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Russia-China relations: Objectives and interests

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Abstract

Russia and China share a discontent with the United States-dominated unipolar world and want to establish a multipolar international system. They are concerned about the West's attempt to expand NATO eastward and its security ring around China. Russia has an identity crisis vis-à-vis the West and is sceptical about a partnership with the West. Russia needs to modernise its defence forces to meet the security needs of post-Soviet Russia, and must lessen external threats. Russia sees China as a crucial pillar of the post-Cold War Eurasian security framework. Moscow believes that China's interest in military cooperation with Russia will support the growth of stable bilateral relations. China's leaders are worried that Iran, Afghanistan, or the Central Asian republics may try to infiltrate western China with "Islamic" militancy. Russian diplomats maintain that the Russo-Chinese partnership is not targeted against any country.

Keywords: Russia, China, strategic partnership, United States, NATO, arms sales

Introduction

The current study aims to provide key answers to several queries on the evolving strategic relationship between Russia and China. For example, why and how did all this happen? What was the driving force behind the Russo-Chinese *rapprochement*? Is it a temporary trend dictated by short-term factors such as financial constraints and political compulsions, or is it a beginning of stable and long-term cooperation? Will Moscow and Beijing form a sort of strategic alliance directed against other powers (Japan, the United States, Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)), or should this cooperation not be evaluated in terms of challenge, threat, and danger? Will the Russian supplies substantially increase China's offensive capabilities or not? Will some regional arms transfer control regime be possible or not? This research is an attempt to address some of these questions.

This study attempts to answer these issues by demonstrating that "Russia's policy on arms transfers" is not a stand-alone aspect of the nation's global strategy. Instead, the study situates "arms sales and acquisitions" in the broader framework of "domestic and foreign policies" of Russia and China. The goals and interests of the two countries should be compared first, as "arms trade policy" is an outcome of domestic debate as much as a tactic of foreign strategy.

Both Moscow and Beijing had a number of serious reasons for resuming their bilateral political, economic and military ties. They have both common and different interests in developing strategic cooperation.

Common Interests

(a) Shared indignation towards the West

The "strategic partnership" between Russia and China is sui generis. In a world that is transitioning from a bipolar system to a still uncertain order, where one superpower stays dominant and global economic integration is happening quickly, they both seek a new world order. Together, the two nations aim to stop the expansion of Western hegemony, slow the impact of "geoeconomic integration" on geopolitics, and hasten the decline of one hegemon in favour of "multipolarity".^[1] Because they feel the heat of Western hegemony when it comes to deciding the most important global issues, Russia and China are resuming their fight against a system of international relations that is "dominated by the United States, Japan, and the great powers of Western Europe."

The West's attempt for the eastward expansion of NATO has been a source of concern for the both in varying degrees.^[2] As NATO's forward line moves closer towards Russia, the

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United States has also thrown a security ring around China by concluding a security pact with Australia and Indonesia and roping in Japan^[3] for a similar arrangement. Both Russia and China watch these developments with increasing anxiety.^[4]

China has grown sick of the nonstop harangues from the West in relation to its trade practices and its so-called “human rights” violations. It is worried about the strategy of the United States (US) to “contain” its growing regional power and, in exchange for Russian backing in opposing American and Japanese security cooperation, is backing Russia in its objections to North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) enlargement. Russia would also not want to see a militarily stronger Japan because of their own territorial conflict.

And most crucial of all, both Russia and China They share the same discontent with a US-dominated unipolar world. A Russo-Chinese alliance against this dominance has been forged in part by concern over the growing American economic and military commitment in Central Asia and the resulting conflict of interests.^[5] Their alliance, which they refer to as a “constructive strategic partnership,”^[6] is mainly a counterbalance to US dominance and is intended to establish “multipolarity” in “international system”.^[7] Both nations benefit domestically when they occasionally adopt an aggressive demeanour toward the US. Both Russia and China find it convenient to use their essentially “anti-Western” partnership as a negotiating tool in “their international relations”.^[8]

(b) Common challenges from the US

“Structural realists” believe that in view of Russia’s weakening position and America’s rise to a hegemon-like power position, the alliance between Russia and China aims to offset US influence.^[9] Many Western scholars and analysts use a “structural realist” paradigm. They cite geopolitical issues including Russia’s decline following the dissolution of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, as well as its incapacity to successfully compete with the US. In order to counterbalance the American “hegemonic” influence, the Russians turned to China, a growing power. “Structural realists” also stress the fact that these two countries were once allies, then became adversaries, and are “now warming” up once more.

The author of the book *China’s Great Strategic Choices for the 21st Century: Foreign Policy Strategy*, Xi Laiwang, notes striking changes in the two triangles of Sino-Russian-U.S. relations and Sino-U.S.-Japanese relations. These changes offer new opportunities and challenges to China. The improvement and warming of Russian-Chinese relations have caused a significant improvement in China’s security environment. The United States and Japan have strengthened their “security alliance”, and this has created a change in the Sino-U.S.-Japanese triangle disadvantageous for China. “Looking at the Asia-Pacific region,” Xi Laiwang writes, “Moscow must lean on Sino-Russian relations to contain the U.S. and Japan. Simultaneously, Russia also must rely on China’s position and influence to gain a place in Asia-Pacific affairs.”^[10] The view that Russian-Chinese cooperation might result from common challenges from the United States was also expressed in the popular book *A China That Can Say No*.^[11] Though not expressing the results of scholarly research or an official policy, the book reflects the attitudes and sentiments in recent years of a

broad mass of Chinese, especially the younger generation. Undoubtedly, what is planned may turn out to be one of the most important partnerships of our time through cooperation in armaments supply and shared efforts to influence the international “strategic environment”. It is, in theory, “nothing less than a counterthrust” against an American-led new international order.

(c) Balance of power

As Moscow works to bolster its influence in the “Asia-Pacific region”, many Russian experts of what may be termed as the “optimistic school” believe that China is the only country on whom Russia can rely.^[12] As a foundation for more Russian-Chinese collaboration in addressing regional crises and other difficult topics like “nuclear disarmament”, these experts refer to the common goal of “creating an external environment” favourable to domestic economic changes. Cooperation between China and Russia may enable Beijing to maintain the regional balance of power. In part, Russia acts as a check on the influence of the US and Japan. Chinese and Russian interests overlap on many global issues.^[13]

(d) Opposition to US missile defence system

Russia and China oppose the US plans to build a “new missile defence system”. Both express anxiety over the “American strategic superiority”. Beijing believes that the proposed “missile defence” strategy planned by the US is aimed at it, and it has made it clear that it would also develop its own strategic arsenal in retaliation.^[14] Similarly, Moscow is very critical of the idea despite the US’s assurance to Russia that it won’t render that country’s nuclear deterrence ineffective.^[15]

(e) Common interests in regional stability

Between Russia and China there are unstable and unpopular governments in Central Asia. Both have a shared interest in the stability of this region. Russia’s interests in her ‘near abroad’ conflict with those of America. Both Russia and China have close links with Iran of which the West is circumspect and even suspicious.

They have common distrust of Islamic fundamentalism of “Taliban”^[16] and “al Qaeda”^[17] variety which has already caused problems in Tajikistan, a close ally of Russia and along the border that China shares with Afghanistan.

Another possible hotspot that China and Russia may try to control together is Korea. In their struggle of power with the West, it also benefited both Russia and China to prop up an intractable North Korea. However, it would be advantageous to them if they work together in persuading it to start acting rationally.

(f) Mutually convenient arms trade

China has purchased arms worth billions of dollars from Russia and has been successful in securing technology transfers from the latter—primarily for aircraft construction—that enabling the former to produce more and better weapons on its own. Slowly but surely, “military cooperation” between Russia and China will match that of the United States and Israel in the Middle East. China has continuously purchased small and heavy armaments, guided missile destroyers and submarines, fighter bombers from Russia and has built a plant to assemble them. This deal has benefitted both of them. According to a professor at a think

tank affiliated with the Chinese government, Russia is offering technological know-how “that would take China a very long time to develop by itself and which it absolutely could not get anywhere else.”^[18] For this reason, China finds collaboration with Russia advantageous in the long run. It also helps Russia’s struggling economy. The restrictions on military exports put in place by the West in the wake of the Tiananmen massacre have benefited Russia’s armaments producers.^[19] In other words, China’s desire to purchase weapons fulfils Russia’s requirements, making both parties an ideal match.

(g) Non-intervention in each other’s internal affairs

Due to their “shared interests”, Russia and China have “pledged not to interfere in each other’s domestic affairs.”^[20] China has been one of the few countries to support Russia’s use of force in the north Caucasus.^[21] In exchange, Russia supports Beijing’s position on “Taiwan, Tibet, and Xinjiang”.

To sum up, China “opposes NATO expansion”, provides markets for Russian goods outside those produced by arms companies, and supports Russia’s involvement in Asian international fora.

On the other hand, Russia acts as China’s policeman in unstable Central Asia, saving China from having to interfere and isolate the region from its insurgent Xinjiang province. At a cheap relative cost, Russia provides China with much-needed weaponry, technology, and the expertise of Russian experts. China acquires permanent sway over central and regional lobby groups that have a say in how Russian policy is decided, as well as control over ASEAN and the Spratly Islands dispute. Russia continues to overlook China’s domestic “human rights abuses”, which continue to strain relations between China and the United States.

Apart from these common incentives, both countries have different objectives and interests for the development of a new kind of “strategic relationship”.

Russian Objectives and Interests

(a) Identity crisis *vis-à-vis* the West

Notwithstanding the disappearance of the great strategic friction, the West’s relationship with new Russia is reminiscent of Cold War legacy with the Transatlantic community still remaining undecided as to what the former superpower is to them—an ally, or a client or a mere defeated adversary? So far, the West has failed to put her in one single category. Likewise, this ambivalence is no less acute for Russia, which is unable to integrate itself with the West, although she chooses to be its friend. She is too big, too proud and too nationalist to be reduced to vassalism. Even if the Cold War has been won by the West, Russians are not prepared to accept the defeat and continue to claim the traditional greatness of their country. Sharing with the United States the special global responsibility, the post-Cold War Russia very much wanted to evolve a strategic partnership with the West but thus far she has been meted either with veiled contempt or subtle discrimination from the other side.

Moreover, much to the disappointment of the Russians the flow of the western financial assistance as a dividend for dumping their socialist ideology came at the most in trickles.

There is a growing skepticism among the Russians about a democratic transition and productive partnership with the

West which is busy drawing a new security line in Europe by expanding NATO further to the East with the exclusion of Russia. More Russians are convinced today that the western countries want to reduce Russia to serving as a mere supplier of raw materials for the Western world.

Caught between her lofty ambitions and reduced capabilities Russia now desperately struggles to extricate itself from its present predicaments. Repeatedly rebuffed by the West on the question of NATO expansion and strategic partnership, as the fallen giant looks for an alternative to buttress its remaining strength a rising China emerges as a choice on the agenda of the many in the Russian foreign policy community. “If NATO goes east, we will go east too,” then Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev said in 1996 that Moscow could use China as a counterbalance.^[22]

(b) Defence industry

While the two countries were warming up, China placed ever larger orders for Russian arms. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, its “military-industrial complex” had virtually collapsed. It was mainly because of the massive cuts in the budgets of their military.

Because the Russian military sector cannot exist solely on domestic purchases, arms sales to other countries are essential for Russian defence industry. Military procurement itself was cut by 70 per cent in 1992 alone.^[23] In the years that followed, nothing changed. By the autumn of 1994, 400 defence companies completely ceased manufacturing, while another 1,500 were working part-time.^[24] In 1996, barely 10% of the industry’s potential was being used,^[25] and military output fell by 39.6 per cent.^[26] Statistics show that out of 6.1 million workers, “2.5 million left the defence industry” between 1991 and 1995.^[27] In 1996, the workforce of the defence sector declined by 13.6 per cent.^[28]

The predicted job losses would have a particularly negative effect in some areas, especially in “Siberia and the Far East”, where the defence sector is the only source of employment. The closure of numerous industries and design bureaus worried Russian defence ministry officials since it might hinder the creation of state-of-the-art technology and precipitate the “decline of the Russian military”. Some military and business experts believe that the only way to prevent this scenario is to make systematic efforts to give a fillip to arms exports.^[29]

According to Alexei Arbatov, Vice-Chairman of Russian Defence Committee, the Russian Ministry of Defence has told defence producers not to expect further domestic procurement until the year 2005, when it hopes to order a new level of high-tech platforms and weapons. To survive until then, the defence industry must export all of its conventional weapons production, including state-of-the-art systems. To protect exporters in the interval, there will be no government exports controls on conventional systems.^[30]

When ordering weapons, the Russian government frequently fell short of paying the industry. Government debt to the defence sector reached 11 trillion Russian roubles by the end of 1995.^[31] In addition to other negative effects, the sector was unable to carry out a successful arms export policy as it lacked the funds to begin producing the equipment that foreign customers had requested.

Moscow began exporting weapons as a means of revive the nation’s steadily declining defence sector. According to

President Yeltsin, “The weapons trade is essential for us to obtain the foreign currency which we urgently need, and to keep the defence industry afloat.”^[32]

The money from arms exports is essential for the defence sector to build new weapon systems because there are not enough state orders and funds. For instance, the “MiG-MAPO (Moscow Aircraft Industrial Association)” received \$22 million from the sale of MiG-29 jets to Malaysia, which was used to finance the manufacturing of the MiG-37, “a stealth fighter”.^[33] It is estimated that revenue from “arms exports” accounts for more than 50% of Russian armaments production.^[34]

The conclusions reached by a study show how much “short-term” financial worries have trumped long-term security issues^[35]: “Chinese purchases have proved so important to the cash-starved defense industry, especially in the Russian Far East, that officials representing these sectors have managed to override concerns within the military regarding the possibility of a long-term threat from a resurgent China.”^[36]

Whole segments of the Russian defence industry are in danger of collapsing due to the country’s lack of a cogent “research and development (R&D) and military spending” agenda, which prevents it from subsidising its defence sector as it formerly did. Defense companies have constantly pressed the central government for subsidies as well as complete independence and “control in foreign arms sales” ever since they lost the fight for state funds for “domestic production” and acquisition. In 1996 Yeltsin granted the industry a U.S.\$4 billion subsidy and created a Ministry – only to abolish the ministry in 1997 and take arms control under direct presidential and prime ministerial control. Paradoxically, these steps give the defence sector more freedom to sell state-approved high-tech equipment and weapons to other countries before the Russian military has a chance to employ them.^[37]

Due to a lack of funding, a large number of innovative weapons, designed by Russia’s R&D department and design companies, cannot be put into serial production. A “fifth-generation” stealthy “multi-role” aircraft created by the Mikoyan-Gurevich corporation was said to be compatible with America’s F-22 Raptor. But because of financial constraints, mass production of the aircraft for the Russian air force is not feasible. According to reports, China suggested co-developing the aircraft and afterwards giving China these fighters.^[38]

Russian defence strategy is another important justification for the defence sector to sell abroad. Following the fall of the Soviet Union, Russia’s military leadership was forced to decide between maintaining the greatest number of forces and divisions and making significant investments in upcoming systems and technologies. Moscow decided against future military-technological R&D in favour of readiness and force structure. The “Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty”^[39] mandated force reductions along with the massive overproduction that in some cases has persisted since 1991, Russia has a wide range of appealing weapons to sell, especially combat aircraft,^[40] which currently account for 50% of Russian arms exports. When the Soviet Union fell apart, many of these aircraft were new types that were “in the pipeline” and now needed to be sold abroad to recover their costs.

Russian officials assert that resuming or opening “military ties with China” is a logical progression from their extensive

and developing bilateral relationship. However, it appears that Russia’s willingness to further up its arms sales programme in the region is being driven by economic considerations. Russian ambassador to China at the time, Igor Rogachev, reasoned: “China has been, and I hope it will be, our partner. Our defence industry needs some impulse. We need currency. We now have a lot of economic troubles.”^[41] In 1996 the Russian deputy prime minister said that Moscow was “willing to sell anything that our customers want, except nuclear weapons.”^[42]

It was reported that China would turn to the Russian defence industry in order to acquire the military technologies it needed to compete with Taiwan and Southeast Asia. The powers that be in the Russian defence sector believed that the defence agreements “could become not only a way for our hapless military-industrial complex to preserve jobs and earn money, but also the start of a long-range strategic partnership and a new balance of forces in Asia that would favour Russia.”^[43]

Regardless of their actual “costs and gains”, “production lines” must continue to run. This lowers unit and research and development expenses for both “old and new weapons”. Because of the resulting “economies of scale”, the customers of these weapons may buy more at the same or possibly lower prices.^[44] When a production process is discontinued domestically, foreign sales assist in recouping expenditures for the technologies of the following generation.^[45] Exports appear to generate significant profits for the exporter, whether it be the MoD or the defence sector, given that Russian industry is actually heavily subsidized.^[46]

(c) Need for reforming and modernising Russian defence forces

The Russian armed forces desperately need to be modernised and reformed. The decision was made to decrease the number of soldiers to “1.2 million” and transform it into “a more mobile and well-equipped professional fighting force” in order to meet the altered security needs of post-Soviet Russia. Only under circumstances of “peace and security” on the extensive border with China could these military changes be put into action. Moscow is attempting to cultivate a ring of “friendly, non-threatening neighbours” around itself given its current state of “military, political, and economic weakness”. All of this calls for a foreign policy paradigm that regards “China as a friend, good neighbour, and partner” with whom Russia may collaborate on military and technological projects.

(d) A weakened Russia needs breathing space

Russia is in need of some breathing room to focus on internal issues. It must lessen external threats, and a hostile Sino-Russian relationship would highlight the escalating vulnerabilities of Siberia and the Far East of Russia. For the foreseeable future, Russia is no longer an important Asian force. Russia’s other avenues of influence have shrunk or crumbled, and it has never been a significant economic player in Asia. Particularly, Russian military strength has declined. The Pacific Fleet and the land and air forces that the USSR sent to China’s border in reaction to border incidents in the late 1960’s have significantly diminished in size. Even if these military resources—so important to Soviet influence in Cold War Asia—were still as strong as they once were, they would not give Russia the same

leverage “in a post-Cold War Asia” where the military power equation is less important than commerce and investment flows.

(e) Getting money for economic reforms

The question of where to get the funding required to carry out Russian reforms has been at the centre of a major discussion about arms exports. One school of thought advocated for outside assistance, while the other looked to domestic resources.

Some Russian officials and businesspeople assert that sales of weaponry can be used to pay for economic changes. One Russian official claimed that the value of Russian weaponry in 1996 was between US\$3.5 and US\$3.6 billion.^[47] According to estimates, Russia needed to export armaments to the tune of “US\$5–10 billion” per year “for 15–30 years” to cover the expected US\$150 billion transitional costs.

Thus, Russia’s weapon-sales serve twin purposes of (i) keeping their military-industrial complexes well-oiled and operational; and (ii) earning precious foreign exchange.^[48]

(f) Influence of social factors

The Military Industrial Complex (MIC) in Russia is said to have lost 2.5 million of workforce since 1991, bringing the total number of employees to 3.6 million.^[49] Exports of weapons are beneficial for employment and labour relations. The agreement with China on submarine exports in September 1994 stopped the factory’s financial meltdown “and a strike at the Krasnoye Sormovo plant in Nizhny Novgorod.”^[50] An increase in armament sales in 1995–1996 helped in retaining 835,000 employees in the sector.^[51]

Russians think that such military cooperation might nevertheless help to resolve the issue of shortage of consumer goods in their country even if the “developing countries” are unable to pay in cash for their arms purchases. Some experts point out that China, for instance, can provide Russia with a variety of commodities, including “toys, some electronics, textiles, shoes, and leather goods,” as well as “tea”. Chinese products are typically of lower quality than those from other emerging and industrialized nations, but they are nevertheless adjusting to the Russian market considerably better.

(g) Regionalism

For the purpose of granting the Russian provinces “autonomy” in terms of “economic and political” governance, the Russian central authorities introduced a “new federalism” programme in 1994. Moscow chose to “convert the local defence industries” and attract global finance for the recovery of the region’s natural resources and bring about “economic reforms” in Russia’s Far East.^[52]

The Ural and Siberian regions of Russia, as well as the Heilongjiang province of China, are home to a large number of the businesses engaged in Sino-Russian joint projects. A number of regions in China and Russia have established very tight economic ties. The Far East of Russia has seen an upsurge in Chinese investment. There were around 800 joint ventures in 1992–1993, and since then, the number of firms that are solely Chinese has increased.^[53]

Socio-economic factors and other domestic incentives play a significant part, but they are not the main drivers of “Russian military cooperation with China”. China is

essential for Russia for a number of “geopolitical, strategic”, security, and humanitarian reasons as well.

(h) Creating a new security structure on the continent of Eurasia

Russia’s quest for a new identity and global significance must be taken into consideration while analysing China’s position in the new Russian worldview. The Russian government believes that Russia should be the centre of a new Eurasian security system. President Boris Yeltsin emphasised Russia’s Eurasian character during his visit to India in December 1992 by emphasising that the majority of Russian citizens lived in the Asia part of Russia and that the bulk of “Russian territory (10 million out of 17 million square kilometres)” was located there.^[54] In November 1992, he visited South Korea and emphasised that Russia’s foreign policy was “moving away from the West” and “toward the Asia-Pacific region”.

Asia-Pacific was placed third (following the Commonwealth of Independent States and East Europe) in Yevgeny Primakov’s scheme of priorities in February 1996, when he was the Russian Foreign Minister. Regarding its territory, as well as its interests, policies, and even psychology, the Russian government has emphasised numerous times that Russia has always been a Eurasian nation.

Russia sees China as a crucial pillar of the post-Cold War Eurasian security framework, alongside India and Kazakhstan. In addition, when some conflict first surfaced with the West in 1994, Russia began to see China as a counterweight to NATO’s eastward expansion and the West’s policy of “new containment” of Russia. Beijing made it plain that it backed Moscow’s opposition to the expansion of NATO. The two nations claimed that they were working together to create a “strategic partnership”. However, they deliberately refrained from calling it a “strategic alliance”.^[55] Both nations oppose military bloc tactics and support a “multi-polar world order”, as they made clear in their joint statement on April 24, 1997.^[56]

(i) The regional military balance

Russian officials think that by arming China and other nations in the Asia-Pacific, Moscow can change the balance of power. Russia sees a powerful China as a check on the United States and Japan given its waning influence in East Asia.

Another explanation for Russia’s desire to use the “Chinese card” against Tokyo and Washington is that country’s absence from the key economic and security organisations that are progressively emerging in the Asia-Pacific region.

(j) Fear of Islamic fundamentalism

Russia no longer has any “plans for a general war” to protect its territory against a prospective “Chinese invasion” because it considers that the military danger posed by China has subsided for the near future. However, Russian officials saw the post-Cold War global environment as being “chaotic and unpredictable”. Some claim that Moscow is supplying Beijing with military hardware in an attempt to mitigate two dangers to the country’s integrity: the potential rise of “Islamic fundamentalism within Russia” and the revival of “regional powers with Islamic roots”.^[57]

Some analysts claim that in the coming years, the “strategic balance of Asia” will be shaped by the “economic and

strategic” alliances that are developing in Central Asia, particularly among the Islamic peoples.^[58] It’s interesting to note that although China has sought India’s views on the possibility of an anti-Islamic bloc, the Russians have proposed a “triple alliance” that would unite these three nations in a “triangle of desire” and equip them to effectively combat such threats.^[59] Furthermore, some Chinese strategic thinkers have used this shared opposition to Islamic extremism among the three to create a “triangular strategic military partnership” that may usher in a period of ongoing stability.^[60] For these reasons, it is in both Russia and China’s best interests to keep a close eye on what the jihadists are up to. Joint action to stop any potential threat resulting from this activity will serve as a strong foundation for future relations between China and Russia and will be a permanent aspect of their policy.

(k) Promoting Russo-Chinese relations

Moscow believes that China’s interest in military cooperation with Russia will support the growth of “stable bilateral relations” and make it easier to resolve any other issues that may or may not already exist between the two countries.

“The resolution of bilateral territorial disputes” has been made more favourable by “military cooperation” between Russia and China. The Russians are confident that China would not employ its growing “military capability” against her, despite certain security worries among some politicians and components of the Russian military. The Russian government has also emphasised how trade in armaments and technology strengthens economic ties between the two nations. Russian-Chinese bilateral commerce reached the level of U.S.\$ 5-7 billion per year and thus exceeded overall Soviet-Chinese commerce during the 1950’s and 1960’s. China has become “third largest trade partner” of Russia. This economic basis in turn acts as a further impetus for the growth of Sino-Russian collaboration across a range of sectors.

Russia’s geopolitical interests in friendship with China are therefore evident. As its military might dwindles everyday along its Asian borders, Russia needs a friendly China to ward off threats.^[61] “Asian Russia” continues to be a force-based economy that cannot be fully protected right now or in the foreseeable future. It may face land threats from China as well as maritime threats from Japan and the US. Russia therefore needs China to lessen American pressure. Leading Russian observers agree that despite the fact that Russia is obviously weak in several areas of national power and that many countries have misgivings about its goals, Russia must challenge American “unipolar hegemony” and achieve equality with Washington in all respects.^[62] According to Aleksei Bogaturov and Viktor Kremenyuk, “The greater Russia’s irritation at the “geopolitical pluralism” of the United States ... the more rosy the prospects of rapprochement with Beijing appears to the Russian leftwing politicians... At any rate, the possibility that Russia would deliberately distance itself from the United States and prefer to expand military-political relations and other contacts with the PRC [People’s Republic of China] ... appears to be a possible Russian foreign policy concept in the next few years.”^[63]

On June 25, 1996, Yevgeny Primakov, who was serving as Russia’s foreign minister at the time, made a significant speech on the country’s foreign policy, in which he openly

stated that in order to combat the perception that the Cold War had “winners and losers” and that a “unipolar world order should be established against Russia’s interests,” Russia must have friendly relations with China.^[64] Another Russian minister stated that in terms of “Asian security” issues the interests of both countries were essentially the same.^[65]

A combined Sino-Russian “condominium for policing Asia” was proposed by the Russian defence minister Pavel Grachev in 1995.^[66] Russian diplomats assert that “the 1996 border treaty,” which demarcates “China’s borders with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan,” and establishes “confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs),” is equivalent to or a “non-aggression pact”. In fact, Russia and China did sign a “non-aggression pact in 1994, to which Russia added the non-targeting of nuclear weapons clauses.”^[67]

Similar to this, Russia and China jointly proposed a “plan for Southeast Asian security” right after the meeting in April 1996.^[68] Instead of addressing ASEAN’s concerns, this proposal appears to only take into account “China’s security requirements” and attempts to “swindle” ASEAN into adopting a “one China policy”.^[69] Additionally, previous high-level visits have made it apparent that Russia needs China’s assistance in joining the Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).^[70] Lastly, “the communiqué and reports from the Beijing summit” demonstrated a continued attempt to develop a shared approach on crucial “Asian-Pacific security” problems.^[71] Now, it seems as though the attempt to establish a united posture is paying off.

The partnership between the two states is now more frequently announced in Russian media. Following the conference in April 1996, a Russian government source claimed:

“Russia and China are able to create a powerful economic alliance in Asia which will determine the climate on the market of the Asian-Pacific region in the future... the political system favors creation of this alliance and Russia’s growing role on the Chinese market in machinery and military-technical production.”^[72]

Vladimir Kuznechevskii, another Russian analyst, also wrote:

“Who might support China in her legitimate desires to reunify Taiwan with the mainland? Who is objectively interested in supporting China’s economic expansion in Southeast Asia? Nobody except Russia! ... A “purely military alliance” is unlikely and that “neither China nor Russia need it” ... too close a rapprochement causes strong contradictions. But objective circumstances nevertheless literally push Moscow and Beijing towards a closer mutually advantageous cooperation not only in the economic field, but in the military one as well.”^[73]

Chinese Objectives and Interests

Russia’s weapons sales are mostly driven by socioeconomic factors. China’s policy options are, however, not so clear. The analysts offer a number of possibilities as to why China has resumed its military ties with Russia.

(a) New threats and challenges in the post-Cold War world

Beijing, like Moscow, continues to be watchful for the two dangers to its security: “Islamic fundamentalism and resurgent regional powers”.

China's leaders are worried that "Iran, Afghanistan, or the Central Asian republics" would try to infiltrate western China with "Islamic" militancy. It is thought that the Xinjiang province is especially vulnerable to these influences. Russian weapons might aid China in controlling insurgents. According to some accounts, China's April 1996 agreement with Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan is intended to stop military confrontations along its borders and may also stop the supply of weapons "from Afghanistan to Muslim separatist insurgents in Xinjiang."^[74]

Additionally, China is apprehensive about potential military threats from some of its neighbours, particularly Japan. China believes that Japan has played what it sees as its own rightful role in the world over the past 100 years. The Chinese leadership fears that Tokyo may soon convert its enormous economic might into military strength if and when America withdraws militarily from the region.^[75]

India, with which China has had ongoing border disputes since the late 1950's, including a war in 1962, is seen by the Chinese as a potential rival as well. This attitude has changed as a result of India's increased investment-friendly policies and recent nuclear-weapons status. Additionally, territorial disputes and clashes over marine rights and interests exist inside East and South-east Asia itself between Beijing and Tokyo, Vietnam and China, and others. Furthermore, ASEAN countries are accused of making vain attempts to encroach on China's claimed "Spratly Islands". The American presence in the area also worries China.

(b) U.S. challenge to communist China

Some experts claim that future clashes between China and the United States are likely, citing the 1996 conflict over Taiwan^[76] as an example. Intense protests in Beijing and a robust response from the Chinese government followed "the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in May 1999." These changes, along with American public support for Tibet and anxiety about the future of Hong Kong^[77], are increasingly perceived by the PRC as a challenge by the United States to communist China.

According to some American commentators, the PRC will be the dominant competitor for global leadership in the twenty-first century.^[78] The United States is viewed as China's greatest threat and impediment on the path to regional military superiority and reunification with Taiwan in the PRC White Paper on National Defense, published in October 2000.^[79] The White Paper stated that Washington was "practicing a new gunboat policy and neo-economic colonialism", and that the proposal to build a missile defence system would significantly undermine regional security in the Asia-Pacific.^[80]

(c) Multipolarity

China's post-Cold War global consciousness is also fundamentally based on multipolarity (*duojihua*). According to the concept of multipolarity, relations between the United States, Japan, Germany (or the European Community), Russia, and China heavily influence the direction of international affairs. Russia is still a global great power and a significant pole in the multipolar world, despite the fact that its national power has already declined in comparison to that of the former Soviet Union. China wants more flexibility on the global stage because it is the largest developing nation and one of the United Nations Security

Council's permanent members. Beijing should keep cordial ties with all of the world's superpowers, including Russia, in order to accomplish this flexibility and have a favourable impact on world affairs.

(d) A new hegemon on the horizon?

Many observers predict that China will fill the strategic void in East Asia on its own, and that Russian weaponry and technologies will aid it in extending the reach of its air and naval power.

Will China use its military might to settle regional conflicts? The solution is not evident. Long-standing border disputes exist between China and a number of its neighbours, "including Japan, Vietnam, and India." China has also never disclaimed the option of annexing Taiwan by force. Beijing frequently emphasises its dedication to peaceful means of conflict resolution.^[81] In addition, it claims jurisdiction over all of the South China Sea, including the major maritime lanes that carry oil "from the Middle East to Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan."

(e) New military doctrine and PLA's modernisation

China currently boasts the largest army in the world, with almost three million soldiers who are actively serving. However, the majority of its military hardware is dated. For instance, only around half of the submarine fleet of the People's Liberation Army is in use.^[82]

The programme to modernise military forces of China is part of a major strategic project adopted in 1978, called the "four modernizations".^[83] China considers modernisation of its defence forces essential, despite the fact that it is given "a lower priority than the economic, industrial, scientific, and technological sectors."

The resources of China's armed forces increase by almost 75% during the country's remarkable economic boom in the 1990s, despite a steady drop in "military spending as a percentage of GDP (Gross Domestic Product)."^[84]

The 1991 Gulf War prompted an extensive reform of the PLA's training and doctrine. The former idea and its emphasis on people over weapons are fundamentally different from the new military doctrine. The new philosophy gives fighting prowess and technology more weight.^[85]

China thinks that by working with Russia, it will be able to both modernise its defence industry and fill in some urgent gaps with some "off-the-shelf systems from Moscow."

(f) "The pragmatic consumer" explanation

Russia's defence sector is still able to create and export cutting-edge weapon systems and military technologies despite the country's "economic crisis". Moscow is offering first-rate military equipment and technologies at significantly lower prices. According to observers, China's recent purchases could be compared to a smart buyer who is reaping the benefits of "fire sale" prices.^[86]

(g) China's efforts to emerge as a world power

For China, relations with Russia are less of a focal point of its foreign policy than they are a component of a larger endeavour to become a major global player after more than 150 years of exploitation and backwardness. China seeks financial and political backing for this objective, notably for the modernisation of its economy and armed forces. It does not want this assistance to be held by Americans or other

Westerners to the point where it restricts its own internal or exterior possibilities. China seeks to avoid the possibility of an international alliance of powers aiming to hinder, constrain, or even reverse its aspirations as its power increases and regional and global perceptions of its significance take shape. The rapprochement with Russia is not Beijing's main plan; it is merely one component of it.

(h) Old tensions resolved

China wants to strengthen ties with Russia for a number of specific reasons. Now is the time to find a solution that China can accept to the issues that still cause friction from the Soviet-Chinese era. Now that these disagreements are resolved, China can concentrate on developing its own market and attend to its neighbours to the south and east.

(i) Economic reasons

China wants access to the gas and oil reserves of Russia and the other former USSR states due to its developing economy and rising energy needs. In order to complement rather than replace its vital economic connections with the United States, Japan, and the West, China is interested in cultivating specialised ties with Russia.

(j) Tempting western arms merchants

Chinese military cooperation with Russia has likely resumed in an effort to demonstrate "to the United States and Western Europe" the pointlessness of their 1989 prohibition on the sale of advanced weaponry to China. It makes the case that the West neglected a valuable trading partner.

(k) Developing arms export capabilities

China has a history of exporting weapons and military services. It supplied numerous "pariah" governments shunned by the west during the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s, ranking as the fifth largest arms exporter in the world.^[87] Arms shipments give China the hard income it needs to continue its modernisation programme and also aid China in gaining more influence abroad.

Some experts believe that China may be importing Russian technology and weapons in order to modify, produce, and export them outside. The Chinese government was accused of purchasing "Russian technology" in 1992 primarily for the purpose of creating new weapons to sell to the Third World, according to the US administration.^[88]

These worries appear to be supported by historical Chinese practices. For instance, China's T-59 MBT is a licensed variant of the Soviet T-54 tank that Beijing has sold to numerous African and Asian states. Additionally, the "C-801 anti-ship missile" is thought to be a "reverse-engineered" replica of the French Exocet, as is the "Chinese F-7 aircraft, a clone of the Soviet MiG-21." The improvement of China's export-oriented Super F-7 fighter was the prime objective of the 1992 acquisition of "100 Klimov RD-33 aircraft engines, which Russia uses to power the MiG-29 fighter."^[89] China has occasionally produced weapons that are of comparable quality to the originals ("such as its Silkworm anti-ship missiles copied from the Soviet SS-N-2-Styx"). In certain instances, China might have even "made the original weapon's quality better" (for example, its F-7M aircraft).^[90]

At the same time, as Gerald Segal put it, China may "find that its ability to sell lower technology systems is insufficient in the new marketplace, especially after the Gulf

War demonstrated the utility of smarter weapons. China may find itself pushed further down market or into closer collaboration with states such as Russia to co-produce more sophisticated weapons."^[91]

(l) Domestic politics

Some scholars believe that the rekindling of military relations with Russia may simply be the result of disputes between Chinese leadership factions in the early stage. Leaders like Yang Baibing and Yang Shangkun, who prioritised political allegiances and put a lot of the PLA's modernisation programme on hold, were replaced in 1992 by military personnel who were committed to professionalism. General Zhang Zhen and Admiral Liu Huaqing emerged as winners from these changes. Both supported strengthening "military ties with Russia" and expanding the PLA's naval resources.^[92]

To sum up, the growth of political, economic, and military cooperation is in best interests of both Russia and China. Their shared objectives include modernising the defence sector to reflect post-Cold War realities, as well as gaining some economic advantages, enhancing bilateral ties, preserving the military balance in the region, containing the emergence of East Asian superpowers and Muslim radicals in Central Asia, solidifying their position on the global arms market, and gathering crucial intelligence data. At the same time, China is primarily focused on force modernisation, the acquisition of cutting-edge technology and "production rights", and the preservation of its budgetary resources and foreign exchange funds, while Russia is primarily focused on raising money for its struggling defence sector. Although there is some conflict of interest due to this difference, it is "not strong enough" to upset the entire system of collaboration.

Conclusion

Naturally, Russian diplomats maintain that no one is the target of the Sino-Russian relationship. "Our bilateral relations are not developing to the detriment of any other nation, not the US and not Japan", said Igor Rogachev, Russia's then ambassador to Beijing.^[93]

Others downplay the importance of the Russo-Chinese cooperation. "I don't think that anybody in Beijing is seriously considering any kind of strategic collaboration with Moscow against the US", stated Bonnie Glaser, a US government consultant and an authority on US-China relations.^[94]

"It's not as if they're forming a military alliance", stated an Asian ambassador in Beijing. "Russia hasn't the muscle, and China hasn't the will. Russia can't succeed in its economic reforms without international financial help, and Chinese exporters can't suffer a total rupture with the US."^[95]

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