not have the same shared experiences as their predecessors" (Ferdinand 2007, 848). Thus, Ferdinand's assertion that Chinese and Russian leaders decided to reframe their relationship merely describes the outcome, it does not meaningfully explain it.

Contributions and limitations of the special issue

The papers in this special issue pursue its twin goals—explanation of increasing China–Russia cooperation, and advancement of broader IR theory—in three inter-related ways.[17] First, the papers by Korolev and Tao present typologies—theoretically informed descriptions—that characterize and categorize recent developments in China–Russia relations.[18] These papers effectively establish empirical puzzles to be explained, which are then addressed by the causal theories developed in the other contributions. Secondly, the papers by Larson, Owen and Ross deductively apply nuanced versions of existing theories, developed by the authors themselves, to explain empirical puzzles in China–Russia relations. The application of these theories to a novel empirical case also serves as an important hypothesis test that augments confidence in the generality and explanatory power of their causal logics. Finally, the papers by Kydd, Haynes, and Yoder inductively develop novel theoretical explanations for empirical puzzles in the Sino-Russian relationship, which can then be generalized to other cases. Both the deductively and inductively derived explanations are syntheses and/or extensions of the baseline versions of realism, liberalism and constructivism characterized above, and account for key aspects of China–Russia cooperation that existing alternatives do not.[19] The papers in this special issue therefore work in combination to both improve our understanding of a crucially important contemporary case, while also advancing IR theory in substantial ways.

Alexander Korolev's paper draws on a series of objective indicators to establish the main outcome that the other contributions seek to explain: the secular trend of increasing cooperation between China and Russia since the end of the Cold War. Although many scholars of China–Russia relations have noted this trend, they have relied on ad hoc measures of cooperation that are neither systematic nor logically or empirically justified. Korolev, in contrast, develops a theoretically informed typology of military alignment, a concept that has never been systematically defined and operationalized despite its centrality to IR scholarship. Drawing on Chinese and Russian sources, Korolev then applies his multidimensional index to measure China–Russia military cooperation over time, which he corroborates using quantitative measures of bilateral institutional and economic cooperation. His paper therefore not only makes an essential contribution to the current issue by establishing the

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[17] These goals mirror those of the "analytic narratives" in Bates et al. (1998, 14–18), in which the authors construct novel theoretical models that both explain empirical facts about a particular case for which alternative theories cannot account, and carry implications that generalize to a larger population of cases.

[18] On the value of typologies and their role in hypothesis testing and explanation, see George and Bennett (2005, Ch. 11), Elman (2005).

[19] *Synthesis* refers to combining variables from different theoretical perspectives to show how disparate theoretical mechanisms can systematically complement each other to produce novel causal effects. *Extension* refers to the introduction of new "auxiliary" variables or reexamination of existing theoretical mechanisms to derive novel implications from an existing ontological framework. See Elman and Elman (2003).

core dependent variable, but also contributes a novel typology and empirical index that will be of general importance in IR. As Korolev acknowledges, this typology is a first cut that remains imprecise. Nevertheless, his application of the framework to China–Russia relations demonstrates its value as a systematic measure of this crucial variable on a case-by-case basis, and as a baseline for further refinement in subsequent work.

Whereas Korolev's paper establishes the outcome the other contributors seek to explain, Tao Wenzhao's paper focuses on a key independent variable, the influence of the USA, which pervades each of the subsequent arguments. For Tao, the USA has driven China and Russia together in four ways, each of which he classifies under a realist, liberal or constructivist rubric: (1) failing to treat China and Russia as equals, (2) threatening Russia through NATO expansion, (3) threatening China through deployment of missile defense systems, and (4) promoting liberal democracy and human rights abroad. This is itself an example of a kitchen sink argument that describes, rather than explains, increasing China–Russia cooperation. But importantly, Tao goes beyond the existing descriptive literature on China–Russia relations by explicitly categorizing his causes according to the theoretical perspective they align with. This provides some much-needed clarification that the pervasive claim that China and Russia are cooperating to balance against the USA could actually be driven by numerous alternative causal mechanisms, which must be assessed against the empirical record and aggregated into a coherent explanation. The subsequent contributions to this volume specify these mechanisms and subject them to preliminary evaluation. Tao's paper thus serves as an important overview that enhances the coherence of the collection.

Tao's first factor is developed by Deborah Larson, who applies her pioneering social identity theory (SIT) to explain the nature and extent of China–Russia cooperation. Through careful process tracing, Larson offers qualitative evidence that China and Russia are not simply balancing against American power, but rather trying to restore their great power status while maintaining a distinctive identity separate from the West. She argues that China and Russia are engaged in social cooperation, whereby each recognizes the other's superiority in a different area—economic wealth for China, military power projection for Russia—in order to enhance their respective status in the eyes of the USA. In contrast to the status-based explanations advanced in the current China–Russia literature, Larson specifically identifies foreign policy behaviors that are consistent with SIT, but *not* with competing materialist explanations.

Whereas Larson rejects realism wholesale, John Owen advances an innovative synthesis of material and ideational factors to explain why China and Russia are increasingly balancing against the USA, instead of each other. Building on Tao's fourth theme of democracy promotion, Owen argues that American liberal hegemony—the combination of preponderant material power and a liberal ideology—threatens the Chinese and Russian regimes in two ways: first, by attracting adherents within each country and threatening to undermine their legitimacy, and secondly by pulling liberal third-party states out of the Chinese and Russian spheres and into alignment with the USA. Importantly, Owen argues that the threat posed by US liberal hegemony has increased even as US power has declined, as neighboring states

and domestic groups in China and Russia have continued to pursue and adopt liberal values. Yet if the USA retreats from its liberal ideology in the post-Trump era, Owen predicts that US threat, and with it the impetus to Sino-Russian cooperation, will fade.

In contrast, Robert Ross offers a clear and powerful realist explanation of Sino-Russian cooperation. Ross rejects the neorealist claim laid out above, that secondary powers engage in balancing by joining the weaker side, in favor of the classical realist argument that small states maximize their security by bandwagoning with more powerful actors. Thus for Ross, Russia is simply doing what all non-great powers do: bandwagoning with the most powerful state in its region. Ross argues that the widespread expectation that Russia should balance against an increasingly powerful China is misplaced, because it is based on the false characterization of Russia as a great power in East Asia. If, instead, we accept the premise that China is the sole great power in mainland Asia, Russia's failure to balance China as the latter grows increasingly powerful becomes far less puzzling. As a non-great power, Russia simply has no choice but to accommodate China's rise.

Andrew Kydd also advances a realist explanation, but employs a very different logic than does Ross. Rather than rejecting the realist balancing logic characterized above, Kydd extends it by introducing a new variable, the dynamic power *trend*, which has heretofore been absent from the literature on balancing and alliances. Specifically, Kydd asks at what points in a power transition third-party states, such as Russia, should be expected to shift their alignment between a declining hegemon (e.g., the USA) and a rising challenger (e.g., China). He argues that during the phase of a power shift when the rising state is rapidly gaining power, the main threat to third-party security is preventive conflict initiated by the declining state. This should prompt alignment with the rising state to deter such destabilizing actions. However, as the power shift progresses, the main threat to stability is from revisionist actions initiated by the newly powerful riser, which should prompt security-seeking third parties to flock to the decliner. Furthermore, Kydd supplements his theory with another structural variable that has been absent from realist balancing theories: the presence of nuclear weapons. As the USA has steadily and dramatically upgraded both its offensive and defensive nuclear capabilities since the end of the Cold War (Tao's third factor), China and Russia have grown increasingly concerned about the security of their nuclear forces against a US first strike, and their resulting vulnerability to American coercion. Kydd's hypotheses align quite closely with the observed pattern of increasing post-Cold War Russian alignment with China as American incentives and capabilities for destabilizing preventive actions have increased.

The papers by Kyle Haynes and Brandon Yoder introduce novel rationalist theories that transcend the realist/liberal/constructivist ontological debate. Yoder adopts an informational approach to explain the pattern of post-Cold War Sino-Russian cooperation. He shows that in the late 1990s and 2000 s, China was able to successfully reassure Russia of its benign intentions, despite a high degree of initial distrust. Yet this finding is puzzling in light of the well-known argument that rising states' cooperative signals should have low credibility, due to their strong incentives to misrepresent hostile intentions while still rising. Yoder presents a simple model

that shows how the presence of a third-party threat can increase the credibility of a rising state's reassurance signals in two ways: (1) it reduces incentives for hostile risers to misrepresent their intentions, making it easier for the decliner to identify truly benign risers; (2) it places enduring constraints over the riser's behavior that will induce it to cooperate in the future even if its preferences do not perfectly align with the decliner's. Yoder presents a detailed case study demonstrating that rising Russian threat perceptions of the USA have helped convince Russian leaders that China's current cooperation was a credible signal of its benign future intentions. This, in turn, facilitated increasing Russian accommodation of a rising China.

Finally, Kyle Haynes adopts a non-formal rationalist approach to argue that China and Russia are engaged in a form of logrolling at the international level. He argues that although Chinese and Russian preferences diverge from those of the USA, the two states also hold broadly incompatible preferences for the shape of the international order—both seek to impose more hierarchical orders in their home regions that would subordinate the interests of external parties, including each other. Yet China and Russia value these regions asymmetrically. Whereas China prioritizes East Asia and the Pacific, Russia prioritizes Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Thus, China and Russia have incentives to support the other's revisionist actions in its home region in exchange for reciprocation in their own home region. Haynes concludes that although Russia and China have few shared positive interests, the two states could very well maintain their limited but highly consequential "axis of convenience" for the foreseeable future.

Although these arguments collectively mark an important advance in scholarship on China–Russia relations, each contains important limitations. The current volume does not adjudicate between these alternative hypotheses by rigorously testing them against each other, nor does it aggregate them into a complete explanation for the observed outcome of increasing China–Russia cooperation. Rather, the far more modest empirical goal of these articles is to show that their hypotheses are more consistent with the available evidence than the default alternative hypothesis of mainstream neorealism. Indeed, each of their causal arguments leaves important empirical questions to be addressed in subsequent scholarship. Thus, this volume does not fulfill the ultimate goals of adjudicating between these alternative hypotheses, or aggregating them into a complete explanation for the observed outcome.

Yet despite the incomplete empirical task, this collection of papers makes a tremendously valuable contribution to both the literature on China–Russia relations and IR theory. By advancing well-specified theoretical arguments, the papers in this issue are amenable to contested appraisal against the empirical record, and thereby facilitate cumulative scholarly progress that has been lacking in previous work on China–Russia relations. Subsequent empirical work on China–Russia relations will now be able to draw on the theories advanced here to derive clear hypotheses about the causal variables and mechanisms driving increasing post-Cold War China–Russia cooperation, and identify precisely what evidence would support or reject these arguments.

Finally, the theories advanced in this issue also contribute to IR scholarship beyond the China–Russia relationship. The three applications of existing theories to this novel case help to increase confidence in the generality and explanatory power

of the causal mechanisms for which the authors find empirical support. The three original theories potentially make an even greater contribution, by identifying novel causal processes that may be operating in other cases. Kydd's dynamic theory of alignment is an important generalization of existing realist balance of power that may account for many other cases that have previously been considered anomalous for realism. Yoder contributes to the burgeoning literature on the general conditions under which foreign policy signals are credible. And Haynes's logrolling mechanism seems likely to be a common facilitator of cooperation among states with seemingly incompatible preferences. Thus, even if subsequent empirical scholarship were to cast doubt on these theories as explanations of post-Cold War China–Russia cooperation, they remain important contributions to IR that may have explanatory power in other cases.

Conclusion

Theory is an essential component of explanation. This is true regarding both the average causal effects of a single set of factors across multiple cases, or for a multi-causal account of a specific outcome in a single case. Yet in the large and growing literature seeking to account for increasing China–Russia cooperation since the end of the Cold War, theory has been either underdeveloped or absent entirely. This has precluded both the rigorous evaluation of competing hypotheses against evidence, as well as the identification of how various causal factors have worked in combination to produce the observed outcome. The papers in this special issue are a first step in filling this theoretical lacuna, introducing well-specified theories that can account for empirical puzzles in the China–Russia relationship that mainstream IR theories cannot. In doing so, the volume facilitates scholarly progress in understanding a crucially important contemporary case, while also advancing international relations scholarship more generally.

Compliance with ethical standards

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