

China-Russia Relations:
Crouching Missiles, Hidden Alliances

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No sooner did George W. Bush take office in January than China and Russia encountered Washington's uncompromised "moral imperative" to deploy missile defense (MD) systems. Meanwhile, in the areas of proliferation, human rights, and regional security, Bush's "humble realism" is creating a situation in which Russia and China are moving, though reluctantly, toward a major upgrade of their bilateral ties with a considerably expanded defense component for the next two decades. This despite the fact that their historical mutual distrust, domestic political systems, and external economic interests should have pulled each other away from such a hidden agenda.

Moving Beyond Strategic Partnership

For Russia and China, signing a comprehensive treaty is by no means for defense purposes alone. The mutual need for a broader, deepened relationship, particularly in the economic area, has been of concern to Moscow and Beijing since the normalization of relations in the late 1980s. Beyond that, Russia's interest in securing its thousand-kilometer border in the east in the midst of its historical decline is one of the key considerations for a binding accord with its largest and steadily rising neighbor in Asia. A safe and secure Asia Pacific front would be a valuable card that Russia could play in dealing with a more powerful Europe.

For China, such a treaty would provide more certainty when Russia is plagued with domestic instability and constant leadership reshuffling. An immediate goal is perhaps to make it harder for Russia to cut a separate deal with the U.S. over missile defenses, which many in China believe that Russia is both capable of and perhaps willing to do. In the longer term, a friendly, or at least neutral, Russia would be highly desirable if the situation in the Taiwan Strait and across the Pacific deteriorates.

For all these attractions, however, Russia and China have, until recently, postponed a type of partnership that would jeopardize their respective relationships with the West and

particularly with the United States for one simple reason: their long-term modernization (for China) and recovery (for Russia) cannot be achieved separately from the West-dominated world trading system. The long-held articulated policy by the two strategic partners not to target a third party reflects both the limits and the irony in the history of their complex bilateral relationship.

At the beginning of the new millennium (for China and Russia, the millennium started in 2001), policies of the new U.S. administration appear to be compelling Moscow and Beijing toward closer coordination in defense matters with consequences that may be neither anticipated nor liked by any power, including Russia and China.

Dancing with W

The drafting of a comprehensive friendship treaty started in the last few days of 2000, when the deputy foreign ministers of the two countries met in Moscow. At the beginning of the new year, drafting teams went into “full swing.” In mid-January, Russian President Vladimir Putin and PRC President Jiang Zemin reportedly discussed, in an unpublicized telephone conversation, the issues in the treaty. They covered broad orientation of the bilateral ties and steps to be taken for a much upgraded and deepened relationship. Already, officials of both countries were upbeat about the pending treaty, which was said to become “a major landmark in the history of relations between the two countries” and to “overshadow” all other agreements to be signed at the moment.

While the final wording of the treaty is still being worked out for the midyear Moscow summit, Russian and Chinese officials continued to tell Westerners, publicly and privately, that they were not making an alliance. Rather, it would be a document to “sum up everything positive that has been amassed in bilateral relations over the past decade and to serve as the basis for their development in the 21st century” and would not “include any mutual commitments of the military-political kind,” according to Russian sources.

While these gestures were seen by some in the West as “hollow rhetoric” (*The New York Times*, January 14, 2001), moves by Moscow and Beijing to publicize their effort while deflecting Western concerns were signals to the new Bush administration about the likely outcome for MD systems. The door was left open for a less defense-oriented treaty.

Events, however, quickly outpaced expectations in Moscow and Beijing. Barely two weeks into office, the Bush administration launched a “missile offense” against its European allies. Speaking at the Munich Conference on International Security, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared that a ballistic missile defense system was not a technical issue but “a moral imperative.” He blamed those skeptical European leaders, who were a generation younger, for using outdated Cold War concepts, such as deterrence, mutual assured destruction, and the Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) for security and stability. For both Russia and China, the U.S. “consultation” with its allies over the sensitive missile defense issue was no more than a take-it-or-leave-it order. If this was the way of Washington dealt with its allies, nothing would stop the U.S. effort to deploy its missile defense system, just as Russia had had to swallow NATO expansion.

It was not long before Washington turned up the heat on Moscow and Beijing. Shortly after American and British planes struck Iraqi targets outside the no-fly zone on February 16, Washington accused both China and Russia of alleged “misbehavior.” While China was blamed for helping improve Iraqi air defenses and amassing missiles across the

Taiwan Strait, Russia was said to have moved nuclear weapons westward to threaten Baltic Sea and to be an active “proliferator” of weapons of mass destruction. These actions by Russia and China would require and justify U.S. missile defenses at both theater and strategic levels.

For Russia and China, watching the quick unfolding of Bush’s bold foreign policies was frustrating. On February 19, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and his Chinese counterpart Tang Jiaxuan spoke via phone about the Iraqi bombing. They also discussed the pending Moscow summit in June or July. Both described the scheduled signing of the friendship treaty as “a historic event that will allow the creation of a solid foundation for the further advancement of relations of equal trustful partnership and strategic cooperation between the two countries.”

While Tang and Ivanov coordinated their positions over the Beijing-Moscow hotline, defense officials were meeting in Moscow on February 20 to 22 for the 8th session of the Russian-Chinese inter-governmental committee for military and technical cooperation. The three-day meeting fashioned their expanded military-defense cooperation into short (2001-02) and mid-term (2001-07) frameworks for both research and development in military technology and weapons sales, with a projected 20 to 25 percent annual growth rate. The Russian side even expected a “breakthrough” in its military-technological cooperation with China.

Chinese General Zhang Wannian, vice chairman of China’s Central Military Commission, joined the military-technical subcommittee. An agreement was reportedly reached to regularly exchange defense intelligence, a major step toward the forming of a quasi-defense alliance. Other agreements included setting up a joint expert group for missile defense and counter missile defense mechanism for Russia and China and/or regional countries. Although Russian Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, who chaired the Russian governmental team, publicly ruled out the sale of Russian strategic nuclear submarines to China, it was believed that the two sides had reached an agreement to sell five Russian A50 early warning radar planes to China.

Reluctant Partnership

A substantive Sino-Russian strategic partnership is clearly in the making. If events follow their natural trajectory and the U.S. takes steps toward deploying a missile defense systems, a defense mechanism between Moscow and Beijing, declared or not, would be “activated.” Such a mechanism, however, would largely be issue-based and event-driven, rather than rigid, encompassing, or formed out of affection. Each would prefer maximizing its freedom of action outside the accord. Its operating principle would be consultative and consensus building, unlike the asymmetrical relationship between Washington and its allies.

Even when China and Russia were working hard on the treaty, dissonance was discernible. Sha Zukang, China’s chief arms control official, reportedly expressed his “mixed feelings” about the anticipated joint efforts between China and Russia in

opposing the U.S., citing “not so pleasant memories of the Sino-Soviet alliance during the Cold War.” Other Chinese analysts talked about the “lack of trust” between the two sides as a bottleneck in furthering bilateral relations.

Historical baggage and mutual distrust aside, more tangible interests and immediate concerns are also at work behind the hesitations over a closer strategic partnership. One of the key issues here is the asymmetrical stakes for Russia and China in their respective dealings with the U.S. missile defense systems. While Russia’s huge nuclear arsenal would not be significantly affected by any U.S. missile defense system in the foreseeable future, China’s symbolic strategic force would be immediately compromised. Moreover, the U.S. theater missile defense (TMD), whose key components (Aegis and Patriot systems) are already operational, would considerably neutralize the PLA’s only viable means against Taiwan’s move toward independence. An economically weakened but militarily potent Russia clearly has more strategic options than China.

During the first quarter, Moscow actively toyed with the idea of a pan-European theater missile defense as an alternative to the U.S. missile defense systems, even though Moscow clearly understood that such an option would sacrifice Russia’s strategic ties with China. For this, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao went as far as to say on February 22 that a Russian proposal for a European missile defense system might be “worthy of discussion and study *as long as it helped promote global stability* [emphasis added].” Even a much clouded U.S.-Russia relationship did not prevent Bush from talking to Putin over the phone, while the new president has yet to call up his Chinese counterpart, whose three diplomatic envoys to Washington during the first quarter were either sidelined or postponed.

China’s relations with U.S.-led alliances are ambiguous at best and precarious at worst. Secretary of State Powell defined China as neither a strategic partner nor an implacable foe and declared that the U.S. “is not seeking an enemy, but is looking to build a cooperative relationship with China.” *The Washington Post* prematurely reported that Defense Secretary Rumsfeld officially recommended in March that the U.S. military shift its focus from Europe to the Pacific as the most likely theater of future major U.S. military operations. However, Rumsfeld quickly cleared this up in later comments to the press, stating that no official policy changes had been made. Beijing will have to wait until Bush’s foreign/security policy team is in place.

Perhaps the biggest foreign policy constraint for China is the Taiwan issue with its perceived make-or-break nature. In the eyes of Beijing, the March 2000 election of a pro-independence Taiwan president and the institutionalized U.S. weapon sales to the island are removing the “fig leaf” that has, until recently, barely maintained the delicate status quo across the Taiwan Strait. TMD would further that centrifugal trend toward Taiwan’s eventual independence.

While Taiwan remains a preoccupation of China’s diplomacy and relations with the U.S., Chechnya has been a more manageable, though annoying, subject in Russo-U.S. relations. Russian diplomacy during the first quarter therefore continued to be dynamic

and omnidirectional, particularly in the presidential diplomacy with South Korea (February 26-28), Vietnam (February 28–March 2), Iran (March 11-12), and Japan (March 25). The momentum of these summits was preceded by Putin's historical visits to Cuba and Canada in December 2000, and will be followed by DPRK leader Kim Jong-il's trip to Moscow scheduled for April 2001.

To Beijing, not all of Russia's diplomatic actions have been harmless. In mid-February, Moscow and New Delhi signed a \$1 billion sale of 310 Russian T-90C main battle tanks. Meanwhile, India also obtained a license to produce 140 Su-30 MKI jet fighter-bombers, an upgraded version of India's existing Su-30 and Su-27UBs. Chinese analysts noted that these weapons deals, once fully implemented, would make the Indian military even better equipped than its Russian counterpart in conventional terms by 2010, a situation Russia would never allow to occur in relations with China. Already in the first quarter, India's naval forces appeared to have a permanent presence in the South China Sea. Putin's trip to Vietnam, too, was closely followed by Beijing because of possible Russian weapon sales to Vietnam, including Mig-31 interceptors.

The \$8 billion Sino-Russian trade in 2000 was hailed as a record high. It nonetheless paled in comparison to their respective trade volumes with the U.S. (\$10.2 billion for Russia and \$74.5 billion for China). This was the case after years of mutual effort to boost bilateral economic relations. Although Putin has identified the European Union and China as Russia's main partners of external economic cooperation as a result of Russia's disappointment with economic relations with the U.S. and Japan, current Russian and Chinese economic infrastructures determine that they do not need each other as much as they need the West. Both understand perfectly well that their economic well-being--Russia's recovery and China's modernization--largely depends on how much they can benefit from the existing international economic-trading system for capital, technology, and market. Their past effort to create a separate economic bloc outside this West-dominated world market proved to be sub-optimal at best and disastrous at worst.

The complex relations between Russia and China and their respective relations with the sole superpower was somehow reflected in a "representative all-Russian poll" across Russia in March. Although 34 percent of the respondents viewed America as the worst threat to Russia, China was ranked a distant second on Russia's most hated list with five percent of the respondents, naming the Asian giant as a potential threat. This was ahead of the three percent for Japan. Notably, Russians in the Far Eastern area tend to see China as threatening, while the more educated and richer respondents saw the U.S. as less of a threat than the average Russian did.

Mir Is Down, How About Peace?

Fifteen years ago, the former Soviet Union launched its ambitious space center Mir (Russian for "peace") in the midst of Gorbachev's optimistic yet fatal reforms for the Soviet empire. After 15 years in the heavens, Mir returned to the earth on March 23, 2001. Although Mir's life span in the earth's orbit overlapped with a relatively peaceful phase of East-West relations, it nonetheless witnessed the historical decline of Yeltsin's

Russia, which was politically democratized and destabilized, economically shocked and confused, and strategically squeezed and eclipsed. The rise of Vladimir Putin at the turn of millennium, therefore, is clearly a pragmatic and nationalistic response out of dismay and frustration with the U.S. post-Cold War dominance.

In a broader perspective, however, Mir's demise seemed to usher in a more cloudy, if not confrontational, era of trilateral relations between Washington on one side and Moscow and Beijing on the other. Although a clearly defined fault line of the Cold War style has yet to emerge, the trading of accusations across the oceans heated up in the first quarter.

All three Cold War military-political states are now selling weapons/equipment, or being accused of doing so, to some other country that is not liked by at least one power (US to Taiwan, Russia to China, India, Vietnam, and Iran, and China to Iraq). Polemics over human rights (Taiwan, Falun Gong, Chechnya, Florida recount, etc.) is escalating. All have tangled for some time in much politicized espionage games (Wen-ho Lee, Cox Report, Edmond Pope, Robert Hanssen, tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats, PLA colonel Xu Junping, EP-3 spy plane, etc.).

Moscow and Beijing were apparently taken aback by the new Bush administration's get-tough policies with allies, friends, and potential adversaries as well as its moving from Clinton's "maximum" to "minimum" peace effort in the Mideast, Korea, Taiwan, Kosovo, and Northern Ireland. The capacity of the younger Bush--be it in Texas, during elections, or as commander-in-chief--was clearly underestimated. Although Putin joked about U.S. missile defense as an effort "to burn a house to make scrambled eggs" and China's "foreign policy Czar" Qian Qichen described it as China's Great Wall--looks great but may not work--both Moscow and Beijing understand well that perhaps nothing will stop Washington from striving for unilateral and absolute security in the 21st century, following the failed multilateral/collective security of the first half of the 20th century (hot wars) and the mutually deterred bilateral security of the second half (Cold War).

It remains to be seen how Moscow and Beijing will finalize the wording of their comprehensive friendship treaty in April in anticipation of Washington's next moves toward missile defense and weapons sale to Taiwan.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations January-March 2001

Jan. 6, 2001: A Russian delegation from the Economic Policy Commission of the Russian Federation Council visits Beijing to promote exchanges and cooperation between the parliaments of the two countries.

Jan. 10-12, 2001: Members of the “Shanghai Five” (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, and Tajikistan) hold 3rd meeting in Beijing to plan this year’s meetings among the heads of state, premiers, and foreign ministers of the five countries.

Jan. 24, 2001: Russian President Vladimir Putin sends greetings to Chinese President Jiang Zemin on occasion of Spring Holiday and New Year on the Lunar calendar stating, “Russia and China are...successfully developing and intensifying partnership and strategic corporation built on trust and equality in all areas.”

Feb. 1, 2001: It is reported that bilateral trade hit a record of \$8 billion in 2000, surpassing the 1993 record of \$7.68 billion.

Feb. 7, 2001: The 13th Sino-Russian Economic and Trade Fair concludes in China with contracts nearly \$266 million and 27 bilateral economic cooperation projects involved joint investment worth over \$1.9 million.

Feb. 13, 2001: Taiwan FM Tien Hung-mao was quoted *by Nezavisimaya Gazeta’s* “Dipkuryer” supplement, urging the Russian government to develop closer relations with Taiwan. Russo-Taiwan trade in 2000 increased 25 percent to \$1.5 billion, topping Russian trade with any ASEAN country.

Feb. 14, 2001: Atomic Energy Ministry spokesman Yuri Bespalko states that Russia did not and would not take radioactive waste from Taiwan or any other country.

Feb. 14-15, 2001: Shanghai Forum meeting is held in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, a document is signed to help conduct rescue operations, prepare documents on the fight against terrorism, and cooperate in training antiterrorist specialists.

Feb. 19, 2001: Russian FM Igor Ivanov and his Chinese counterpart Tang Jiaxuan speak via telephone on the situation concerning Iraq following the bombing of suburbs of Baghdad by the United States and Great Britain on February 16, Jiang Zemin’s visit to Russia, and missile defense.

Feb. 19-22, 2001: A representative Russian delegation headed by Minister of Economic Development and Trade German Gref visits Beijing and Shanghai to study Chinese experience of economic development in the sphere of credit policy, investments, and restructuring of enterprises.

Feb. 19-22, 2001: Col. Gen. Zhang Wannian, deputy chairman of the Chinese Central Military Commission, visits Moscow to discuss the Russian-Chinese weapon’s trade, meets with PM Mikhail Kasyanov, Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev, and President Putin.

Feb. 20-22, 2001: The Russian-Chinese intergovernmental committee for military and technical cooperation holds 8th session in Moscow.

Feb. 22, 2001: Russian and Chinese border guards conduct joint exercise to detain border violators.

Feb. 28, 2001: Russian Deputy FM Georgy Mamedov and Chinese Ambassador to Moscow Wu Tao discussed the possibility of using the ideas of Moscow's proposed European missile defense system in the Far East and the Asian-Pacific region on Wednesday.

Mar. 1, 2001: Russian customs officers arrest Li Yong, a Chinese national suspected for espionage, and confiscate what appears to be drawing of a submarine and a chart of the location of ships in Avacha Bay of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski. Li is released on March 5 after Russian authorities cleared him.

Mar. 8, 2001: Liaoyang, a city in China's Liaoning Province, and Tomsk, a university town in Russia, sign an agreement to build a high-tech research development zone.

Mar. 11, 2001: Russian Vice Premier Ilya Klebanov confirms contract with China for the delivery of three Il-96-300 airplanes.

Mar. 17, 2001: A one-day Sino-Russian consultation on disputed border areas is held in Beijing; no progress is made.

Mar. 24, 2001: Taiwan's Ministry of Transport and Communications announced that Vladivostok Air would begin charter flight service on the Vladivostok-Taipei route in May.

Mar. 27, 2001: Chinese embassy to Moscow hosts a reception for Russian veterans who participated in the anti-Japanese war in China and the Korean War.