

**China-Russian Relations:
New Century, New Face, and China's "Putin
Puzzle"**

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The sudden changing of the guard in the Kremlin at the turn of the century led to a cooling and holding phase for Russo-Chinese relations. Although minister-level contacts continued after Yeltsin's grand exit from power and before Putin's election as president, some second thoughts or reassessment of bilateral relations seemed to be in progress in the Kremlin. Putin's cautiousness on a China policy, deliberate or not, was in sharp contrast to an unprecedented Russian "omnidirectional" foreign policy in Asia, demonstrated by Foreign Minister Ivanov's travels in the region. The Putin puzzle seemed to worry China, which had every reason to press for stronger ties with Russia as relations with both Taiwan and the United States started to whither.

Acting President's New Clothes

While American presidential hopefuls were debating their intended policies, Yeltsin's handpicked successor moved quietly and quickly as if he already had a strong mandate from the Russian people. On the home front, Putin continued the brutal war against Chechen separatism; moved quickly in early January to reshuffle Kremlin personnel, cutting most of his ties to Yeltsin; and allied with the Communists in the Duma to secure majority support.

In defense policy, Putin's first presidential move was to activate Russia's new "Concept of National Security" as a direct response to NATO expansion and the Kosovo crisis in 1999. The new policy allows for Russian use of nuclear force "if all other measures of resolving a crisis situation have been exhausted and have proven ineffective," as Putin described it. Other presidential directives aiming to enhance Russia's preparedness included a 50 percent increase in military spending, resumption of training reserves, and a new nuclear command and control structure consolidating command of Russia's strategic deterrence forces (land, sea, and air).

In foreign policy, Putin kept busy by receiving foreign dignitaries including U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, NATO Secretary-General George Robertson, Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian, and Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan. Indeed, Putin never strongly criticized Washington despite the latter's criticism of his handling of the war in Chechnya and the seizure of a Russian oil tanker suspected of breaking the Iraqi embargo. Putin even toyed with the idea of Russia joining NATO, although his foreign minister later explained away the statement as hypothetical. Regardless, restoring ties and cooperating with NATO became policy.

Beijing's "Putin Puzzle"

There was an exception amidst all the domestic and diplomatic initiatives in Russia: Putin was cautious in revealing his China policy. Some early signs of the "Putin puzzle" could be seen in January when Chinese Defense Minister Chi Haotian visited Moscow. Chi's appeal for broader cooperation with Russia, especially in the military sphere, was not particularly reciprocated by

his counterpart, Igor Sergeev, who referred to the “dynamic” military cooperation as having “prospects.” Chi’s meeting with Putin appeared to be warm. However, Chi failed to persuade Putin to proceed with a trip to China in February, as promised by Yeltsin a month earlier. Instead, the Kremlin made an announcement immediately after this meeting stating that Putin would not leave Russian territory before the March election, although China would be one of the first visits for the new Russian president. Apparently to dispel any doubts about the consistency of post-Yeltsin China policy, a Putin aide described to reporters the acting president’s “unconditional adherence to those agreements which had been reached at previous Russo-Chinese summit meetings.”

The Russian side appeared most careful in military relations. According to Russian sources, Chi’s shopping list included Russia’s latest multi-mission Su-37 plane and more advanced Russian air defense systems. These items were deemed vital for a possible military showdown in the Taiwan Strait, perhaps in the not too distant future. The Russians, however, insisted that nothing new be added to the agreed structure of deliveries reached in August 1999. Instead of meeting China’s new and growing demands for Russian hardware, Defense Minister Sergeev made clear he was more interested in cooperation in the field of civil aircraft-building and China’s possible participation in Russia’s civilian space project, GLONASS. Deputy Prime Minister Klebanov went even further stating that Russia would “not allow a tilt in our relations...only in the field of military-technical cooperation.”

Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan also experienced similar caution from the Russian side in late February. While Tang, in his first official visit to Russia, urged the promotion of bilateral ties to one of all-around cooperation, his Russian counterpart seemed satisfied with the current state of strategic coordination and stressed the implementation of existing agreements. On the crucial Taiwan issue, a joint communiqué released after the meeting stated that Russia supports China’s efforts aimed at the peaceful unification of the country, a variation from China’s approach to Taiwan as stated in the White Paper issued on February 18. After his return to China, Foreign Minister Tang referred to his talk with Foreign Minister Ivanov as “very candid as well as constructive,” suggesting a certain degree of disagreement between the two sides. Tang even evaded a question from a Russian *Itar-Tass* correspondent asking if there was any change in the relationship in the aftermath of Yeltsin’s resignation.

Putin’s cautiousness on a China policy, deliberate or not, was in sharp contrast to an unprecedented Russian “omnidirectional” foreign policy in Asia, demonstrated by Foreign Minister Ivanov’s travel to North Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Those trips led to significant outcomes in economic cooperation, diplomatic ties, and in the case of Vietnam, military sales. Further confusion may have been generated by a host of seemingly contradictory messages emanating from the Kremlin, including Putin’s “hypothetical” idea to join NATO and Russia’s “soft landing” for the oil tanker crisis with the U.S. In addition, Putin’s confession to the visiting U.S. Secretary of State of his “European essence” and superficiality in regard to Asian interests (practicing judo and eating Chinese food) did not earn him any kudos in Beijing. The Putin puzzle apparently worried China, which had every reason to press for stronger ties with Russia as relations with both Taiwan and the United States started to wither.

Putin: Keeping the “China Baby” Without Yeltsin’s “Bath Water”:

Russia’s more cautious approach to Beijing should not be over-emphasized. The basic structural constraints for Moscow in the post-Cold War years offered a limited range of alternatives for a weaker Russia. Russia’s sudden oil fortune does not reverse the basic downward trend of its comprehensive power. According to the Stockholm Institute of International Peace, not a single tank, piece of artillery, missile, warship, submarine, or airplane was added to the Russian military in the entire year of 1998, due to financial constraints. Russian military pilots only flew eight hours per year as compared to the average of 200 hours for NATO pilots. One Russian analyst lamented that for the first time in the past 300 years, Russia is surrounded by economically and militarily “more dynamic countries.”

For these reasons, from a Chinese perspective Russia’s basic interests require closer relations with China. Moscow should not alienate Beijing, at least for the time being, when the West is viewed by some as trying to weaken Russia and when China is yet to pose itself as a major threat to Russia’s security.

It may be premature to speculate that Putin was significantly revising or readjusting Russia’s China policy. The simple fact is no substantial policy regarding China could be made until after the late March presidential election. Putin may intend to reserve the opportunity for any major policy change, domestic or foreign. Keep in mind also that Putin is a skillful card player: a more effective China card is perhaps useful as either an inducement or deterrent in Russia’s relations with the more powerful West.

Moscow’s cautious approach to Beijing’s eager request for closer military relations, particularly in military sales, is not new. The positive attitude of the Russians in this area in the recent past (since Kosovo) is actually an anomaly for the 1990s. With the Kosovo crisis behind them, it is natural for Moscow to seek to repair, not worsen, relations with NATO and Washington. In the strategic area, it is still in Moscow’s interest to have a “build-down” of its nuclear weapons with Washington through START-II and III. Even if the U.S. eventually deploys its national missile defense system, Russia’s strategic capability, unlike that of China’s, would not be immediately compromised. In the Asia-Pacific, it is against Russia’s fundamental interests to become deeply involved in a crisis/conflict over the Taiwan issue. In an actual crisis situation across the Taiwan Strait, more Russian arms sales to China could lead to only two sub-optimal choices for Moscow: Beijing would be better prepared and thus more prone to use force against Taiwan, leading to a possible conflict with Washington; or a more militarily capable China would emerge, perhaps faster than Russia would like to face.

Putin’s China policy should also be assessed within the context of Russia’s overall foreign policy orientation, which started to unfold after the March 26 presidential election. Foreign Minister Ivanov described the goals of Russian foreign policy as creating a limited but sufficient posture to defend Russia’s security and business interests with predictable and flexible approaches. Within this general framework of a scaled down, pragmatic, and balanced foreign policy, Putin replaced Grigory Karasin with Alexander Losyukov, a career diplomat with extensive experience in the Asia-Pacific, as deputy foreign minister for regional affairs. In his first talk with reporters, Losyukov began with a description of a balanced, though continuous, course in developing

relations with all countries in the region, then turned much of the rest of his talk to relations with Japan.

For these reasons, among others, a more nuanced policy adjustment toward China seemed to take shape in the Kremlin: stabilize military relations, push forward diplomatic coordination for “strategic stability” (Moscow’s jargon for anti-ballistic missile issues), and promote economic transactions.

Russia and China became increasingly concerned with Washington’s unilateral moves to alter the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, the foundation for almost all nuclear arms control treaties between the superpowers during the Cold War. Washington’s unilateralism was perceived as the first step toward eventually neutralizing the nuclear deterrent capability of the two continental powers -- even if, as noted earlier, China had more to lose, and sooner, than Russia.

For this purpose, Moscow and Beijing pursued both coordinated and independent efforts to oppose any violation of the ABM treaty. This concern dominated the defense ministers’ talks in Moscow, the first high level consultation of the year under acting president Putin. Both defense ministers strongly criticized U.S. plans to unveil a national anti-ballistic missile system. “If the U.S. ever leaves the ABM treaty of 1972, the international situation will start to deteriorate,” Defense Minister Igor Sergeev said after emerging from the first day’s meeting with his Chinese counterpart. In early March, a joint communiqué issued during the Chinese foreign minister’s visit to Moscow vowed to make joint efforts to strengthen global strategic stability and regional security based on the existing ABM treaty.

Political, diplomatic, and strategic coordination between Moscow and Beijing will be further promoted when top Russian and Chinese leaders meet several times in upcoming months, including Putin’s visit to Beijing in early summer, the “Shanghai Five” summit meeting (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, and Tajikistan), and the annual APEC Leaders Meeting.

In the economic arena, Moscow seemed to become more eager for broader relations with Beijing. When Russia’s Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov visited Beijing in early March, his initiatives included joint development of a new generation of civilian airplanes, possible Chinese purchase of Russian passenger planes, joint manufacturing of energy equipment, cooperation in oil and gas production and transportation, and Chinese construction of 45 ships for Russian shipping companies. Agreements were signed on Russian fuel exports for a nuclear power plant in southern China and a joint two to three year program of cooperation in navigation, manned space missions, and space communications and research. China also invited Russia to join the Chinese State Planning Committee in developing its western provinces.

The Sino-Russian Subcommittee for Energy met in Beijing after Klebanov’s trip to coordinate the detailed cooperation in this area. Several agreements were signed between Chinese and Russian companies for Russia to supply gas and oil to China. Two pipeline routes are under consideration: one from Russia through Mongolia to Beijing, and the other from Russia through Altai territory to northeastern China. They would have the capacity to ship at least 20 to 30 million tons of oil a year to China, with an estimated cost of \$1.7 billion for construction. In

1999, Russia delivered to China 500,000 tons of oil via rail and is expected to double that to one million tons in 2000. The feasibility study of the gas project could be finished this year. Under the project, Russia is to export to China up to 30 billion cubic meters of gas annually over ten years.

Implications for the West and the U.S.

A decade ago, Boris Yeltsin started out as a major political challenge to China when he embarked Russia on a genuinely desired Westernization. However, the failure of the Western-designed economic "shock therapy," followed by NATO expansion, and then the Kosovo war drove the Russian democrat to China's embrace. The last foreign visit by Boris Yeltsin ended in Beijing and convinced the Chinese that the Yeltsin decade, though lost for the Russians, was perhaps the most beneficial for China and Russia in the past 300 years. It is not clear whether the younger, well-educated, clearly West-looking (if his confession to Secretary Albright is believed) Russian leader will follow the same path as his predecessor. So far, all indications suggest Putin certainly tries to avoid conflict with the West. He is also, perhaps more than any of his predecessors, ready to defend Russia's interests, particularly at a time when both Russia and China perceive the world to be increasingly unipolar in nature.

Chronology of China-Russian Relations January - March 2000

Jan. 6, 2000: Two Russian cosmonauts arrive in Beijing at the request of the Chinese government to provide technical advice to China's space program.

Jan. 13, 2000: Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin discuss over the phone a plan for establishing a public and political forum for "enhancing the positive processes in international politics."

Jan. 16-18, 2000: China's Defense Minister Chi Haotian visits Moscow to consult with his Russian counterpart Igor Sergeev for expanding the framework of Russian-Chinese military cooperation and for deepening military-technical cooperation.

Jan. 21, 2000: The Mongolian Ministry for Infrastructural Development and the Russian Yukos oil company signed a memorandum for constructing an oil pipeline from Russia's Siberia through Mongolia to China. A corresponding agreement with China would be conducted later.

Feb. 7, 2000: Russian Foreign Ministry issues a statement against the Taiwan Security Enhancement Act passed by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Feb. 11, 2000: The first of two Russian-built guided missile destroyers (Sovremenny class) sails through the Taiwan Strait on its maiden voyage from a Russian shipyard to its new home port in the East China Sea.

Feb. 24, 2000: Russian Foreign Ministry issues a statement opposing the development of the U.S.-led theater missile defense system (TMD) in the Asia-Pacific.

Feb. 28 to Mar. 1, 2000: Chinese Foreign Minister Tang Jiaxuan visits Moscow and talks with his Russian counterpart Igor Ivanov.

Mar. 1-4, 2000: Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov visits China and meets with his Chinese counterpart, state councilor Madam Wu Yi, on issues of cooperation in the energy sector, aircraft building, trade, investment, and military sales. He also met Central Military Council Deputy Chairman Zhang Wannian to discuss military sales and cooperation.

Mar. 14-21, 2000: Russian human rights commissioner Oleg Mironov arrives in Beijing for a week-long visit, including a three-day visit to Tibet, and states that Russia is opposed to the separation of Tibet from China.

Mar. 19, 2000: Russian Foreign Ministry officials indicate that the election of a pro-independence president in Taiwan would not change Russia's "four-No" policy toward Taiwan: no acceptance of Taiwan's independence, no recognition of two Chinas or "one China and one Taiwan," no Taiwan participation in international organizations as a sovereign state, and no arms sales to Taiwan.

Mar. 20-22, 2000: Russian Fuel and Energy Minister Viktor Kalyuzhny travels to Beijing for a three-day meeting of the Russian-Chinese Subcommission for Energy.

Mar. 25, 2000: A group of 60 Chinese military officers concludes a five-month air defense missile system training program in Russia.

Mar. 27, 2000: Chinese President Jiang Zemin telephones Vladimir Putin to congratulate him on his election as president of the Russian Federation.

Mar. 30, 2000: The first defense minister conference of the "Shanghai Five" (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, and Tajikistan) is held in Astana, capital of Kazakhstan.