

China-Russia Relations:
Tales of Two U.S. Partners:
Coping with Post-Taliban Uncertainty

by Yu Bin
Associate Professor, Wittenberg University

For Moscow and Beijing, the Taliban's demise was by no means a harmless "regime change" but the beginning of another round of geostrategic posturing with the U.S. in their highly volatile backyard. Within a month, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) was dead (Dec. 13, 2001), and a new, proactive nuclear strategy (Nuclear Posture Review or NPR, Jan. 8, 2002) was in place. As critical as they were of the "axis of evil" Bush doctrine (revealed in his Jan. 29 State of the Union speech), Russia and China were to be further bewildered and angered in early March when they learned the NPR treated them as part of a "gang of seven" for possible U.S. nuclear strikes.

Bilateral relations between Russia and China were subject to the ever growing and ubiquitous U.S. shadow. For these two partners in the U.S. war against terrorism, it seemed that to be the U.S.' newfound friend (Russia) was as tricky and unpredictable as being its potential foe (China). This was true despite President George Bush's two trips to China (October 2001 and February 2002) and his scheduled May visit to Russia. Meanwhile, Moscow and Beijing worked hard to salvage the leftovers from the massive and strategic return of the United States to Central Asia.

Post-Taliban Era: SOS for SCO?

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was the first "casualty" of the U.S.-led anti-Taliban war in Afghanistan. Although both Moscow and Beijing denied that the SCO had "lost any substance," most of the SCO's Central Asian states had become hosts to the U.S. military since Sept. 11. This was in sharp contrast to pre-9-11, when the SCO was the only regional security mechanism without direct U.S. participation.

Although the large-scale military operation in Afghanistan was declared over in late January (according to Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage on Jan. 29), there was no sign that the U.S. would withdraw its military from Central Asia. To counter the growing U.S. influence and to restore a certain degree of normalcy in the post-Taliban era, SCO foreign ministers met in Beijing in early January to assess "the new situation in the region." The SCO officials agreed to set up a regional counterterrorism agency and an emergency response mechanism. The two mechanisms could be formally operationalized in the SCO's June summit in St. Petersburg, Russia.

In addition to expressing support for Afghanistan's interim government and emphasizing the non-military aspect of the post-Taliban reconstruction, SCO members clearly articulated their concerns about a growing foreign presence in the region. "Any attempts to impose this or that form of rule and drag that country into anyone's sphere of influence could lead to a new crisis" in and around the country, stated a joint declaration released by the SCO foreign ministers. The declaration also said all international community members "must respect Afghanistan's sovereignty and territorial integrity and prevent interference in its internal affairs." In a clear reference to the high-handed and unilateralist U.S approach to the fight against cross-border terrorism, SCO's officials insisted that antiterrorist efforts "must be devoid of bias and double standards" and "must meet the goals and principles of the UN Charter and other universally accepted international law standards."

Despite these declared intentions, the gathering of SCO foreign ministers in Beijing appeared to be more for consensus building than for specific actions. In a more practical sense, the special meeting provided an opportunity for top Russian and Chinese officials to assess the impact of the post-Taliban and the post-ABM world. In a separate meeting between Russian and Chinese foreign ministers during the SCO conference, the issue of "strategic stability" – another phrase for the issues of the ABM Treaty and arms control – dominated the agenda. The meeting between PRC Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan and Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov also touched on issues of implementing the friendship treaty signed in July 2001, India-Pakistan tension, and coordinating high-level contacts for 2002. To add more weight to the foreign minister meeting, Chinese President Jiang Zemin met with Ivanov, urging the Russians on to "closer strategic coordination on the international arena" for joint safeguarding "world peace and global strategic stability."

The January SCO foreign ministers' meeting clearly injected momentum into the somewhat eclipsed regional security network. Its future effectiveness, particularly in the new strategic environment, has yet to be demonstrated. Specifically, the SCO needs to address the question of how to move the proposed antiterrorist center in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan beyond the current talking stage, if it is to function at all. More specific rules are needed to define the SCO's structure, mode of operation, rules for accession, participation of observers, and membership criteria (will Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan be allowed to join?). How will the SCO relate to the U.S. as its influence on SCO members continues to grow? Maybe one of the most pressing issues for the SCO member states in the near future is to work out a delicate balance between safeguarding the SCO's own interests while avoiding direct and open opposition to the U.S. presence and interests.

Beyond the ABM Treaty: Russian Pragmatism and China's Strategic Vulnerability

For several years, Moscow and Beijing coordinated their diplomatic efforts on the issue of "strategic stability," particularly the integrity of the ABM Treaty. When the U.S. finally pulled out of the landmark arms control treaty at the end of 2001, Beijing seemed

more surprised by Russian President Vladimir Putin's mild reaction than by the much anticipated U.S. move.

A sense of disappointment permeated the writings of Chinese commentators after the Russian president described the U.S. move as a mere "mistake." Putin went as far as to cast the U.S. move as a "difference between friends" that should not crush "the spirit of partnership and even alliance" between the two nations. Meanwhile, Chinese media noted that Russian military leaders indicated that Russia did not plan any immediate moves to respond to the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty. Russia's measured response was a remarkable turnaround from its earlier resistance to a U.S. move that had inflamed and infuriated many pro-West Russians.

To be sure, the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty has yet to have any adverse effect on the Chinese minimal nuclear deterrent posture. The immediate impact of the U.S. move, however, was psychological, particularly for Russian-Chinese relations. Moscow and Beijing were well aware of this. For Putin, Sept. 11 provided a historic opportunity to move Russia into the U.S.-led Western camp. The warming between Russia and the U.S. was simply too good to be spoiled by insistence on the integrity of the ABM Treaty. Chinese analysts, too, understood the much-weakened bargaining power of Russia as a result of its shrinking economic power and its aging nuclear arsenal. The latter required drastic reduction, with or without the treaty. If confronting the U.S. was not an option, it would be more pragmatic for Russia to soft peddle the ABM issue.

Still, the area of strategic stability should not be neglected. In addition to the foreign minister talks in early January, three vice foreign ministerial-level talks were held (Feb. 28, March 5-7, and March 21) to exchange views and coordinate policies on the issue of strategic stability.

"Goldilocks Trap" for Beijing

Despite these efforts to adapt to the post-ABM world, China's strategic environment was clearly deteriorating, ironically in a classic "Goldilocks" fashion: if Russia's huge, though rusted, nuclear arsenal was still too big to be seriously compromised by any U.S. missile defense (MD) system and the "rogue" missiles were too primitive and/or too few for targeting on continental United States, the U.S. MD system seems "just right" – no matter how "unintended" – to neutralize China's minimal strategic deterrent posture based on two dozen old-fashioned, liquid-fueled intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) sitting in their vulnerable silos.

The PRC's strategic vulnerability in the post-ABM world can be further demonstrated at the regional level. In contrast to the grumpy Europeans, Washington's MD system was much better received in Asia, where there is an immediate beneficiary (Taiwan), a muted but real supporter (Japan), and a recent but enthusiastic convert (India). Most important, Asia would provide both the current – though somewhat symbolic – concern (North Korea) as well as a potential and real one (China) for U.S. MD.

From a historical perspective, the U.S. tended to unilaterally engage Asia while being rather reluctant to get involved in Europe. Indeed, it was the attack on Pearl Harbor that dragged the U.S. into the European theater in World War II. The Cold War was “cold” only in Europe, whereas in Asia, Washington battled Asian communism in two “limited” hot wars (Korea and Vietnam). Up to the Sept. 11 attack, the U.S. seemed to be preoccupied with Asia as the Bush team was tempted to withdraw the U.S. military from Europe and to shift the U.S. strategic focus to the Asia Pacific. Sept. 11 did not change this basic policy orientation.

Russia strongly believed that China would have to strengthen its strategic forces. A 17.6 percent hike in China’s defense spending for the next fiscal year was a strong indication. “Whether this will benefit or harm the U.S. is anyone’s guess,” said Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Losyukov in early February. He went on to say that “the end of the 1972 ABM Treaty will be very destructive for Asia.” The PRC’s effort to modernize its strategic nuclear forces would inevitably lead to a regional arms race that would affect everybody including Russia. By mid-February, Moscow started to argue that all members of the nuclear club including China should be reducing strategic offensive armaments.

The NPR and “Gang of Seven”

Forty days before *The Los Angeles Times* disclosed the Pentagon’s Nuclear Posture Review China’s *Jiefangjun Bao* (*People’s Liberation Army Daily*) concluded that the U.S. goal to develop fourth generation nuclear weapons – small and micro nuclear weapons – was to fill a gap between conventional weapons and nuclear weapons. As a result, this would increase the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons and enable the United States to use nuclear weapons in a flexible and selective manner in a real war, thereby lowering the nuclear threshold. The PLA analysis asserted that the U.S. began “taking practical measures to implement its nuclear strategy that places equal stress on defense and offense.”

What the PLA analysts did not realize, until *The Los Angeles Times* March 9 disclosure, was that China was part of the “gang of seven” on the U.S. nuclear hit list. And worse, the NPR allegedly clearly specifies the use of U.S. nuclear weapons in case of a China-Taiwan conflict.

Russia, too, is part of the contingency list and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov requested an explanation from the U.S. side. Putin, however, stepped in to minimize the impact of the NPR on U.S.-Russian relations. Meanwhile, the Bush foreign/defense policy team quickly explained it away in mid-March to the visiting Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov. After meetings with Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, State Secretary Colin Powell, and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice, who all assured that Russia was not being targeted, the defense minister accepted the U.S. clarification. A “satisfied” Ivanov was quoted as saying that “being a defense minister, I understand well that the Defense Ministry of any country must plan for any kind of development.”

There was, however, no diplomatic effort, at least publicly, to comfort Beijing. China waited for several days before lashing out at the NPR. Deputy Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing summoned U.S. Ambassador Clark Randt and told him that China would never yield to foreign threats, including nuclear blackmail. After a historic visit to the U.S. by Taiwan Defense Minister Tang Yiau-ming – where he met U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly in early March – Beijing officials warned the U.S. not to cross the “red lines” with regard to Taiwan. A *People’s Daily* analysis went as far as to say that nuclear war was not far away. Another lengthy article described how Jiang Zemin nurtured the development of China’s strategic missile forces.

From Beijing’s perspective, the close timing – in less than a month – of the ABM Treaty withdrawal (Dec. 13, 2001) and the U.S. intention to move toward a lower nuclear threshold (the NPR was submitted Jan. 8, 2002) suggested that international politics were clearly in uncharted waters.

Trade Away Strategic “Blues”

If there was little China and Russia could do in the international strategic and diplomatic arena in the post-Taliban and post-ABM world, trade seemed to be one of the few bright spots in their bilateral interaction. According to official estimates by both sides, Sino-Russian trade in 2001 exceeded \$20 billion, although half of that amount was counted as unofficial trade (border, barter, etc.). The 33.3 percent hike over the previous year’s record was the highest in history. After years of subperformance due to Russia’s economic depression and bilateral incompatibility, there are growing hopes for Russian-Chinese economic relations.

Some Russian commentators even suggested that the recovery of the world economy now depended on the Russian-Chinese-Indian trio, whose growth rate happened to be the fastest in a world plagued by recession. It is doubtful that the combined economic activities of these three relatively poor countries would significantly accelerate the world economy. However, for China’s foreign trade experts and officials, the stronger demand for machinery and consumer goods in Russia was an attractive market for China’s under-loaded manufacture sector. The huge growth in bilateral trade with Russia in 2001 was three times higher than the next highest growth among China’s top 10 trade partners in 2001 (11 percent growth for Sino-EU trade). Among European countries, Russia was able in 2001 to edge ahead of Britain as China’s second largest trade partner.

To speed up bilateral economic interaction, in early January Chinese officials suggested Russia send a delegation of 100 Russian businessmen from some of the largest Russian firms to China for fact-finding and business opportunities. In 2002, Russia would begin the delivery of five Tu-204-120 airliners with an option on another 10 Tu-204-120 airliners equipped with British-made Rolls Royce engines. Shanghai, the largest industrial/business center in China, was taking the lead to build the Shanghai Trade Center in St. Petersburg. Meanwhile, a direct flight was opened in January between Shanghai and Vladivostok.

These positive developments in bilateral trade even attracted considerable attention from top leaders. Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji was so upbeat about bilateral trade that he predicted at the annual session of the National People's Congress in mid-March that trade volume with Russia would double in two or three years. President Putin, too, was encouraged and called President Jiang to discuss trade and economic relations, something that rarely happened during the two years Putin has been in the Kremlin.

The Year of the Horse (2002) ushered in a series of mini-anniversaries: six months for the 9-11 attacks, one year for the Bush inauguration, two years for Putin (March 27), and the last year for Jiang Zemin. Longer memories recall this Horse Year as the 10th anniversary of the formation of the Russian Federation, which replaced the 74-year Soviet empire, and the 30th anniversary of Nixon's historical trip to China. Whatever connections between the two extended anniversaries, some in China may now regret their country's crucial role in the U.S. world-wide crusade against Soviet power.

An old Chinese saying prophesies that everything goes in the opposite direction every 30 years (*sanshi nian he dong, sanshi nian he xi*). Thirty years after Nixon's 1972 journey to China, the chemistry between the three Cold War strategic players is shifting again. Although Russia and China have long passed the phase of seeing everything through a zero-sum Cold War lens, relations with the world's sole superpower remain the most important, most difficult, and perhaps most unpredictable task for the ruling elite in Beijing and Moscow.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations January-March 2002

Jan. 3, 2002: Russia's state weaponry trading company Rosoboronexport signs a \$1.4 billion contract with China to build two destroyers of the 956EM type to be delivered before the end of 2005.

Jan. 7, 2002: Foreign ministers of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) meet in Beijing for a "non-regular" meeting, the first of this kind, to coordinate their efforts against terrorism, fundamentalism, and separatism. A joint statement also expressed "grave concern over the growth of tension between India and Pakistan."

Jan. 7, 2002: Russian President Vladimir Putin conveys his "warmest New Year's wishes" to President Jiang Zemin through visiting Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov who is in Beijing.

Jan. 16, 2002: Russia's Federation Council (upper house of Parliament) ratifies the Sino-Russian Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation.

Jan. 28, 2002: Russian President Vladimir Putin signs a federal law “On the Ratification of the Treaty on Good-Neighbor Relations, Friendship, and Cooperation between the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China.”

Feb. 3, 2002: It is reported that trade volume between Russia and China exceeded \$20 billion for 2001, a 33.3 percent hike over 2000 and the highest in history.

Feb. 6, 2002: In a meeting with Chinese Ambassador Zhang Deguang in Moscow, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov “highly assessed” the development of the bilateral strategic partnership in 2001 and advocated further expansion of bilateral relations in 2002. Ivanov briefed Zhang on key areas in Russia’s foreign policy.

Feb. 9, 2002: Russia and China sign a protocol of intent to purchase five Tu-204-120 airliners from Russia’s Aviastar-SP in 2002-2003, with an option of buying another 10.

Feb. 22, 2002: President Jiang briefs President Putin via telephone on U.S. President George W. Bush’s recent visit to China.

Feb. 22–23, 2002: Senior generals of the Chinese and Russian armed forces stationed on the Sino-Russian border meet in Heihe City of Heilongjiang Province in China and in the Russian city of Blagoveshensk; this is the first meeting of this kind.

Feb. 26, 2002: Chinese Vice Premier Wen Jiabao meets in Beijing with Viktor Vladimirovich Gerashchenko, president of the Central Bank of the Russian Federation.

Feb. 28, 2002: Russia’s Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoliy Losyukov and Assistant to the Chinese Foreign Minister Liu Guchang exchange ratified copies of the Sino-Russian friendship treaty in Beijing to mark the official debut of the 30-year treaty.

March 5–7, 2002: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Mamedov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Guangya hold talks in Beijing on strategic stability.

March 7, 2002: The National Coordination Council SCO meets in Moscow and decide to start drafting the SCO’s charter that will be signed at a regular SCO summit meeting in St. Petersburg early in June.

March 12–13, 2002: Valeriy Nikolayenko, secretary general of the CIS Collective Security Council, visits Beijing for the first-ever consultations with the Chinese Foreign Ministry.

March 14-15, 2002: A delegation led by Sergey Shoygu, Minister Sergei Kuzhugetovich Shoigu of Civil Defense and Emergency Situations, holds talks with their Chinese counterparts in Beijing.

March 15, 2002: Russia begins a temporary ban on imports of pork, beef, and poultry from China. Sergey Tsyplakov, Russia’s trade representative in Beijing, states that this

was a “technical matter that will be settled through consultations in the spirit of partnership and cooperation.”

March 20, 2002: Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks via telephone with Chinese President Jiang Zemin to discuss trade and economic relations.

March 21, 2002: Deputy FM Mamedov and the Chinese permanent representative at the Conference on Disarmament Hu Xiaodi meets in Geneva, expressing dissatisfaction with the state of affairs in multilateral arms control, disarmament, and nonproliferation.

March 25, 2002: Sergei Stepashin, chairman of the Russian Audit Chamber, begins a week-long visit to study the experience of his Chinese counterpart. Stepashin meets with Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji and China’s General Auditor Li Jinhua.