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Elements of strategic relationship between Russia and China

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Abstract

Leaders in Russia and China are openly discussing a “strategic relationship” based on self-interest and a desire for leverage over other countries. The warming of relations between Russia and China had already begun in the final phase of the Soviet period, when the eastern border was defined and the entire border demarcated. Their post-Cold War strategic relationship is based on five main determinants. These include border transformation, force reductions, confidence-building measures, interdependence and Russian arms sales. Russia and China have agreed to reduce the potential for a military conflagration by de-targeting nuclear weapons and not using nuclear weapons first. Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese Premier Li Peng agreed to develop cooperative relations in 1992, and since then there have been regular high-level visits between the two countries. Russia’s trade with China has increased substantially since the Gorbachev period, and “in 2012 two-way trade equalled almost US\$ 88 billion, a huge increase from 2001.” Both military and non-military trade relationship between Russia and China is a positive factor in Russo-Chinese relations.

Keywords: Russia, China, trade, cooperation, border, central Asia, military cooperation.

Introduction

Leaders in Russia and China now openly discuss a “strategic” relationship, which may have significant implications for global “security”. Despite the fact that Russia and China have developed close “political, economic, and military” connections since 1992, they are not a part of an “alliance” in the traditional meaning of the word. The best way to describe their relationship is “as one of strategic convergence”, which involves extensive “cooperation” as well as a consensus of opinions and “interests” on crucial issues of global security. It is not fostered by love and friendship; rather, it is perpetuated by calculating “self-interest and a desire for leverage” over other countries, particularly the United States.

The post-Cold War strategic relationship between Russia and China is based on five main determinants: border transformation, force reductions, confidence-building measures, interdependence and, most important, Russian arms sales and China’s military modernization. In addition, two other important elements in the Russian-Chinese partnership are cooperation in Northeast Asia and Central Asia, and common position on global issues.

Removing Elements of Conflict: The Border Issue

The transformation from bitter enemies to strategic partners is a consequence of the large-scale changes in the international system that manifested themselves in the “collapse of the Soviet Union” and the end of communism in Europe. The bitter rivalry between the Soviet Union and China was based both on issues of ideology and power. China could not accept the kind of dominating leadership role that the Soviet Union demanded and exercised with regard to the members of the Warsaw Pact. Moreover, Mao Zedong’s vision of socialism in the world clashed with the more conservative, power-dominated outlook of the Soviet leadership. As the Soviet Union has ceased to exist, Russia is no longer ruled by communists and economic reform has eroded the ideological content of communism in China, these issues are no longer relevant.

The warming of relations between Russia and China had already begun in the final phase of the Soviet period as Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev started to tackle the continuing border disputes. The principal concession that the Soviet leadership made in 1989, which ended the stalemate on the border issue, was that “the thalweg of the rivers bordering

between the Soviet Union and China (and not the Chinese river bank) should be the border.” The eastern border (98 percent of USSR-China border),^[1] was defined through a contract that was inked in May 1991. The Ussuri River in the east and the rivers Arjun and Amur in the north serve as major defining features. From the Russian, Chinese, and Mongolian triangular intersection to a location near Vladivostok at the river Tumen, it is 4,200 km. long. The Russian Federation approved this agreement on 13 February 1992, while Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan did the same in October of that year.^[2] A mutually agreed settlement was made in September 1994 on the 55-km. borderline in the West connecting Mongolia and Kazakhstan.^[3] The eastern border demarcation was completed in November 1997. Except for a few small stretches, the entire Russian-Chinese border is now demarcated.^[4] The last issue was settled in a “border agreement between Russia and China” that was concluded on October 14th, 2003. In the vicinity of Khabarovsk, China was given jurisdiction over the islands of Tarabarov (Yinlong Island), Zhenbao, and around “50% of Bolshoy Ussuriysky (Heixiazhi Island)”. On April 27, 2005, the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress approved the accord for China, and on May 20, the Russian Duma did the same. Sergei Lavrov, the foreign minister of Russia, and Li Zhaoxing, the foreign minister of China, “exchanged ratification documents” on June 2.^[5]

Force Reductions

Another important factor in the Soviet-Chinese conflict that needed to be addressed was “the build-up of military forces”, especially in the Soviet Far East Military District. By 1985 the Soviet Union had increased its ground forces in the Far East to “500,000 men”^[6] In addition, there have been extensive deployments of conventional and nuclear-armed aircraft and missiles, including SS-20s and strategic nuclear forces, targeting China. In 1989, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze made an announcement that 250,000 troops, including 120,000 who were facing China directly, would be leaving the Far East. A meeting later in 1989 that began to negotiate a demilitarized zone was facilitated by Mikhail Gorbachev’s proposal of complete demilitarization along the Soviet-Chinese border. Since then, Russian troops have completely withdrawn from Mongolia as part of a downsizing in their military presence in the Far East. The Far East Military District’s three tank divisions have been completely disbanded, and by 1996, there were only 10 mobile rifle divisions left, down from 21 in 1989. Russia’s Pacific Fleet was cut by about 50 per cent in the same time period.^[7]

In addition to the force reductions, Russia, China and the Central Asian states have agreed on a regime of confidence-building measures that should significantly reduce the potential for any kind of military conflagration. These include an agreement in December 1992 that over a period of seven years all forces on both sides of the border should be pulled back a distance of at least 100 km. from the border. Artillery, tanks, strike planes, and other offensive weaponry, including nuclear weapons, had to be removed from within 200 km. of the border.^[8] This will be expensive for Russia to implement since a sizeable proportion of deployed forces and their infrastructure are currently within the 100-km. zone. Other measures include an agreement signed in 1994 to prevent military accidents, such as

violation of air space and accidental missile launchers. There has also been a declaration to de-target nuclear weapons and not to use nuclear weapons first. Military officers from both sides have attended military exercises in Russia and China.^[9] It has been agreed that any exercise involving more than 35,000 troops required that observers from both sides be invited and that exercises involving more than 40,000 troops should no longer take place.^[10] Cooperation was expected to continue after an accord on initiatives to minimize soldiers along the borders^[11] was reached in April 1997.

Confidence Building

The border agreements and the so-called demilitarization of the border region are an important prerequisite for a political process of *rapprochement* between Russia and China. The most visible manifestation of the new relationship has been the intense diplomatic activity between the two countries. Russia and China have both kept up the high-level political communications that started under Gorbachev. A close bond between the two countries starts from the top down. Senior officials meet regularly and ministers and deputy ministers are in close contact through committees and consultations. Whatever the issues, both sides promise a warm atmosphere at their frequent meetings. Unlike the first decade of relationships, when the ego of leaders sent relationships on a downward spiral, socialization and frequent attention from leaders will always propel relationships forward. Of course, the gap between a top-down relationship, guided by frequent summit meetings and regular interdepartmental committee consultations, and a lack of substance for the two sides to work bilaterally needs to be bridged. The warm atmosphere of a generation of leaders raised together in the 1950s will not be passed on to the next generation unless subcommittees on energy, transportation and a host of other issues make key decisions. That bind countries.

At the end of January 1992, Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese Premier Li Peng agreed to develop cooperative relations in a meeting on the occasion of a United Nations Security Council meeting. Andrei Kozyrev, the Russian foreign minister, visited China in March 1992, and Shokhin, the deputy prime minister, did the same in May.^[12] In December 1992, April 1996, and November 1997, Yeltsin paid visits to China. In May 1994, Viktor Chernomyrdin, the prime minister of Russia, travelled to China. Chinese President Jiang Zemin met with the former Russian President Yeltsin 9 times and 4 times with President Vladimir Putin respectively, resulting in 11 statements or declarations and in the constant deepening of mutual understanding and personal chemistry between President Jiang Zemin and both former President Yeltsin and President Putin (Jiang Zemin went to Moscow in September 1994, May 1995, April 1997 and in November 1998). From December 1992 to December 1999, there were seven summits between Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin. The rhetorical shift from “constructive partnership” to “determining the fate of the twenty-first century”^[13] used to describe these high-level visits which were the signals of the “changed atmosphere” in the Russia-China relationship, or at least of how the two countries wanted the world to see it. Li Peng, the Chinese Prime Minister, visited Moscow in June 1995 and December 1996. Additionally, there have been several meetings “between the foreign and defence”

ministries, as well as “military and economic” authorities of the two “countries”. Such regular and high-level interactions have not only helped to foster a friendly political climate, but they have also resulted in meaningful accords. “The presidential and prime-ministerial visits, and the subsequent joint statements, provided opportunities for the two sides to identify areas of mutual agreements.”^[14] Some of these were: “the commitment to a strategic partnership of equality, mutual confidence, and mutual coordination; the pledge to observe the 1991 and 1994 treaties delimiting the common border; the affirmation that Russian policy in Chechnya is an internal affair necessary to keep Russia whole; opposition to North Atlantic Treaty Organisation expansion; China’s support for Russia’s entry into the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation agreement; Russia’s commitment to avoid official ties with Taiwan; Russia’s public declaration that Tibet is an integral part of China; and continued military cooperation, arms reductions and conventional and nuclear confidence-building measures (CBMs).”^[15]

During Yeltsin’s trip to Beijing in December 1992, a joint statement was issued calling for enhanced communication between Russian and Chinese military forces. Each party also vowed “not to use force against the other”, even in other countries, and to fight shy of establishing any “military and political alliances directed against the other Party, or sign with third countries treaties or agreements detrimental to the state sovereignty and security interests of the other Party.”^[16] In July 1994, in order to lessen the risk of unintentional “escalation”, Pavel Grachev, then Defense Minister of Russia, and Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian agreed on steps such as “preventing accidental missile launches”, ceasing “electronic communication” disruption, and developing “signals to warn aircraft and ships in danger” of breaching the other side’s boundary. When Pavel Grachev visited China in May 1995, he recommended sending Russian observers to watch Chinese military drills.^[17] A number of CBMs, such as refraining from making the “first use of nuclear weapons and retargeting nuclear missiles away from one another’s territory”, were highlighted in the Yeltsin-Jiang communiqué in September 1994. The last point is that there have been a lot of “high-level military-to-military” meetings. These have also happened frequently on a local level, with “local commanders visiting each other’s military districts”, and vessels from the North China Fleet visiting Vladivostok in May 1994 and the Russian Pacific Fleet making a port call in Qinghai in August 1994. Admiral Felix Gromov, the head of the Russian Navy, while in Beijing in 1994, signed a pact for “military cooperation”, involving “joint naval exercises”. The “border security forces” of the two nations also started CBMs.^[18]

Interdependence – A New Trade Partnership

Apart from the general issue of geopolitics and the avoidance of mutual conflict, there are other concrete common interests that promote Russo-Chinese cooperation. One of these is the growing trade between the two countries. The nature of the non-military trade has some interesting features. As “China’s industry” was initially designed with “Soviet assistance” in the 1950s, the former was interested in modernising such plants utilising Russian technological know-how and industrial equipment. This is a one-of-a-kind circumstance because, generally, except for nuclear reactors

and military equipment, Russia is unable to sell what it considers high technology products abroad. Additionally, Russia also promised to help China build its “nuclear and hydroelectric power” projects.^[19] China, on the other hand, exports a range of consumer goods and foodstuffs to Russia. China’s rapid economic growth means that its demand for energy is also growing and, as a result, China has become a net importer of oil. Thus, China is interested in importing electricity from the Irkutsk province as well as “oil and gas from the Russian Far East and Central Asia.”^[20] In November 1997, a framework agreement was signed governing a pipeline project “that would run from Irkutsk province to South Korea through Mongolia and China” at a cost of US\$12 billion.

In 1984, Soviet-Chinese trade amounted to US\$370 million. This volume of trade increased substantially in the Gorbachev period and by 1991 had reached US\$3.9 billion.^[21] Russia’s trade with China has since exceeded the volume of trade with the Soviet Union as a whole, reaching a level of US\$6.8 billion in 1996, “making China Russia’s third largest trade partner after Germany” (US\$23.7 billion from 1993 to 1995) and the United States (US\$16.7 billion).^[22] In April 1996 both sides set a target of \$20 billion for the total volume of trade to be achieved by the year 2000.^[23] “China is now Russia’s biggest trading partner and two-way trade equalled almost US\$ 88 billion in 2012, a huge increase from 2001.”^[24] As estimated by Unnikrishnan and Purushothaman, “while Russia exports natural resources to China, China exports almost all kinds of manufactured goods to Russia.”^[25]

In 2021, 18% of Russia’s trade was with China, while Russia made up 2% of China’s trade. From “11% in 2013”, China’s share of Russian trade has increased gradually.^[26] About “70% of Russia’s imports” of “semiconductors and electronics” come from China.^[27]

On the whole, the non-military trade relationship with China is a positive factor in Russo-Chinese relations because it increases co-operation and interdependence and reduces the likelihood of conflict. This is especially the case for the joint exploitation of natural resources, which involves a common large-scale infrastructure that both sides have a large interest in maintaining. It has to be pointed out, however, that Moscow is wary of the unpredictable effect of closer trade relations between China and the Russian Far East and, therefore, has sought to impose stricter controls over the trade relationship. Trade could be a source of tension as well as cooperation.

Russian Arms Sales and China’s Military Modernisation

Another critical aspect of this partnership is its strategic character. Russia’s economy is insufficient to support its “military-industrial complex”. China declares itself to be “a great power politically, but not economically or militarily”. The rapid increase in Russian weaponry shipments since 1992 portends greater collaboration. Russia will continue to lag behind the United States for many years, but with China’s assistance, Russia could be able to create the weapons it views as essential. In the interim, collaboration will increase in the study and creation of cutting-edge weaponry technologies. As the Russians are sceptical of this idea of strategic partnership, they would rather transfer outdated technologies. Many see China as a possible threat rather than a rescuer of an imperilled armaments industry. However, the impetus for collaboration is building, and

Russia is unlikely to receive a better deal. Arms shipments represented around “one-fifth to one-quarter” of a still modest trade total in 1996–1997, but the proportion kept increasing. Russia provided “more than 90%” of China’s significant conventional weapons imports between 1991 and 2010, and China accounted for over “40% of Russian exports”.^[28]

Russian armaments provided several advantages for China. They were simpler to incorporate into the Chinese military because most of their weapons were manufactured and transferred by the Soviet Union, and the Chinese have fared significantly better “in reverse engineering and retrofitting with Russian” weaponry “than with Western military technology”. Russian arms helped in military modernization and “power projection”, both of which are prime concerns for military strategists of China.

According to Zhang Hanhui, China’s Ambassador to Russia, Russia-China “military and security cooperation serves each other’s core interests, does not target any third party and is conducive to regional peace, stability and development.”^[29]

Cooperation in Northeast Asia and Central Asia

“Security cooperation” extends beyond arms. The two countries commit to redouble their efforts to collaborate in Northeast Asia and Central Asia. They agree on the objectives of restricting Japan’s growth as a military force, assuring a peaceful entry in Korea that decreases US dominance, and containing the “spread of Islamic” extremism. China commits to back “Moscow’s sphere of influence in Central Asia”, while Moscow agrees to assist China’s reunion “with Taiwan”, with a focus on Southeast Asia. Both sides will vehemently defend the “territorial integrity of the other”. “Territorial integrity” is a concern for Russia as it faces strained economic relations with the Far East and “separatist” movements in some of its provinces, and it is also a concern for China as a result of ethnic unrest in “Xinjiang and Tibet”, as well as the prospect of “Taiwan independence”. The synergy of their “military requirements” is likely to persist, especially if the two nations “succeed in security cooperation in Central Asia and Korea.” A dwindling superpower concerned with preserving one aspect of its dominance on the one hand, and the rising superpower concerned with military weakness, on the other, will perceive each other as satisfying each other’s demands.

Common Position on Global Issues

Global coordination in conflict zones, peacekeeping operations, and other security issues are also the goals of strategic cooperation. China and Russia will confer with one another in an effort to find common ground. They anticipate influencing choices about international security in opposition to unipolarity with two vetoes in the UN Security Council.

Russia and China both oppose the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s enlargement. They are leery of the US’s stance on matters like the “promotion of democracy” and its outspoken critiques of both Russia’s and China’s “human rights records”. Pro-US governments in “the Baltics, Georgia, and Ukraine” are unwelcome to Russia. Similar to how China coexists with “US bases in Japan and South Korea”, Russia finds the fact of a persistent “US presence in its neighbourhood” unsettling.^[30]

Conclusion

Russia and China will continue to be close allies as long as they have a common goal in opposing the US hegemony. This will establish all the prerequisites for converting this “tactical proximity” into a true “strategic partnership”.^[31]

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