



## **Dance with Bears: Post-Putin Sino-Russian Relations** by Yu Bin

Perhaps more than any other capital in the world, Beijing has closely observed the change of the guard in the Kremlin. There are many reasons for Beijing's concerns: Russia's revival as a major power, its petro-politics approach to foreign relations, managing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), not to mention the stability of the 4300 kilometer Sino-Russian border.

### **It's Still Putin, Stupid**

Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrangement with Dimitri Medvedev last December was a surprise for Beijing. Few, if any, Chinese observers had anticipated that Putin would have his cake and still eat it. What separates Beijing and the West in their respective perceptions of Russia's leadership transition is a matter of substance vs. form. For the West, Putin's rule means Russia's departure from democracy. Beijing sees that Putinism works for a nation like Russia. During eight years under Putin, Russia has been transformed from chaos to stability, fragmentation to recentralization, and poverty to prosperity. It is only natural for Russians to continue the current policy, with or without Putin. For Beijing, Moscow seems to have finally figured out its approach to modernity: not the West, nor the East, but somewhere in the middle – the Russian way.

The same charisma and capabilities that brought Russia back from the brink of collapse have been actively applied to dealing with others, including China. In eight years, Putin repositioned Russia's relations with the West, consolidated the former Soviet space, institutionalized the SCO with Beijing, and prioritized economics in Russia's foreign policy. All this has been driven, at least partially, by rapidly rising energy prices.

### **Sustaining the Strategic Partnership**

In the past eight years, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has broadened and deepened, ironically, without much progress on the much-talked-about (initiated by Boris Yeltsin in 1994) oil pipeline from Siberia to China's northeast. The pipeline is still in the pipeline. It remains to be seen what Prime Minister Putin will do in this vital area of Russian-China economic cooperation.

Although both sides claim that the current bilateral relationship is the "best" in history, this state of affairs was achieved at a time of Russia's historical decline and China's historical rise. For the foreseeable future, Beijing will have to adjust to an increasingly strong and self-confident Russia. Already in the past eight years, China has learned, from firsthand experience, that Putin's ability to defend Russia's national interests should never be discounted.

One key element of the current Sino-Russian strategic partnership has been a high level of trust, which is expected to continue under the Medvedev-Putin team. Harmony among political elites, however, is no guarantee of success in managing a host of dissonant issues such as asymmetrical trade (a rapid decline of Russian equipment exports to China), stagnant military sales, and perceived Chinese immigration into Russia's far eastern region. It is unclear if the just finished "China Year in Russia" (2007) and "Russia Year in China" in 2006 will help ordinary Russians and Chinese to develop some mutual chemistry.

Moscow and Beijing also need to invigorate the SCO to turn it into a more efficient regional grouping. It is not easy to interface with all major religious and cultural systems: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. SCO's future expansion and relations with others, particularly Washington, continue to challenge this diverse group of nations from the East and the West, democracies and non-democracies, large and small, and relatively developed, newly industrialized, and less developed. While two U.S.-led wars on terror are being fought on the SCO's peripheries (Afghanistan and Iraq), none of the 10 formal and observer members of the SCO want to turn this group into an anti-West or anti-U.S. alliance. Beijing and Moscow will have to figure out how to keep a delicate balance between these diverse interests.

### **Thirty-year cycle?**

By the end of Putin's second term as president, Sino-Russian relations has experienced 19 years of stability, which almost doubles the 10-year Sino-Soviet "honeymoon" (1949-1959). It has, nonetheless, yet to pass the 30-year mark of "bad times" from 1960-1989, after Beijing and Moscow switched from allies to adversaries almost overnight. During these three decades, precious resources were diverted, drained, and wasted by both sides.

Russia is heading back to its past glory and dream with a strong leader like Putin as both "the Great" (staying in office beyond 2008) and the "Ghost" (working behind the scenes). It remains to be seen how the dragon will play with the new double team of bears in the coming years.

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