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Chinese Perceptions of Russian Foreign Policy During the Putin Administration: U.S.-Russia Relations and "Strategic Triangle" Considerations

Joseph Y. S. Cheng

Abstract: This article examines the Chinese perception of Russian foreign policy during the Putin administration by analysing Beijing's assessment of Russia's foreign policy objectives and its policy towards the U.S., as reflected in the official media and the authoritative publications of China's major security and foreign policy think tanks. Promoting multipolarity and checks and balances against U.S. unilateralism has been a very significant consideration on the part of the Chinese leadership. Using the concept of the "strategic triangle", the article demonstrates how changes in U.S.-Russian relations have probably become the most important variable in this push for multipolarity. In the past decade and a half, Sino-Russian relations have improved when Russia has become disappointed with the support it received from the U.S. There have also been periods of time when Russia has anticipated closer relations with the U.S. and thus neglected China's vital interests. The Chinese leadership, however, has exercised restraint at such times. There has been greater optimism in Beijing concerning Sino-Russian relations in recent years because of the expanding economic ties, Russia's increasing oil wealth and Putin's authoritarian orientation.

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Keywords: China, Chinese perceptions, Russian foreign policy, Putin administration, strategic triangle, security and foreign policy think tanks

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Introduction

In the late 1960s, in view of the sharp deterioration in the bilateral relationship and the occurrence of minor military conflicts, China's Soviet policy became dominated by considerations of the "strategic triangle", that is, the seeking of an advantageous position in the relationships among China, the Soviet Union and the U.S. (see Dittmer 1987, 1981, 2004). Chinese leaders of that time were concerned that the Brezhnev Doctrine might be applied to China; they believed that there was a distinct danger that the Soviet Union might invade China or launch a "surgical strike" against China's nuclear weapons. Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai argued that the Soviet Union was a social-imperialist power more dangerous than the U.S., the established imperialist power, and decided to approach the U.S., which led to the Nixon visit in February 1972. For their part, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger believed that the Sino-Soviet confrontation could be exploited to the advantage of the U.S., which was attempting to improve relations with both Communist countries. In ideological terms, the Chinese leadership provided a new analysis of the nature of the Soviet regime as justification for its approach to the U.S., intended to deter Soviet expansionism (see Cheng 1976). Following the break-up of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the "strategic triangle" has lost its significance in terms of the military balance; however, as this paper will show, both China and Russia still consider relations with the U.S. the top priority in their respective foreign policy agendas, and their respective relations with the U.S. remain very important factors affecting their bilateral relationship. Hence, China's perceptions of Russian foreign policy and its policy towards Russia remain influenced by "strategic-triangle" considerations.

This article examines the Chinese perception of Russian foreign policy during the Putin administration by analysing Beijing's assessment of Russia's foreign policy objectives and its policy towards the U.S., as reflected in the official media and the authoritative publications of China's major security and foreign policy think tanks. The author also conducted a number of interviews with China's Russia experts during the period 2005-2007.[1] The article begins with a consideration of the Boris Yeltsin

1 In June 2005, July 2006, and April 2007 the author visited the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing University, the Central Party School, the China Institute for International Strategic Studies, the China Institute of Contemporary International Relations, and the Shanghai Institute of International Studies. The author held ex-

administration's approach to the West and its limitations, followed by an examination of Vladimir Putin's redefinition of Russia's foreign policy framework in his pursuit of the re-establishment of Russia's major-power status, both as seen through the eyes of Beijing. In this context, the article analyses how the evolution of U.S.-Russian relations during the Putin administration influenced China's policy towards Russia. It is hoped that this analysis may serve to highlight the impact of "strategic-triangle" considerations on the Chinese leadership.

Prelude: Redefining Russian Relations with the U.S. under Yeltsin

The fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe and the break-up of the Soviet Union meant victory for the U.S. and the end of the Cold War. As the U.S. emerged as the sole superpower of the world, "strategic-triangle" considerations became much less important in the eyes of the powers concerned. Moreover, in the wake of the Tiananmen Square incident, China faced sanctions from the Western world and its leaders felt the pressure of the latter's "peaceful evolution" strategy. Chinese leaders, however, maintained that a multipolar world would be the ideal scenario, both from the perspective of China and that of the world, and they believed that a unipolar situation would only be transitional. Their basic strategy was to strengthen China's ties with the Third World, avoid confrontation with the U.S., and attempt to establish friendly relations with Russia and the new Central Asian states.

Russia, which emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union, adopted a "leaning-to-one-side" pro-Western policy programme right at its birth. However, the inadequacy of Western assistance damaged the Russian reform processes. It weakened Boris Yeltsin's position and generated the rise of Russian nationalism. The Russian economy continued to decline until almost the end of the decade.

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tensive discussions with over 50 academics and research workers on Chinese foreign policy and China's Russia policy. To facilitate the exchange of ideas, they will not be quoted directly. Instead, their views will be summarized and presented as those of the Chinese research community on China's Russia policy. Admittedly, their views were not identical, but in interviews with academics from outside China, they always had the "official line" in mind. Hence, their views as articulated in the interviews fell within a fairly well-defined spectrum, as reflected in publications on the related subject areas in China's major academic journals.

The initial pro-Western foreign policy position of the Yeltsin administration probably alienated Russia from its traditional allies. As good relations with the Western world became a top priority of Russia's foreign policy, Russia neglected its relations with Serbia, Iraq, Libya, Cuba, and North Korea, countries which were the targets or potential targets of Western sanctions. The Boris Yeltsin administration even participated in some of the sanctions initiated by the West against its former allies. In view of the lack of support from the West, Yeltsin's critics naturally believed that Russia's influence was in decline, its bargaining position vis-à-vis the West weakened, its pursuit of major-power status damaged, and its economy also suffering considerable loss (Li 2006: 79).

Both Yeltsin's critics and China's experts on Russia agreed that the Western world only wanted to prevent Russia from sliding into complete chaos; it had no intention of treating Russia as an equal partner, and it did not desire its rapid revival either. Russia's failure to integrate with the West and its sharp economic decline resulted in a sense of isolation and marginalization in the international community among its people. This was in sharp contrast to the situation in the previous decade when the Soviet Union was on par with the U.S. in the bipolar world.

It appeared that adjustments in this pro-Western "leaning-to-one-side" foreign policy came under consideration within the Yeltsin administration in the second half of 1992 (see Kozyrev 1992). On 30 April 1993, Yeltsin formally approved the document The Conceptual Framework of the External Policy of the Federal Republic of Russia, which defined a new omni-directional foreign policy position (for the document, see Russian Foreign Ministry 1993). The document stated that Russia should develop relations with those countries which would contribute to its revival, that is, its neighbours, the major economic powers in the West and the newly industrialized countries in various regions. It claimed a "special interest" in the territories of the former Soviet Union and pledged to improve relations with members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Finally, it acknowledged that differences and even contradictions might exist between Russia and the West, and it objected to the U.S.'s self-perception as the "sole superpower" as a sign of imperialism.

Foreign policy adjustments reached a new stage in early 1994. Under the increasingly strong pressure of nationalism, the Yeltsin administration began to accord priority to the revival of Russia's major-power status and the preservation of national dignity (see, for example, Yeltsin

1994 and the commentaries of the major Russian newspapers on the following day). Andrei Kozyrev, in an article published in *Foreign Affairs* in the U.S., clearly stated that "Russia is destined to become a strong country", and that it could not be a junior partner, but only an "equal partner" of the U.S. (Kozyrev 1994). Defence Minister Pavel Grachev also declared that "the world would witness the resurrection of Great Russia", and that the country would "secure its place among the ranks of the major powers" (Xue and Jiang 2001: 31).

Following the above guidelines, the Yeltsin administration adopted a stronger position in defence of Russia's state interests, strategic security and national pride vis-à-vis the West. Yeltsin and Primakov argued that multipolarity would be the basic trend in global development and would be in accord with the interests of the people of the world. They also opposed any attempt to establish a unipolar world, while indicating that Russia would strive to become an important pole in the multipolar transfiguration of power. To realize such an objective, Russia would pursue an active foreign policy. Russia had no intention of engaging in confrontation with any power centre, and would not seek to rely on any power centre; instead, it would approach all power centres in a balanced manner. Finally, Russia viewed important international organizations as significant platforms to maintain multilateral ties. It appeared that the Yeltsin administration accorded priority to improving relations with France, Germany, China, and India in the promotion of multipolarity.

Putin's New External Strategy: Recalibrating Russia's Superpower Status

China's experts on Russia believe that Russia's multipolar strategy in the latter half of the 1990s might have satisfied to some extent its rising nationalism and its demand for major-power status, but it failed to improve its external environment. The financial crisis in 1998 almost bankrupted the Russian economy, reflecting the failure of the economic reforms underway since the beginning of the decade. Russia's comprehensive national power sharply declined while pressure from NATO and the U.S. was stepped up.

It was in this context that Vladimir Putin gradually outlined his foreign policy framework after his election as president in March 2000 (he served as acting president upon the resignation of Boris Yeltsin on 31 December 1999) (Putin 2002: 80). China's experts on Russia have care-

fully studied a number of documents (Li 2006: 262-278; EWGZW 2003) and seem to have reached consensus on their common features. In the first place, they believe that the Putin administration accorded a higher priority to domestic objectives than to external objectives. The first foreign minister of the Putin administration, Igor Ivanov, summed up the lessons learnt from previous errors as follows: the "superpower" mentality, a legacy of the Soviet era, prompted Russian participation in international affairs to the greatest extent, which was sometimes beyond the capability of its domestic resources. Hence, he suggested that Russian foreign policy at this stage would first serve the interests of domestic development, creating a good environment for stable economic growth to improve people's living standards (see the Chinese translation of Ivanov 2002: 7). Though both state security and economic development were core domestic objectives, Russia's nuclear capability would be a more than adequate deterrence to guarantee its security; economic development naturally became the predominant objective (Putin 2002: 80). It had become all the more significant because, as Putin acknowledged, "Russia, for the first time in two or three hundred years, really faces the danger of declining into a second-rate, or even third-rate country" (see Putin 1999 released on the last day of 1999 when he became acting president; and also Putin 2002: 16).

China's foreign policy experts have endorsed this approach approvingly. They note the significance of this change in orientation as historic, as both Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union had made economic development subservient to their respective external strategies of expansion. Such a foreign policy orientation contributed to China's security and promoted Sino-Russian economic cooperation; there was also a certain satisfaction that Russia now followed China's example too.

In line with the emphasis on domestic economic development, the Putin administration now accepted close cooperation and integration with the international community. This implied the abandonment of the historical tradition of treating Czarist Russia and the Soviet Union as independent and complete systems, attempting to reshape the world order according to their respective geopolitical and ideological designs. China's experts similarly observe that this acceptance of international norms and integration was similar to China's position and its Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence, jointly initiated with India and Burma in 1953/54.

According to the document Russian Strategy: the President's Agenda, the Putin administration adopted a model of "selective participation". It would very resolutely defend Russia's important interests, and would maintain principled though not confrontational stands on other issues (EWGZW 2003: 63). The document specifically stated that this "selective participation" was "similar to China's external policy in the recent twenty to twenty-five years". China's foreign policy in this period was said to have

> gradually abandoned the global messianic thinking of communism, initially giving up confrontation with the U.S., later confrontation with the Soviet Union, while concentrating on domestic construction. At the same time, China consistently and most resolutely insists on its principled foreign policy stand within a small scope (EWGZW 2003: 65)

Within this framework, the Putin administration gradually revealed its priorities. While defending its sovereign independence and territorial integrity as well as promoting economic development, Russia first sought to maintain its leading role within the CIS. This geopolitical consideration had become even more important in view of the aggressive eastward expansion of NATO, and the Putin administration was willing to pay a substantial political and economic price. It also wanted to establish a belt of good neighbours in order to reduce the pressures of ethnic separatism and international terrorism.

As a major power, Russia would work to ensure a leading role for the United Nations and push for the multipolarization of the international political order. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council with veto power, Russia saw the United Nations' leading role in international affairs as a relatively effective bulwark against Western hegemony. Russia's major-power status and influence in international affairs would first be reflected in its significant role in international security organizations. In addition to the United Nations' collective security system, Russia accorded priority to the CIS and other security organizations in Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. It would continue to engage in various arms control negotiations with the U.S. to maintain strategy stability. In line with its recognition of its limited capability, it would selectively take part in regional affairs.

China in Putin's Foreign Policy Framework: Triangulating Russia's Relations with the U.S.

It is interesting to note that China's experts on Russia tend to divide Sino-Russian relations under Putin into three periods; the countries' respective relations with the U.S., that is, "strategic-triangle" considerations, have been a key factor shaping the bilateral relationship throughout these three periods (see Wu 2007).

The three years following the establishment of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperative partnership in April 1996 were largely a stage of institutionalization, especially in terms of various levels of scheduled meetings. Both countries attempted to establish and expand their consensus, and on that basis sought to broaden the scope of their cooperation. Effective cooperation on border issues, mutual support on national unification (the Taiwan issue for China and Chechnya for Russia), and major economic cooperation and trade projects pushed by the two governments were the major achievements of the strategic cooperative partnership in this period.

March 1999 to September 2001

March 1999 has often been identified as the watershed in Sino-Russian relations exactly because it was also perceived as a watershed in terms of unilateralism on the part of the U.S. It has been suggested that the period from March 1999 to September 2001 was a period in which both China and Russia encountered severe challenges in the international environment; therefore, it was a period in which the two countries had the strongest common interests and the greatest need for mutual cooperation. This suggestion implies that the strategic cooperative partnership had become a checks-and-balances mechanism against U.S. unilateralism.

In March 1999, the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives passed the National Missile Defence (NMD) programme legislation, which was endorsed by President Bill Clinton the following July. At the same time, the Clinton administration also decided to cooperate with Japan and South Korea to develop a Theatre Missile Defence (TMD) programme. In the eyes of Russia, this could be interpreted as a threat to force it to engage in an arms race which it could not afford (Wu 2007: 38-39). Despite its financial difficulties at that time, the Russian government believed it could not give up the development of space weapons. Missile technology transfer between the U.S. and Japan, that is, the fur-

ther strengthening of the U.S.-Japan alliance, was perceived as a threat by both Moscow and Beijing. An NMD programme could easily compromise China's very limited second-strike capability. Chinese leaders believed that China had to engage in a significant improvement of its strategic weapons. They also felt that involvement in an expensive arms race might adversely affect China's economic development at this stage. If Taiwan was allowed to take part in the joint development of a TMD programme led by the U.S., it would amount to a de facto renewal of the U.S.-Taiwan military alliance.

NATO's military campaign in Kosovo, initiated in March 1999, was also seen as a common threat. Both China and Russia considered this a weakening of the United Nations, and a potential precedent for the U.S. to intervene in their own respective attempts to maintain the unity of their states (the Taiwan and Chechnya issues) through non-peaceful means.

During this period, Beijing and Moscow came under pressure over the Taiwan and Chechnya issues respectively. In February and April 1999 the U.S. Defense Department released reports which strongly recommended the sale of hi-tech military equipment to Taiwan and its involvement in the Asia-Pacific TMD system. The Cox report, publicized by the U.S. House of Representatives (Select Committee of the United States House of Representatives 1999), generated strong criticism in China of the U.S.'s attempts to "demonize" the country. Meanwhile, the Chechen rebels launched a series of terrorist attacks in major Russian cities and criticism from the U.S. and other Western countries was viewed by Moscow as an attempt to "internationalize" the Chechen issue.

On the day of the "accidental" bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO in May 1999, President Yeltsin publicly condemned NATO's "barbaric act"; the Russian foreign minister postponed indefinitely his visit to the United Kingdom, which had originally been scheduled to begin the same day. Two days afterwards, the Russian special envoy for Kosovo, Viktor Chernomyrdin, had emergency discussions with the top Chinese leaders on the crisis. On 1 June 1999, the Russian foreign minister, Igor Ivanov, visited Beijing. He was received by President Jiang Zemin, and the two foreign ministers released a press communiqué which emphasized that the termination of NATO bombing in Yugoslavia would be an "essential condition" for a political solution to the Kosovo issue. Chinese foreign policy experts consider Sino-Russian

cooperation, especially within the United Nations Security Council, to have been the crucial factor for bringing the issue back to the track of a political solution through the United Nations.

At this time, Beijing and Moscow had a relatively strong consensus on upholding the 1972 U.S.-Soviet Union Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. They advocated for the further reduction of offensive strategic weapons on the basis of maintaining the treaty. They opposed the deployment of non-strategic ballistic missile defence systems in the Asia-Pacific region and the involvement of Taiwan in such systems. In April 1999 China and Russia initiated the mechanism of a biannual strategic stabilization consultation at the vice-foreign minister level. From 1999 to 2001, their joint resolution on maintaining and observing the ABM Treaty was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly every year.

Russia was probably the strongest supporter of China's Taiwan position. In 1998 the Russian government clearly stated its "four no's" commitment: that it would not support any form of Taiwanese independence; that it would not support a "two Chinas" or "one China, one Taiwan" position; that it would not support Taiwan joining the United Nations or other international organizations whose memberships were restricted to sovereign states; and that it would not sell weapons to Taiwan. In July 2000 it further committed to rejecting any external forces interfering in the resolution of the Taiwan question. In return, China supported Russia's upholding of its state sovereignty and territorial integrity in all bilateral documents and considered the Chechen question Russia's domestic affair.

The establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on 15 June 2001 was certainly an important achievement in the development of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperative partnership. Cooperation between the two countries regarding security and economic development in the Eurasian land mass had become stronger than their competition. China's presence in a region considered Russia's traditional sphere of interest was accepted.

China's experts on Russia believe that the two countries' mutual strategic demands in this period were symmetrical. Both felt an urgent need to engage in strategic cooperation to counter U.S. unilateralism. But they were not allies, and they both wanted to maintain a dialogue and good relations with the U.S. China's experts believe that the conclusion of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and

Cooperation in July 2001 was an important achievement, and that the bilateral relationship had not been affected by the leadership succession in Russia.

September 2001 to October 2004

This was a period of difficulties in Sino-Russian relations. In this period, the Bush administration actively improved relations with Russia with a view to creating balance against China, while the neoconservatives in the U.S. argued that Russia was a democracy while China was not. In the wake of 9/11 the Putin administration strongly backed the U.S., including encouraging the Central Asian republics to provide military facilities for the U.S., increasing its assistance to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan to fight the Taliban regime, etc. The conservative mainstream in the U.S. then had a very positive perception of the Putin administration and promoted the cultivation of Russia and India in order to "contain" China (Garver 2002).

At the bilateral level, problems began to emerge. At the end of 2002, the Russian State Duma passed a resolution preventing foreign state-owned oil companies from purchasing Russia's privatized state assets, thus denying China National Petroleum Corporation the opportunity to acquire a controlling share of Slavneft, which was being auctioned by the Russian authorities (Butrin and Skorobogatko 2002). Then the latter backtracked on an earlier commitment to build an oil pipeline from Angarsk in eastern Siberia to Daqing in China's north-east (MP 2003). In the summer of 2004 the Dalai Lama was given a visa to visit the Buddhist areas of Russia despite the concerns expressed by the Chinese leadership.

At the international level, in December 2001, the U.S. withdrew from the ABM Treaty with the concurrence of the Putin administration. In November of the same year, when Putin visited the U.S. and was received by President George W. Bush in his Texas ranch, the two leaders had reached an understanding. When Bush formally announced the U.S. American withdrawal from the treaty in the following month he stated that Putin agreed that the decision would not damage the relations between the two countries nor Russia's security (see SCMP 2001a, 2001b). During Putin's visit to the U.S. the two leaders also reached a verbal agreement to reduce the two countries' strategic nuclear arsenals by two-thirds to the level of the 1960s in the next decade (MP 2001). Russia obviously had to cut its nuclear weapons in order to reduce its

defence expenditure, something which was essential to overcoming its economic difficulties. Russia lacked the economic resources to engage in an arms race with the U.S.; it had to make the concessions because of its limitations. The reward for Russia was that NATO agreed to set up a joint committee with policy-making powers on common action, thus allowing Russia a voice on NATO's security affairs, but without veto power (SCMP 2002).

Russia's common stand with France and Germany in strongly opposing the U.S. military campaign against Iraq was probably a surprise for the Bush administration. The U.S. and Russia exchanged accusations during the military campaign. The Russian government protested against American surveillance aircraft flying over Georgia; it criticized the U.S. attack for generating instability in the neighbouring areas, and the Russian legislature even suspended deliberations on the arms control treaty between the two countries.

The Russian position, however, changed significantly when the coalition forces were about to occupy Baghdad. At that point Putin openly indicated that he would not like to see a failure on the part of the coalition forces. In August 2003 he stated that Russia would be willing to assume an active role in the stabilization and reconstruction processes in Iraq after the war; Russia also supported the United Nations Security Council in approving a multinational force led by the U.S. to be deployed in Iraq. To secure better support from Russia, the Bush administration granted Russia a contract to equip two Iraqi armoured divisions. The official Chinese media avoided open criticism of the Russian position, though China's experts often emphasized China's consistent stand and observed that Russia was more cooperative with the U.S. in Iraq's reconstruction.

China's experts on Russia believe that the Putin administration's strategic compromises were aimed at facilitating the establishment of a stable U.S.-Russian relationship so as to secure a better environment for developing Russia's economy. This was in line with Russia's basic policy of giving priority to its economic development. In many ways the Chinese leadership had been following a very similar line. Regarding the bilateral conflicts, these experts tended to regard them as inevitable and natural in the context of China and Russia rising or re-emerging as major powers. They were concerned, however, with the spread of the "China threat" perception in many Russian circles.

Chinese leaders attempted to maintain the momentum of the strategic cooperative partnership by playing down the frictions and strengthening common interests. It was said that China's arms imports from Russia amounted to 2 billion USD per annum in this period. Until 2003, 90 per cent of China's arms imports originated from Russia; China remained its most important client, absorbing 40 per cent of its arms exports in 2003. At the end of the year, when it appeared likely that the European Union would terminate its arms embargo against China, Chinese president Hu Jintao had a telephone conversation with Putin, reaffirming that cooperation in military technology would remain an important element of the strategic cooperative partnership (Wu 2007: 44).

In recent decades, Russia has been China's principal source of advanced weaponry – from Su-27 fighter aircraft to Kilo-class submarines and Sovremenny-class destroyers – and the Russian armament industry has needed the sales. But dissatisfaction has existed on both sides. On the part of China, there have been muted complaints that Russia has offered more advanced equipment to India and other countries, and there have been attempts to ensure that the weapons are inappropriate for application along the Sino-Russian border. The Russian side has been concerned about the "reverse engineering processes" in China and even its sales of weapons based on Russian technology to other Third World countries.

The strengthening of the SCO was certainly an indicator of the healthy state of Sino-Russian relations. In September 2001, SCO members concluded a memorandum on regional economic cooperation as well as trade and investment facilitation; they also agreed on scheduled meetings for their premiers. In June 2002, during the summit meeting in St. Petersburg, they signed the SCO Charter and an agreement on the establishment of a regional anti-terrorism agency. In August 2003 they held an anti-terrorism military exercise together, and in the following year the SCO established its secretariat in Beijing and its regional anti-terrorism agency in Tashkent.

After the U.S. withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, China and Russia maintained their strategic-stabilization construction mechanism. In June 2002 the two governments jointly presented a working paper on the prevention of the militarization of outer space to the United Nations Disarmament Conference in Geneva. They also continued to oppose the inclusion of Taiwan in any missile-defence programmes (Gill 1998; Gill and Medeiros 2000).

To reduce the impact of the "China threat" perception, both countries worked to expand bilateral trade and investment, as well as various exchanges. At the Sino-Russian Committee on Education, Culture, Public Health, and Sports Cooperation meeting in July 2002, the promotion of tourism was accorded priority. The two presidents also agreed to make 2004 the year of friendship among youth to strengthen related exchanges. In 2001 the Sino-Russian Science and Technology Park was initiated in Zhejiang and the Sino-Russian Centre for Scientific-technological Cooperation and its Industrial Application was launched in Heilongjiang. In May 2003 a joint working group on immigration issues was established, and in September 2004 the two governments completed the bilateral negotiations on Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). Both countries mutually recognized their respective market-economy status. Chinese enterprises were encouraged to take part in the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East, while Russian enterprises were asked to move to western China and the north-east.

In the aftermath of 9/11, improvements in U.S.-Russian relations reduced the Russian demand for Sino-Russian cooperation in restraining U.S. unilateralism. On the other hand, the Bush administration's perception of China as a "strategic competitor" and the tension generated by the "spy plane" incident and the arms sales to Taiwan in the first half of 2001 prompted China to continue to consider the common efforts to impose checks and balances on U.S. unilateralism the core of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperative partnership.

China's foreign policy think tanks believed that by then the bilateral strategic partnership had its own momentum, and that it had not been adversely affected by the Bush administration's active cultivation of Russia. This was probably partly diplomatic language to hide China's worries, but this apparent optimism was also likely based on the assessment that the Bush administration would not award the truly equal status that the Putin administration sought, and that the latter's pursuit of major-power status would ultimately push it back into cooperation with China in order to promote multipolarity. Meanwhile, Chinese leaders also demonstrated that when common global interests were weakened, they would focus more on bilateral and regional issues, and more on economic interests than strategic interests.

China's foreign policy think tanks would probably agree with the observations of international experts on Russia such as Robert Legvold, Dmitri Trenin and Bobo Lo that Putin's Russia desired peace, stability

and "happy mutual interaction" with the U.S., while there continued to be serious disagreements over individual policies and the normative basis for cooperation (Legvold 2002/2003). Above all, Russia could be a local or regional competitor of the U.S., but this competition was no longer a zero-sum game (Trenin and Lo 2005: 19).

October 2004 to the End of 2007

In October 2004, Putin began to exert pressure on the business oligarchs in order to eliminate their political influence. His administration gradually reabsorbed the strategic economic sectors, including the energy and armaments industries, into the state sector. His administration also began to control the media, so as to reduce the voice of the opposition and the critics of his administration. Further, Putin strengthened the powers of the presidency and the federal government over the local governments; the president now effectively controlled the appointment and dismissal of local heads of government. The Bush administration was concerned that authoritarianism had quietly returned to Russia. In February 2005 at their meeting in Bratislava, Bush openly asked Putin to observe the principles of democracy. In the following May when Bush was in Moscow he met leaders of the opposition and indicated that the U.S. would help Russia to build "civil society". In *The National Security Strategy of The United States of America*, released in March 2006, Russia was said to have been deviating from the road of liberty and democracy (Bush 2006). On 4 May 2006, U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney openly criticized the Putin administration during a speech in Lithuania for unfairly restricting Russian citizens' rights and for using energy as a tool to threaten and blackmail CIS members. Putin hit back a few days later in his State of the Union address and implicitly labelled the U.S. "Comrade Wolf".

China's foreign policy experts evaluated the political reforms of the Putin administration favourably, partly because the Chinese leadership favoured the central government's retaining of ultimate control in China and partly because it had been concerned with the distinction between China and Russia as a non-democracy and a democracy. By 2005 and 2006, new conflicts emerged in U.S.-Russian relations. When the likelihood of the U.S. and its Western allies launching an air strike against Iran increased, Russia offered to sell to Iran twenty-nine sets of surface-to-air missile systems amounting to 700 million USD at the end of 2005. Russia also opposed the sanctions imposed on Iraq by the United Nations Security Council and the Security Council's measures in opposition

to the policies of the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration. In March 2006 a Hamas delegation from Palestine was invited to visit Moscow. This was an obvious diplomatic coup for the Hamas government, which was boycotted by the U.S. and its allies. This invitation was generally interpreted as a challenge to the U.S.'s Middle East policy. Similarly, Hugo Chavez, president of Venezuela, visited Russia in July 2006. The two governments concluded a 1 billion USD agreement on the sale of Russian fighters and helicopters to Venezuela.

In September 2006, the spy plane incident in Georgia highlighted the tension between Russia and the U.S. in their competition for spheres of influence. The government of Mikhail Saakashvili arrested the Russian officers in an attempt to force the withdrawal of Russian forces from Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Apparently this move enjoyed the support of the Bush administration. Russia not only retaliated, but also continued to promote the regions as unrecognized states in order to deter Georgia from quickly joining NATO. The Putin administration has since continued to strengthen the Eurasia Economic Community and the CIS Collective Security Treaty Organization, and it has shown little hesitation in using the supply of cheaper oil and natural gas to exert pressure on its CIS neighbours. In sum, the U.S.-Russian competition in the CIS states will likely continue.

The Georgia crisis in August 2008 is a good example of this competition. While China perceived the improvement of relations with Russia by the Bush administration at the beginning of this millennium as a U.S. attempt to "contain" its own peaceful rise, it did not consider a U.S.-Russian confrontation in its interest. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership must not become a liability in Beijing's approach to Washington, as it needed cordial Sino-U.S. relations in order to maintain a peaceful international environment in which to concentrate on its modernization. In the subsequent SCO summit in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan, President Hu Jintao succeeded in dampening Russian lobbying efforts for the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Apparently, China's position was appreciated by the Central Asian states and served to enhance its status in the region (Lo 2008a).

In the energy field, competition between the U.S. and Russia also sharpened. Russia believed that its influence in the Caspian region would be minimized because of several projects (Guseinov, Denisov and Goncharenko 2007; Feygin 2007). In his annual State of the Union address in May 2006, President Putin noted that many new threats had appeared in

the course of the emerging new world, and that Russian military and foreign policy doctrines had to meet the urgent challenges. Upgrading the country's strategic nuclear capability was accorded priority. In view of its huge energy wealth, Russia's defence budget has been increasing at an annual rate of around 20 per cent in recent years; and the defence budget for fiscal year 2007, approved by the State Duma in August 2006, was 821.2 billion RUR, up 23 per cent from a year earlier (The National Institute for Defense Studies 2007: 188-189).

In view of the sharpening contradictions and competition between Russia and the U.S., China's foreign policy experts have considered the bilateral relationship to be one between neither friends nor enemies. The ideological and social system differences constituting the foundation of the Cold War no longer existed. Russia still accepted the global integration process, and it did not have the resources to engage in comprehensive competition with the U.S. But the rapid expansion of its national power meant that it was much less willing to make concessions. The U.S.'s continued push for NATO's eastward expansion, its promotion of "coloured revolutions" in CIS member states, and its pursuit of the maintenance of its superiority in strategic weapons capability meant that closer Sino-Russian cooperation had a greater appeal for Russia. China's foreign policy experts certainly have not seen the bilateral relationship as "an axis of convenience"; rather, they have considered the logic for cooperation to be a long-term logic (Lo 2008b and 2008c).

The final settlement of the Sino-Russian border issue was achieved with the conclusion of the supplementary agreement on the eastern section of the Sino-Russian border in October 2004 during Putin's China visit. However, today there is a view, especially among Chinese pro-democracy activists outside China, that Beijing made too many concessions, and nationalists in both countries still have grievances regarding the border issue (Gill 2007: 47-58). The two heads of state also agreed to establish a national security consultative mechanism, while a large-scale joint military exercise "Peace Mission – 2005" was held in August 2005. During the summit meeting both countries approved the implementation guidelines of the Sino-Russian Treaty of Good Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation for the next four years, defining cooperation programmes in various sectors.

Bilateral trade between the countries expanded rapidly between 2000 and 2005, from 8 billion USD to 29 billion USD. After years of uncertainties and bargaining, the construction of Russia's longest pipe-

line, from eastern Siberia to the Pacific Ocean, was launched in April 2006. The pipeline linked Taishet in Irkutsk to Nakhodka on the Pacific, from where oil will be exported to Japan, South Korea, and other countries. However, an extension of the pipeline from Skovorodino to Daqing in China's north-east was also to be built (AFP 2006; Xinhua 2006). Finally, in order to develop people-to-people diplomacy, Russia organized a "Russia Year" in China in 2006 and China organized a "China Year" in Russia in the following year.

The aim of strengthening mutual strategic interests further facilitated Sino-Russian cooperation at the regional and international levels. The SCO's geopolitical coverage expanded to South Asia and the Persian Gulf as Mongolia, India, Pakistan, and Iran were granted observer status. The development of economic cooperation within the SCO framework implied that Russian suspicions regarding China's economic approach to Central Asia had declined (Zhao 2007: 30).

On 1 July 2005, Hu Jintao and Putin released a Sino-Russian Joint Statement on the International Order in the Twenty-first Century; this was a follow-up to the joint statement in 1997 on the establishment of global multipolarity and a new international order. China's foreign policy experts indicated that the statement "peace and development remain the main themes of the times" in the 2005 joint statement represented a common worldview on the part of the two governments. The joint statements spelled out their common positions on various important international issues, emphasized their historical responsibilities in establishing a new international order, and even outlined concrete ways to resolve the pressing problems in contemporary international politics. Hence these experts believed that after a decade of adjustments, Sino-Russian relations had entered a stage of stable and pragmatic development. Both sides would consider national interests in a comprehensive manner; they would pursue their respective interests while showing respect for the other side's legitimate interests; they would recognize that competition exists in the bilateral relationship, and concessions would be made on a rational basis.

Conclusion

In the world of perceptions, it seems hard to discern what is "natural" and not. As this article has demonstrated, the idea of a "strategic triangle" remains in the thinking of most Chinese foreign policy experts to-

day, in turn reflecting and influencing the thinking of the Chinese leadership. Promoting multipolarity and checks and balances against U.S. unilateralism has been a very significant consideration on the part of the Chinese leadership in the post-Cold War era. Given the relative stability in U.S. relations with Japan and the European Union, changes in U.S.-Russian relations have probably become the most important variable in the push for multipolarity from Beijing's point of view. Chinese leaders assume that Sino-U.S. relations will remain relatively stable as they themselves will try hard to achieve this objective, and the U.S., too, appreciates China's role as "a responsible stakeholder" in international politics.

China's experts on Russia often refer to the legacy of the Czarist era. They tend to believe that Russia is eager to regain and maintain its major-power status, with the consequences that it cannot accept its role as a junior partner of the U.S., that it shares China's interests in promoting multipolarity and checks and balances against U.S. unilateralism, and that it will re-establish and expand its influence as a major power, as Stephen Blank has observed,

> the perceptions of waning power are difficult for Russian leaders to accept and translate into policy. Russia is disinclined to accept limits on its capability to achieve its perceived vital interests (Blank 2001: 144).

These experts are now much less concerned with the Bush administration's improvement of relations with Russia in order to contain China as they were at the beginning of this century. Obviously, both China and Russia consider their respective relations with the U.S. the most important bilateral relationship in their respective foreign policy frameworks, and both will avoid confrontation with the U.S. because of their weaknesses. But in balancing U.S. unilateralism, China and Russia will have to turn to each other because Japan and the European Union are less likely to oppose the U.S. Hence, the "strategic triangle" is a significant part of the multipolarity which the two countries would like to promote.

China's foreign policy experts believe that in the past decade and a half, Sino-Russian relations have improved when Russia has become disappointed with the support from the U.S. or when the latter failed to meet Russia's expectations as a major power. There were also periods of time when Russia anticipated closer relations with the U.S. and thus neglected China's vital interests. The Chinese leadership, however, has exercised restraint in such times and avoided open criticism of its Russian counterpart. Since the Chinese think tanks and the media have to

toe the official line strictly in foreign policy, there have been no open criticisms of Russia from the early 1990s onwards. Apparently this restraint has been based on an appreciation of the fact that Russia considers the U.S. a more significant factor than China in its foreign policy; the reverse is true for China too. Hence, China has accepted that Russia has to pursue its own national interests, even when those of China have been compromised. The most significant examples are Russia's acceptance of the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty and the oil pipeline from Eastern Siberia to China's north-east. Both sides have therefore gradually developed a realistic appraisal of the limitations of the strategic cooperative partnership. This realistic appraisal has probably become well established in the early part of this century. This appraisal tends to concentrate on the assumption of substantial common interests, rather than on common ideological positions and values; hence, it helps to downplay historical memories of mutual distrust and suspicion. An important indicator of the common interests has been the expanding bilateral trade, which amounted to 56.8 billion USD in 2008.[2]

There has been a stronger optimism in Beijing in recent years concerning Sino-Russian relations because of the expanding economic ties, Russia's increasing oil wealth and Putin's authoritarian orientations. Developing economic ties means that the bilateral relationship has a firmer foundation and that even in times of divergent strategic interests and other conflicts there will be sufficient common interests to maintain cordial relations. In this respect, Sino-Russian relations are increasingly similar to Sino-U.S. relations.

Russia's oil wealth facilitated the Putin administration's pursuit of major-power status and the strengthening of Russia's military strength. It will be increasingly more difficult for the U.S. to cultivate ties with Russia, which has itself become more emboldened in its efforts to curb U.S. unilateralism. This strength may well have contributed to a reduction of Russia's suspicions regarding China's advance in Central Asia, too. Some China experts, however, are aware of Russia's economic weaknesses and its over-dependence on energy resources. They have been proven right as Russia has been hard hit by the recent global financial crisis. President Dmitry Medvedev has proposed a "new security architecture", and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin called for joint approaches to the crisis at

2 Though the bilateral trade increased 18 per cent year-on-year in 2008, it was down 42 per cent year-on-year in January 2009 because of the global financial crisis (RIA Novosti 2009).

Davos. It appears that Moscow is indicating a renewed desire to engage with the West, and there has been little co-ordination with Beijing.

In contrast to the West, there appears to be general acceptance of Putin's authoritarian measures in Beijing. A democratic Russia might well introduce more uncertainties into the bilateral relationship. The restoration of an authoritarian regime in Russia means that there will be fewer incentives for the West to improve relations with Russia to contain China. A strong federal government in Moscow has been in a better position to suppress the articulation of local interests against China in the Russian Far East. Putin's stepping down from the presidency does not seem to have diluted this optimism. There is a general expectation in Beijing that Putin remains in control; China's media are not interested in speculations that Medvedev may step out of Putin's shadow and initiate reforms (Matthews and Nemtsova 2009).

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