

China-Russian Relations: Strategic Distancing...or Else?

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From time to time in Sino-Soviet relations, young men in the Kremlin challenged older leaders in Beijing. Now, 45 years after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization and 15 years after Gorbachev's "new thinking," Russia's new president is reshaping his foreign policy in a remarkably realpolitik way, which may not be fully anticipated--or welcomed--by his older Chinese counterparts.

To be sure, much of Russo-Chinese relations in the second quarter was business as usual: Russian arms continued to flow to China; trade was up; vows of mutual commitment to territoriality were routinely uttered; bureaucrats frequented each other's capital. The chemistry between top leaders, however, did not seem to be an amicable mix.

Putin's "Long-March" to Beijing

It all started with a seemingly minor issue involving president-elect Putin's travel schedule. Shortly after Yeltsin's resignation at the end of last year, the Kremlin announced that Beijing would be the first trip abroad for Russia's new president. Once in charge, however, Putin turned down several of China's requests for an early summit, claiming that in accordance with the Russian Constitution, Putin could not make any trips abroad as both the head of state and prime minister. It soon became apparent that such a constitutional restriction applied only to trips to China. In the next few months, as Putin busied himself with many foreign trips, expectations for a Sino-Russian summit waxed and waned to the dismay of Beijing's leaders.

On April 12, Russian sources confirmed that Putin would meet PRC President Jiang Zemin before the G-8 summit in Japan in July. On April 25, a Russian Foreign Ministry official told the media that "there has been no official announcement of the timing of Putin's China visit yet." Apparently, in an effort to set the record straight, a Chinese spokesman quickly pointed out that the two would meet this year, when the Shanghai-5 summit held its fifth meeting in Dushanbe in May. Thus, Beijing seemed to lower its expectation of a Putin visit by securing a "mini-summit" for the two leaders in the pre-agreed Shanghai-5 gathering, but even this did not work out. The Dushanbe meeting was delayed for no apparent reason, though Putin did travel to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan on May 18 and 19.

Meanwhile, reports from Moscow were inconsistent at best. One Russian diplomat stated that it would not be necessary for Putin to stop in China on the way to Okinawa "because the presidential plane needs no refueling for 12 hours," while another was quoted as saying, "in

effect, if the Russian president does land in China, this could be regarded as a full-fledged visit rather than a stopover.” By early June, it became clear that Putin’s much discussed China trip was reduced to a stopover or “working visit,” on his way to the G-8 summit in Japan. Arranging trips to Beijing was a problem not just for the presidential travel staff. Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov also delayed his visit to China from June to an unspecified time in late fall.

For Beijing, these inconsistent messages coming from Moscow amounted to “a lot of thunder but no rain,” as a Chinese proverb goes. Although the Chinese appeared more tight lipped about the new Russian president, the official news agency *Xinhua* on April 12 noticed the “busy” overseas travels for Putin, and indicated that Putin had previously said he would not travel abroad until after his May 7 inauguration. Beijing finally confirmed Putin’s visit on June 29.

Putin the Metternich

The new Russian president may indeed have been squeezed by many of his overseas trips, or he may simply be playing a Russian version of Tom Sawyer’s “fence painting” to outsmart his erstwhile Chinese counterpart. Still another reason could be the different personalities of Putin and Yeltsin. Unlike his predecessor, who developed personal relations with foreign heads of state, the former KGB colonel just does not do shoulder-patting and first-name calling. One can certainly argue that Putin’s “neglect” of China was due to the Kremlin’s re-prioritization of its foreign policy in which the relationship with China was regarded as a “non-problem.” Attention, therefore, should be paid to other parts of the world. Last but not least, if Kosovo was over and NATO expansion a done deal, a more rational policy for Russia is to determine how to live with the reality of an ever-powerful West. While China is important for Russia’s Asia policy, it is also a fast-rising power and should be guarded at all the times, utilized when necessary, but never nurtured, particularly during Russia’s decline.

Perhaps only Putin himself knows the truth behind his “lack” of a China policy. One should not question, however, Putin’s ability to control events around himself and Russia. As part of the “cream” of the Russian elite, the Russian president perfected his skill through years of apprenticeship in the Russian intelligence apparatus. In sharp contrast to his sidelining China, Putin’s approach to the West proves that he is a remarkable impersonator of the 19th century Austrian von Metternich, who made himself the nerve center of post-Napoleon Europe. In a matter of a few months, the new Russian president has maneuvered himself, and a much-weakened Russia, back to the center of the trans-Atlantic world.

During his frequent encounters with foreign dignitaries both in and outside Russia, Putin’s attractive style proved more substantive, particularly in relations with European nations. In April, Putin clearly gained the moral high ground in the missile defense game with Washington by pushing the START II agreement and the 1997 antiballistic missile package through both houses of the Russian Duma. Later the Russian lower house also passed the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. These moves won the support of the Europeans, whose fear for strategic instability arising from U.S. missile defense plans played right into Putin’s hand. Putin even scheduled to meet “lame duck” President Bill Clinton on four different occasions. Thus, a few months of “de-Yeltsinization” has rid Russia of its trademark as either the West’s “yes-man” or a “rogue” nuclear power to be feared only because of its huge (but rusted) deadly arsenal. An influential

German commentator described Putin as doing “what Yeltsin and Gorbachev failed to do, and that is anchor Russia firmly in the European house.” For this, one needs only to recall how Putin described himself to U.S. Secretary of State Albright early this year, as a Russian with European essence (in thinking and value) and Asian superficiality (enjoying Chinese food and practicing Japanese Judo).

For these reasons, among others, the China factor has to be secondary. Indeed, becoming too close with Beijing may not be in Russia’s long-term interests. In the short run, a certain degree of ambiguity in dealing with China may be even desirable, precisely when China’s relations with both Taiwan and the U.S. remained tense and dangerous following the historic changing of the guard in Taiwan to the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). The timing of Russia’s hesitations in high-level contact with Beijing in the second quarter paralleled, interestingly enough, China’s high-handed coercive diplomacy toward Taipei.

Bear’s Judo vs. Dragon’s Tai-chi: Continuity or Change?

While China’s preference for policy continuity can be seen in its desire to continue the Yeltsin legacy of habitual summitry and opposition to U.S. unilateralism, Beijing leaders were soon caught off guard by the Kremlin’s initiatives. On June 6 while visiting Italy, Putin offered to jointly develop a missile defense system for Europe with NATO and the U.S. Although Russia made it clear that such a joint effort should be based on the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty, the Chinese Foreign Ministry chose to emphasize the “integrity of the ABM treaty” and suggested China would also object to changes from the Russian side. “*Any efforts* to amend the ABM treaty or to withdraw from it would not only threaten the nuclear disarmament process but would also shake the basis for nuclear non-proliferation and would give rise to a new round of arms race, including an arms race in outer space [emphasis added],” a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman said. She also spoke about “the common interests of all countries,” a reminder to Russia not to neglect China in the missile defense issue.

It is unclear whether or not Russia informed China of such a major policy change. The Russian military did indicate in late April that Russia might cooperate with China in building an anti-missile system for the two countries, although nothing has been substantiated thus far. Putin’s bold proposal, although unspecified, was perhaps viewed as the first step toward a real compromise with the U.S. Beijing sensed the winds of change during the Putin-Clinton Moscow summit when the Russian president acknowledged the “missile threat.” Worse, Putin’s new proposal came just a few days after the Russian Security Council Secretary Sergey Ivanov assured the press on May 29 that a compromise with the U.S. was “unlikely.”

The rather intense diplomatic interactions between China and Russia after Putin’s proposal suggested that Beijing was not aware of Moscow’s initiative. Beijing was clearly taken back to see such a proposed system with no consideration for China’s interests or its inclusion. China thus took an extra step the next day (June 7) to voice its doubts regarding such a move by Russia. China’s foreign ministry stated that it “does not fully understand Putin’s proposal,” and reaffirmed China’s non-acceptance of any change or amendments in the ABM treaty. Some Chinese analysts went as far as to say that it was hard to imagine the development of a strategic

relationship between Beijing and Moscow against U.S. hegemony and a unipolar world if Russia decided to have a common defense system with Washington.

China's publicized misgivings about Russia's unilateral move perhaps prompted Putin to make his first hotline call to his Chinese counterpart on June 8. This "extensive" conversation seemed to reveal more disagreements. While Putin was quoted as saying to Jiang that relations with China are "very important," Chinese media reported that Jiang stated that it was "an unusual year" for Sino-Russian relations.

Putin's "virtual contact" with Jiang, though timely, did not dispel China's doubts. On June 11, Colonel-General Leonid Ivashov of the Russian Defense Ministry stated that China should have no reason to think that it was either "left out" or threatened by Putin's proposal for a European antiballistic missile defense system, since it was aimed at combating only non-strategic missiles. Actually, this step "is strengthening Russian and Chinese positions in respect to the U.S. attempts to quit the ABM treaty," according to the Russian general. China's official view of Russia's proposal appeared to soften at this point, when a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman described Russia's proposal as efforts to persuade the U.S. to give up its national missile defense (NMD) and was thus "worth studying."

The Chinese military, however, remained unconvinced. In an analysis on June 26, the *People's Liberation Army Daily* indirectly blamed Russia by stating that it was Russia's "understanding" with the U.S. proposed theater missile defense (TMD) system in March and September 1997 that eventually led to the much bigger and more ambitious U.S. NMD project. China's concern for any possible alteration of the ABM treaty is genuine because its much smaller strategic forces could more easily be neutralized by such a system. The Russian motivation to cooperate on TMD is clear. While viewing the U.S. plan for NMD as a threat, Moscow is now embracing TMD as an alternative. Such a slap to China's face could be a step toward a major cooling of bilateral relations.

The tug of war between continuity and change can also be seen in other areas. While Beijing remains engaged in the Korean Peninsula, Putin had no intention to be left out of the Korea game following the historic summit between the two Kims. On June 8, Russia announced Putin's visit to North Korea (July 19-20), the first by any Russian head of state in history. Two weeks later (June 20), Putin also accepted an invitation to visit the South.

Putin's scheduled visit to the Koreas may not be at China's expense, given the fact that Kim Jong-il just visited China at the end of May. Besides, the world's last "Stalinist" state itself is opening up with its own omnidirectional diplomacy, similar to that of Putin's. Nonetheless, Putin's sudden interest in the Koreas amounted to harvesting the fruits of others, at least to some in China. In the past decade, Russia had largely disappeared on the Korean Peninsula. Deliberately or not, Russia's absence deprived Pyongyang of its swing power between Moscow and Beijing, which partially contributed to the historic summit between the two Koreas. Russia's return may reintroduce that complexity into peninsular affairs.

Putin's initiative, however, is by no means symbolic. Russia will benefit concretely from an opening North and friendly South Korea. This is particularly true if North Korea opens itself

gradually, based on its existing infrastructure, much of which was installed by the Russians. Moscow thus can reap some tangible gains and assume a growing role in this strategically important Peninsula. Its reappearance, apparently with little or no cost to Russia, would curb the influence of both Washington and Beijing. Moreover, Russia's renewed interest and effort in six-way talks (U.S., Japan, China, Russia, and both Koreas) would also give Japan a bigger role, something Beijing would not like to see.

Half way around the world, some discord appeared between Moscow and Beijing over the usually closely coordinated issue of Yugoslavia. Russia's representatives in the UN still strongly defend Yugoslav interests. The Russians and the Chinese even managed a walkout in late June to protest a bill banning Yugoslav participation. Beyond that, however, their approaches to Belgrade have started to diverge. China's support for Belgrade remained unabated. In December 1999, Beijing extended a \$300 million credit to Belgrade for the latter's reconstruction. In June, Chinese leader Li Peng was in Yugoslavia, vowing his firm support for the Serbian state. Possibly because the NATO bombing of the Chinese embassy left too deep a scar, Beijing was not ready to give up on Belgrade. Moscow, nonetheless, seemed to have second thoughts. In May, the Russian Foreign Ministry criticized Belgrade's attacks on independent media, and Moscow even hosted a group of Serb opposition leaders. Although Serbian foreign and defense ministers also visited Russia in the second quarter, Moscow became evasive whenever the West criticized the visits. A cooling phase between Moscow and Belgrade seemed to set in, even as China's ties with Belgrade grow warmer.

“What is to be Done?”

When his presidential plane finally touches down in Beijing in July, Putin will probably have to wrestle with this famous century-old question, first asked by his countrymen Nikolai Chernyshevsky (the utopian) and later by Vladimir Lenin (the revolutionary)--“what is to be done?” The question will be relevant for the younger Russian president because his Chinese counterparts are not ready or willing to abandon the Yeltsin legacy. More important, the Chinese have also attempted the most daring Westernization experiment ever seen in Chinese history (WTO membership ahead of Russia). While Russian (Soviet) leaders have swayed between orthodox communism and democratic capitalism, the Chinese are mixing both. The result: today's Chinese are perhaps more Western-looking than most of Putin's fellow countrymen. But unlike their communist founding elite a century ago, Chinese today no longer perceive the West through a “Russian-lens.” If Putin really believes that Russo-Chinese relations are still “very important,” he will have to do some damage control during his brief stopover in Beijing. Ironically, what can be done there is perhaps quite limited.

On the one hand, it is perhaps best for Putin to avoid doing anything radical because the structure of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is still there and is likely to remain if neither moves to take it apart. Even Khrushchev took four years (1956-1960) to completely sever Soviet military and economic ties with Mao's China. Right now, bilateral trade is up, thanks to the upswing of both economies. In military sales, China's orders need to be processed and they are essential for keeping Russian plants running and for funding the research and development of Russia's next generation weaponry. Threats from cross-border terrorism, separatism, drug trafficking, and illegal immigration all have to be dealt with, despite the cooling trend.

On the other hand, the erosion or lack of trust between the two sides cannot be fixed overnight. It took almost a decade for Beijing to nurture that special relationship with Yeltsin the democrat. It is amazing how quickly damage can be done to the Sino-Russian architecture. Without another immediate “push” from the West (either in the form of another NATO expansion or Balkan war), it probably will take some time for Moscow and Beijing to regain mutual trust.

Whatever the setting for the upcoming Putin-Jiang summit, its outcome will affect all major powers in the area. If Putin really intends to elevate Russia’s international status, a friendly Beijing is not only important, but crucial for his grand strategy to revive Russia and re-balance the world. The European-minded Kremlin wizard should not forget that the Russian Eagle on its crest has two heads; it looks both to the West and to the East. Working with the Chinese requires a delicate balance between patience and novelty, wisdom and smartness, long-term vision and short-term returns. Strategic marginalization of China, if not carefully executed, may carry a higher price tag than previously calculated.

For Beijing, patience, too, is needed to deal with this “best and brightest” of Russia. China perhaps will have to get used to the usual “irritants” coming from the Kremlin where handpicked successors always deviate from or even betray their mentors (as Khrushchev to Stalin and Gorbachev to Andropov/Chernenko). Beijing’s early and/or over-reaction to younger Russian leaders’ new initiatives, as in the case of Khrushchev, could prove to be disastrous, while a less reactive approach, as in the case of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, could benefit Beijing and be conducive to more stable bilateral relations.

The West, and especially Washington, should recognize that the only thing that would quickly mend the damaged Sino-Russian relationship would be to excite both by another round of U.S. unilateralism, such as NATO expansion, NMD deployment, and/or a Kosovo-style humanitarian intervention on the Russian periphery. Sometimes carrots or quiet diplomacy are more effective in dealing with a much weakened Russia. For this, the late 1990s are a useful reminder that NATO expansion and the Kosovo war actually drove Moscow and Beijing very close to a quasi-military alliance.

When Chernyshevsky and Lenin asked “what is to be done,” Russia was weak, disoriented, and in chaos. Now in the 21st century, Russia finds itself in a similar position and Putin perhaps has to answer this question himself. He certainly has accomplished much in the past few months. Regardless of what may be the outcome of his Beijing visit, the new Russian president deserves credit for unfolding this fresh round in the big-power game, for which no one, including Putin himself, may foresee the final phase.

Chronology of China-Russian Relations April-June 2000

Apr. 1, 2000: Defense Minister Chi Haotian returns to Beijing after attending the defense ministers’ meeting of the Shanghai-5 in Kazakhstan.

Apr. 8, 2000: China and Russia hold the 42nd regular meeting of the Joint Commission on Border River Shipping in Harbin.

Apr. 8, 2000: A second group of Chinese military experts complete training at the Russian Armed Forces Air Defense Forces training center in Orenburg.

Apr. 12, 2000: The Russian Foreign Ministry states that the first meeting between Russia and China leaders would take place in Dushanbe in May during the annual Shanghai-5 summit.

Apr. 12, 2000: The Russian government approves a draft inter-governmental agreement with China on cooperation in building and running an experimental fast-breeding reactor in China.

Apr. 13, 2000: Moscow and Beijing agree in principle that President-elect Putin would pay an official visit to China before the G-8 summit in Okinawa.

Apr. 13, 2000: Another railway line opens linking China's Jilin Province and Makhhalino in Russia, to boost the economy in the Tumen River Delta area.

Apr. 13, 2000: Russia bans the import of Chinese beef because of alleged foot-and-mouth disease in Chinese cattle.

Apr. 21, 2000: The Shanghai-5 police and security chiefs decide to develop a joint strategy for combating crime and terrorism.

Apr. 25, 2000: Buddhist organizations in Moscow and other Russian cities demonstrate, demanding "freedom for the Panchen Lama XI."

Apr. 25, 2000: Deputy Foreign Minister A. Losyukov states, "there has been no official announcement of the timing of Putin's China visit yet, but preparations are under way."

Apr. 25, 2000: Chinese and Russian representatives at the UN depart for Belgrade to listen to opinions on the Kosovo issue.

Apr. 26, 2000: Russian military sources tell *Sankei Shimbun* that Russia may ally with China to take countermeasures, including building their own missile defense, if the U.S. carried out its NMD program.

May 6, 2000: Russia offers Europe and China cooperation in building and running its Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS).

May 7, 2000: President Jiang Zemin sends a message of congratulations to Vladimir Putin after he is inaugurated as Russia's new president.

May 8, 2000: A 648-km-long land-water route linking China, Russia, and South Korea officially opens, providing the only direct passenger/cargo transportation line around the Sea of Japan.

May 15, 2000: A month-long operation by Russian border guards against poachers begins in the Russian Far East. In the first few days, 50 Chinese junks and 100 fishermen were found to have violated the Russian border on the Amur River.

May 15, 2000: China bans import of Russian meat and related products due to foot-and-mouth disease break out in Russia.

May 16, 2000: 24 Russian SSN-22 anti-ship missiles are shipped to China for China's new Sovremenny-class destroyer, specially designed to cope with the U.S. carriers. Another 24 missiles are due at year's end.

May 16-19, 2000: Russian and Chinese experts hold consultations in Moscow on the ABM issue.

May 20, 2000: The Russian Northern Fleet carrier-cruiser Kiev embarks on its last voyage, the 32,000-ton ship was sold to China for scrap.

May 21-24, 2000: Chinese Foreign Trade Minister visits Moscow to take part in the Economic and Trade Sub-Committee Meetings. Trade balance was one major issue. Although China's export to Russia grew 70% in the first four months, Russia had accumulated \$16 billion surplus in the previous decade.

May 23, 2000: East Line Airlines, Russia's biggest air cargo transport company, is approved to open four more regular air routes from Moscow to four Chinese cities. A total of nine Russian airlines are now running 32 Sino-Russian air routes to 10 Chinese destinations.

May 24, 2000: The Russian Foreign Ministry states that the change of leadership in Taiwan will not change Russia's one-China policy.

May 30, 2000: Russian Minister for Atomic Energy Yevgeny Adamov leads a delegation to Beijing to attend bilateral subcommittee meeting on cooperation in nuclear energy.

May 31, 2000: Russian Foreign Ministry confirms that President Putin will make an official visit to China on July 18 before the G-8 summit in Okinawa. The visit of Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov, initially timed for June, is put off until September-October.

Jun. 5, 2000: The Russian Defense Ministry claims it informed China about all the issues discussed between Putin and Clinton right after the Russo-American summit in Moscow.

June 6, 2000: Putin offers to jointly develop a missile defense system with NATO. Chinese Foreign Ministry states that China does not fully understand Putin's proposal.

Jun. 8, 2000: President Putin phones President Jiang Zemin to discuss Sino-Russian relations.

Jun. 8, 2000: The Russian Foreign Ministry announces that President Putin will visit North Korea on July 19-20. On June 20, Moscow also announces Putin will visit South Korea soon.

Jun. 8, 2000: A joint team of experts/officials of the Shanghai-5 meet in Beijing to discuss information exchange for combating international terrorism.

Jun. 9, 2000: Oleg Lobov, head of the Moscow-Taipei Economic and Cultural Coordination Commission, points out that Chen Shui-bian visited Moscow in 1995 to receive an honorary Ph.D. from Plekhanov Russian Academy of Economics.

Jun. 11, 2000: Russian military spokesman says China has no reason to think that it was “left out” in a European missile defense system proposed by Putin.

Jun. 12, 2000: President Jiang sends a message to Putin on Russia’s National Day, hailing the establishment and development of their strategic and cooperative partnership.

Jun. 17, 2000: *Jane’s Defense Weekly* reports that China will purchase 20 additional Su-27s, because its licensed production is unable to meet quality requirements and its annual capacity is far below PLA needs.

Jun. 20, 2000: The Russian Federal Border Guard denies knowledge of the transit across Russia by the group of Chinese found suffocated in a truck at the British port of Dover. In past five years, the number of illegal immigrants detained on the border with China has risen by a factor of 10.

Jun. 21, 2000: Sino-Russian trade for the first four months up 20.1% over the same period last year to \$2.055 billion.

Jun. 23, 2000: Russian and Chinese ambassadors to the UN walk out when the Security Council tries to exclude Yugoslavia’s UN envoy from a debate on the Balkans.

Jun. 24, 2000: PRC Foreign Ministry announces that President Jiang Zemin will attend the Shanghai-5 summit in Tajikistan on July 5.

Jun. 29, 2000: PRC Foreign Ministry confirms that President Putin will pay an official visit to China between July 18-19.