

China-Russia Relations:

Moscow and Beijing Adapt to a Different Pax Americana

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From the war in Afghanistan to the anthrax scares to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) show to the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) demise, Russia and China – together with the rest of the world – were barely able to keep up with the thrust and momentum of U.S. foreign policy in the last quarter of 2001. Despite their support for Washington, perhaps more than at any time in the past decade, both were taken back by the persistence of Washington's "unilateralism."

In their bilateral relations, Moscow and Beijing actively coordinated their policies for the U.S.-led anti-terrorism war. Toward the quarter's end, however, they started to diverge over the ABM issue.

Business as Usual Despite Unusual Business

One major foreign policy issue for Moscow and Beijing was how the historical friendship treaty, signed just a few months before and designed to be "long-term," would be able to absorb the impact and immediate needs created by the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S.

Judging from appearances, bilateral interactions continued across all governmental levels, in various areas, and on both multilateral and bilateral occasions. This included a Vladimir Putin-Jiang Zemin mini-summit on the sidelines of the October APEC Leaders' Meeting in Shanghai (their third meeting in 2001); foreign ministers' and their deputies' meetings in the two capitals; SCO (Shanghai Cooperative Organization) law enforcement and border monitoring officials meetings; the first anti-terrorist working group session at the deputy foreign minister level; parliamentary reciprocals; General Staff meetings at both the chief and the deputy levels in Beijing and Moscow; over-fulfillment of force reduction goals along the Sino-Russian border; and growing exchanges in the areas of culture and economics.

Russia and China also carefully coordinated their anti-terrorist moves. Despite the difference in the degree of their respective cooperation with the U.S., both insisted that terrorism be curbed "in all its manifestations, wherever acts of terrorism may be staged"; that the "struggle against terrorism should be comprehensive and long-term, and all countries should cooperate in this sphere on the basis of the UN Charter and other norms of international law to apply a wide spectrum of anti-terrorist measures"; that it was

unacceptable to identify terrorism with a specific religion, ethnic group, or culture, or to apply double standards in combating this evil; and that a swift end to the military strikes and the installation of a broad-based coalition regime in Afghanistan was needed.

For this, Russian President Vladimir Putin described “a very high level of mutual trust that has been established between the two countries,” while Chinese Vice President Hu Jintao assessed that “Sino-Russian political mutual trust is developing to a deeper level.” There were reasons for such an upbeat assessment of bilateral relations for the eventful last quarter of 2001. The historical friendship treaty, which was signed in July, was separately ratified by China’s NPC (National People’s Congress) and Russia’s Duma. Even the unusually slow-moving trade relations showed some signs of life. For the year 2000, bilateral trade was estimated to be close to \$10 billion, the highest in history.

When Hu – who is widely believed to be President Jiang Zemin’s successor in the next few years – emerged from his prolonged political internship with his diplomatic debut in Europe (Britain, France, Spain, and Germany), his first stop was Moscow. Hu’s “working visit” at the invitation of Putin, however, seemed to have more substance as Hu went directly to meet the Russian president, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, and Deputy Prime Minister Ilya Klebanov, who is in charge of military sales and cooperation with China. For much of the West, Hu remains a shadowy “crown prince.” Putin, however, was cultivating a relationship with the post-Jiang political elites in China.

To be sure, most of these interactions would take place with or without the impact of Sept. 11. The attack on the U.S., however, was perhaps the real theme for the seemingly business-as-usual bilateral interactions between Russia and China. Such unusual circumstances certainly tested the limits of their 20-year friendship treaty.

A Different World?

The world was different after Sept. 11. That day marked the end of the general post-Cold War tranquility. For the sole superpower, it meant devastation, lingering horror, and a deep sense of vulnerability. Meanwhile, the attack on the U.S. also, for the first time since the early 1970s, broadened and deepened a general economic slowdown around the world. A less noticed, but perhaps potentially more significant, twist of world political history was that both Germany and Japan, which devastated Russia and China during the first half of the past century, were able to shake off their post-World War II constraints by sending their militaries to faraway places. Finally, the U.S. decided to withdraw from a major international treaty (the ABM) for the first time since the end of World War II.

In the Asia Pacific, the first gathering of heads of state after Sept. 11 made political-security issues prevail over economics in the APEC Leaders’ Meeting in Shanghai for the first time since APEC was created in 1989.

In Central Asia, the massive and mighty return of the U.S. to the region generated strong pressure for regional alignment. Until Sept. 11, Russia and China dominated the budding Shanghai Cooperative Organization (SCO), the only regional security organization in the

world without direct U.S. participation. Now, the region has become a hunting ground for U.S. special forces and a target range for the U.S. Air Force's precision-guided munitions. The SCO still exists, but it functions under the long shadow of the ubiquitous U.S. presence in the region.

The post-9-11 world changed so much, and yet, so little. Despite the strong and lasting impact of the terrorist attack on the U.S., real transformations in the international system were minimal. Despite the psychological shock created by the terrorist attacks, the U.S. remained the world's strongest power and perhaps emerged even stronger. Moreover, 9-11 provides both the justification and willingness for Washington to exercise that power, with or without support from its allies or the international community.

For both Russia and China, support for the U.S. war against terrorism, though for their own respective national interests, has yet to produce a compatible reciprocity from the U.S. in regard to their own terrorist problems (Chechnya and Xinjiang respectively). Neither did Russia's unhesitating support for the U.S. war against terrorism have any impact on the U.S. determination and eventual steps to withdraw from the ABM Treaty.

Unequal Opportunities and Asymmetrical Returns

Beijing's current difficulty with Washington is largely the continuation of the strategic dilemma that existed before Sept. 11. For China, the lone superpower is seen as embodying "China's greatest hopes and its greatest nightmares."

Specifically, two opposing trends in U.S.-China relations persisted after 9-11. Until Sept. 11, China, not international terrorism, was the main concern for the Bush administration. From the EP-3 incident to a \$4 billion arms sale to Taiwan to Bush's "accidental" remarks to defend Taiwan with "whatever" means possible, U.S.-China relations dropped to a dangerously low point.

Historically, 9-11 provided Putin with an extraordinary chance to promote Russia's revival in American eyes, similar to the one handed Deng Xiaoping some 20 years ago following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The historical rise of China, therefore, ironically coincided with the beginning of the 22-year Afghan war.

The Russian policy elites were well aware that Russia's low-key and symbolic criticism (by President Putin) of the U.S. effort to drop the ABM Treaty would leave China, not the so-called "rogue states," highly vulnerable, particularly in the event of any flare-up in the Taiwan Strait. The unusual opportunity to normalize relations with Washington, however, was too strong a temptation to resist.

For these purposes, Moscow concluded that relations with Beijing would have to be stretched, but not strained. The goal was to maximize relations with the U.S. while minimizing the impact on relations with China. This was part of the reasoning behind the busy schedule of bilateral exchanges between Moscow and Beijing during the fourth

quarter. It may also be part of the reason why Putin arranged a “working visit” to Moscow by Hu Jintao before Hu’s official European tour in late October.

Beyond the ABM

China understood Russia’s motivations and limited options as a result of Russia’s declining capability and bargaining power with the world’s sole superpower. Nonetheless Beijing did not enjoy the result. As in a soccer game with a scoreless tie in regulation, Putin’s moderate criticism of the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was seen as a weak last chance “penalty kick.” There was clearly a sense of disappointment, if not despair, in China’s assessment of Russia’s last “inaction” over the treaty. Nevertheless, some Chinese analysts pointed out that Putin exercised great restraint in dealing with the Bush administration and that Russia’s final decision was more based on its own interests and did not aim at any third party.

The asymmetrical results for Russia and China in their relations with the United States were not left unattended. Immediately after the U.S. decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty, Putin called Jiang and vowed to take “joint actions to prevent a major deterioration of international affairs.” Four days later, the fourth round of Russian-Chinese consultations on strategic stability convened in Moscow where a “far-reaching and intensive exchange of opinions” occurred between Deputy Foreign Minister Georgii Mamedov and his Chinese counterpart Wang Guangya. The two sides reportedly concluded that “the national missile defense system can hardly be effective in fighting terrorist acts and anthrax”; that “Washington’s true aims are not those being declared”; and that the U.S. goal in pulling out of the ABM Treaty was to neutralize the nuclear deterrence potential Russia and China possess. Countermeasures to the U.S. decision on the ABM Treaty, however, remained unspecified except to agree that their “joint positions should be firm, principled, but not hysterical.”

Coming Clashes of What Kind?

Not everything was unpleasant in 2001. Compared with the beginning of 2001, Russia and China actually moved closer, perhaps more than any other time in the past 100 years, to join the West-dominated world. China finally entered the World Trade Organization (WTO) while slowly liberalizing its vast society. Russia, too, had successfully leaped over the last strategic and political hurdles to become part of the world trading system, in spite of its domestic economic difficulties.

The world they tried to join, however, was perhaps less hospitable and conducive to their rise and recovery.

At the international systemic level the Cold War remnants were indeed gone, as was a more balanced distribution of power that contributed to the “long peace” of the second half of the past century. Meanwhile, Moscow and Beijing continued to be puzzled by Washington’s active dismantling of, or departure from, a series of international treaties and commitments, many of which were created by the U.S. itself. The surprisingly quick

end of the Taliban regime seems only to have reinforced that proclivity of the world's sole superpower.

As the quarter and the year drew to a close, the war in Afghanistan gave way to the beginning of a much larger disturbance in the region as India and Pakistan postured and prepared for a new round of conflict. A nuclear exchange must be prevented – there won't be a one-sided strike like the Hiroshima bombing. For better or worse, Russia and China have been behind each of the world's newest nuclear powers in South Asia.

The India-Pakistan duel is likely to fit itself into a new round of growing clashes, not necessarily between civilizations, but more precisely between various fundamentalist-revivalist-hard line-firstist forces within each of the major religions/civilizations.

For both Russia and China, both of which have moved significantly toward the center of the world's ideological spectrum by departing from their respective leftist-communist orthodox, the Cold War was indeed over as the world entered 2002.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations October - December 2001

Oct. 1, 2001: Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulates Chinese President Jiang Zemin on the 52nd anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China.

Oct. 7, 2001: Zhang Wannian, vice chairman of China's Central Military Commission, meets in Beijing with Andrei Nikolayev, chairman of the Defense Committee of the State Duma of Russia.

Oct. 7, 2001: Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov calls his Chinese counterpart Tang Jiaxuan shortly after the U.S. anti-terrorism war in Afghanistan began.

Oct. 11, 2001: Governmental officials of the law-enforcement agencies and special services of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization's (SCO) member-states hold an emergency meeting in Bishkek, discuss security in Central Asia, and analyze the military-political situation and anti-terrorism operations in Afghanistan; Uzbekistan is not represented.

Oct. 12, 2001: Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Losyukov holds talks in Beijing with Chinese counterparts over the issue of terrorism and the future of Afghanistan.

Oct. 17-21, 2001: FMs Ivanov and Tang meet in Shanghai in preparation for the APEC Leaders' Meeting, agree on the need for a broad coalition government in Afghanistan that would coexist with its neighbors, and discuss mutual suspicion of U.S. missile defense plans.

Oct. 18-21, 2001: Presidents Putin and Jiang attend the Ninth APEC Leaders' Meeting in Shanghai, hold talks on Oct. 20.

Oct. 18-31, 2001: A delegation of the National Committee of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) headed by Vice Chairman Sun Fuling arrives in Moscow on the first leg of a two-week visit to Russia, Moldova, and Romania.

Oct. 19-21, 2001: Gen. Anatoliy Kvashnin, chief of the General Staff of Russian armed forces and deputy defense minister, joins the Russian team for the APEC Leaders' Meeting. In Shanghai, Kvashnin held talks with Gen. Fu Quanyou, chief of the PLA General Staff.

Oct. 23, 2001: Kvashnin holds talks with Fu, National Defense Minister Chi Haotian, Vice President Hu Jintao, and Zhang Wannian.

Oct. 25, 2001: A Chinese delegation, headed by Huang Yicheng, chairman of the Chinese side of the Sino-Russian Committee for Friendship, Peace, and Development, arrives in Moscow for the fourth plenary session of the committee.

Oct. 27-28, 2001: Vice President Hu pays a two-day working visit to Russia where he meets with Putin, Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, and Vice Premier Ilya Klebanov.

Oct. 28, 2001: The Standing Committee of the Ninth National People's Congress (NPC) ratifies the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation signed by Presidents Jiang and Putin in July 2001.

Nov. 4-7, 2001: A group of four Taiwan lawmakers visit Moscow to meet with students and businessmen from Taiwan; they also meet with Russian counterparts and visit think tanks in Moscow.

Nov. 10, 2001: The monitoring group of representatives from China, Russia, and three other Central Asian states bordering China (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) holds its fifth meeting in Beijing. The group verifies compliance with the arms reduction agreements signed in 1996-97 for confidence building and arms reductions along the border region.

Nov. 19, 2001: Putin briefs Jiang over the phone about the Russia-U.S. summit held during Putin's official visit to the U.S. Jiang praised the proposed deep cuts in nuclear weapons.

Nov. 23-27, 2001: Gen. Xiong Guangkai, deputy chief of the PLA General Staff, visits Moscow for the fifth round of strategic consultations of the Chinese and Russian General Staff Departments. He held talks with Russian counterpart Gen. Yuri Baluyevsky, first deputy chief of staff of the Russian armed forces.

Nov. 28-29, 2001: The first session of the Russian-Chinese anti-terrorism working group is held in Beijing jointly chaired by Deputy Foreign Ministers Anatoly Safonov and Li Zhaoxing. President Jiang and President Putin agreed to set up the working group during the October APEC meeting.

Nov. 27–Dec. 2, 2001: A Chinese public security delegation led by Public Security Minister Jia Chunwang visits Russia at the invitation of Russian Minister of Internal Affairs Gryzlov. This was the first official visit to Russia by a Chinese public security minister. On Nov. 28, Jia and Gryzlov sign a cooperation agreement between the PRC Ministry of Public Security and the Russian Federation's Ministry of Internal Affairs for jointly fighting terrorism, drug smuggling, illegal immigration, and other cross-border crimes, as well as on protecting the two countries' security and social stability on the border areas.

Dec. 9–13, 2001: A Russian State Duma delegation led by Gennady Seleznyov makes an official goodwill visit to China at the invitation of Li Peng, chairman of the NPC Standing Committee. The group was also received by Jiang and Premier Zhu Rongji separately on Dec. 11.

Dec. 14, 2001: Putin and Jiang discuss via telephone the U.S. decision to withdraw from the 1972 ABM Treaty, call for closer cooperation between their countries to prevent international instability and for continuing to pursue a consistent line to build a reliable system of strategic stability.

Dec. 17, 2001: Russian and Chinese Deputy Foreign Ministers Georgii Mamedov and Wang Guangya hold fourth consultations on strategic stability in Moscow.

Dec. 17, 2001: Chinese Embassy in Moscow holds a one-day exhibition to expose Falun Gong's activities for 300 Russian and Chinese attendees.

Dec. 26, 2001: Russian Duma ratifies the Russo-Chinese Treaty of Good-neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation signed by Jiang and Putin in July 2001.

Dec. 26, 2001: Russian Gazprom opens a permanent office in Beijing, becoming Russia's largest trade and economic establishment in the Chinese capital.