China-Russia Relations:
Back to the Future

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On the eve of the new millennium, Moscow and Beijing continued to deepen their "strategic partnership." The last quarter of the year started with much fanfare to commemorate the twin 50th anniversaries of the PRC's founding and Russian (Soviet)-PRC diplomatic relations. This culminated with Boris Yeltsin's visit to Beijing -- before his "grand exit" at the year's end -- for another "informal" summit with his Chinese counterpart. In both cases, symbolism and substance interplayed against a backdrop of perceived Western pressure led by the United States.

Beyond the 50th Anniversaries

While the twin-anniversaries were commemorated with mixed feelings of expectations and anxieties toward the future in both countries, the last quarter of the year and millennium began with quite a few unprecedented developments in bilateral relations. First, Russian and Chinese navies conducted their first joint naval exercise since 1949 on October 3-6. Visiting Russian warships included the Pacific Fleet flagship Varyag and destroyer Burgy. The 7,940-ton, Type 956E, Sovremenny destroyer received particular attention from Chinese military observers who noticed that the ship was designed to counter U.S. carrier groups. The Chinese Navy would acquire two of the same type at the turn of the millennium. Then, in mid-October, the two countries began the process of creating a 100-kilometer wide de-militarized zone on each side of the Sino-Russian border. This was a step toward implementing the final agreement on military force reduction and confidence building measures reached in late August 1999 during the five-nation summit (Russia, China, Kyrgystan, Kazakstan, and Tajikistan) in Bishkek, Kyrgystan. Next, with the help of Russian expertise and technology, China reportedly began the construction of a new type of nuclear-powered submarine. The sub, expected to be in service in three years, will have strategic nuclear strike capability. On October 18, Russia and China apparently accelerated their cooperation in space science and technology as Russian Space Agency chief Yuri Koptev announced that Russia would help China carry out its first manned space flight toward the year's end. Russia also began training a group of 20 Chinese astronauts in its Yuri Gagarin Cosmonaut Training Center.

While developments in the strategic/military area attracted the most public attention, perhaps greater progress was made in non-military and low-key projects. According to a Chinese media account, more than 1,000 Russian technology projects have been introduced to China in the past five years. When Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited Russia in early 1999, the two sides resolved to expand their cooperation in science and technology. They signed technological trade contracts for over $1.5 billion. The accord seemed to have gained strong

support from both governments in 1999 when a high-tech industry base was set up in China's coastal city of Yantai, Shangdong Province.

By the year's end, a $3.2 billion nuclear-power project broke ground in China's Jiangsu Province. This is by far the largest joint governmental investment by Moscow and Beijing. The Russian-made generators, which have the advantage of a high peak-load operating capacity compared with Western equivalents, will be the two largest nuclear generators in China when they are put into commercial operation in 2004 and 2005.

Meanwhile, preparation for a gas and a power transmission line from Russia to China through Mongolia continued. This was the main economic subject of a Kremlin meeting between Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his Mongolian counterpart Nachagiyn Bagabandi immediately after Yeltsin's trip to China. All three participating countries will benefit from constructing this "project of the century."

Bilateral trade was estimated to reach $6 billion, up from $5.5 billion in 1998, reversing the downward trend occurring since late 1996. China is Russia's third biggest trading partner among countries outside the former Soviet Union. Russia's share in China's total trade turnover is about five percent. By the end of 1999, Russian investments in major projects under construction in China reached approximately $300 million, a quite remarkable sum for a cash-tight country like Russia.

Despite all these developments in both "high" and "low" politics, both Moscow and Beijing continued to deny any temptation to advance their "strategic partnership" into one of alliance against a third party. Nor did any credible Western observer give serious consideration to the possibility of a Sino-Russian "axis" in the foreseeable future, many citing historical enmity and geopolitical rivalry as long-term constraints in their bilateral relations.

These opinions -- Russian, Chinese, and Western -- may miss the true, and evolving, nature of the Moscow-Beijing relationship. That is, both Moscow and Beijing have carefully and persistently pursued a normalcy in bilateral relations in the past ten years. In Yeltsin's words, the current Sino-Russian relationship is one of "trust, friendship, peace and cooperation." Unfortunately, few in the West care about those "declared" principles, which are dismissed as symbolic at best and propagandistic at worst. This rhetoric, however, makes more sense if the current normalcy of bilateral relations is contrasted with the past "extremes" of the "best" (alliance of the 1950s) and "worst" relations (arch enemies of the 1960s-1970s) between Moscow and Beijing.

Perhaps the process of achieving the current cycle of bilateral relations is more important than the state of normalcy itself. Unlike the grand, "lean-to-one-side," strategic choice made by paramount leaders (Mao and Stalin), Moscow and Beijing have been taking small steps. This piece-meal, problem-solving approach in developing bilateral relations is clearly different from the sweeping alliance relationship of the 1950s when problems that were first avoided eventually degenerated into crises and breakdowns.

At the strategic level, both sides have opted for a more flexible, case-by-case, area-by-area, coordinating approach, instead of the sweeping, rigid, obligation-ridden alliance as was the case during the Sino-Soviet honeymoon period of the 1950s. Both sides have tried to minimize

the impact of their growing strategic coordinating actions upon their respective relations, particularly in the economic areas, with the West and the United States. This being the case, the frequent "no-alliance" assurance from both Moscow and Beijing should be taken more seriously. It is clear that Moscow and Beijing have pursued a very different type of relationship from the wide fluctuations of the past, making sure that their ties are balanced, sustainable, and substantive at all levels. It is against this backdrop that Yeltsin's last trip to Beijing as Russia's president is analyzed.

A Russian in Beijing: Bear Hugs and "Nuke" Grumbles

Boris Yeltsin's December trip to Beijing turned out to be his last major foreign policy move before his sudden resignation at the end of the millennium. This eighth meeting in the past ten years between Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin (two, including this one, were "informal") was widely anticipated in both Russia and China yet was repeatedly postponed. Nonetheless, both sides were looking forward to a "qualitative breakthrough" in their bilateral relations. The informal meeting finally took place only two days after Yeltsin was released from hospital following a week-long stay for a respiratory infection.

The two sides concentrated on international issues. This focus was reflected in their joint statement in which eight of the ten points were devoted to international issues of varying kinds. The main theme was to promote a fair, democratic, balanced multipolar world based on the UN Charter and existing international laws. Both sides resolved to oppose a unipolar world order with cultural/ideological uniformity, presumably imposed by the U.S.-led Western world.

Beijing and Moscow were apparently alarmed by a perceived "negative momentum" in the area of international security. The joint statement specified a series of unilateral actions taken by the U.S. including attempts to redefine the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, intention to deploy a theater missile defense system (TMD), and refusal to approve the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT).

Issues of sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity were also key issues, as both Moscow and Beijing are challenged by what they term separatist movements (Chechnya and Taiwan) and their internationalization. Both pledged support for each other's effort for national unity.

While strategic issues were discussed between Yeltsin and Jiang, the Russian president devoted his talk with Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji to bilateral economic issues of trade, high-tech joint ventures, technology transfers, military sales, and infrastructure projects such as oil, gas, and transport. The Russians disclosed that both sides were interested in boosting military cooperation and "serious talks are expected" in that field. These talks were apparently so successful that the Chinese premier described Yeltsin as making a "historical contribution...to the growth of Sino-Russian friendly and cooperative relationship."

Yeltsin's sudden departure from politics clearly surprised Chinese leaders. President Jiang Zemin expressed his "sorrow" over his Russian counterpart's unexpected move. China's nostalgia for Yeltsin's Russia and concern for the post-Yeltsin uncertainties in bilateral relations are easily understood, largely because Yeltsin and Jiang "have established quite strong personal

contacts characterized by a high degree of confidence and frankness." And it was "their personal relationship that allows them to discuss any questions."

Indeed, in the midst of constant change among the top Russian political elite, Yeltsin became a strong anchor in Beijing's relations with Moscow. It was quite ironic that Yeltsin, the father of Russian democracy, steadily rebuilt relations with China, a rising, non-Western, and communist power. For the West and particularly the United States, the unpredictable Russian leader was tolerated because no one else seemed capable of managing the decline of this vast empire with thousands of rusted nuclear weapons. Yeltsin's choice of Beijing to remind Washington of Russia's nuclear capabilities was a warning, if not a threat, to the West, which in recent years has grown accustomed to a weakening Russia. Yet for the Chinese, Yeltsin's personal investment in promoting relations with Beijing is perhaps bigger than any other Russian leader's in the 20th century, from the Czar to Gorbachev.

The New Millennium: In Search of Stability in an Uncertain World

Yeltsin's "bear hugs" and tough "nuke" talk in Beijing, however, should not be treated as a mere personal attachment to relations with China. In the last year of the 20th century, both continental powers faced growing internal tensions and perceived mounting external challenges to their respective national interests. Although both have significantly departed from their past communist legacies, they have found a fast-changing, unfriendly, and even increasingly dangerous, international environment. This is particularly true in their relations with the United States. In the eyes of the Russians and Chinese, the hegemonic power is now determined to go alone and outside the existing world governing institutions/regimes (UN, CTBT and ABM Treaties), most of which were the U.S.' own creation. This is in sharp contrast to the post-World War I era when the non-status quo powers (Germany, Japan, and Italy) were the first to quit the League of Nations. Despite the differences between the two historical periods, both are seen as destabilizing. The concerns of China and Russia about Washington's attempted "grand-exit" were clearly reflected in the joint statement in which Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin repeatedly emphasized the role of UN, international law, and international treaties in world affairs.

For Moscow and Beijing, this posture of U.S. hegemony is not just unilateralist but interventionist as well. This dual nature of U.S. foreign policy is bolstered by Washington's move toward actual deployment of the TMD and national missile defense (NMD) systems. This, coupled with a growing and consolidated alliance infrastructure Washington has constructed around the world, poses serious constraints/threats to China and Russia's national security in general and their nuclear deterrent capabilities in particular. Moscow and Beijing were sufficiently alarmed by the unrestrained and unopposed power of the United States during the Kosovo crisis in early 1999 when the UN was bypassed, Russians sidelined, and Chinese bombed. All this was done for a "fight-for-values-not-for-territories" justification, which the U.S. could apply to domestic issues in the two countries such as Chechnya, Taiwan, Tibet, and Falun Gong.

These actions of the U.S., among others, have been driving Russia and China together in search for a more balanced world with certainty and stability in the midst of their sweeping domestic changes. If this is the case, the strategic partnership, constructed by Yeltsin and his Chinese counterparts in the past ten years, will likely continue and even be furthered by Acting

President Vladimir Putin. The more pragmatic and apparently more nationalistic Russian leader is scheduled to visit China in February for the fifth Sino-Russian consultation at the prime minister level.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations
October - December 1999

Oct 2-8: Two naval vessels of the Russian Pacific Fleet arrive in Shanghai for a five-day visit to mark the 50th anniversary of ties between the two countries. The Russian ships join the Chinese East Sea Fleet for the first joint exercise between the two navies since 1949.

Oct 7-10: A delegation of the Russian Communist Party headed by Party Chief Gennady Zyuganov visits China at the invitation of the international relations section of the Chinese Communist Party.

Oct 8-10: Mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov visits Beijing to participate in the Days of Moscow festival in Beijing.

Oct 15: A group of Chinese officers arrive at Vladivosdok to observe and verify Russian military withdrawal from the 100-kilometer area from the Sino-Russian border.

Oct 18: Russian Space Agency chief Yuri Koptev announces that Russia would help China carry out its first manned space flight, scheduled for an early-2000 takeoff.

Oct 18-25: Vice Adm. Shi Yun-sheng, commander of the PLA Navy, arrives in Moscow for a week-long visit to Russia. Shi's itinerary includes a working discussion with his Russian counterpart Adm. Vladimir Kuroyedov on implementing agreements for naval arms and technology transfers, joint naval exercises in 2000, and training of Chinese personnel in Russian military academies.

Oct 20: The Russia-assisted nuclear power plant breaks ground in Tianwan, Jiangsu Province. The project is the biggest cooperative project between the two governments and will generate 14 billion kilowatt-hours per year for Shanghai and its vicinity.

Oct 20: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin and Chinese Ambassador in Moscow Wu Tao have a "substantive discussion of the problems of strategic stability and security in the world."

Oct 27: Russian Cultural Minister Vladimir Yagolov visits Beijing.

Oct 28: Vladislav Nichkov, Russian vice-minister of science and technology, signs an accord with Chinese counterpart for Sino-Russian cooperation in high-tech research park based in Yantai, Shandong Province.

Nov 2: An agreement on financing trade operations is signed in Moscow between Russia's Vneshekonom Bank and Bank of China.

Nov 5: Russia, China, and Belarus draft a resolution for the UN General Assembly for continuing efforts to strengthen and preserve the ABM Treaty.

Nov 16-17: The third round of Russian-Chinese general staff talks are conducted in Moscow, discussing issues concerning military and military-technical cooperation, international security, and the need to fight ethnic separatism, religious extremism, and terrorism at an early stage.

Nov 26: The second round of bilateral consultations at the deputy foreign minister level are held in Moscow between deputy foreign minister Wang Guanya and his Russian counterpart Grigory Berdennikov.

Dec 10: First Vice-Premier Viktor Khristenko receives President of the Chinese People's Bank Dai Xianglong.

Dec 10: Eight Russian carrier-borne anti-submarine helicopters (three Ka-27s and five Ka-28s) are delivered to China under a contract to fit out two Sovremenny-class destroyers.

Dec 9-10: Russian President Yeltsin visits Beijing and uses the opportunity to remind the United States that Russia "possesses a full arsenal of nuclear arms." The two sides vow to "deepen" their strategic partnership. Three documents are signed: a protocol on narration of their eastern border, a protocol on narration of their western border, and an agreement on joint use of some islets and surrounding waters in border rivers for economic purposes.

Dec 11: China and Russia reportedly reach another major arms sales agreement shortly after Yeltsin ends his Beijing trip. The Russian side reveals the $1 billion deal consists of dozens of Sukhoi-30MKK aircraft or even more advanced models.

Dec 20: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin represents Russia at the celebration of Macao's return to China after hundreds of years of Portuguese colonial rule.

Dec 22: A second group of Chinese astronauts are reported to receive training in Russia's space center.

Dec 24: A public opinion poll shows that 88 percent of the Chinese believed Chechen militants are resorting to terrorist means to split from Russia; 76 percent support Russian military actions against Chechen separatism; and 88.4 percent see Western diplomatic and economic pressure on Russia as interfering in Russian domestic affairs. The Social Survey Institute of China (SSIC) conducted the poll in seven major Chinese cities.

Dec 26: First of two Sovremenny-class guided missile destroyers (armed with SS-N-22 Sunburn supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles) is delivered to the Chinese navy in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Dec 31: In his letter to the outgoing Russian president, President Jiang Zemin expressed "sorrow" [*wan xi*] over Yeltsin's sudden resignation.