

Prospects for the Integration of China and the CSTO

Sergey V. Uyanaev^{1a}✉, Anton V. Bredikhin^{2b}✉

¹² Institute of China and Modern Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

^a svuyav@yahoo.com, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5471-8224>

^b bredikhin90@yandex.ru, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4097-3854>

Abstract. Modern challenges, packages of European and American sanctions, and a special military operation in Ukraine have contributed to Russia's reorientation to the East, not only in trade, economic and energy terms. The issue of military-political cooperation, in particular, between the countries of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the People's Republic of China has acquired particular relevance. The coherence of their actions both in the direction of "CSTO + 1" and "CSTO + Shanghai Cooperation Organization" contributed to the development of interaction, a new round in the development of the CSTO, although some of its participants declare the possibility of leaving the Treaty (Armenia). But there are also countries that are ready to take a more active part in its work (Syria, North Korea). At the same time, none of the CSTO countries sent their military contingents to support the Russian army in the Northern Military District.

The Central Asian region occupies a special place in the system of relations between the CSTO and China: for example, the peacekeeping operation of the CSTO countries in Kazakhstan in January 2022 attracted the close attention of the Chinese authorities, which once again demonstrated their interest in regional stability. In the context of American pressure on China, its authorities have repeatedly spoken positively about jointly countering such challenges as terrorism, separatism and extremism ("three evils").

The purpose of this work is to assess the prospects for cooperation in the field of countering the "three evils". To achieve this goal, the authors use the comparative analysis method and SWOT assessment. The authors come to the conclusion that since the CSTO countries and China face similar challenges, there is a possibility of situational involvement of China in the military operations of the CSTO. Therefore, a broader consideration of the "linkage" between the CSTO and the SCO is required.

Keywords: Eurasian integration, People's Republic of China, Collective Security Treaty Organization, Russian Federation, Shanghai Cooperation Organization

For citation: Uyanaev S.V., Bredikhin A.V. Prospects for the Integration of China and the CSTO. *Russia & World: Scientific Dialogue*. 2024; 2(12): 80-93, [https://doi.org/10.53658/RW2024-4-2\(12\)-80-93](https://doi.org/10.53658/RW2024-4-2(12)-80-93)

Introduction

The foreign policy turn of the Russian Federation to the East has brought to the forefront the issue of forming a new military-political strategy for our country. We are talking about expanding the circle of possible allies and partners. In the context of a special military operation (SMO) [1], the activities of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) are especially important. Of interest are issues related to the approaches that China adheres to in relation to the Organization. Directly or indirectly, official Beijing has repeatedly demonstrated its attention to the CSTO. As, for example, the head of the PRC Xi Jinping noted in a telephone conversation with V.V. Putin on the eve of 2022, the Chinese side is ready to “cooperate with Russia and the CSTO member states in a flexible and varied format in the interests of security and stability in the region”¹.

Materials and Methods

The study uses scientific and analytical works, including those of leading scientists from the Institute of China and Modern Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences, which allows us to speak about a qualitative and objective approach. The current international legal acts governing the activities of international blocs and organizations, primarily the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, are considered.

The authors carried out a content analysis of Russian and Chinese media in order to clarify and clarify the opinions of politicians and political experts on this issue.

Particular attention is paid to the institutionalism method, which allows us to consider and compare the principles of work of large international supranational actors, such as the SCO and the CSTO.

Results

The SMO, which began in February 2022, changed the international military-political situation, which could not but affect the current and future agenda of the CSTO.

As for the CSTO position on the SMO, none of the participating countries took part in it, with the exception of Belarus, which provided the SMO with territory for the deployment of Russian troops and hospitals. None of the CSTO members recognized the Republic of Crimea, the federal city of Sevastopol, the Donetsk People's Republic, the Lugansk People's Republic, the Zaporizhia and Kherson regions, which became part of the Russian Federation.

¹ Chairman Xi Jinping held a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin via videoconference. 2021-12-15. Available from: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/rus/zxxx/202112/t20211216_10470464.html.

The Armed Forces of the Republic of South Ossetia-Alania, which recognized the DPR and LPR, became part of the army of the Russian Federation². But as a state, the Republic of South Ossetia-Alania did not join the CSTO, while de facto finding itself under the protection of the Russian Federation, a member state of the Organization.

Transnistria and Karabakh, on whose territory Russian peacekeepers are stationed and which are managed with the participation of Russia, acquire a special status. In addition to Russian troops, Armenian military units took part in the military operation on the territory of the Syrian Arab Republic.

The Karabakh war of 2020 ended with the introduction of Russian peacekeepers into the territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, which caused a negative reaction in Armenia. At least one of the speeches by Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan was assessed as the beginning of Armenia's movement to withdraw from the CSTO. This position was due to the “non-interference of the CSTO” in the Armenian-Azerbaijani confrontation of 2022.

There are different assessments regarding the prospects of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the number and composition of its participants. Following the Moscow CSTO summit held on May 16, 2022, Belarusian Defense Minister Viktor Khrenin announced the possible admission of new members: “These will be dozens of states that value peace and stability, and not aggressiveness and changes in the political system of other states”³. Secretary General of the Organization Stanislav Zas, who did not rule out that “the CSTO will grow with partners, observers and members of the Organization”⁴.

The prospect of new participants joining the CSTO is mentioned, in particular, in connection with Syria: “If it is beneficial to everyone – Syria, Russia, and our other CSTO partners – then I do not rule out such a possibility”⁵, – For example, Deputy Minister of Defense of the Russian Federation Andrei Kartapolov stated regarding the possible expansion of the CSTO. Volunteers from Syria took part in the SMO.

Similarly, in the case of participation of the North Korean military contingent in the SMO, which is mentioned as a possible prospect in some media, the possibility of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea joining the CSTO is being considered. At the same time, it is obvious that the Syrian and North Korean stories would change the status of the CSTO as a supranational integration association of post-Soviet states.

One can also find discussions about the return of Azerbaijan to the CSTO, which left its ranks in 1999, although today, in the context of the still unresolved Karabakh conflict, such a prospect is problematic. Belarus, which is a member of the CSTO, is also a member of the Non-Aligned Movement, and the Russian Federation, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan act as observer countries, which neutralizes this circumstance as the impossibility of parallel membership in the CSTO.

² Agreement between the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia on the procedure for the entry of individual units of the Armed Forces of the Republic of South Ossetia into the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation. Available from: <https://docs.cntd.ru/document/456059687>.

³ Sensation of the Moscow summit: CSTO will expand. Who and when. Tsargrad. Available from: https://tsargrad.tv/articles/sensacija-moskovskogo-sammita-odkb-budet-rasshirjatsja-kto-i-kogda_549214.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ The Ministry of Defense did not rule out Syria joining the CSTO. RIA Novosti. Available from: <https://ria.ru/20210820/siriya-1746640366.html>.

The impetus for the expansion of the CSTO could be the expansion of peacekeeping operations by its member states. In June 2022, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev submitted a proposal to the country's parliament "to send a peacekeeping contingent of the Armed Forces numbering 430 servicemen to participate, firstly, in a multidisciplinary integrated mission in the Central African Republic, secondly, in the UN stabilization mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, thirdly, in a multidisciplinary integrated mission to stabilize the situation in Mali, and fourthly, in temporary force missions in Lebanon." Bringing such peacekeeping missions under the CSTO flag could become a serious reason for discussions within the Organization. There is a basis for resolving this issue: in 2018, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the Secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the United Nations. The document concerns only the area of combating terrorism, but it demonstrates the possibility of cooperation between the two organizations in principle, and therefore the possibility of expanding their interaction.⁶

CSTO-China: a new bloc in the Eurasian space?

China recognizes the role of the CSTO as the leading security mechanism in the CIS. There are many examples of this. Back in the summer of 2011, against the backdrop of bloody internal events in Kyrgyzstan and the accusations that were then being made against the Shanghai Cooperation Organization for "inaction," Chinese representatives, not without reason, pointed out that the range of issues of the anti-extremist and anti-terrorist struggle is to a much greater extent the prerogative of the CSTO, and not the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which "is not a military alliance." And it is no coincidence that a decade later, Beijing treated with understanding the participation of the CSTO in the settlement of the events in southern Kazakhstan.

The issue of China's "exit" to a higher level of interaction with the CSTO is, to a large extent, a topic of the prospects for a military-political alliance between China and the Russian Federation.

There are various expert points of view on this matter, and the topic of "alliance" or "not an alliance" continues to be discussed, despite the official position of the parties, according to which their relations "are not an alliance." It is appropriate to pay attention to the peculiarities of the Chinese approach, which reflects the traditional political culture of the Celestial Empire. It is based on the so-called principle of three NOTs, where the emphasis is primarily on the concept of "non-union" (the other two components are "non-confrontation" and "non-direction against third countries").⁷

⁶ Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the United Nations represented by the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism. Available from: https://antiterror.odkb-csto.org/int_organizations/un/memorandum-o-vzaimoponimaniy-mezhdu-sekretariatom-odkb-i-oon-v-litse-ktu-oon/#loaded.

⁷ These principles were again pointed out at the turn of 2022-2023 by the former and current Chinese Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Qin Gang. Quoted from: With the world in mind, boldly move forward and write a new chapter of great-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics. Available from: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/wjzbzd/202212/t20221225_10994826.shtml.

In parallel, in the official political and expert rhetoric, the parties began to resort to the thesis that "not being a military-political alliance, like the alliances that formed during the Cold War, Russian-Chinese relations surpass this form of interstate interaction."⁸

Apparently, relying on such a broad interpretation of the issue, expert studies continue to contain references to the words of Xi Jinping, spoken at a meeting on the occasion of the 95th anniversary of the CPC: "I believe that Russia and China can create an alliance before which NATO will be powerless and this will put an end to the imperialist aspirations of the West."⁹

In connection with such statements, references (albeit mostly speculative) to the creation of a certain "Eastern Entente" began to appear in news agency reports. Much closer to the objective picture is the thesis that both states in their practical interaction in the sphere of defense and security have approached the state of a "deferred military-political alliance." This concept was introduced into political science by experts from the Institute of China and Modern Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Chinese Academy of Contemporary International Relations (CACIOR) [5].

Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC) of the PRC Li Zhanshu spoke out clearly on the issue of cooperation with the CSTO, stating that China is ready to "continue interaction with this Organization in a flexible format, jointly protect regional security and stability," adding that in doing so, the PRC intends to "implement the initiative on global development and security put forward by PRC Chairman Xi Jinping."¹⁰

Strengthening ties with the CSTO is also due to the growing pressure from the American side on Beijing.

According to China's Permanent Representative to the UN Zhang Jun, China "will step up foreign policy contacts and coordination with CSTO member states and will closely cooperate at multilateral venues such as the UN in order to make a positive contribution to maintaining the international order based on international law and preserving the UN's leading coordinating role in international affairs."¹¹

One of the main "nodes" of intersection of military and political interests of the CSTO and China is Central Asia. The peacekeeping operation of the CSTO troops in Kazakhstan in January 2022 demonstrated the interest of the Chinese side in stabilizing

⁸ Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation. Available from: <http://static.kremlin.ru/media/events/files/ru/hkwONxOFSpUGgXPaRU3xUHRmkRneSXIR.pdf>.

⁹ Xi Jinping: Alliance with Russia will sweep away NATO and change the world order. Available from: <https://vegchel.ru/index.php?newsid=26210>.

¹⁰ In a "flexible format" mode: why Beijing is talking about its readiness to develop cooperation with the CSTO. RT. Available from: <https://russian.rt.com/world/article/990985-kitai-odkb-sotrudnichestvo>.

¹¹ Remarks by Ambassador Zhang Jun at Security Council Debate on Cooperation Between the United Nations and Regional and Subregional Organizations in Maintaining International Peace and Security (CSTO). Available from: https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjb_663304/zwjg_665342/zwb_665378/202202/t20220217_10643165.html.

the region. Troops of the member states of the association were deployed on the territory of Kazakhstan in accordance with Articles 2 and 4 of the CSTO Collective Security Treaty. According to the statement of the Chinese Ambassador to Russia Zhang Hanhui: "China is ready to continue to deepen strategic cooperation between China and Russia in Central Asia, firmly support the current regimes of the Central Asian countries, resist external interference, resolutely prevent "color revolutions" and jointly fight the "three forces" (terrorism, extremism and separatism - author's note). "As many influential experts believe, the situation related to the participation of the CSTO in the events in Kazakhstan showed that Russia and China have many common interests and winning impulses for cooperation¹².

Central Asia is a region where military facilities of a number of Asian countries that are not members of the CSTO are located. There is a Chinese military post in Gorno-Badakhshan, Tajikistan. Indian air bases are located in Farkhor and Western Dushanbe. The Organization of Turkic States is actively working to create the "Turan Army" with the Turkic-speaking states of the region. On the one hand, this may be a cause for concern. But, on the other hand, it can be seen as an impetus for establishing communication bridges that would serve the statutory interests of the CSTO, including the prevention of possible new challenges. The result of such communication could potentially be the expansion of military-political cooperation with interested countries, up to their entry into the CSTO.

Integration of the CSTO and SCO: not a merger, but a complementarity

Another way to establish interaction between the CSTO and China could be cooperation between the CSTO and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The SCO members are the current CSTO members – the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan; Belarus is an SCO observer, for which the procedure for joining the Organization has begun, and Armenia is a dialogue partner.

The relationship between the two associations already has a legal framework, for example, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariats of the SCO and the CSTO (signed on October 5, 2007 in Dushanbe), the "Protocol of Understanding between the CSTO Secretariat and the SCO RATS (signed in June 2011 in Astana) [8:191]. As experts note, "agreed measures of interaction with the EAEU, CIS, CSTO, SCO are being adopted in the interests of ensuring collective security"[7]. This is also noted by authoritative Chinese experts, who emphasize that "through the SCO and CSTO, China and Russia should strengthen cooperation in order to jointly combat common threats and strengthen mutual trust." As one of the leading Chinese experts on Russia, Professor Zhao Huasheng of the Center for Russia and Central Asia at the Institute of International Studies at Fudan

¹² China and Russia Both Benefit From the CSTO Intervention in Kazakhstan. The Diplomat. Available from: <https://thediplomat.com/2022/01/china-and-russia-both-benefit-from-the-csto-intervention-in-kazakhstan/>.

University, noted, "obviously, the SCO and CSTO should be in close partnership relations, and their cooperation is not illogical."¹³.

It is important to take into account that the SCO itself is not a military-political bloc, but promotes the "New Security Concept" within the framework of which results have been achieved in countering the "three evils", in identifying, preventing and suppressing the actions of these "forces" in the territories of SCO member states, in eliminating the causes and conditions for the emergence and spread of these dangerous phenomena, as well as in countering the spread of their ideology and propaganda [2]. Integration along the SCO-CSTO, China-CSTO lines will raise the question of the military-political bloc's position in light of territorial disputes in the South China Sea [9], as well as on the Indian-Chinese border, including the Kashmir issue [7].

In this regard, a number of experts believe that the formation of collective security along the SCO-CSTO line actualizes the task of establishing our own institutional mechanism for Eurasian security through military-economic cooperation and stimulating the ideas of a fair multipolar world order [7].

However, it is unlikely that we can talk about a "merger" of the two organizations. A much more realistic path seems to be one of rapprochement, interaction and mutual complementarity. In addition to Russia and China, other countries can also contribute to such integration of the CSTO and SCO. For example, Iran, which joined the SCO and sent its representatives to the meeting of the CSTO Parliamentary Assembly in 2022. This country is a member of the Non-Aligned Movement and has a free trade agreement with the EAEU. The Russian side has stated the possibility of closer cooperation between the CSTO and India.

As for Afghanistan, its problems are in the focus of both the SCO and the CSTO. This is evidenced by the very fact that a joint summit of the leaders of the SCO and CSTO member states on the Afghan problem was held in September 2021. Speeches at the forum, in particular, the speech of the Chairman of the People's Republic of China Xi Jinping, called on Afghanistan's neighbors to "work together to alleviate the situation in the war-torn country and provide humanitarian and anti-pandemic support to its people"¹⁴.

There is potential for cooperation. The problem is that for the past decade and a half since the adoption of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Secretariat of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Secretariat of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in 2007, the implementation of its provisions has been slow and has not been active or targeted. A rare exception is the "Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation and Interaction between the RATS SCO, the CIS ATC and the CSTO Secretariat" adopted in 2018.

However, even in this case, we are dealing with only a declaration of intent that requires practical implementation. It is clear that rapprochement cannot and should not be artificial. But the current situation is changing rapidly. In the context of international

¹³ Wang Chaoqing. International cooperation in the field of security between the SCO and the CSTO. Theory and practice of social development. 2015; 8:123–127.

¹⁴ Nations urged to assist Afghan reconstruction. ChinaDaily. Available from: <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202109/18/WS61451e44a310e0e3a68226de.html>.

transformations that have accelerated sharply since the spring of 2022, which, due to the Ukrainian crisis and the escalation of the situation around Taiwan, have either a real or potential military dimension, the intensification of the SCO's activities on one of its basic goals - ensuring security - is becoming relevant. We see the practical content of such cooperation as precisely the intensification of interaction with the CSTO. The areas of such interaction, including, first of all, "ensuring regional and international security and stability", were clearly spelled out in the bilateral Memorandum of the SCO and the CSTO of 2007.

There is reason to believe that such a vision increasingly clearly defines the position of the SCO "heavyweights" - Russia and China. It is no coincidence that the "Joint Russian-Chinese Statement" signed in Moscow on March 21, 2023, emphasized the "positive contribution of the CSTO to ensuring regional security" and noted the "potential for developing cooperation between the CSTO and China." Such cooperation would be the key and direct impetus for the coordination of the CSTO and the SCO and even for their joint actions. The inclusion of this provision in this systemic Russian-Chinese document serves as an indicator that the coincidence of ideas about an integrated Eurasian security space "from Belarus to Taiwan", which has manifested itself in recent years, is strengthening in relations between Russia and China, which is precisely the area of responsibility of both the SCO and the CSTO. Obviously, NATO's actions contributed to the formation of such an approach. As was clearly demonstrated, for example, by the Madrid summit of the alliance in 2022, NATO's doctrinal sphere of interests is increasingly becoming not only the traditional "North Atlantic", but also East Asia¹⁵. NATO has been paying increased attention to Central Asia (in the context of the situation in Afghanistan) for several years now.

The SCO and CSTO have motives and potential for cooperation. But in order to convert intentions into joint steps in strengthening defense and security, there must be a willingness to move towards practice, with the top priority being the task of further improving the legal framework that would legitimate the directions and forms of cooperation between the CSTO and SCO.

First, attention should be paid to the joint task of coordinated counteraction by the SCO and CSTO to a number of relatively new risks that were generated by the West's activity. We are talking about the command and staff exercises "Regional Cooperation-2022" held in August 2022 on the territory of Tajikistan, a state that is a member of both the SCO and the CSTO. As emphasized on the website of the American embassy in Dushanbe, the exercises with the participation of Central and South Asian countries are annually "organized by the US Central Command" and are held in different countries of the region¹⁶. In addition to the organizers represented by the Pentagon and the hosts, the 2022 exercises also involved military personnel from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Pakistan. The event was succinctly assessed by the Secretary of the Russian Security Council N. Patrushev,

¹⁵ The Stoltenberg Plan is a 21st century war plan by the collective West against Russia and China. Available from: <https://zvezdaweekly.ru/news/202272130-8C3gQ.html>.

¹⁶ Military exercises "Regional Cooperation - 2022" began in Dushanbe. Available from: <https://tj.usembassy.gov/ru/>.

who emphasized that such events "are needed by the Americans, first of all, to study the potential theater of military operations, clarify the coordinates of promising targets and adjust digital maps for high-precision weapons."¹⁷ It is clear that such events directly contradict the interests of consolidation of the CSTO and SCO.

Conclusion

Within the CSTO (in the SCO this is hardly possible today), it is vitally important today to conclude an Agreement that would contain a ban on participation in exercises similar to those mentioned above.

No less urgent are the development and adoption of an Agreement regulating the conduct of military exercises along the SCO-CSTO line, which are currently absent. It is important that this approach is shared by the Chinese expert community, some of whose specialists directly say that real cooperation between the SCO and the CSTO "must begin with joint anti-terrorist military exercises" [3].

It would not be superfluous to have a document regulating the CSTO's position with respect to a country-member of the Organization that is conducting military operations with external forces in order to protect its national interests, and at the same time - oriented towards providing assistance to such a member.

A pressing task is to increase the capabilities of the SCO and the CSTO in the matter of real opposition to growing military threats, including through coordination of the actions of the two organizations. Let us recall that the most authoritative participants of both structures - Russia and China - are declared in the doctrinal documents of the USA and NATO to be an "acute threat" (in the case of the Russian Federation) and a "systemic challenge" (in the case of China).

One of the ways that would contribute, on the one hand, to the growth of the overall potential of the SCO in ensuring regional security, and on the other - would create practical bridges of interaction between the SCO in this area and the CSTO, is an initiative that a number of Russian experts have been advocating for several years now, and which has found understanding among their Chinese colleagues.

The initiative takes into account that the SCO is not a military alliance, but at the same time proceeds from the fact that annual military exercises "Peace Mission" held under the auspices of the SCO have already become a common occurrence. The essence of the proposal is that the command and staff structures created for the period of such exercises would be integrated in a compact form and on a permanent basis into the existing mechanisms of the SCO, for example, into the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. If necessary (critical aggravation of regional threats), such a "compressed" staff group could be quickly deployed into a full-fledged command and staff mechanism, capable in turn of becoming the basis for the deployment of the corresponding military contingents of the participating

¹⁷ Patrushev warned his SCO colleagues about the dangers of joint exercises with the US. Available from: <https://tass.ru/politika/15536949>.

countries, trained during the same “Peace Mission” exercises [6]. The presence of such a structure in the SCO on an official and legitimate basis would be a step towards the creation of an urgently needed legal basis for coordinating the potential of the SCO and the CSTO, which would justify their joint actions. Then the member states of the two organizations would have the opportunity to take certain steps not only in the usual format of each of the organizations, but also as part of temporary coalition groups to carry out tasks to eliminate the threat that has arisen, including external threats to any of the SCO or CSTO countries.

All of the above, especially in light of the above-mentioned Russian-Chinese statement on cooperation between the CSTO and the PRC, is also related to the possibility of situational connections of the People’s Republic of China to the activities of the CSTO. Moreover, it is precisely this option in the form of the “CSTO + 1” format, which provides for “selective participation of China in terms of ensuring security in the Central Asian region”, that Chinese scientists have been talking about for many years.

Such a scenario would mean that defense cooperation between the Russian Federation and the PRC would reach a new qualitative level and at the same time would reduce the uncertainty of the ongoing discussions regarding the prospects of the Russian-Chinese military alliance.

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About the authors

Sergey V. UYANAIEV. CandSc (Hist). Deputy Director, Institute of China and Modern Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5471-8224>. Address: 32, Nakhimovsky Prospekt, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation. svuyav@yahoo.com

Anton V. BREDIKHIN. CandSc (Hist). Leading Researcher at the Center “Russia, China, the World” of the Institute of China and Modern Asia of the Russian Academy of Sciences. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4097-3854>. Address: 32, Nakhimovsky Prospekt, Moscow, 117997, Russian Federation. bredikhin90@yandex.ru

Contribution of the authors

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

Article info

Received: February 23, 2024. Approved after peer review: March 31, 2024. Accepted for publication: April 1, 2024. Published: May 15, 2024.

The authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

Peer review info

«Russia & World: Scientific Dialogue» thanks the anonymous reviewer(s) for their contribution to the peer review of this work.