

Chapter 4: The Development of Sino-Russian Relations

In order to correctly trace the pattern in Sino-Russian relations throughout the 20th century, it is important to understand what shaped their relationship during the course of the last 50 years. Beginning with the start of the PRC in 1949 under Mao Zedong and the decline in the relationship among communist brothers to the seemingly congenial and improving relationship of today, we must fully understand what the motivations of both China and Russia have been and how the motivations of each has affected the relationship during this period.

4.1 Sino-Soviet Relations: 1969-1991

The Border Conflict

During the 1960s the Sino-Soviet ideological dispute deepened and spread to include territorial issues, culminating in 1969 in bloody armed clashes on their borders. In 1963 the boundary dispute had come into the open when China explicitly raised the issue of territory lost through “unequal treaties” with tsarist Russia in the past. After unsuccessful border consultations in 1964, Moscow began a military buildup along Russia’s border with China and in Mongolia, which continued into the 1970s. The Sino-Soviet dispute reached its nadir in 1969 when serious armed clashes broke out at Zhenbao Island on the northeast border between the two countries.

Ideological Dispute

The Sino-Soviet dispute also was intensified by increasing competition between Beijing and Moscow for influence in the Third World and the international communist movement. China accused the Soviet Union of colluding with imperialism. In 1970, Beijing shifted to a more moderate course and began a rapprochement with Washington as a

counterweight to the perceived threat from Moscow. Sino-Soviet border talks were held intermittently, and Moscow issued conciliatory messages after Mao's death in 1976, all without substantive progress. Officially, Chinese statements called for a struggle against the hegemony of both superpowers, but especially against the Soviet Union, which Beijing called "the most dangerous source of war."

In the late 1970s, the increased Soviet military buildup in East Asia and Soviet treaties with Vietnam and Afghanistan heightened China's awareness of the threat of Soviet encirclement. In 1979 Beijing notified Moscow it would formally abrogate the long-dormant Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance but proposed bilateral talks. China suspended the talks after only one round, however, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.

Return to Normalization

The Soviet position on Sino-Soviet relations showed greater flexibility in 1986 with General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev's July speech at Vladivostok. Among Gorbachev's proposals for the Asia-Pacific region were several directed at China, including the announcement of partial troop withdrawals from Afghanistan and Mongolia, the renewal of a concession pertaining to the border dispute, and proposals for agreements on a border railroad, space cooperation, and joint hydropower development.

Further, Gorbachev offered to hold discussions with China "at any time and at any level." Although these overtures did not lead to an immediate high level breakthrough in Sino-Soviet relations, bilateral consultations appeared to gain momentum, and border talks were resumed in 1987. Whether or not full normalization would include renewed relations

between the Chinese and Soviet communist parties, as China had established with the East European communist parties, was uncertain as of mid-1987.³

4.2 The Yeltsin Era: 1991-1999

As the USSR collapsed on December 25, 1991, Russia became the successor of the former Soviet Union, and Sino-Soviet relations became Sino-Russian relations. In February, 1992, Russian President Boris Yeltsin made a state visit to mainland China, and in recognition of the importance of China as a close powerful neighbor, the Russian delegation signed over twenty documents, among them a mutual promise of cooperation in trade, technology, and culture between Russia and China. This was followed by a withdrawal of Russian troops from Mongolia the same year. Similar troop reductions took place in the Russian Far East where 200,000 troops were redeployed, and in December 1992 an agreement was reached to withdraw offensive weapons and troops within 100 miles from the border.⁴ By the time Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visited Moscow in September 1994, both sides stressed on the establishment of a new, permanent "strategic partnership", with neither conflict nor alliance, based on the foundation of a due respect of prolonged and stable neighborliness between Russia and China.

In mid-1990s, with the collapse of the bipolar world during the "Cold War", China and Russia were motivated to develop a closer partnership based upon mutual interests and the resentment towards the acutely increased US role in geopolitics, such as US foreign policies encouraging NATO's eastward expansion, which impeded Russia's attempt to unify the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); broadcasting the concept of 'China threat'; contradicting with China in opinions on resolving Taiwan and human right issues; and endeavoring to establish a US-Japan alliance against China. Their expectations of amicable

³ Savada Matles and Ronald E. Dolan, eds., "Sino-Soviet Relations." *China: A Country Study*. Washington: GPO for the Library of Congress, 1987. 1-3

⁴ Herbert J. Ellison and Bruce A. Acker. "The New Russia and Asia: 1991-1995." *NBR Analysis* 7, No. 1 (1996.No. 1): 10.

Sino-Russian relations was reflected in the April 1996 official visit of Boris Yeltsin to China. The leaders of both countries signed a joint statement, announcing their desire to develop a “strategic partnership directed to the 21st century of which there was no other such pair in the world.”⁵

4.3 The Putin Era: 2000-Present

The Vladimir Putin administration, starting in 2000, followed significantly in the track of his predecessor Boris Yeltsin’s policy towards China. In July 2000, Putin visited China where he co-signed a Joint Statement with Chinese President Jiang Zemin reassuring the strategic relationship between Russia and the People’s Republic of China. Further, in July 2001 in Moscow, Putin and Jiang Zemin signed the “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation”. At the joint declaration, the two countries insisted that their treaty was not aimed against any third party, and “the ‘Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation’ is a milestone to characterize the new stage of the Sino-Russian relations” for the purpose of “endeavor[ing] to enhance relations between the two countries to a completely new level, determined to develop the friendship between the people of the two countries from generation to generation”.⁶ This Treaty was the achievement by both sides in process of developing legal foundations for bilateral relations.⁷

Security Cooperation

The September 11th terrorist attacks improved the US-Sino-Russian trilateral relations in cooperation on the issues of anti-terrorism and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Under these circumstances, China and Russia cooperated very closely over the

⁵ Leszek Buszynski. “Oil and Territory in Putin’s Relations with China and Japan.” *Pacific Review* 19, No. 3 (September 2006).

⁶ See “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation” <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2006-03/21/content_548330.htm>. (Retrieved May 15, 2007).

⁷ 中俄元首莫斯科聯合聲明，新華網，2001年7月16日。
<http://big5.xinhuanet.com/gate/big5/news.xinhuanet.com/ziliao2002-11/27/content_642534.htm>.

issue of anti-terrorism, and in June 2002 the two countries also strengthened their former Shanghai Five cooperation in Central Asia with further institutionalization of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which included China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and adopting a number of documents to articulate such regional cooperation. China and Russia set up an “anti-terrorism working group” at the suggestion of President Jiang Zemin and President Putin, which held regular meetings to exchange views on the international struggle against terrorism and how to strengthen cooperation between the two countries on the issue of anti-terrorism. It is notable that, only in 2005, they held four regular meetings.

Energy Agenda

Russia is also expanding its ties with China through oil shipments and the liquefied natural gas (LNG) contracts from the Sakhalin oil projects⁸. As a result, the Sakhalin oil projects may generate more alternatives for natural gas supplies to China, and the contemplated oil pipeline from Siberia to China, albeit Russia’s indecisiveness regarding the final route, might significantly meet China’s energy security needs in the near future. The importance of Sino-Russian energy cooperation has made it a top story in the American media in recent years.

In March 2006, Russian President Putin visited China again to attend “Russia year”⁹ and while there signed a declaration titled, “Russia, China support energy diversification,” specifying increased strategic cooperation in response to the growing Sino-Russian trade relationship. Except for the energy cooperation, President Putin also stressed that an intimate Sino-Russian strategic partnership meets the long-term interests for both the Chinese and the Russian peoples. To avoid any doubt by other countries, Putin described the partnership as

⁸ The Russian government has revoked its ecological approval for Royal Dutch/Shell's giant oilfield project off Sakhalin Island, however, it was reported that Russia used the revocation as a way to threaten West companies to increase their investments in relevant projects.

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6108998>

⁹ 2006 is China’s “Russia Year”; 2007 is Russia’s “China Year”

transparent, being non-bloc, and aimed at establishing a better rule of law in the international community.

To sum up, China's policies aiming at greater energy security have become a prominent issue in Sino-US military relations. In a recent report on the US National Security Strategy, Washington bluntly condemned Beijing's energy policy as obsolete. The US is also wary of Putin's strategy in using energy exports as a foreign policy tool to boost Moscow's influence. The energy trade between China and Russia is now causing concern in Washington.

Strategic Partnership

Political Agenda

On the political agenda, China and Russia developed positive chemistry between Putin and Chinese leaders to assert friendly contemporary Sino-Russian relations, and incrementally improved their cooperation in every respect. Meanwhile, both sides support the policy principle of non-interference in domestic issues, and primarily so with regards to separatism of Chechnya, Tibet, and Taiwan (which includes Russia's covenant against establishing any official relationship with Taiwan). In light of the international affairs, as mentioned previously, both sides collectively called for the affirmative combat against any form of international terrorism right after the September 11th terrorist attacks in 2001. They also formed a joint front on other prominent international issues, such as SCO, Iraq, North Korean nuclear development, the establishment of multilateral systems, the function of the United Nations and the Security Council, and further cooperation with each other in international affairs.

On the issue of Iran, the US is annoyed by China and Russia's position against US in calling on Iran to suspend uranium enrichment. Both China and Russia have close relationships with Iran. China has signed a 25-year \$50 billion deal to develop and import oil and liquid natural gas from Iran, and there are potentially another \$200 billion worth of

projects under discussion between China and Iran. The Russian military-industrial and nuclear complex benefits from large-scale contracts with Iran, including the construction of the \$800 million Bushehr nuclear reactor. Given these economic ties, Russia and China vetoed the US proposed UN Security Council vote on economic sanctions against Iran for violations of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Economic Agenda

Besides seeking to improve political relations, Putin also attempted to resolve the stagnation of economic relations since the mid-1990s. Due to the introduction of strengthened visa requirements as a result of massive migration flows, the trade between Russia and China declined in 1993, and ultimately resulted in a 40 percent decline in the first half of 1994. Bilateral trade was recovered in 1995 but stayed around \$5-7 billion for the rest of the decade. As Putin assumed the office in 2000, China's trade with Russia rapidly increased and stood at \$29.1 billion in 2005. The two countries set the target of a bilateral trade volume amounting to \$60 billion by 2010. However, in terms of their own bilateral trade, both China and Russia are essentially dissatisfied with the current state of engagement even though the bilateral trade is booming. Russia is dissatisfied with the type of commodities traded, as it would rather see itself as an exporter of technology, and machinery than just raw materials and energy.¹⁰ The latter comprised almost 90 percent of Russia's total exports to China in 2005.

The development of Sino-Russian energy cooperation also enhanced the bilateral economic relations. In September 2005, Putin announced that a Pacific-bound oil pipeline will be built, with a branch line extended to China. On November 4, 2005, a Sino-Russian "Joint Statement" declared the importance of their energy cooperation and called for variable forms of cooperation between Chinese National Oil and Gas Exploration and Development Corporation (CNODC) and Yukos, especially in the areas of oil exploitation and construction

¹⁰ Stephen Blank. "The Eurasian Energy Triangle." *Brown Journal of International Affairs* 12, No. 2 (Winter/Spring 2006): 57.

of an oil pipeline. Taken in aggregate, even though frustrated by Moscow's hesitance in letting Beijing fully know Russia's decisiveness regarding oil and gas deals, China constantly expressed the strong willingness to further increase Sino-Russian energy cooperation in the area of exports of oil, gas, and electricity so as to strengthen its energy security.

Another economic area where Russia and China were destined to increase cooperation was arms trade. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) of China has been largely equipped by Russian exports of weapons and military technology. For China, the Beijing government was seeking, and could actually acquire from Russia, systems and technologies restricted or denied to it by the West. For Russia, the Chinese arms market was turning into a primary source of foreign revenue, in turn intended for the modernization of its own armed forces. In the past ten years, the arms trade between China and Russia accounted for more than \$12 billion, and the importing Russia's arms costs China about \$2 to \$2.5 billion annually, as 90% of China's weapons are purchased from Russia. In 2003, China made up 40% of Russia's arms exports. Besides the weapons trade, Beijing is incrementally interested in military technology transfers and licensing as well. China even dispatches a number of military specialists to Russia every year to have relevant military technology training.

Military Strategic Partnership Agenda

In addition to the arms sales, joint military maneuvers also play an important role in Sino-Russian military cooperation today. China and Russia held the "Peace Mission 2005" (和平使命—2005) on August 18, 2005, kicking off in Vladivostok, 30 miles from the North Korean border. The maneuvers involved nearly 10,000 troops (including 1,800 Russian military personnel); scores of advanced aircraft (including Russian TU-95 and TU-22 heavy bombers, which can carry cruise missiles); and army, navy, air force, marine, airborne, and logistics units from both countries on China's Shandong peninsula. For their part, Moscow and Beijing declared that the maneuvers were aimed at combating terrorism, extremism, and

separatism (a veiled reference to Taiwan). The Russian daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* was more blunt about the purpose of the maneuvers, say they were an all out assault on the uni-polar world that has so suited Washington since the end of the Cold War. Chinese experts also stated that the main target of the maneuvers was the United States.

In 2005, the two countries also signed a “China-Russia Joint Statement on 21st Century World Order,” stressing their mutual commonalities, interests, and benign intentions. A high-level mechanism devoted to bilateral security talks between Russia’s Security Council and the Chinese communist Party’s Politburo has also been formed. Another palpable achievement of Sino-Russian relations was the resolution of their outstanding border disputes. In 2004 both sides reached a settlement of their 4,300-km shared border by signing an “Addendum of Treaty Regarding Sino-Russian Eastern Shared Border between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation.” In sum, with political and economic ties, the establishment of amicably bilateral relations between China and Russia has represented Russia’s mainstream opinion on China since mid-1990s.

On the surface level, these developments seem to form a Sino-Russian military “strategic partnership” since China and Russia came together steadily to deal with a number of issues and agendas in the past few years. From the perspective of the United States, however, Washington regards such Sino-Russian partnership as simply an exchange between China and Russia for their respective interests, as Moscow and Beijing do not have any mutual strategic goals permanently and unchangeably.

Washington’s above-mentioned analysis is to some extent reasonable. There is some sign with Moscow’s hesitance in advancing its relationship with China. For instance, Russia never sold its newest military equipment to China. In addition, China and Russia are still at the preliminary stage of the energy cooperation, and the United States is apparently aware of

Russia's indecisiveness on the Siberian pipeline and its proposed development to either Japan or China.

However, from the perspective of the United States, the Sino-Russian rapprochement might imply a lot of potential troubles even though the US believes neither China nor Russia has the intention of constituting an anti-American bloc in the short or medium term. As discussed above, an ostensible example is the arms sales between Russia and China. Since late 1990s, Russia exported fighter planes, missiles, and warships to modernize the Chinese army. Russian arms sales to China bring new challenges and risks to the United States in resolving a possible international conflict situation between Taiwan and China.

Even though Washington shows its resentment against a more intimate phase in Sino-Russian relations, I believe the US realizes the limitations of the Sino-Russian "strategic partnership".¹¹

¹¹ 裴敏欣；BBC Chinese.com; Washington Perspective: Sino-Russia Strategic Relationship; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/chinese/simp/low/newsid_4850000/newsid_4858400/4858458.stm>.