

Strategic Insight

The Limits of Chinese-Russian Strategic Collaboration

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On July 16, Beijing and Moscow celebrated the first anniversary of their treaty of friendship and cooperation. The treaty codified agreement between the two sides to collaborate in diluting what each saw as American domination of the post-Cold War international order. Events in the year since the treaty's signing, however, have underscored how limited the basis for strategic collaboration between Russia and China actually is.

The treaty, signed in Moscow last year by Russian President Vladimir Putin and PRC President Jiang Zemin, invites immediate comparison with the treaty between Beijing and Moscow in the early Cold War years. That treaty, signed in Moscow on February 14, 1950 by Josef Stalin and Mao Zedong, was a full-fledged security alliance, calling for each side to render "military and other assistance with all means at its disposal" to the other in the event of an attack by "Japan or states allied with it"—implicitly referring to the United States.

The 1950 treaty rested on a powerful convergence of interest and ideals between the two sides. On Moscow's part, the treaty locked the new People's Republic of China into the Soviet bloc security system built around the same kind of bilateral security treaties it had signed with the new East European communist regimes. On Beijing's part, the 1950 treaty brought China under the Soviet security umbrella at a time of an uncertain American posture toward Beijing. It also paved the way for massive Soviet assistance in recasting China's economy according to the Stalinist planned economy model and in creating Soviet-style socialist political institutions. For both sides, the treaty reflected shared Stalinist ideological views on the world communist movement, on East-West relations, and on the nature of socialism.

Despite these shared interests and ideals, however, the 1950 alliance foundered over the next ten years. The ensuing Sino-Soviet split of the late 1950s grew out of fundamental changes in Moscow's foreign policy—especially its line of "peaceful coexistence" with the West—and its evolving domestic policies under Stalin's successor Nikita Khrushchev, whom Mao believed to have betrayed Chinese national interests and fundamental Marxist-Leninist principles. By 1963, the Sino-Soviet treaty was a dead letter, although it did not formally expire until 1980.

The 2001 Russian-Chinese treaty is far more limited than the 1950 alliance. First, it is not a security alliance, including no provision for mutual defense in the event of attack by a third country. It states only that the two sides will have "immediate contact and consultations" if either perceives a threat to its security interests. Second, there is no congruence of political ideology, as post-Soviet Russia has emerged as a democracy of a kind while China remains an authoritarian communist state. Third, the two sides share important economic interests, but now the respective roles are reversed from what they were in the 1950s. Russia is working to convert its former planned economy to an open market economy, to integrate itself into the broader world economic order and gain membership in the WTO. China has already made great advances in dismantling its Stalinist economic system in favor of a market-based order, is the world's sixth-ranking trading nation, and attained membership in the WTO last year.

Nevertheless, the 2001 treaty was important because it codified important trends of Russian-Chinese cooperation through the post-Cold War decade. For example, through the 1990s, bilateral trade grew significantly. Chinese consumer goods occupied a growing niche in Russia. In 2001, Russia became China's eighth-ranking trade partner, moving up from eleventh the year before; in the first five months of 2002, Sino-Russian trade expanded by 20 percent over 2001. The 2001 treaty pledged new steps to facilitate further growth in trade.

The most significant elements in the 2001 treaty, however, dealt with strategic collaboration. In this regard, the treaty reflected shared concerns expressed repeatedly over the preceding several years about American "hegemonism" in the international system. In April 1997, former President Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin signed a joint statement in Moscow establishing a "strategic partnership" between Russia and China for the purpose of promoting "the multipolarization of the world and the establishment of a new international order" and opposing any country that seeks "hegemony, practices power politics, or monopolizes international affairs"—implicitly referring to Washington's unipolar position of predominating power in the international system. This pledge for strategic cooperation was renewed repeatedly in subsequent annual bilateral summits between the two countries, including Vladimir Putin's first trip to China, in July 1999, after becoming Russia's president. The 2001 treaty, agreed on in principle during Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in 2000, grew out of this pattern of strategic collaboration.

Russian-Chinese strategic collaboration rested on mutual perceptions of national interest. Each country saw itself potentially threatened by the expansion in the post-Cold War period of American-led Cold War security alliances—Moscow to the west by NATO expansion, and Beijing to the east by the modifications to the guidelines implementing the 1960 U.S.-Japan security treaty. Both sides saw advantage in promoting a "multipolar" international order in which several lesser great powers—themselves included—might balance against overwhelming American military, economic, technological, and "soft" power in the world. Both sides collaborated to stabilize a power vacuum in Central Asia created by the collapse of the Soviet Union, establishing a regional political and security cooperation mechanism in the region, first known as the "Shanghai Five" (Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, and Tajikstan) and, in 2001, the "Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (adding Uzbekistan to the previous five). Russia, along with Israel, became China's most important source for advanced military hardware and technology, helping Beijing acquire what its own defense industries could not produce and to overcome the Western sanctions imposed in the wake of the 1989 Tiananmen crisis; and helping Russia prop up its own sagging defense industrial sector. During Putin's July 1999 visit to Beijing, the two sides signed a joint statement reiterating their support for the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and their opposition to American efforts to build a national missile defense system.

The 2001 treaty encapsulated these joint strategic interests, and they were reaffirmed explicitly in Russian and Chinese media accounts of Putin's and Jiang's talks during the visit and in commentary following the signing of the treaty. Over the ensuing year, Moscow and Beijing found occasion to stand united on international issues involving American power. Both sides, for example, expressed public disagreement with President Bush's characterization of Baghdad, Tehran, and Pyongyang as an "axis of evil" in his State of the Union speech last January. Since then, Beijing has commented favorably on Moscow's nuclear cooperation with Iran and its economic and technical ties to Baghdad.

The year since the treaty's signing, however, has demonstrated much more clearly the limits of Russian-Chinese strategic collaboration, not its breadth or depth. Repeatedly through the year, each side has found itself acceding to new U.S. steps in areas of critical national interest, despite their mutual pledge to collaborate. For example:

- Beijing watched quietly as Moscow ultimately acceded to Washington's announcement last December of its intention to withdraw from the ABM treaty in the spring of this year.
- Beijing expressed public understanding but seemed privately dismayed at Moscow's tilt toward the West reflected in Moscow's admission to a new NATO-Russia Council.
- Both Beijing and Moscow moved quickly to cooperate with Washington in the "war on terrorism" following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon. Both made a

public show of "consulting" on how to fight terrorism—as required by the 2001 treaty—and each attempted to bend the American agenda to suit their own, Moscow in suppressing the Chechens and Beijing in suppressing Uyghur unrest in Xinjiang. But each acted separately on what each recognized as an opportunity to improve bilateral relations with Washington.

- No area of mutual concern more clearly reflected the limits on their strategic collaboration than their acquiescence to the entry of American forces and a long-term security presence in Central Asia, a region where Washington previously had none and where Beijing and Moscow had just completed a major effort to stabilize the region between them.

These accommodations to U.S. moves reflect a basic truth about Russian-Chinese strategic collaboration: however much each side sees shared strategic interests in diluting American power in the international system, each also recognizes that it possesses a significant and often greater interest in sustaining good relations with Washington. In this respect, there is a basic symmetry in Russian-Chinese interests. Each perceives an interest in resisting overwhelming American power in the international order. But each also needs Washington in crucial ways. On Beijing's part, for example, China's continued economic development and prosperity rests on access to American markets. Roughly 40 percent of China's exports come to the United States, and China's trade volume with the United States was, by Beijing's own statistics, nearly eight times its trade with Russia. In contemplating resistance to American actions in the global arena that it perceives as potentially threatening, Beijing must also take into account the potential cost such resistance may have in bilateral economic and other ties with the United States. To a great extent, Moscow must make the same broad calculations.

In celebrating the anniversary of their 2001 treaty in July this year, therefore, expressions of strategic collaboration against Washington were muted. Presidents Putin and Jiang saluted the treaty anniversary in messages to each other. An editorial in the People's Daily—as the official voice of the Chinese Communist Party, the most politically important newspaper in China—applauded the year-old treaty as an enduring framework for Russian-Chinese bilateral friendship and as a model for establishing a "democratic, just, and rational new international order." But each of these authoritative expressions was subdued to the point of silence about the two sides' common interest in strategic collaboration in creating a "multipolar world" free from "hegemonism."

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