



## **Hu's Trip to Russia: without Love, but...** by Yu Bin

Next week (March 26-28), Chinese President Hu Jintao will make a state visit to Russia. Like-mindedness, not love, will dominate the summit chemistry between the two strategic partners.

The Hu-Putin summit will be loaded with the usual high-sounding political declarations and trade deals. Hu will also join Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in a grand inauguration of Russia's first ever "Year of China," during which Russia will have hundreds of China-related projects and activities regarding business, media, education, science, sports, tourism, etc.

There are numerous reasons for the extravagant demonstration of their strategic partnership, now entering its second decade. Perhaps more than any other time in the history of their relationship, China and Russia share a strategic outlook. Both are deeply involved in the two six-party nuclear talks (with North Korea and Iran). Their joint venture – the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) – not only survived, but is thriving in the post-9/11 world. In bilateral areas, the two also have things to cheer: stability across the 4,000-km border, institutionalized government-to-government exchanges of various kinds, growing trade and mutual investment (\$4.3 billion worth of deals are expected to be signed at this meeting); and stable military-military relations, to mention just a few.

This "best ever" bilateral relationship, however, is fostered, maintained, and nurtured precisely at a time when their domestic political systems are so different: Russia has become a democracy, while China remains communist, though each departs from its past by taking its own path and proceeding at its own pace. It is largely true that currently, bilateral relations are the most equal since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This rough equality between Moscow and Beijing is reinforced – for the first time in the past 100 years – by the absence of the Russia factor in China's domestic politics. Last if not least, today's Chinese elite, unlike their predecessors (Jiang Zemin and Li Peng), are not "made in Russia."

Given these developments, the strategic partnership relationship between Beijing and Moscow is both prominent and paradoxical. For one thing, the relatively high level of trust between top leaders is not shared by ordinary Russians and Chinese. Both publics seem to be bypassing each other to Westernize and modernize. Even at the top level, pragmatism, rather than compassion, dominates.

This is particularly true from a Russian perspective. The "equal" relationship, which makes Chinese more confident in dealing with their Russian counterparts, is a psychological discomfort for many in Russia. China's economic growth is perceived by many more as a threat rather than an opportunity.

This, coupled with the ongoing de-population of Russia's Far Eastern regions and a perceived illegal immigration "problem" there, is fanning Russian xenophobia. Even relatively fast growing bilateral economic relations, which are largely complementary, are viewed as alarming due to the shrinking share of manufactured goods in Russia's exports to China. The prospect of Russia becoming a raw material supplier to China is unacceptable, even if this has long been a fact of economic life in Russia's trade relationship with the West. At the societal level, ordinary Chinese and Russians no longer love or hate one another as in the past. The problem today is that they may not care much about each other. Finally, Russia's military sales to China, which have long been a pillar of bilateral ties, are now faced with uncertainties and need new directions. It remains to be seen if Moscow is willing and able to "upgrade" its arms transfers to China to the level of those purchased by India.

Given these achievements and problems, the current state of the bilateral relationship is not as strong or weak as it appears. It is a complex, and perhaps normal, relationship: one with problems amidst progress, cooperation and competition, or a "marriage" that lacks passion. Nonetheless, managing such a huge and complex, albeit normal, relationship is a challenging enterprise for Hu and Putin. Both understand the limits of their achievements and desire for more progress. Russia's "Year of China," like China's "Year of Russia in 2006," is designed to fill the gaps in their bilateral relations.

Exactly how Russia's "Year of China" will shape the minds of average Russians regarding China remains to be seen. The post-9/11, post-Iraq, and post-Korean nuclear crisis world is promising and problematic for the two countries. For all the inadequacies in their bilateral ties, Russia and China are each other's strategic rear. In this sense, the Sino-Russian relationship is strategic by nature, be they friends or foes. Plus, Moscow and Beijing need to continue to work through the SCO to adjust their respective interests in central Asia. This is a region where Russia and China are engaging and hedging the United States, and is also a meeting place, if not a fault line, between all major civilizations. (For the author's recent analysis of the SCO, see "Central Asia Between Competition and Cooperation," *Foreign Policy in Focus*, <http://www.fpiif.org/fpif.txt/3754>).

For all these reasons, their shared strategic outlook – or dreams for a more stable and more multipolar world order – would have to be maintained, even from "different beds" (different domestic political systems). Hu's upcoming trip to Russia, therefore, is both symbolic and substantive. After the turbulent 20<sup>th</sup> century, relations between China and Russia have gone beyond love or hate, but are in a state of strategically-driven and historically-conscious "like-mindedness," to borrow a phrase from Dr. Bobo Lo, leading

Russia scholar at the prestigious Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs).

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