

Comparative Connections

A Quarterly E-Journal on East Asian Bilateral Relations



U.S.-Russia Relations: Great Game Redux?

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The strategic partnership between the United States and Russia still exists in the war on terror, and to a lesser extent in the battle to prevent the proliferation of nuclear material and weapons. But in Central Asia, the relationship between Moscow and Washington has clearly turned a corner, and turned into a competition. And although this author hates to utilize clichés (see the reference to the “Great Game” in the title), the situation in Central Asia is clearly turning acrimonious. The transition from strategic partner to strategic competitor was made clear at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in July. At the summit meeting, SCO members China, Russia, and the four nations of Central Asia called on the U.S. to announce a date for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from bases and facilities in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Moscow and Washington also continue to agree to disagree about Iran’s nuclear ambitions. In Northeast Asia, relations appear to be in the *status quo* mode, although Moscow appears to be continuing its slow creep toward China. Presidents George Bush and Vladimir Putin met twice during the quarter, and appear to have maintained their friendship, despite the political differences dividing their two countries.

Russia reasserts itself in the CIS

The SCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan came on the heels of a number of events in Central Asia that left Moscow wondering whether the U.S. was trying to export revolution to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – a grouping of former Soviet republics. Protests by opposition figures in Kyrgyzstan led to the overthrow of the regime. In Uzbekistan, they led to a violent suppression of dissenters by President Islam Karimov. At the SCO summit Russia and China appeared to have led the movement to call for the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the region, going so far as to ask the U.S. to specify a timetable. It is unclear how enthusiastic some of the leaders of the Central Asian nations felt, but in the U.S. the speculation was that Russia and China had “bullied” their junior partners into issuing the joint statement, at least that was the contention of Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff.

It was clear that Karimov, however, was a primary supporter – if not the originator – of the statement. Karimov had visited Moscow in June 2005, and called for stepped up

strategic cooperation between Russia and Uzbekistan. He publicly accused “foreign elements” [i.e., the U.S.] of fomenting the unrest at Andijan, and suggested that Russia would be allowed access to any number of military facilities in Uzbekistan. Karimov made overtures to both China and India, as well. Shortly before the SCO summit, the Uzbek government announced that the U.S. had six months to withdraw from its air base at Karshi-Khanabad. The suggestion was quickly made (both in Tashkent and Moscow) that Russian forces move in to occupy the base once U.S. forces were withdrawn, according to the *Rossiskaya Gazeta* (a Kremlin-supported daily).

The leadership in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan appeared somewhat less enthusiastic about calling for a U.S. withdrawal. In fact, two weeks after the SCO summit, U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visited Kyrgyzstan and met with leaders from both that nation and from Tajikistan. Rumsfeld was assured that the U.S. would continue to have access to Manas Airbase in Kyrgyzstan as long as the antiterror operations continued in Afghanistan, and until that country is “stabilized” (which could be read to mean in perpetuity). In September, the Kyrgyz government let it be known that it would appreciate a little more money for its efforts in supporting U.S. operations in the region. The U.S. government reportedly offered to double what it is paying for the airbase there, and is prepared to offer a \$200 million interest-free loan (according to a report in *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*). The U.S. does not have forces based in Tajikistan, but does have an overflight and refueling arrangement with Dushanbe.

The defense establishment in Moscow and Washington spent the summer trading barbs. Russian Defense Minister and Putin confidante Sergei Ivanov has been the most vocal in criticizing the growing U.S. presence in the CIS (including U.S. efforts to establish strong ties with Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Ukraine). Ivanov visited Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the latter half of September in an attempt to boost Russia’s political position in both countries. A statement issued by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in July called – in decidedly Cold War fashion – for the U.S. presence in Central Asia to be “rolled back” (*svernuto*). Apart from Myers and Rumsfeld, others in the Pentagon have been quick to defend the U.S. position. Former Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Douglas Feith said in an interview with the *Washington Post*, “We are not threatening [Russia].” He went on to reject the demand for a withdrawal timetable, and stated that any such undertaking would be based on “circumstances” and not “dates.”

Defense planners in Russia have also indicated that they are nervous about shifts in the U.S. nuclear strategy, as outlined by the U.S. this spring. A draft copy of the Pentagon’s alleged Doctrine for Joint Nuclear Operations states that the U.S. should not rule out the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons against enemies if they appeared to be ready to use weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. Defense Minister Ivanov asked for a clarification of this change in doctrine at a NATO summit in Berlin in July (it was not reported how Rumsfeld responded – he has reportedly not yet signed the final version of Joint Publication 3-12). Russia’s top generals called for a similar change in Russia’s nuclear use doctrine. The daily *Izvestia* published an article on this issue with the headlines, “Pentagon Prepares for Preventive Nuclear Strikes.” There have been concerns

that the U.S. could utilize nuclear weapons on terrorist groups operating in Central Asia, Russia's backyard.

Neither Presidents Bush nor Putin has touched publicly on the issue of Central Asian strategy. They met twice during the quarter – at the G-8 summit in July and at the UN summit in September – but strategic matters in the CIS and Central Asia were not on the agenda. It should be noted, however, that by the end of the summer, Russian nervousness about U.S. designs in the region had abated somewhat. In a speech at Stanford University in late September, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov noted that Russia recognizes U.S. interests in the CIS and Central Asia.

Nonproliferation struggles

The issue that did top the discussion at the last Bush-Putin meeting was joint nonproliferation cooperation, both within Russia and around the world. Topping the agenda was the standoff over Iran's incipient nuclear program. Washington wishes to bring this issue up to the UN Security Council, but Moscow is determined to keep it from that. Russia hopes to benefit economically from Iran's plans to develop a domestic nuclear energy industry. A delegation of Iranian politicians and nuclear scientists visited Moscow in July and spoke of a plan to eventually build up to 20 nuclear power plants. Obviously, Russia would like to build them. Washington, on the other hand, sees a potential proliferation nightmare emanating from Iran. Bush tried to convince Putin to see it his way, but Putin appears to have stonewalled him.

The U.S. and Russia are not at odds over the DPRK nuclear dispute, but Russia has offered a much more conciliatory hand to the North Koreans. Again, Russia hopes to somehow benefit economically from whatever arrangement is agreed upon, whether through the supply of a reactor (as the DPRK has asked for), or through the reopening of a trans-Korea railroad linking the port of Pusan to Europe via the trans-Siberian railroad.

Bilateral nonproliferation efforts in the former Soviet Union, although fairly robust (the U.S. gives Russia roughly \$1 billion annually for nuclear material cleanup and protection), continue to face problems in the implementation process. On the U.S. side, Congress is increasingly hesitant to dole out aid to a country that is reaping immense profits from the historically high price of oil. In Russia, many in the defense establishment and nuclear industry are hesitant to allow U.S. officials access to sensitive areas and sensitive information. A prime example of the disconnect, not only between Moscow and Washington, but between the leadership of both countries and lesser officials, is the detaining of the airplane carrying U.S. Senators Richard Lugar and Barack Obama in the Siberian town of Perm in August.

The two senators had been inspecting progress in programs that are part of the so-called Nunn-Lugar initiative, which covers the aforementioned nuclear cleanup in Russia. They had been given a prior green light by Moscow to make a tour in a U.S. military aircraft, but the plane was detained. Russian officials were set to search the aircraft when Moscow told them to stand down. Russian officials called it a miscommunication, but it left Lugar

– the most powerful proponent of the Nunn-Lugar programs in Washington – somewhat miffed by this treatment. At a time of slight strategic tension, and at a time when nonproliferation programs are under intense scrutiny, neither side can afford to alienate their key supporters in one another's capitals.

On a positive note, on Sept. 26-27, 14 kilograms, or nearly 31 pounds, of highly enriched uranium that could be used to assemble a nuclear weapon was safely returned to the Russian Federation from a research reactor in the Czech Republic. The operation, monitored and verified by the IAEA, was a joint effort that included the UN agency, the U.S., Russia and the Czech Republic and was part of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative.

Moving toward Beijing and away from Tokyo

In East Asia, Russia appears to be drawing closer and closer to China, both economically and strategically. The July SCO summit was a historic event that firmly marked China's reemergence as a Central Asian power for the first time in over a century. Russia's tacit approval of a strong Chinese political posture in the region was aimed at balancing against the U.S., whose presence and heightened profile in the region is beginning to become worrisome for many in Moscow. This year Chinese troops participated in military exercises in the region, and China's state-owned energy firms have begun investing heavily in the region. In September, China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) gained a controlling share in the Kazakh firm PetroKazakhstan.

On the littoral side of Asia, Chinese and Russian troops joined together in large-scale military exercises on the Shandong Peninsula, north of Shanghai, and near the Russian city of Vladivostok, as well as in coastal waters near both locales. China had reportedly wanted to hold the exercises across from Taiwan, but Moscow insisted they be held further north. Russian leaders demonstrated their sensitivity toward the Taiwan issue, and an editorial in the *Rossiskaya Gazeta* warned about Russia playing "somebody else's game." The exercises, dubbed *Peace Mission 2005*, involved 10,000 troops (mostly Chinese), lasted eight days, and came on the heels of the U.S. Defense Department's report warning about the military buildup of China. U.S. Forces in Japan closely monitored the exercises. Moscow is again giving priority to pushing for economic benefits, its latest weapons systems for the PLA. China purchased close to \$2 billion in arms and equipment from Russian defense manufacturers in 2004. Combined with the SCO statement about a U.S. withdrawal from Central Asia, the joint exercises could be seen as a poke toward the U.S., as analysts both in Russia and the West have suggested. Two Russian dailies *Gazeta* and *Vremya Novostei* suggested that the exercises were of "geopolitical significance" for Russia and brought political benefits for Russia in both Central and East Asia. But as an article in *Le Monde* suggested, ordinary Russians (citing opinion polls) are still quite wary of China and Chinese designs.

Japan was more than just a casual observer of the exercises. If both Beijing and Moscow were sending signals to Washington, then Beijing was also sending a signal to Tokyo, with whom it has engaged in verbal sparring all summer over a territorial dispute in the

waters in the East China Sea. Moscow, meanwhile, has given conflicting signals to Tokyo about the destination of the East Siberian oil pipeline, which has been the focus of a diplomatic and economic competition between China and Japan. Earlier in the year, the Russian government had definitively announced that a pipeline would be constructed to the Pacific coast, instead of directly to northeastern China. At the July G-8 summit, Putin stated that Russia's priority would be to supply China by rail, by first constructing a pipeline from Siberian fields to rail lines close to the Chinese border.

Twice during the summer – first at the G-8 summit and then in a televised interview in late September – Putin referred to the territorial dispute with Japan. While recognizing Russia's interest in signing a peace treaty with Tokyo, Putin strongly defended Russia's position and poured cold water on any assumption that he was prepared to meet Japanese demands for the return of the four disputed islands. Putin did, however, announce his intention to visit Tokyo in November.

Leaders in Moscow and Washington recognize the merits of strategic cooperation in the battle against proliferation and in the war on terror. Nevertheless, certain habits die hard, and the Russian leadership appears unwilling to grant the U.S. hegemony over Central Asia. If cooperating with the U.S. in the war on terror entails this, Russian leaders are going to be less and less cooperative in the region, and on other issues, as well. Russia appears willing to oppose both the U.S. and Europe over Iran. On the Korean Peninsula, where less is at stake economically for Russia, Moscow will continue to cooperate with Washington, if nothing else to maintain its political profile in the region. Sino-Russian collusion is still not a great threat to Washington, especially in East Asia, although in Central Asia it represents a much more formidable challenge. Trends in Russian foreign policy do not bode well for Tokyo, and it appears that if a new Cold War ensues between Moscow and Washington, Japan will see all chance of a settlement with Russia evaporate. The hunch here is that Moscow and Washington will set aside most differences and continue to cooperate on the most pressing issues. In Uzbekistan, the U.S. has already been served notice that it will have to leave. This should quiet the most vociferous voices in Moscow who are concerned about the U.S. presence in Central Asia. But if the U.S. is granted basing access in Azerbaijan or Turkmenistan (negotiations are reportedly underway), tensions could rise again.

Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations July-September 2005

July 5, 2005: The leaders of China, Russia, and four Central Asian nations ask the U.S. to set a deadline for the withdrawal of U.S. bases from the region. The announcement comes at the SCO summit meeting in Astana, Kazakhstan.

July 5, 2005: The U.S. State Department announces that for the FY 2006 it will allocate \$85 million for programs of assistance for democratic and economic reforms in Russia.

July 7, 2005: Presidents George Bush and Vladimir Putin meet on the sidelines of the G-8 summit at Gleneagles, Scotland.

July 15, 2005: Russia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs releases a statement calling for a "rollback" of the "non-regional" military presence in Central Asia, an obvious reference to U.S. forces stationed in the region.

July 18, 2005: Russia's armed forces begin a six-day exercise known as *Vostok-2005* in Russia's Far Eastern districts, including along the Pacific coast near Vladivostok.

July 25, 2005: U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld makes a quick visit to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan where the Kyrgyz government reaffirms its support for the continued U.S. utilization of the airbase in that country.

July 29, 2005: Moscow issues a protest to Washington about the *ABC News* interview with Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev, aired nationally on television in the U.S.

Aug. 21, 2005: William Joseph Burns replaces Alexander Vershbow as U.S. ambassador to Russia.

Aug. 18-25, 2005: Russia and China hold an unprecedented, weeklong joint military exercise in the Far East.

Aug. 29, 2005: The aircraft of U.S. Senators Richard Lugar and Barack Obama is detained in the Russian city of Perm for several hours for undisclosed reasons. The senators were part of a team inspecting the progress of the joint U.S.-Russian nuclear clean-up program. The aircraft had been cleared prior to the trip.

Sept. 10, 2005: A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman accuses the U.S. of exercising "double-standards" in the war on terror.

Sept. 13, 2005: In a speech at a NATO meeting in Berlin, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov warns the U.S. against any change of its nuclear doctrine to allow the pre-emptive use of nuclear weapons.

Sept. 16, 2005: In New York, Putin meets with the leadership of U.S. oil majors Chevron, ConocoPhillips, ExxonMobil, and Texaco.

Sept. 16, 2005: Presidents Bush and Putin hold a meeting at the White House. Topping the discussion agenda are the key nuclear disputes in Iran and North Korea.

Sept. 21, 2005: In a speech at Stanford University, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov issues a veiled warning to Washington to avoid interfering in Russian politics, and to pursue goals in ex-Soviet states exclusively by "understandable and transparent" methods. But Lavrov does recognize U.S. interests in Central Asia.

Sept. 26-27, 2005: Fourteen kilograms, nearly 31 pounds, of highly enriched uranium are safely returned to the Russian Federation from a research reactor in the Czech Republic. The operation was a joint effort that included IAEA, the U.S., Russia and the Czech Republic, and was part of the Global Threat Reduction Initiative.

Sept. 26-28, 2005: Russian Minister of Economic Development and Trade German Gref holds talks with U.S. officials in Washington about Russia's joining the WTO.