



Pragmatism dominate Russia-China Relations by Yu Bin

When Russian President Vladimir Putin arrives in Beijing today (March 21, Beijing time) for his fourth official visit to China, he will join President Hu Jintao to inaugurate the year-long festivities for China's "Year of Russia," which will include more than 200 cultural, business, science, and political activities throughout the "middle kingdom." This will be reciprocated by Russia's "China Year" in 2007.

This extravaganza, which is unprecedented even in the Sino-Soviet "honeymoon" of the 1950s, is preceded with other "first-ers" in Russian-China relations. Last August, the Russian and Chinese militaries held large-scale war games in eastern China involving land, air, and naval units from both countries. Trade volume reached an all-time high of \$29.1 billion in 2005 and is expected to hit \$60 billion in three years. The Russian arms industry is busy filling Chinese orders ranging from jet engines, naval vessels, cargo planes, air defense missile systems, etc. And most significant, Putin's visit will be the first time both sides can declare the "end of history," to borrow from the famous prediction by Francis Fukuyama. In this case, there are no longer any of the historical and territorial disputes that have plagued relations between the two continental powers in the past 300 years.

Pentagon strategists may worry about the emergence of a Eurasian re-grouping not necessarily friendly to the U.S. The current exchanges between Russia and China, culminating in the "Year of Russia," however, can hardly conceal a basic fact: the Russians and Chinese do not very much know, like, let alone love, each other. In their unprecedented transitions from orthodox communism, Russia and China have been drifting apart in their political and social settings. While political elites have traveled between capitals more often, the eyes of their peoples are fixing on the West, particularly the United States. This is particularly true for Russians, who are becoming more "European" by moving – more than 1 million in the 1990s – to Russia's European parts from the Far Eastern areas. A rising fear factor, real or imagined, goes hand in hand with an increasingly desolate Siberia, and the historical settlement of the border issue in late 2004 has made no apparent difference in sentiment. Last year, the huge chemical spill into China's Songhua River, which joins the Amur River between Russia and China, reinforced the Russian stereotype of an ever expanding, and polluting, China. The tangible improvement in Russia-China political, strategic, and diplomatic relations, therefore, has yet to find a corresponding social base in Russia and China.

That said, the Chinese hold more positive views of Russia, particularly of Russia's younger (relatively speaking) and more charismatic leader Putin. It is not clear if this has anything to do with the absence of a great leader in the post-Deng China. Yet many Chinese also see Russia over-playing

the energy card with its "strategic partner" China. To be sure, people do not have the illusions about a "friendly" price from Russia, yet they question how and why "Putin the Great" is unable to finish Russian "feasibility studies" for a pipeline to China. For the Russians, however, the long-term concern is the so-called "trade structure" with China, in which the vast Eurasian nation is fast become a raw materials supplier for its southern neighbor, a future not so easily digested by many Russians. It remains to be seen if the much-heralded strategic partnership can be sufficiently "oiled" during Putin's visit.

Moscow and Beijing are also facing immediate challenges both in and beyond their peripheries. The Iranian issue is heating up despite their joint efforts to prevent it from becoming a crisis. Even the "in-house" management of their joint venture, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), poses a challenge when Washington's nuclear policies are either "too soft" toward India and "too harsh" for Iran. Both countries were admitted as observer members of the SCO in 2005. And, all of this is happening as the Bush administration is apparently switching back to a harsher stance similar to, if not exactly the same as, U.S. policies in early 2001 when 41 Russian spies were expelled and U.S. and Chinese airplanes collided off the Chinese coast. If the ensuing 9/11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. did something to reverse, at least temporarily, downward relations with the world's sole superpower, the gathering storm over the Iranian nuclear issue may lead to another policy clash, whose consequences may not serve anyone's interests. That prospect, however, is the least preferred when the long-term national interests of both Russia and China require manageable and working relations with Washington.

Given these dilemmas and challenges, the Russian president and his Chinese hosts won't in the next two days be totally consumed by the funfair of China's Russian Year. Indeed, after the "best" (the Sino-Soviet honeymoon of the 1950s) and "worst" years (conflicts in the 1960s and 1970s) in their bilateral relations, pragmatism has replaced romanticism in managing their rather "normal" relations, strategic partnership or not.

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