

# The Emerging Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership and Eurasian Security

Andrew Kuchins

October 1997

PONARS Policy Memo 11

Stanford University

The evolution of Sino-Soviet/Russian relations from an antagonistic militarized stand-off in the early 1980s to a nascent partnership today is an important development in a changing Northeast Asian security environment. In a joint statement emerging from the April 1996 summit between Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, the Chinese and the Russians announced that they were engaged in building a "strategic partnership." Some eyebrows rose in response, and a good deal of skepticism remained among Russia followers who recalled the inflated rhetoric of 1992 about the supposed "US-Russian strategic partnership." A joint Sino-Russian joint statement from April 1997 began to spell out what the strategic partnership involved as it included an anti-hegemony clause and expressed opposition to a lingering "Cold War mentality" and efforts to enlarge and strengthen military blocs. Seemingly, like the US-Russian declaratory strategic partnership of five years ago, the emerging Sino-Russian strategic partnership carries more near-term political than security weight. This brief will explore the national interests driving Russia and China to closer ties, the dynamics of the Sino-Russian relationship and the security policies of the United States and its allies in Europe and Asia, and how we should begin thinking of a Eurasian security community.

## **Sino-Russian Relations**

A number of strategic, political, and economic factors lead both China and Russia to strengthen their bilateral relationship. Since the founding of the PRC in 1949, Chinese-US-Soviet/Russian relations have always had a triangular aspect with different balances at different times. In the 1950s China and the Soviet Union formed a Communist bloc directed against the United States. With the Sino-Soviet split in the 1960s relations among all three countries were poor. In the 1970s the United States improved ties with both China and the Soviet Union while Sino-Soviet relations remained hostile. The development of China's Independent Foreign Policy in the early 1980s and Gorbachev's New Political Thinking later in the decade resulted in improved relations among all three powers. The dissolution of the Soviet Union and Russia's current greatly weakened economic and military status has left the United States as the only global superpower in the 1990s. It is no mystery toward whom the anti-hegemony clause of the most recent Sino-Russian Joint Statement is directed: the United States. China and Russia have feared that the "New World Order"--articulated during the Bush administration and subsequently muted in the Clinton administrations--was a euphemism for a unipolar world dominated by an arrogant and overbearing United States. A "realist" would say that China and Russia are balancing against the power of the United States. It is an overstatement, however, to say, as Dmitri Simes did in 1996, that "for the first time since 1972...China and Russia have better relations with each other than

either one of them has with the United States." We will return to this geostrategic context later in the memo when US alliance relations are discussed.

Aside from broader geostrategy, both Russia and China have more particular regional strategic interests in improving their relationship. After early disappointment with the West, since 1993 the foreign policy of the Russian Federation has taken on a more Eurasian hue, and this tendency has accelerated since Yevgenii Primakov became Foreign Minister in January 1996. Improved ties with China are an important facet of Russian Eurasianism, and efforts have been stepped up with India, Iran and other countries roughly contiguous with Russia. For Russia, a Eurasian foreign policy is not anti-Western, rather, as advertised by its supporters, it is a balanced correction to the overly Western orientation most closely associated with then Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev in 1991-92. China's foremost foreign and security policy issue is Taiwan. Improved ties with Russia allow China to further demilitarize its northern border regions and focus more attention toward Taiwan and Southeast Asia, also a traditionally significant and contested region for China.

Rather than competing for influence in Central Asia, Russia and China share a mutual interest in curtailing fundamentalist Islamic groups and national separatist groups from achieving greater political power. China has significant Muslim minorities in its Western Xinjiang province, most notably Uighurs, who have been agitating for greater autonomy in recent years. Given the economic potential--possibly huge petroleum deposits--China will not tolerate any nationalist or especially secessionist tendencies and prefers stable and secular rule in the new states of Central Asia. Russia also prefers stable regimes in the region which respect the rights of the variously sized Russian minority populations. In particular, Russia fears an inflow of political and economic refugees from the region. The long-standing civil unrest in Tajikistan is a cautionary tale for both Russia and China. Authoritarian nationalists like Niyazov, Karimov, and Nazarbaev are just fine for Moscow and Beijing.

Economic ties also strengthen the Sino-Russian relationship. The growth of Russian arms sales to China has been a concern for the United States, its allies in Asia, and even some in Moscow. While military modernization has consistently been the lowest priority since Deng articulated the four modernizations in the late 1970s, China's rapid economic growth has allowed for considerable strengthening of Chinese armed forces. Russian arms are attractive to China because they are relatively cheap, and the Chinese force structure is Soviet in origin. In addition, Western states have drastically curtailed arms sales to China since the confrontation on Tiananmen Square in 1989. It is well known that the economic revolution underway in Russia has had a hugely debilitating impact on the once favored military industrial complex. Economic austerity drastically cut back procurement leaving foreign arms sales as a means of survival for many large military enterprises. Given the complementarity in this area, unless the bilateral relationship goes awry, we can expect the arms sales to continue and likely grow. But as Rajan Menon has written, Russian arms sales are a "strategic side show" as they will not determine whether China emerges as a military greater power (it will without Russian arms), nor will they determine whether China will be cooperatively engaged in the international community or become a xenophobic defector from international norms and regimes. We must also keep in mind that the United States dwarfs Russia as a provider of arms to the world, and we currently enjoy unprecedented economic health by comparison.

Of greater import in the long term is the potential for Russian energy exports to China. With predictions--barring any cataclysmic events like major war, depression, or state disintegration--of Chinese GDP growth by a factor of between five and ten over the next fifty years and energy consumption to grow by between a factor of three to six, China's needs for growth in domestic energy production and imports will be tremendous. Siberia and the Russian Far East hold vast potential for oil, gas, and hydroelectric production. Major investment in extraction and transportation infrastructure are needed, and already the Chinese and Russian governments are making considerable progress on long-term plans for the development of Russian energy exports. On the other hand, Russia is hardly enthusiastic about growing Chinese energy ties with Central Asian states which Russia considers its natural sphere of influence. As a major potential customer with capital to spare, China will have considerable leverage over the competition between Russian and Central Asian, primarily Kazakh, energy producers.

While the above trends and issues drive China and Russia together, the relationship is not without difficulties. The greatest danger for the relationship would be developments leading to a further enfeebled Russia as this could lead to greater instability along the lengthy Sino-Russian border and perhaps in Central Asia also. We can anticipate that for the next ten-twenty years, or until the Taiwan situation is resolved, China will not want to direct its energies north or west. In the longer term, and especially if Chinese power continued to grow while Russia struggles, China may seek revision of the Sino-Russian border. Recall that at the height of the Sino-Soviet split in 1964, Mao claimed 1.5 million square kilometers of territory which were acquired by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century by "unfair treaties." The highly unbalanced demographic status near the Sino-Russian border with more than 100 million Chinese to the south and less than 10 million Russians in eastern Siberia and the Russian Far East is a cause for concern in Vladivostok as well as Moscow. Breakdowns in Russia's ability to control its border have contributed to the inflow of likely several hundred thousand illegal Chinese immigrants. For Sino-Russian relations to flourish into the next century, Russia must recover to be a non-threatening economic and military power. Of course, while it is harder to imagine in the near term, a resurgent and aggressive Russia could conceivably cause more problems for China in the long run.

### **The United States and its Alliance System**

During the Cold War, United States security policy focused on containing Soviet power. The principal means for doing so included an economically and military powerful United States, the multilateral NATO alliance in Europe, and a set of bilateral relationships in Asia, most notably the Japan-American Security Alliance (JASA) and to a lesser extent the Korean-American Security Alliance (KASA). Lord Ismay, the first Secretary General of NATO, made the famous observation that the alliance was designed to bring the Americans in, keep the Russians out, and keep the Germans down. An analogous logic applied, if not perfectly, to US engagement in Asia: bring the US in, keep the Russians and Chinese out, and keep the Japanese down. Despite the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these alliances are being enlarged and/or revitalized. The enduring quality of these alliances suggests that the while the task of "keeping the Russians out" was not insignificant, the other reasons for establishing the alliances, while not so elegantly

expressed by Lord Ismay, were more important perhaps than we realized during the Cold War. NATO was far more than an alliance against the Soviet Union. It was, and remains, a key institution along with the EC, OSCE, and others in the development of a security community in Western Europe. A security community where old rivalries like France/Germany and England/Germany were muted over the years not only by facing the common threat in the Soviet Union, but in the development of a series of economic, political, and security institutions which brought much greater transparency and trust to those relationships. The core rationale for NATO's expansion now is to ensure that the security community be enlarged eastward. The obvious problem with NATO expansion is Russia's understandable perception that it may not be included in the growing European security community. It would be an historical mistake of immense magnitude not to allow Russia the chance to become a member of a new European security community. Russia's schizophrenia toward Europe goes back a thousand years to the days of Kievan Rus, and those historical wounds prey heavily on the Russian psyche and body politique. The Partnership for Peace, and especially the recent NATO-Russian Founding Act are important steps and institutions to generating Russian inclusion, but more needs to be done.

Just as Russia has a hard time believing that NATO expansion is not directed against some slumbering Russian threat, China views US efforts to revise JASA and KASA with great skepticism. Of greatest concern is the agreement reached in 1996 between the US and Japan to include the Taiwan Straits in the purview of JASA. US efforts to promote the deployment of theater missile defense systems in Asia, particularly those with a larger "footprint" like THAAD and Navy Upper Tier are a source for tension with China which perceives these systems as threatening Chinese strategic capabilities. Deployment of more advanced systems in Taiwan would cause a major rupture in US-China relations. As NATO transforms its principal role from security alliance to enhancement of a security community, the United States must view its security system in Asia in a similar manner, and China must come to believe that it is eventually a full member with a large investment in growing an Asian security community. The Chinese government and especially the Chinese military must be strategically engaged in the building of such a community. While the United States revitalizes its key bilateral relationships in Asia, it must simultaneously engage China in discussions of an agreement which plays a role like the NATO-Russia Founding Act has played in Europe. The Partnership for Peace is proving to be an important institution in Europe for strengthening military-to-military ties and making military relations more transparent (granted, progress with Russia has been slow). An appropriate vehicle or set of policies must be developed which will help ensure that China feels included in and not threatened by an Asian security community.

If China and Russia continue to perceive US-led alliance systems in Asia and Europe as exclusionary, this can only lead to the Sino-Russian relationship taking on more of a traditionally strategic rather than politically symbolic character. This could also lead to strengthening their ties with other states contiguous with Eurasia--potentially Indonesia, India, Pakistan, Iran, and others--which feel marginalized in a unipolar world. The worst-case scenario would be the emergence of a Eurasian security alliance led by Russia and China that is directed against the United States. Clearly this is unlikely, and it would require a series of major foreign and security policy blunders by the United States and its allies. Still, stranger things have happened in history. The long-term goal, of course, should be the development of a Eurasian security community which is a fundamental part of a global security community. Recall that the British guru of

geopolitics, Halford Mackinder, argued in the first half of this century that whoever controls the "world island," by which he meant Eurasia, will control the world. While Mackinder's geopolitical theorizing seems somewhat arcane now, it is clear that the development of a real global security community in the next century will be impossible without first establishing a Eurasian security community. And if the United States does not tread very carefully in the next few years in strengthening and expanding security communities on the periphery of Eurasia, the prospects for a global security community will be slim indeed.

© PONARS 1997