

Russia's Strategic Partnerships and Global Security

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In the first post-Cold War decade the international system has experienced a period of relative peace among the great powers not seen since the Concert of Europe made its debut after the Napoleonic wars nearly 200 years ago. The United States is enjoying a period of international dominance even greater than that after World War II, and there is no imaginable competitor on the horizon for at least a decade or two. The most economically and technologically advanced countries in Europe and Asia that aligned with the United States in the Cold War continue to bandwagon with US power. Decisions that the next US administration takes on key security issues, including nuclear arms reductions, national missile defense (NMD), and further North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) expansion, will have considerable influence in shaping the policies of existing and emerging great powers with ambivalent attitudes towards the US--notably Russia, China, and India. The system may look overwhelmingly unipolar today, but history suggests that such moments are ephemeral, and we should expect and prepare for a more complex and perhaps dangerous multipolarity to emerge in the first quarter of the new century.

Three years ago in a PONARS policy memo addressing Sino-Russian relations and Eurasian security I concluded that the emergence of some kind of Eurasian, anti-US security alliance led by Russia and China was a highly unlikely worst-case scenario that could only come about as a result of "a series of major foreign and security policy blunders by the United States and its allies." Reasonable people may disagree about the wisdom of the US-British bombing of Iraq in December 1998, the expansion of NATO's membership and mission, and the 1999 Kosovo War, but the net result is further alienation of Russia from the West--which has been codified in its foreign and security policy doctrines enunciated this year. In December 1998, then Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov in New Delhi broached the vague notion of a "strategic triangle" comprised of Russia, China, and India, that would serve as a stabilizing force in international security. The proposal was not received with great enthusiasm in either Beijing or New Delhi, and most Western commentators similarly did not take it very seriously due to long-standing and deep-seated differences between India and China. It is well known, for example, that subsequent to the Indian nuclear tests in May 1998 the Indian Defense Minister cited China as the most serious threat to India, one that necessitated the development of an Indian strategic deterrent. A triangular strategic alliance may not be imminent, but the coincidence of interests between China, Russia, and India has grown in the past three years. For Russia, the "strategic partnerships" it is

developing on a bilateral basis with China and India constitute increasingly important components of its overall foreign policy, which has steadily drifted away from the West during the Yeltsin era. This memo will analyze the dynamics of these relationships in the context of Russia's overall foreign and security policy, how their trajectories could shape the evolution of the international system, and their implications for US policy.

Russia's Strategic Partnerships with China and India

Before discussing the significance of Russia's strategic partnerships with China and India, we must point out the obvious yet crucial point that Russia today enjoys no alliance relationship with any state remotely resembling a great power. Not since the short-lived Sino-Soviet alliance of the 1950s has Moscow embraced another great power in an alliance relationship, and since the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, Russia has been bereft of alliance partners except those that are failed or failing states. For a country like the United States, in the enviable position of strong alliance relations with powerful states, it is easy to be dismissive of the more vague notion of "strategic partnerships." But for Russia, these are very significant relationships, including its floundering "strategic partnership" with the United States. We also see, however, by those wishing to critique US policy toward Russia, or seeking to read malign intent on the part of Russia, a tendency to overstate the significance of Moscow's strategic partnerships, especially with China. The Russian leadership has elevated some bilateral relationships to the level of "strategic partnership" because of perceived long-term and important shared interests--which are not necessarily directed against a third party. The proliferation of strategic partnerships on the part of Russia and other powers (including the United States) also reflects an international system in transition. It is possible that some of these relationships could evolve into tighter alliances, but that is certainly not clear at this point.

The Sino-Russian strategic partnership predates the Indo-Russian strategic partnership, which was finally realized with President Vladimir Putin's trip to India in October of this year. The two relationships share a number of common features, but there are some important differences as well. In each case there is strong rhetorical support for a multipolar world order not dominated by the United States. All three countries support an enhanced role for the United Nations, and Russia has specifically endorsed India's candidacy to join the UN Security Council. All three denounced the NATO action in Kosovo as a violation of international law since it did not receive a UN mandate. All three are also very sensitive to violations of national sovereignty and extremely reluctant to invite international mediation of challenges to their territorial integrity in Taiwan, Kashmir, and Chechnya.

China, Russia, and India share sensitivities about Islamic "threats," as each country has large Muslim populations, and each shares borders with states containing Muslim majorities. In particular, they fear that the increasingly weak and failing states of Central Asia will serve as conduits for more radical Muslim groups, terrorist activities, and drug trafficking--which will erode their authority in peripheral territories. They view Afghanistan under the Taliban leadership as the dangerous hub of these activities.

India and China have increasingly relied on Russia as a source of conventional weapons and possibly other weapons technologies. China and India are the two biggest clients of the struggling Russian military industrial complex, as each purchase now about \$1 billion worth of arms a year, and these relationships are growing. Since domestic Russian procurement virtually dried up in the 1990s, arms sales to China and India are a vital, if controversial, national security interest for Moscow. There is clearly a competitive aspect to Chinese and Indian conventional purchases from Russia since Beijing and New Delhi to some extent regard each other as a security threat.

There is also further potential for growth in Russia's economic relations in the energy sphere as the Chinese and Indian economies continue to grow at a rapid pace. So although today Russia remains a less significant trade partner for China and India than vice versa, overall trade relations will likely grow considerably in the next decade.

On nuclear security, the triangular dynamics between Russia, China, and India become far more complicated. Both Russia and China denounced India's nuclear tests in 1998, although Russia's criticism was milder, and both Moscow and Beijing have urged India to sign the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). If the nuclear rivalry between China and India intensifies, Russia's non-partisan stance as strategic partner to both may become less sustainable.

Possible US deployment of national and/or theater missile defense systems also elicits different kinds of concerns from Moscow, Beijing, and New Delhi. Russians are concerned primarily about the deployment of a NMD system that could eventually compromise the Russian strategic deterrent. The Chinese strongly oppose US deployment of theater systems in the Asia Pacific and especially the potential sharing of such systems with Taiwan. But Beijing is also concerned about so-called "thin" national defenses designed to address small attacks and accidental launches, because these defenses would compromise existing Chinese deterrent capabilities. India is opposed to US deployment of NMD because it will likely hasten Chinese efforts to modernize and expand their nuclear forces, thus compelling India to deploy a more robust nuclear deterrent than it might otherwise.

Even though Moscow has emphasized the long-term nature of its shared interests with China and India, the Sino-Russian relationship is controversial among Russian policymaking elites in a way that the Indo-Russian relationship is not. Russia shares a long border with China and a long history of often bitter and complex relations. There is an implicit Russian hedge position on China that is amplified by the growing sense of economic and demographic vulnerability of the Russian Far East and (to a lesser extent) to Moscow's "sphere of influence" in Central Asia. While perhaps for the near future China will focus on its interests in Taiwan and the South China Sea, there exists a barely-veiled Russian fear that continued Russian weakness will invite Chinese infiltration and eventual control of some Russian territory. Russia shares no border with India, and despite the wild designs of nationalist politician Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the like for Moscow's "drive to the South," it is nearly impossible to foresee circumstances that could

lead to conflict between Russia and India. This is not to say that conflict with China is at all likely, but rather that the sensibilities are different.

There are a number of other obstacles that militate against the establishment anytime soon of a triangular alliance between Russia, China, and India. India worries about Chinese-Burmese cooperation, and the Chinese naval presence in the Bay of Bengal is driving India to modernize and expand its naval forces. The Indo-Chinese border dispute is unlikely to lead to military conflict, but it is a source of estrangement, especially given the presence of the Dalai Lama and a large Tibetan population in India. Russia's status as a falling great power, while China and India are on the rise, also adds to the unease and potential instability in the triangular relationship.

Implications for US Policy

Conclusions that the Sino-Russian and Indo-Russian strategic partnerships have either taken the place of the US-Russian strategic partnership, or are inherently threatening to US interests are either meaningless or simply incorrect. Particularly with Russia and China, but also with India, the United States holds a great deal of leverage--primarily by virtue of its position as global economic leader--but also as global military leader and senior partner in the most powerful European and Asian alliances. For example, when US trade with China is approximately ten times the level of Sino-Russian trade, it is absurd to claim, as some do, that the United States is somehow "the odd man out." It was very telling in recent months how President Clinton received a far warmer reception in India than did President Putin. And that should not be surprising since the United States can bring far more to the table that can influence India both positively and negatively than can Russia. If the United States were to find itself in a position where Sino-Russian and Indo-Russian relations became more threatening, this would represent US policy failures toward India and China at least as (if not more) serious than those toward Russia.

The United States shares concerns with China, India, and Russia about instability in Central Asia, the growing influence of Islam in the region, the terrorist threat, and the debilitating impact of narcotic trafficking. It seems that the growth in authoritarian tendencies of Central Asian leaderships coincides with a reduction in their capacity to govern. But for the United States these are shared interests from a distance, and the threats are of far greater consequence for the Central Asian states themselves and the powers on their borders. It is possible that India could join the Shanghai Forum--composed of Central Asian states, Russia, and China--and that this may develop into a more useful institution for jointly dealing with problems in the region. The United States must be very careful about its security commitments to the region since it risks bolstering highly corrupt and increasingly non-democratic governments in an area where its security interests are minimal.

Sino-Russian and Indo-Russian arms sales and technological cooperation are naturally a more serious security concerns for the United States for a number of reasons. Increased conventional capacity could embolden China to take more risks over Taiwan. The sales

encourage Sino-Indian arms racing, which will have spillover effects in South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia. US policymakers would view most dimly transfers of ballistic missile technologies and cooperation that could possibly contribute to the development of Chinese and Indian nuclear forces. So far, however, despite the near desperate straits of its military industrial complex, Russian arms sales to China and India have not fundamentally changed the balance of power in South Asia or East Asia. Since coming to power, the Putin regime shows signs of greater restraint in its conventional arms sales relationship with China as the Chinese seek more advanced weaponry and licensing agreements.

There is one near-term measure the United States could undertake that has the potential both to accelerate and deepen Sino-Russian and Indo-Russian strategic cooperation, as well as unleash a chain of very destabilizing events. If the next US administration were to move swiftly to unilaterally abrogate the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in order to begin deploying a robust NMD system, all bets are off for the relative great-power stability we are now experiencing, not to speak of the non-proliferation regime at large. This will put a great deal of pressure on China to rapidly expand and modernize its nuclear forces, and India will then respond, followed by predictable responses from Pakistan. The Russians will abrogate the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) II agreement, and we will vastly diminish the possibility for truly deep cuts in nuclear arsenals and probably scuttle a whole series of measures designed to bring greater safety and security to the Russian nuclear weapons and materials complex.

It may still be unlikely that Russia, China, and India would respond by stepping up their strategic partnerships to the level of alliances directed against the United States, but there would likely be growth in strategic cooperation to develop and share technologies to counter missile defenses. But if Sino-Indian relations were to sour and result in a greatly accelerated nuclear arms race including more overt Chinese support for Pakistan's nuclear program, Russia's capacity to maintain "strategic partnerships" with both countries will come under much stress. There is clearly much uncertainty now as to how the United States will handle the missile defense issue and its subsequent impact on other nuclear states. Putin's proposal in June to jointly develop technology with the United States and Europe for theater missile defenses including boost-phase options highlighted possible deep differences between Moscow and Beijing over the missile defense issue. The Chinese wonder, and they are not alone in this regard, whether this proposal was simply a political-diplomatic measure to influence the imminent US deployment decision or whether Moscow seriously entertains cooperation with the United States in this field. US alliances are not the subject of this short essay, but US unilateral defection from the ABM Treaty absent clear changes in the missile proliferation threat (i.e., another North Korean launch or an Iranian intercontinental ballistic missile test, for example) will also be deeply damaging to NATO and alliance relations with Japan. But most fundamentally, this move would unleash a dynamic that is not fully predictable, except that it is likely to be deeply unsettling for the strategic stability that currently exists amongst the world's major powers.