

# The Paradox of Russo-Chinese Relations

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STEPHEN BLANK, JUN 22 2012

### Introduction: The Paradox

At the recent Russo-Chinese summit in Beijing both governments typically hailed an unprecedented closeness, signed 17 agreements, mainly relating to trade and investment issues, and agreed to upgrade joint military exercises like their recent joint naval exercise. They also stated their joint intention to collaborate on Asia-Pacific security, announced an identity of views, particularly regarding Iran's nuclear program and the civil war in Syria. China will apparently invest more in Siberia and Russian Asia and Moscow will also be able to export more nuclear energy to China.[1] Yet despite this seeming identity of views on current international issues, much evidence exists supporting Western and Asian observers' claim that a visible distancing of Moscow from Beijing has begun.[2]

### Factors of Attraction

How then do we explain this paradox? First, we should not overlook the real and considerable intimacy in Russo-Chinese relations. Their joint or shared suspicion of the U.S.' desire to project its power and values into sensitive areas clearly is a powerful shared bond. As Fedor Lukyanov, Editor of *Russia in Global Affairs* has written, what most annoys Russia about U.S. policy is that it constantly interferes in areas where Moscow believes it but not Washington has vital interests. It interprets this interference and resistance to Russia's perceived vital and legitimate interests as anti-Russian, intended to undermine the foundations of Russian statehood. Thus U.S. policy allegedly violates fundamental canons of Realpolitik, i.e. respecting other states' vital interests insofar as they do not hurt your vital interests. Lukyanov complains that America, as a global power, knows no interests that it can sacrifice. "Instead, it considers those territories that Moscow thinks are secondary for the United States an indispensable element of the elaborate structure called 'American leadership.'"[3]

Beijing clearly shares those views and has frequently admonished the U.S. to keep out of areas where Beijing allegedly has core interests like Southeast Asia.[4] Both governments likewise share the view that the U.S. presence in Central Asia threatens their vital interests because of its projection of military and potentially economic power. Therefore they both express that suspicion publicly and privately in diplomatic exchanges with Central Asian governments and try to thwart the expansion of that American presence there. Both these governments have often expressed an identity of views on Korea, fearing that the U.S. is contemplating ratcheting up pressure on North Korea that could lead it to react forcefully and plunge Northeast Asia into armed conflict. Therefore they both espouse a purely diplomatic approach and inducements for Pyongyang to negotiate.[5] Accordingly Russia and China have jointly authored a proposal for multipolar security in Asia that openly attacks the U.S. alliance system while aiming to give them both a free hand in conducting their policies in Asia.[6] Similarly, both governments have also frequently opposed U.S. missile defense and alliance systems in Asia, not just Europe.[7] And also in 2010, as part of the expression of shared policies, they signed an agreement rejecting Japan's claims against them in the Senkakus and Kurile Islands.[8]

These common positions have continued as Sino-Russian economic relations have grown in volume. Clearly there are strong commonalities between Moscow and Beijing in world affairs. They remain high priests of the church of unlimited state sovereignty and demand that the U.S. subject its use of violence to the UN Security Council where they have a veto to prevent Washington from leading a crusade to unseat the brutal Assad government in Syria or the

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Islamic Republic of Iran, lest such precedents later be used against them or their allies. On proliferation issues, not only does it appear that China, if not Russia, may be defying UN and other resolutions against assisting North Korea and Iran, but both sides also clearly seek to limit Washington's ability to threaten Tehran or Pyongyang or even impose new sanctions and pressure upon them.[9] Accordingly it seems clear that this partnership or collaboration some might even say alliance (even if only in a diplomatic sense) is grounded in anti-Americanism seeing both U.S. material power- and the willingness to project it- as well as democratic values that Washington also is ready to project, as linked threats that must be countered. And this has been a mainspring of the bilateral connection for years.[10]

## Reasons for Estrangement

Yet at the same time we see the distancing effect alluded to above in all of these theaters. In economics there is still no gas pipeline from Russia to China mainly because Moscow refuses to accept Beijing's demand for a Russian surrender on prices. Nor is there reason to believe one will be constructed anytime soon. Indeed, no sooner had the two countries opened an oil pipeline in 2011 than it was engulfed in Chinese demands for lower prices and litigation.

In military affairs there is continuing Russian suspicion of Chinese piracy of Russian arms, espionage, and new weapons developments that could lead to a future military threat.[11] Russia's 2010 Vostok exercises culminated in a nuclear weapons strike upon the PLA.[12] Indeed recent Russian first deployments of new weapons systems go primarily to the Far East, not the Western part of the country. For instance, in 2009 Russia deployed S-400 surface to air missiles to the RFE against potential debris from North Korean missile and nuclear tests.[13] In 2011 it deployed S-400s on the Kurile Islands ostensibly against Japan and the U.S. but probably also against China and to hedge against a Korean contingency[14] Similarly Russia's new plans for naval construction, especially in the RFE are extensive. All in all 36 submarines and 40 surface ships are to be added by 2020.[15] These plans portray a reorientation of Russia's naval emphasis to the Asia-Pacific, and to a new emphasis on meeting the challenge posed by China's naval buildup and/or a potential Korean contingency.[16]

In Central Asia China blocked Russia's proposal to enlarge the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), rebuffed Russia's earlier proposal to add a military dimension to that organization's remit, and is steadily consolidating a commercial and financial primacy over Russia in Central Asia. Indeed, President Putin's proposed Eurasian Union, the lynchpin of his foreign policy, clearly carries overtly anti-Chinese implications by restricting the entry of Chinese goods to countries like Kyrgyzstan.[17] China has also long since broken Russia's monopoly over Central Asian gas forcing Moscow to pay higher prices to Central Asian producers.

While Moscow supports Chinese pressure against Japan and seeks to humiliate Japan over the Kurile Islands issue, its diplomats are not above making secret overtures to Japan to persuade them to join the Russo-Chinese bilateral security treaty draft new security order and repudiate the alliance even as this Sino-Russian bullying continues. Earlier in 2007 after China launched an anti-satellite weapon, Russian diplomats approached Japan, claimed to have reassessed security relations with Japan and raised concerns about China.[18] Similarly in Southeast Asia in 2011, Russia openly sided with Vietnam during the recent rising tension over Chinese efforts to declare the South China Sea as a core interest and a Mare Nostrum. Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov gave economic reasons for supporting Vietnam. Not surprisingly Chinese media reports denounced this action as "unrighteous" and warned Russia that it prefers cooperation with "ill-doers" over China with whom it professes an identity of interests. Chinese media also stressed that Russo-Vietnamese military and energy cooperation allows Vietnam to extend energy exploration into contested areas. Vietnam depends on this cooperation with Russia, so in some sense Russia is culpable. It also correctly accused Russia of seeking a return to Cam Ranh Bay.[19] Indeed, quite recently Russia announced its interest in returning there, a step probably connected to joint Russo-Vietnamese energy projects off Vietnam's coast, and as a means of checking China.[20] Similarly the Russo-DPRK agreement of August 2011 whereby Pyongyang will finally consider the long-standing Russian proposal for a trans-Korean pipeline and railway also has a hidden message for China, namely that Russia has alternatives to China regarding gas exports in Asia. A trans-Korean pipeline bypasses China, reduces its leverage on Russia who gains alternatives with which to supply gas to all of Asia, and allows Russia to insist upon a higher price to China. In fact, Moscow recently announced that it would not lower its price for gas through the projected pipeline to China even as it offers South Korea a 30%

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discount.[21]

Not only Russia dreams about building a Euro-Asian trade network. South Korea has previously made similar proposals and by locating this railway's terminus and gas pipeline at home it gains greater security over its energy supplies, shelters them and its overland trade from China's influence, and realizes its earlier dream of becoming a Northeast Asian hub.[22] China too dreams of becoming such a hub through its transcontinental trade projects like the Silk Road and TRACECA which bypass Russia. So the railway and gas pipeline illustrate the ongoing Sino-Russian rivalry for leverage in the Korean peninsula.

Third, despite Russia's plans for an overland freight service along the Trans-Siberian railway from China to Europe, China has no plans to work with Russia on a Far East high-speed railway.[23] Instead China has launched a global offensive to build low-cost high-speed railways to undercut Japanese and potential Russian competitors. Chinese officials openly boast that these railroad investments will help Chinese products spread further, bolster the images of Chinese brands, and the completion of these projects will "heighten China's political influence in the importing countries." [24] Such projects help underscore why officials like Xi Jinping maintain that Russia is a vital market for China's "going global" business strategy.[25]

Perhaps Moscow's understanding of the consequences of China's growing commercial and economic power throughout Northeast Asia explains why a recent article in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' journal *International Affairs* stated openly that the economic development of other countries in the Asia-Pacific region actually threatens Russia by generating an unbridled geopolitical competition of influence.[26] Since Russian leaders expressly link development of Russia's Far East (RFE) to Russia's capacity to play a "system-forming" role in Asia, failure to develop the area through such major energy, transportation, and trade projects consigns it to being linked to China's regional development plan and contributes to the failure of Russia's "Ostpolitik," a failure having profound strategic implications. Despite Russia's professed identity of interests with China, Moscow's policy of enhancing Russia's Asian profile does not entail yielding to China in Korea.

## Explaining the Paradox

How then do we explain this paradox? Apparently Moscow, in keeping with the foreign policy program leaked to *Rusky Newsweek* in 2010, still seeks to "anchor" China to Russia through support for anti-American programs and policies and economic and military concessions like energy and arms sales.[27] Thus, the new agreements look very much like aspects of Moscow's vaunted "modernization partnerships" for acquiring European technology and investment. Hence Putin's remarks about catching the wind in China's sails and the pursuit of Chinese investment in the newest iteration of Russia's development projects for Siberia and the Russian Far East (RFE).[28] But where the issues are purely Asian and there is little or no U.S. presence against Russian interests (as in the South China Sea) there is considerable Russian obstruction, even resistance to projects that will enhance China's power without at least commensurate returns for Russia.

Of course neither side reveals its ultimate objectives and thoughts in public. But any attempt to understand the nature of the Russo-Chinese relationship must take account of this paradox and try to account for it. Undoubtedly other interpretations will come along and may supersede this one. But if we are to make sense of the recent summit or the nature of the bilateral relationship in general, both the elements of warmth and of reserve must be examined without giving way to exaggeration. The growing accumulation of disagreements and even of frustrations between Moscow and Beijing suggests that summit rhetoric aside, this relationship remains a marriage or axis of convenience whose convenience may be diminishing over time.[29]

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