

# What Is At Stake For The United States In The Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty?

Nikolai Sokov

September 2001

PONARS Policy Memo 200

Monterey Institute of International Studies

The new Treaty on Good-Neighborly Relations, Friendship, and Cooperation signed by Russia and China on July 16, 2001, was immediately discounted by the Bush administration as merely a reaffirmation of the long-standing positions of the two countries. Indeed, the two countries have a long record of opposition to U.S. plans to deploy missile defense, of joint statements against “American hegemony,” and coordination of actions on the international scene, in particular at the United Nations. Russian and especially Chinese comments have also been rather low-key, emphasizing that the treaty achieved little but to summarize and reaffirm all previously made joint statements and declarations.

Careful analysis of the text, however, suggests that the treaty’s implications might be broader than they seem at first glance. It is still too early to make definitive predictions, but this treaty might herald a qualitatively new stage in the Russian-Chinese relationship. Although this alliance is still weakly institutionalized and applies to relatively limited areas, it nevertheless has the potential to develop into something much more noteworthy. Of immediate significance is the possibility that the treaty limits Russia’s freedom of action with respect to the possible agreement with the United States on missile defense. Another interesting aspect of the treaty is its apparent inequality, in that China seems to gain relatively more than Russia does. This raises the possibility of some form of payoff for Russia outside the terms of the treaty. It is still unclear what exactly has taken place in the Russian-Chinese relationship, but the treaty certainly warrants a more in-depth analysis, particularly as to how it will impact U.S. interests and U.S.-Russian relations.

## **Opposition to missile defense**

It is tempting to view the new treaty as just another reaction to the ongoing debates over U.S. missile defense plans. Whereas George W. Bush came to Genoa for a G-8 summit with a recent successful test of a defense system to bolster his bargaining position, Vladimir Putin was able to produce a treaty with China that may make U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty more costly. The implications of the Russian-Chinese treaty, however, are more far-reaching than that. After all, the treaty will remain in force for at least 20 years and can be subsequently extended every five years. This means that the two countries are looking at a longer-term “game” than the immediate U.S. plans to scrap the ABM Treaty.

The sheer number of articles (four) that address the ABM Treaty is the first feature to attract attention. According to Article IX, the parties should enter “consultations with the goal of removing the emerging threat” that one of them may perceive. Missile defense is seen, by China especially, as the most urgent potential threat to the region. Articles XI and XII reinforce both parties’ commitment to the ABM Treaty. Finally, Article XII obligates both parties (in particular Russia, of course) to jointly maintain the “global strategic balance and stability,” which could be interpreted to mean that, at a minimum, Russia is required to ensure that China maintains deterrence vis-à-vis the United States at least at today’s level. This would amount to a few dozen warheads capable of reaching U.S. territory and might entail assistance in increasing the numbers and/or quality of China’s strategic weapons to ensure successful penetration of the future American missile defense shield. Taken together, these articles might mean that Russia has little flexibility in its policies toward the U.S. missile defense plans as it could be obligated to support the Chinese position on missile defense.

Of course, Vladimir Putin might still try to pursue a more complex policy. On the day he signed the treaty with China, in an interview with Italy’s *Corriere Della Sera*, he said that the U.S. missile defense plans represent a threat to China, but not to Russia because Russia will surely retain retaliation capability vis-à-vis the United States for the foreseeable future. This statement might be interpreted as a message to the United States that a deal on missile defense and strategic weapons reductions is still possible – if it was, indeed, intended as a signal. But whether Kissinger-style “triangular diplomacy” remains an option is now an open question because the four articles of the new treaty with China might have already limited Russia’s freedom of choice. Indeed, after the visit of U.S. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice to Moscow, Putin called Jiang Zemin to assure him that the Russian position on the ABM Treaty’s future remained intact. Russia continues to offer similar reassurances to China.

### **Bilateral Grip on Central Asia**

The last five years have seen a gradual, but accelerating rearrangement of Eurasia. Russia, unable to maintain its ascendancy in former Soviet Central Asia, acceded to letting China into its former realm. China, for its part, had been trying to make inroads, sometimes welcomed by the area’s states and sometimes causing their concern. Today, the convenient view of the region primarily in terms of an exclusive area of Russian domination is no longer accurate: China is a major player in the region, and together the two great powers can effectively regulate who can and cannot have access to Central Asia and on what terms.

Since 1992, Russia’s role in Central Asia has been institutionalized by the Tashkent Treaty, which established a weak alliance between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia, and Uzbekistan (the last of which has since withdrawn from the treaty). That alliance has recently experienced a moderate revival, primarily because the majority of these states fear the spread of Islamic fundamentalism from

Afghanistan. Maneuvers that took place in August of 2001, which included participation by Uzbekistan, have recently reaffirmed these links. Russian weakness raised the prospect of Russia being pushed out of an influential role in the region, either by Islamic fundamentalism or by Western capital. Thus, it was only logical that Russia would agree to let China into Central Asia. That process was launched in 1996, when several post-Soviet states, including Russia, signed a treaty with China to reduce troops and institute confidence-building measures in border areas.

In the view of these developments, it seems significant that Article IX of the Friendship Treaty between Russia and China is an almost verbatim repetition of Article II of the Tashkent Treaty. This effectively means that China now has the same type of mutual assistance relationship with Russia as the latter has with the majority of Central Asian states.

Furthermore, five years ago, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan created a loose consultative organization, the Shanghai Five. Last June, institutionalization of the Shanghai Five was enhanced as the group became the Shanghai Cooperative Organization and was joined by Uzbekistan, making it the Shanghai Six. The new Russian-Chinese treaty represents a new stone in this still rather loose, but quickly emerging regional structure. In effect, there are now two levels of entanglement: one via the Tashkent and Moscow (with China) treaties, another via the Shanghai Six. And, indeed, according to Article XIV of the new Russia-China treaty, the two sides should cooperate in the adjacent areas, creating “multilateral mechanisms for joint actions on security and cooperation which are commensurate to [the regions’] realities.”

### **The Nature of the New Relationship**

The new Russian-Chinese-Central Asian relationship should be classified as an alliance, albeit a loose and weakly institutionalized one. The central criterion that distinguishes alliances from collective security organizations (such as the OSCE, for example) is that the alliance is always oriented toward a potential or existing external threats whereas the collective security organization is supposed to cope with possible threats from within. Since the latter must assume that one of its members will “turn bad” and attack other members, collective security organizations are inherently less institutionalized and weaker than alliances.

It is obvious that the Shanghai Six is not designed to deal with challenges from within. Its two dominant members, China and Russia, now have a bilateral treaty, which cements their alliance or near-alliance relationship. Instead, the Shanghai Six is oriented toward issues that might arise from outside the borders of the organization. The alliance is weakly institutionalized because external threats are not imminent or do not require very high degree of coordination. For example, countering the emerging threat from Afghanistan does not require a NATO-like structure. An increase in perceived threat, however, would likely trigger rapid institutionalization.

The bilateral Russian-Chinese relationship also represents a weak alliance, albeit more strongly institutionalized than the multilateral Shanghai Six. Although Vladimir Putin strongly denied that the new treaty was a foundation for an alliance, he was probably comparing it to a full-blown, highly institutionalized structure like NATO. All signs of a weaker alliance are in place, however. According to Article VIII, the two countries will not join other alliances or conclude treaties aimed at the other party. This clearly means that Russia will not “conspire” with the West against China’s interests. Article IX, as mentioned above, prescribes consultations in the event of a perceived or actual threat. It thus does not reach Article V of the 1949 North Atlantic Treaty, which is the lynchpin of NATO’s collective defense in which an attack on one member is considered an attack on all. The treaty does, however, go beyond Article IV of the 1949 Washington Treaty, in which members were obliged to consult together when one of them considered itself threatened. According to Articles X and XIII of the Russia-China treaty, the foreign policies of the two states will be coordinated, including within the UN framework.

This alliance is clearly intended first and foremost to contain some aspects of U.S. policy. Article XI, which stipulates support for principles and norms of international law, undoubtedly means further cooperation to prevent a repetition of the Kosovo scenario anywhere in the world, resistance to revision of international treaties, attempts to restore the role of the UN Security Council as the only body with the right to authorize the use of force in the international arena, etc. This is not a full-scale containment, of course. Both Russia and China have a strong interest in good political and economic relations with the United States. They are both, however, also bent on containing certain types of U.S. actions, in effect trying to force the United States to act multilaterally rather than unilaterally.

### **What’s the Price?**

The new treaty is a clear-cut victory for China. It has apparently ensured Russian support, both political and technical, for the modernization of its nuclear arsenal. It has become a full-fledged player in Central Asia, on par with Russia. The logical question is, what Russia has received in exchange?

It has been correctly pointed out that the rapprochement with China reflects disenchantment with the trajectory of Russia’s relationship with the West and especially with the United States in the last ten years. More generally, the treaty probably reflects Russia’s growing fascination with China’s model of economic reforms, which has become especially apparent in the last two years in circles close to the present government.

Ideology is not the strongest foreign policy motive for today’s ever-practical Kremlin, which is always looking for something more tangible. Simultaneously with signing the treaty, Russia and China also agreed to build a \$1.7 billion oil pipeline to China. China has also agreed to buy Russian-made passenger aircraft, which Russia was unable to sell to the West.

More intriguing are the rumors circulating in Moscow of an alleged offer by China to pay Russia's debt to the West. Much remains unclear, such as whether this would entail partial or full repayment, whether the deal entails Soviet era debt only or includes post-1992 debt as well. If this rumor proves correct, this would be a major setback for the West because Russia's debt – especially the expected payment crisis in 2003 – is the West's strongest and maybe the last source of leverage over Russian foreign policy. It will be even worse if this leverage is not merely lost, but is lost to China.

Common sense suggests that an agreement on debt payment is unlikely. But the mere existence of such a rumor – and the fact that it was abruptly terminated only after two days of circulation – demands attention. If the debt rumor is not true, analysts should be looking for some other form of payoff to Russia due to the one-sided nature of the treaty.

### **Possible Future Trajectories of the Alliance**

Of course, one should not overestimate the significance of the treaty or the nature of the mutual commitments. The alliance is weak primarily because neither country currently sees the need for a full-scale containment of the United States. Instead, they seek a good relationship with the United States and what both Russia and China would view as a relatively limited modification of U.S. foreign and defense policies.

The future trajectory of this new alliance will depend, to a large degree, on the United States. The Russian-Chinese alliance can remain weak or effectively dissolve if both countries are reasonably satisfied with U.S. actions. This, of course, does not preclude the emergence of limited policy disagreements with the United States. What is at stake is the scale and depth of these disagreements. If disputes with the United States are limited to secondary issues, policy coordination between Russia and China will be of little if any concern for the United States. If disagreements with the United States are allowed to intensify, it might spell potential trouble for U.S. interests in the future.

The United States still has the potential to prevent the further institutionalization of this treaty by offering incentives to Russia or China. For example, an economics package to Russia (whether involving investment, debt relief, or some other form of payoff) might go long way toward limiting Russia's interest in a close relationship with China. A deal on missile defense and nuclear arms reduction or on NATO enlargement might have the same effect, although neither seems very likely under present circumstances. The size of the economic package and/or the extent to which Russian security concerns should be met now seems beyond the grasp of U.S. domestic politics, however. Similarly, China could be offered a deal on missile defense, Taiwan, economic relationship, etc. Yet again, the domestic political scene in the United States does not seem to favor such a deal. In other words, breaking or seriously weakening the Russia-China alliance will require commitment of resources and decisions, which few in the United States are likely to support.

Russia and China might become closer and take steps to increase the level of institutionalization of their present relationship if their significant policy disagreements with the United States continue. It is not unfeasible that for Russia one of the major stimuli for signing the treaty was NATO's expected enlargement, especially the possibility of the inclusion of the Baltic states. Of course, China will not defend Russia against an imagined attack by NATO, just as Russia will hardly use its nuclear weapons to threaten the United States over a possible conflict over Taiwan. This is the major limitation of their security relationship and the reason why it will never be a new NATO. But perceived threats, whether real or only imagined, can bring the two countries closer on other issues.

Thus, the political implications of the new treaty are potentially enormous and should be given serious attention in Washington. Putin's hints might mean that he is not fully committed to an alliance with China and would prefer equidistant relationship. Backtracking, especially refusing massive technological assistance to China's nuclear programs, will not be easy for him, but it might be worth trying to steer him back towards the West. It might be time for the "battle for Russia" to begin in earnest.

© CSIS 2001