

U.S.-RUSSIA-CHINA: AN UPDATE ON THE STRATEGIC TRIANGLE

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The strategic triangle that once dominated world politics during the heyday of the Cold War, from the 1970s through the 1980s, has lost much of its glamour following the collapse of Soviet power. Nonetheless, Washington continues to keep a watchful eye on what transpires on the Russo-Chinese tangent for clues that may hold policy implications for U.S. national interests. In return, U.S. strategic moves may likewise foreshadow policy responses of Russia and China.

An example of this interaction is found in a series of events that took place in 1993-1994. Allegedly because of U.S. opposition, China in September 1993 lost its bid before the International Olympic Committee to host the 2000 Olympic Game. The defeat, by a mere two votes, was devastating to Beijing. Two months later, by coincidence or not, the Russian Defense Minister, Pavel Grachev, visited China and signed an agreement with his Chinese counterpart to spur ministry-to-ministry defense cooperation. How much impact this development had on Washington's thinking is hard to pinpoint. But the fact is that it came at a time when President Clinton was weighing the annual report to Congress on whether to renew the "most-favored-nations" (MFN) trading status for China. Quite ahead of the deadline, Clinton announced on May 25, 1994, that the United States was ready to renew China's MFN status. He made it known that, in a break with tradition, the MFN issue for China would henceforth be decoupled with the human rights question. Clinton's policy shift anticipated the passage by Congress in 1999 of a legislation to accord China the "permanent normal trade relations" status, paving the way for the Chinese accession to the World Trade Organization two years hence.

The U.S.-Russia Tangle and Russo-Chinese Partnership

While President Clinton favored engagement with both Russia and China, he seemed more wary of Russia, which, despite its domestic disarray following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, has inherited a powerful nuclear capability that could conceivably be a potent threat when the chips are down. This concern may have been responsible for the West's post-1993 push to enlarge the NATO. The move apparently changed Russia's initial "Atlanticist" outlook, and in two years' time Moscow had turned both "inward" and eastward.

In its inward or nostalgic turn, Moscow embraced a “statist” policy, in its attempt to develop a strategic identity and seek the status of a regional power to be reckoned with. In Eurasia, Russia looked to a reintegration of the Commonwealth of Independent States, including Belarus and Ukraine. In East Central Europe, it opposed any Western enlargement that would exclude itself. It aspired to fashion Eurasia under its influence and an East Central Europe that would remain a neutral zone.

In a bold eastward turn, Russia expanded its partnership with China to new heights since the 1989 normalization of the two countries’ bilateral relations that ended a 32-year rift. On the heels of the 1994 Sino-Russian ministry-to-ministry defense cooperation, the two countries entered into a strategic partnership in 1996, sealed by President Jiang Zemin’s Moscow visit in April, in what was his fourth summit with President Yeltsin since 1992. About the same time, representatives of the two countries met in Shanghai, along with those from three former Soviet republics in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kirgizia, and Tadjikistan). The Shanghai Forum they created foresaw the arrival of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in June 2001, when Uzbekistan also joined. The next month, in Moscow, Jiang Zemin signed with President Putin a Sino-Russian Good-Neighborly Treaty of Friendship. A most important feature is the legal framework the treaty provides for a professed enduring bilateral cooperation in a wide spectrum of areas, encompassing trade and economy, science and technology, energy, transportation, finance, space and aviation, IT, and trans-border and inter-regional endeavors. A Russian source describes the treaty and the SCO as the two pillars of Russo-Chinese strategic partnership in the new era.

At home, all Russians across the entire political spectrum see NATO expansion as a provocative act. Even after Moscow entered into a new deal to create a NATO-Russia council --giving Russia an equal footing on security issues with the alliance’s 19 other members—it took steps to make sure that its strategic partnership with China would not be jeopardized. In May, the Russian Defense Minister, Sergi Ivanov, was in Beijing to meet with President Jiang and other high officials. Ivanov reaffirmed the value of the Sino-Russian military partnership, which he said not only benefited both countries, but also “[helped] promote regional and world peace and stability.” An important part of this military cooperation was the heavy arms sales to the Chinese, to beef up their air force and naval capability.

Almost immediately after he became China’s new president in 2003, Hu Jintao had a rendezvous with President Putin in Moscow, to renew pledges to the Sino-Russian “strategic partnership.” They presided over the signing ceremony of a number of agreements, including one on long-term oil supply to China. Hu also oversaw the signing by the China National Petroleum Corporation with Russia’s Yukos Oil Company of an agreement on undertaking for a long-term contract to

supply oil to China via a Sino-Russian oil pipeline.

On political issues, President Putin re-affirmed Russia's support for China's sovereignty claim over Taiwan and Tibet, while the Chinese president reciprocated by supporting Russian suppression of the separatist movement in Chechnya. In a communique, both sides stressed their agreement on the "multipolarity" of the world, in which relations among nations must be "democratized" and the United Nations must play a key role in the settlement of international disputes. The veiled criticism of unilateralism seemed to bespeak a mutual dissatisfaction with Washington. But the Russo-Chinese partnership as such was a far cry from the kind of alliance that some realists predicted would be directed against the NATO and the United States. Putin and Hu explicitly stressed that the partnership was not aimed at any third party.

The U.S.-China Tangle: A Delicate Relationship

At the risk of oversimplification, one could maintain that U.S. relations with China were driven largely by two factors: (a) the vicissitudes in the Russo-Chinese relationship, and (b) the Taiwan question, which is the more important of the two. For thirty years after the People's Republic of China (PRC) came into being in 1949, the United States continued to recognize the rival Chinese regime (the Republic of China, or ROC) that had relocated in Taiwan after losing the civil war on the mainland. The road to eventual U.S. normalization with the PRC in 1979 was paved by President Nixon, whose grand design it was to build an alignment with China, then at odds with the Soviet Union, in an attempt to counter the mounting Soviet threats. But, the United States continues to maintain "unofficial" relations with the ROC on Taiwan. By a domestic legislation, the Taiwan Relations Act, Washington is under an obligation to protect Taiwan's security; thus, the continuing arms sales to the island.

Washington's Taiwan connection, as such, has bedeviled its relations with the PRC ever since, more especially when Taiwan's leaders after 1988 showed growing inclinations toward a separatist course, outside the One China scenario. During a brief confrontation between mainland China and Taiwan, in early 1996, the U.S. dispatched two naval battle groups to the Taiwan Strait, to show moral support for Taiwan (and, above all, to please its Congressional friends). A near accidental war with the Chinese military was averted only with the timely withdrawal of the U.S. carrier *Independent*, while the second carrier, the *Nimitz*, was still on the way from the Mediterranean. The near-miss drove home to the Clinton team Beijing's seriousness about Taiwan, forcing it to undertake a soul-searching review of America's China policy. The final decision to avoid ever again being dragged into an inadvertent war with China for the sake of Taiwan led to Clinton's all-out engagement policy toward the Chinese, which he pursued during his second term.

What happened to Clinton is nothing strange. In what has become an almost set pattern, every American president since Ronald Reagan would start his presidency with a high-profile posture on Taiwan to the bewilderment of China, only to relent subsequently. The same harrying problem has haunted the George W. Bush Administration since 2001. And, Bush seems to conform to the pattern, even though in his case the speedy turnaround was in part precipitated by the anti-terrorist needs after September 11. During his 2000 campaign, candidate Bush called China a “strategic competitor” and, after taking office, he pledged that the United States would do anything within its power for the protection of Taiwan’s security. Following the April 1, 2001 spy-plane incident, nevertheless, President Bush dropped the “strategic competitor” characterization. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, when Beijing promptly offered its support for the war on terrorism, the Bush Administration regarded China as an ally in that effort. By the time Bush visited China in February 2002, tensions between the two countries had eased since the first months of his presidency.

U.S. enthusiasm toward Taiwan cooled off distinctly during 2003, in part because of the increasingly opaque separatist agenda President Chen Shui-bian was pursuing. Washington felt uneasy about the Taiwan leader’s avowed plan to hold a nondescript plebiscite alongside with the island’s scheduled presidential election in Spring 2004. To that, he added a call for the rewriting of the ROC Constitution. If Chen’s plan was to use a plebiscite to affirm and legitimize the ruling DPP party’s platform seeking a separatist Taiwan republic completely cut off from its umbilical chord to China, it would court an almost certain armed invasion from Beijing, as the latter had threatened to do. Sensing the potential catastrophe, the Bush Administration cautiously distanced itself from Taiwan and warned its leaders that they alone bear the responsibility for all consequences.

The corresponding change in attitude of the Bush Administration toward China, on the other hand, was graphically summed up by Secretary of State Colin S. Powell, who said U.S.-China relations in 2003 were at their best since Nixon’s opening to China. The reasons for the change went beyond Taiwan’s loss of favor or even China’s supportive role in the anti-terrorist fight after 9/11. Another reason was apparently China’s demonstrated diplomatic mellowness, as demonstrated in its initiative in brokering a negotiated process out of the international crisis surrounding the North Korean nuclear weapons.

Analysis

With necessary variations, three pillars seem to underpin both Russia’s and China’s relations with the United States: (a) the war on terrorism, (b) aversion for the spread of weapons of mass destruction, and (c) mutual economic interests.

Differences in their respective views on these seeming common concerns with the United States suggest that the road ahead may not be paved with roses. For instance, America's anti-terrorist preoccupation with the Al Qaeda is quite different from the Russian and Chinese concerns with domestic separatism. Bush's nonproliferation concern, riveted on the "axis of evil" states of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, clashed with the Russian view, as Putin never considered Iran a danger. Like the French and the Germans, he was openly against the war on Iraq. The Chinese were more muted in their disagreement over the latter issue, but were in broad agreement with Bush that the North Korean nuclear problem must be contained. The Taiwan question remains a perennial spoiler. As to economic interests, the Russians were more concerned with their entry into the WTO, and the Chinese were consumed in fighting Washington's pressures to reduce the U.S. trade deficits and to allow the renminbi to appreciate against the dollar.

A complicating factor was the U.S. air-force presence in the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, first established in the war against the Talibans in Afghanistan and expanded during the Iraq war. It seemed to cause concern in Russia and China, plus India. Hence, the rumored move by Russia and China to broach a trilateral "strategic partnership" with India. The staging of an unprecedented joint naval exercise by China and India in early November 2003 seemed to lend some credence to the rumored move. Russia, China, and the four Central Asian nations that are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization signed an agreement in Beijing in September, 2003, for the installation of a common Anti-Terrorist Center in Uzbekistan. The implications, if any, for Washington remained to be seen.

Critics of the Bush Administration often allege that its policy had driven Russia and China (along with the Central Asian states) closer together. There were contrary signs, however, that Russian-U.S. relations were on the mend after the end of the Iraq war. At their meeting in June, for example, Bush and Putin not only signed the Treaty of Moscow limiting each country's strategic nuclear arsenal, but portrayed a common basis of mutual interests between their two countries. On the eve of his summit with President Bush at Camp David in September, 2003, Putin expressed his willingness to assist the United States in the reconstruction of Iraq. Nevertheless, he coupled the offer with calls on the world to rein in American military power.

A Chinese commentator described Russo-U.S. relations as being characterized by "intermittent tensions and long feuds punctuated by short periods of rapport." As shown above, more or less of the same may be said of China's relations with the United States since the end of the Cold War. While their similar plight may have "pushed" them together, it remains true that Russia and China do not seem to be colluding to challenge the U.S. hegemony. The game being played now is

qualitatively different from what prevailed during the heyday of the Cold War, when in a different alignment pattern the United States was playing the “China card” against the Soviet Union in a cut-throat competition. Today, Russia and China are on the same side to ward off the perceived threats from the sole surviving American superpower, but in a non-zero-sum game.