
A Fine Balance – The Strange Case of Sino-Russian Relations



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Abstract

Russia's relationship with China is complex and contradictory. Bilateral ties are more substantive and multifaceted than ever before, the two countries agree on most regional and international questions, and China is a major customer of Russian arms and energy. However, Moscow is increasingly uneasy about China's transformation as the next global power and the implications of this for Russia's security and place in the world. Balancing delicately between strategic convergence and suspicion, Sino-Russian partnership faces an uncertain future.

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Russia's relationship towards China is defined by numerous ambiguities and contradictions: a generally pragmatic mindset, but one tinged with prejudice; positive engagement interspersed with strategic competition; commonalities of policy counterbalanced by suspicions about ulterior agendas; envy mixed with civilizational contempt. The logic behind cooperative ties between Moscow and Beijing is multifaceted and compelling, yet in the post-Soviet period China has frequently been relegated to a make-weight in Russia's larger relationship with the West. While the strategic partnership exemplifies for some the 'pragmatism' of post-Soviet Russian foreign policy, for others the closeness and warmth of ties are more rhetorical than substantive.

The weight of history

The schizophrenia in Russian policy and attitudes towards China has a long history, dating back to the Mongol invasion of the Russian city-states in the 13th century. The destruction wrought by the Mongol horde established firmly in Russian consciousness the idea of the East as an abiding source of threat and insecurity. Crucially, the Mongols contributed almost nothing to the peoples they subjugated, which reinforced the image of the East as the embodiment of barbarism and backwardness, as well as danger. In the centuries that followed, Russia's substantial isolation from mainstream Asian civilizations greatly inhibited the emergence of alternative, more positive conceptions of the East¹.

The negative impact of long-term structural factors – distance and isolation, civilizational and normative divergence – was exacerbated by developments in the modern era: Russia's involvement in the foreign powers' carve-up of China in the second half of the 19th century; Stalin's double-dealing approach in the Civil War between Mao Zedong and Chang Kai-shek; the bitter ideological and personal rivalry between Mao and Nikita Khrushchev; and the Sino-Soviet border clashes of 1969.

¹ This contrasts markedly with Russian attitudes towards the West. Despite suffering enormously at the hands of Napoleon and Hitler (not to mention other invaders from the west), there is enduring admiration for French and German achievements in government, law, philosophy, economics and culture. It is indicative, for example, that Putin's reputation as a Germanophile has benefited rather

The combination of a subliminal 'Mongol complex', civilizational alienation and historical 'black spots' has created an underlying basis of mistrust that continues to constrain the development of Sino-Russian relations. It is largely responsible, for example, for the hoary myth of millions of Chinese flooding into the sparsely populated spaces of the Russian Far East (RFE)² and the reluctance by many to credit Beijing's assurances that it has given up any irredentist claims. Despite the formal demarcation of the frontier, there is a lingering suspicion in Moscow that, when the opportunity presents itself, Beijing will look to recover lost lands by one means or another – if not militarily, then through a 'creeping' expansion that exploits the huge (and growing) demographic imbalance on either side of the border³.

The strategic dimension

In this psychological climate, it is unsurprising that the strategic dimension should dominate Sino-Russian relations. A difficult past, the recent memory of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as the global hegemon have ensured that security and geopolitical issues remain at the forefront. Notwithstanding the expansion of bilateral economic ties, policy-makers in Moscow and Beijing continue to think primarily in terms of threat perceptions and geopolitical calculus.

The balance of power

This strategic dimension operates at three distinct, if interrelated levels. The first is the bilateral balance of power, which also touches on other geopolitical constructs, such as zero-sum equations and spheres of influence. Despite official disclaimers, many Russian policy-makers and thinkers are increasingly concerned at the speed with which China is narrowing the strategic gap. Indeed, some argue that China's aggregate power – political, military, economic – already exceeds Russia's. They are scarcely comforted by an overwhelming superiority in nuclear weapons, since the use of these is scarcely conceivable. Instead, they focus on the disturbing contrast in conventional forces capabilities: on one side, a vast Chinese military undergoing rapid modernization and strengthened significantly by high-tech

than hindered his career. Similarly, during the Cold War strategic hostility towards the United States was tempered by genuine respect for America's level of economic and technological development.

² In fact, the *maximum* number of Chinese in the Russian Far East is considered to be no more than 100,000, more than half of whom are not permanent settlers. This is a figure considerably lower than in Tsarist times, and even compared to the 1930s before Stalin's deportations.

³ The population of the Russian Far East is thought to have fallen to about 6.7 million, compared to over 110 million in the adjoining Chinese provinces.

Russian weaponry and military technology; on the other, Russia's own demoralized, poorly equipped and increasingly ineffective armed forces.

True, the 'China threat' arising from the changing military balance is hardly imminent. The continuing backwardness of much of the Chinese military, the final demarcation of the Sino-Russian border, confidence-building measures within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the two countries' likemindedness on many international political and security questions make it improbable that Beijing will attempt aggressive action against Russia anytime soon. But in the longer term China's steady transformation into a global power and the shifting bilateral balance have given Yevgenii Primakov's maxim, 'trust in capabilities, not intentions', a particular currency. If China can sustain annual growth rates of 8-10 percent (as it has done since economic reforms were initiated in 1978), then this is likely to translate – sooner rather than later – into a quantum leap in military capabilities. And although Beijing is committed to a broad vision of modernization, Russian strategic planners will have noted that the Chinese leadership is devoting increasing resources to building a modern military⁴, one that would be capable of fighting any kind of war.

Triangularism

Such anxieties lie at the root of the Putin administration's attempts to resurrect ideas of strategic diversity at the regional level, most notably through a triangularism involving Russia, China and Japan⁵. Moscow's recent decision to renege on an agreement to build the East Siberian oil pipeline to Daqing in Manchuria arose mainly out of concern that Russia would open itself up to possible blackmail from China as the monopoly customer. In opting for the much longer and more expensive route to the Russian Pacific port of Perevoznaya, Moscow hopes to reduce its dependence on Beijing by diversifying exports to the wider Asia-Pacific market. Putin's offer to Tokyo to revisit the question of the disputed South Kuriles/Northern Territories is born of the same logic. It reflects not only a desire to improve relations with

⁴ According to the International Institute of Strategic Studies, China increased its official defence budget by 11.9 percent in 2003, the fifteenth straight year of double-digit growth (*The Military Balance, 2004/2005*). Beijing is also taking steps to modernize China's military-industrial complex, including by pressing the Russians to transfer weapons technology through licensing in preference to sales of military hardware. Moscow is reluctant to go down this path, although mainly for economic rather than security reasons.

⁵ Interestingly, such strategic triangularism has been only a peripheral factor in the steady improvement of Russia-India relations under Putin. The Kremlin does not view India as a strategic counterweight to China, but rather values good ties with New Delhi for their own sake – as a key market for Russian weapons and nuclear energy.

The notion of a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis directed at the United States – first touted by then Foreign Minister Primakov in 1998 – is even more fanciful. Although this idea resurfaces occasionally, its obvious unfeasibility means that the Kremlin has never given it serious consideration.

Japan for their own sake, but also to allow Russia greater strategic flexibility in the Asia-Pacific region.

The deeper rationale behind such triangularism is to preserve the strategic status quo in Northeast Asia. In the same way that Russian policy-makers oppose the notion of a global hegemon in the form of the United States, so they wish to prevent the emergence of a hegemonic presence in East Asia. China's rise as the next superpower threatens to create a new dynamic that could both destabilize the region and marginalize Russia from important decision-making, for example in relation to the Korean peninsula where Moscow's already modest role could be reduced even further. The case for a more diversified, less Sinocentric orientation in Moscow's 'Asian policy' is reinforced further by the disappointment of earlier hopes, in the 1990s, that China would assist Russia's political and economic integration in the Asia-Pacific region.

Instrumentalism and Americacentrism

The principle of strategic diversity is integral to Russia's world-view under Putin, enshrined in the much-publicized notions of a 'multivector' foreign policy and 'geographical balance'. Within this overarching conceptual framework, the Sino-Russian relationship stands on two pillars: a broadening bilateral agenda, and a commitment to counterbalance or constrain the power of the global hegemon. This anti-hegemonic consensus is often mistaken as an 'alliance'. In fact, it reflects a strategic mindset rooted in the early 19th century tradition of the Concert of Great Powers. The emphasis on 'multipolarity' in Sino-Russian summit statements reveals above all the commitment of both sides to an international system based on multiple checks and balances.

The obvious downside to this vision, other than its tenuous link to reality, is that in practice it has operated more as an anti-philosophy directed at the United States than as a positive basis for the development of Sino-Russian partnership. This was especially the case during the Yeltsin years, when Moscow's approach to China became instrumentalized as a series of reflex actions in response to 'adverse' Western actions, such as NATO enlargement and the alliance's military intervention in Kosovo. The impression of negativity was heightened by the stagnation of economic ties and the declarative nature of many Sino-Russian bilateral agreements. Much though Moscow and Beijing criticized Washington, it was evident that they assigned far greater importance to relations with the United States than with each other.

Under Putin, Sino-Russian relations have become more substantive, multifaceted and institutionalized. But Moscow's world-view remains overwhelmingly Westerncentric for all that. Putin's endorsement of an American military presence in Central Asia after 9/11; his complaisant attitude to Washington's withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (despite the Sino-Russian Friendship Treaty having described it as the 'cornerstone of strategic stability'); and the conclusion in May 2002 of the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty – showed where he sees Russia's priorities. Ultimately, partnership with China, no matter how close, can never substitute for functional relations with the United States (or even Western Europe); it can only be an adjunct, albeit an important one.

Strategic aspirations

China, then, has assumed a peculiar and contradictory persona in Russian eyes. At one level, it is a 'strategic partner', whose similar outlook on many regional and international questions, ranging from separatism (Chechnya, Xinjiang, Tibet) to 'multipolarity', is valued highly. It is also a pivotal customer for Russian arms and energy exports. At the same time, however, Russian policy-makers recognize the limits of Chinese influence in world affairs. For now at least, China is not a significant player in regard to the post-9/11 security agenda, nor is it an economic partner comparable to the European Union or even some of the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent States, such as Ukraine and Belarus.

The primary strategic interest of China to Russia lies in the longer term. It is one of the many ironies in the relationship that the two countries are divided as much by their similarities as their differences. Both are aspiring world powers – China emerging from the ranks of the developing nations, Russia attempting to restore a measure of its Soviet-era status and influence. However, while Russia shows few signs of making this jump, China's seemingly inexorable progression as the next global power has enormous implications for the world in general and for Russia specifically. In these circumstances, the real 'China threat' would not be the notional possibility of military or demographic attack, or even the changing strategic balance, but rather China's transformational process and Russia's corresponding confinement to the periphery of international decision-making. Significantly, although Moscow and Beijing have been careful to underplay suggestions of strategic rivalry, incipient tensions have emerged even in today's benign bilateral climate – in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization where each looks to assume the leading role, and on the Korean question where Russia seeks to constrain – discreetly – Chinese assertiveness.

The ambivalence of economics

The economic relationship between Russia and China mirrors these strategic complexities. Official trade has tripled under Putin – from USD 5.7 billion to USD 15.7 billion – while ‘unofficial’ commerce, dominated by cross-border shuttle trade, is at an all-time high (USD 10 billion according to Putin). The potential for further expansion of trade and investment in nuclear energy, space cooperation, as well as in oil and gas projects, is also good.

Despite these positive trends, however, it remains unclear whether Russia and China are natural commercial partners, whose economic complementarities offer the prospect of lasting mutual benefit, or rivals competing for foreign trade and investment. In this connection, policy-makers in Moscow face an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, Russia has an obvious interest in sustaining economic growth by playing to its strengths – oil and gas exports, including to the expanding markets of East Asia; arms transfers to major customers such as China and India; and tapping lucratively into the growing demand for nuclear energy and space technology.

On the other hand, the drawbacks to expanded economic cooperation with China are by no means negligible. Oil and gas exports to China help drive the furious pace of modernization in that country, a modernization fundamental to its transformation into a global power. Similarly, the transfer of arms and weapons technology enhances Chinese military capabilities, with potential consequences not only for regional stability, but also for Russia’s own long-term security (including the possibility that such hardware and know-how could one day be used against it).

Such fears, exaggerated though they may be, have considerable resonance across the Russian political spectrum, from westernizing liberals to ‘great power’ nationalists (*derzhavniki*). Policy-makers and thinkers certainly appreciate the vital importance of maintaining businesslike, cooperative relations with China, but this realization is accompanied by a palpable and pervasive sense of unease. Many doubt, in particular, whether the economic benefits of arms and energy exports to China outweigh the risks to national security.

Outlook

The presence of numerous asymmetries – political, economic, ideological and civilizational – does not of itself preclude the development of functional and even close ties between Russia

and China. They may not be as like-minded as the official rhetoric would have it, but the strategic partnership is nonetheless healthier than one might have expected given its difficult historical genesis and the obvious dissimilarities between the two countries.

Part of the reason for this is that it is based on interests rather than values. While the Russians and Chinese may not always 'like' or even understand one another, they are bound together by many ties of mutual benefit. An extended (4,300 km) common frontier, opposition to American 'hegemonic' behaviour and growing economic cooperation are all compelling reasons to emphasize the positives of partnership while minimizing, if not necessarily overlooking, its negatives.

However, the vulnerability of any relationship based on selected common interests rather than shared values lies in the fact that interests can and do change. Today's strategic convergence in opposing the dominant power of the United States can easily transmute into a different set of strategic imperatives tomorrow. The lack of a 'values base' underpinning the Sino-Russian relationship could mean that, in times of difficulty, it lacks the resilience to withstand setbacks and downturns.

A second complicating element is the variability of Russian foreign policy, which is frequently hostage to short-term political and economic expediency, the interplay of sectional interests and the over-personalization of decision-making. This variability has hampered the emergence of a coherent strategy towards China. The traditional mix of general principles – multipolarity, strategic partnership, etc. – and often *ad hoc* responses to specific problems is a recipe for inconsistent and confused policy, as illustrated by the fiasco over the East Siberian oil pipeline.

Third, the negative impulse that drives much of the Sino-Russian relationship is by its very nature unstable. Putin's alacrity in embracing the United States after 9/11 – relegating China to a decidedly secondary place in Russian foreign policy thinking – highlighted the innate Westerncentrism both of Putin himself and the Russian political elite in general. A stable, consistent approach towards China will remain elusive as long as Moscow views good relations with Beijing principally as a means to an end – an 'added value' in the context of the global strategic equation – rather than as an intrinsic goal. The prospect of a more mature, more 'strategic' approach, however, seems remote, particularly given that generational change in Russia and China is likely to ensure that both will look increasingly to the West, rather than to each other.

Finally, and paradoxically, the fact that the strategic partnership has achieved much in recent years could turn out to be a disadvantage as well as a strength. With many bilateral issues having been substantially resolved, the question now arises about where the relationship goes from here. Is it set to move to a qualitatively new stage of development, as Moscow and Beijing have proclaimed, or has it reached the limit of its potential, following which we can expect an extended period of stasis and stagnation, if not necessarily crisis? Much will depend here on the continuing commitment of China and Russia (especially) to mutual engagement in the face of the many prejudices and suspicions that still divide them, the temptations of strategic games-playing, and the inevitable disagreements over individual policy issues that crop up in even the closest of relationships. In the light of historical experience, it is difficult to assume such a denouement with confidence.

The Author

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