

# Sino-Russian Relations: Will the Strategic Partnership Endure?

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**A**fter the collapse of Soviet socialism in 1991, of all possible upgradings of bilateral great power relations, the least likely, according to the prevailing reasoning of the time, would be a fundamental improvement in Sino-Russian relations. Ideologically, Russia was blaming communism for its troubles, while China was desperately defending communism's so-called fundamental principles if not its historical contents. Politically, Moscow had narrowly escaped from the August 1991, pro-authoritarian coup to embrace democratic ideals, as Beijing readied itself for a Communist-style succession from the publicly venerated Deng Xiaoping to the hand-picked Jiang Zemin. Internationally, Russia and China were both supplicants to the United States, Japan, and Western European countries for assistance, investment, and markets; neither could promise the other what it most needed for the coming stage of economic restructuring and development. Nonetheless, as other great power relations—U.S.-Chinese and Russo-Japanese in particular, but also U.S.-Russian, Sino-Japanese, and arguably, even U.S.-Japanese—have failed to draw closer, Chinese and Russian leaders have announced one higher stage after another in their improving relationship. Now they claim to be strategic partners for the twenty-first century, achieving an unprecedented all-around advance.<sup>1</sup>

Not only did analysts fail to anticipate the rise of a Sino-Russian partnership, they have reached little consensus on what the partnership is, why it has developed, what it signifies, and how firm it is likely to be. This close relationship between two recent adversaries has come with a jolt in the confusing context of the global power realignment of the 1990s. Two utterly contradictory interpretations of it are vying to be taken seriously, with few alternatives in sight: The rejectionists deny that solemn declarations of partnership have meaning, suggesting that if this is not a fictitious marriage, it is at best a marriage of convenience that cannot last. The alarmists warn that this partnership gives continuity to a division of the globe that operated in the cold war and is resurfacing; in other words this

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is a remarriage between partners who regret the effects of their divorce and are mature enough not to repeat past mistakes.

On one hand, the rejectionists express contempt for the Sino-Russian partnership as a transparent bluff by two countries desperate to exert leverage on the United States.<sup>2</sup> In their view, the partnership has little foundation; it responds primarily to short-term tactical factors as Moscow strives to prevent NATO's expansion and Beijing focuses on Taiwan reunification; and it will crumble into acrimony as soon as it is put to a serious test. To the rejectionists, this is a superficial relationship not to be taken seriously.

On the other hand, the alarmists warn that the partnership reflects a civilizational divide nurtured in the 1950s by a Communist alliance and destined to shape the twenty-first century. If the Sino-Soviet schism occurred as a result of personality conflicts between Stalin's, and then Khrushchev's, "big brother" mentality and Mao's megalomania, exacerbated by ideological fervor, now the two countries need not be distracted from their deeply felt national interests.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the argument goes, given inflated nationalistic images of their rightful place as global powers, they will cling to each other, giving priority to techno-military cooperation in limiting the sway of the West and U.S. dominance. Alarmists foresee no shift in the world system in coming decades to challenge the staying power of the partnership between China and Russia.

In this article, I try to answer eight questions about Sino-Russian relations that neither the rejectionists nor the alarmists seem to be examining closely. I partially agree with the rejectionists that the foundation of the strategic partnership is unbalanced and fragile: Before one can confidently conclude that the partnership will endure, it must survive a series of tests over the coming years. I also partially agree with the alarmists that long-term interests can bind Russia and China together in a world dominated by the United States and its allies. Even when bilateral problems strain Sino-Russian relations, their national identities as great powers and deep regrets over the negative consequences of their earlier falling out will give them impetus to find common ground. Answers to the set of questions below, however, make clear that we can do a better job of predicting how bilateral relations are likely to evolve by avoiding the two extremes of rejecting or becoming alarmed at the strategic partnership.

### **Eight Questions for Examining Sino-Russian Relations**

1. What is the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, and through what stages has it evolved since 1992? This is the essential factual basis for further analysis. We need to trace the history of this bilateral relationship if we are to explain it.

2–3. What factors have motivated Russia to push for an increasingly close relationship with China? What factors have motivated China to respond favorably to this opportunity? These questions link domestic and international developments. The answers no doubt change somewhat from 1992 to 1997, and we need to emphasize the latter years as the relationship has grown closer.

4–5. How do the Russians envision the Sino-Russian relationship within the context of great power relations? How do the Chinese envision it? The world-

views of the two leaderships provide the context for understanding their motivations. Perceptions of the world order play a large role in evolving relations.

6. Dividing Sino-Russian relations into political, economic, public opinion, border, and other dimensions, what imbalances exist in the pace of improvement? Answers to this question probe the actual state of the relationship. The very unevenness of improvements sheds light on the challenges ahead in strengthening the foundation of relations.

7–8. What bilateral problems threaten to undermine the partnership? What actions by the United States, Japan, or global financial markets would be likely to exert a strong impact? These questions point us toward the future as we look ahead five to ten years.

The questions draw our attention to the evolution of relations, causes of improving relations, problems of unevenness, and challenges that stand in the way. Of course, diverse forces are at work, especially in two countries facing leadership transitions and in a global system still adjusting to the end of the cold war and the collapse of the Soviet Union. We should keep in mind that of all the relationships not involving the United States directly, the Sino-Russian relationship is most likely to influence that global system in the coming decade. Indeed, its unpredictability since 1991, and its significance, justify treating Sino-Russian relations as the principal wild card in international relations.

### **What Is the Partnership and Through What Stages Has It Evolved?**

Sino-Russian relations are bilateral ties between great powers in what both wishfully characterize as a multipolar world despite recognition of increasing economic interdependence. Unlike relations among great powers in the age of imperialism, between superpowers battling for hegemony in the cold war, or between superpowers and their dependent allies jockeying for advantage, these relations are of a new character. According to Moscow and Beijing, they are equal, they are based on noninterference in each other's internal affairs, and they are imbued with respect regardless of ideological, human rights, and other differences. Moreover, they are forward-looking, facing the twenty-first century, when the West is losing its hold over the world and a more diverse group of great powers will be ready to accommodate each other.<sup>4</sup>

Supposedly, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is not directed against any third party. If not, why is it necessary? In fact, the primary thrust of the new relationship is to address international questions differently than other parties do—regional problems in the Asia-Pacific, global problems within the purview of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and fundamental problems in establishing a new world political and economic order. The bilateral partnership drew closer from 1994 to 1996 as a means of increasing cooperation in opposition to hegemonism from the West and the pressure of power politics. It is against outside pressure: for human rights, for territorial separatism based on ethnicity, for continued separatism despite historical and ethnic bonds, for expanded military alliances, and for the establishment of a world system based on hierarchical power and the right of global institutions to intrude in

national matters.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, this partnership is targeted against the United States, NATO, Japan, and the U.S.-Japan security alliance.

The partnership evolved through several stages:

*Stage 1. Consolidating the gains of Sino-Soviet normalization and building good friendship ties.* Immediately after the breakup of the Soviet Union on 27 December 1991, a Chinese mission to Moscow succeeded in salvaging the gains of the previous decade in bilateral relations. It promised that China would respect Russia's choice and refrain from interference in internal affairs, as the Soviet Union had refrained in the case of China's internal troubles in June 1989. The deputy foreign ministers of the two sides affirmed continuity with the bilateral agreements reached in 1989 and 1991, including the treaty on border demarcation, and agreed on the establishment of a joint economic, trade, and science and technology committee to improve relations.<sup>6</sup> A month later at the United Nations Boris Yeltsin and Li Peng reaffirmed these understandings. In March, the Supreme Soviet ratified the 1991 border agreement. Continuity had been achieved.

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*Stage 2. Raising relations to a new level and opening the prospect of partnership.* In the second half of 1992, Russian leaders were upset with the West for failing to provide as much assistance and respect as expected and so frustrated by Japan that President Yeltsin behaved very undiplomatically in September by canceling a summit in Tokyo on short notice without any serious excuse.<sup>7</sup> An intense debate on foreign policy raged in Russia's Foreign Ministry and other government circles in the summer of 1992. A delegation from Beijing in September 1992 preparing for Yeltsin's visit to China was struck by the comments of Russian officials that Sino-Russian relations should markedly improve to reflect an abundance of common interests.<sup>8</sup> It is not likely to be coincidental that the very month that Yeltsin's advisors urged him to snub Tokyo they were pressing for close ties to Beijing. When Deputy Foreign Minister Georgyi Kunadze visited Beijing on 24–26 October, Russia was looking ahead to the summit visit in December as a means to build a foundation for what both sides had already agreed would be a new stage of bilateral relations.<sup>9</sup> Coming on the heels of rapidly expanding border trade and accelerated plans for Russian arms sales and military cooperation, these talks gave hope to advocates of closer relations on both sides. On 11–13 November, an academic conference in Beijing, “Sino-Russian Relations in New Circumstances,” accentuated what could be accomplished. Mikhail Titarenko, director of the Institute of the Far East in Russia's Academy of Sciences, made a pitch for cooperation on the glob-

al stage. He declared that in the Asia-Pacific region Russia regards Russo-Chinese relations as a partnership and that both benefit from maintaining the Yalta system in Asia, which permits no border changes—Taiwan cannot become independent, Mongolia cannot unite, and the four islands cannot be returned to Japan. Reinforcing Yeltsin's 15 September presidential declaration that Russia cannot recognize Taiwan, Vasileev, first deputy director of the Asia-Pacific Department in the Russian Foreign Ministry, insisted that Russia and China can establish partner relations. The language was upbeat: Russia recognizes that China is a world great power; Yeltsin accepts China as the first center of its Asian policy; Russia regards China as an important strategic partner. The Chinese were assured that with Yeltsin's visit, relations would rise to a new level.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the summit of 17–19 December 1992 became known as a historic breakthrough in relations; by all accounts the visit went even better than expected..

*Stage 3. Basking in a constructive partnership.* When Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev visited China on 26–29 January 1994 with a letter from President Yeltsin, he expressed Yeltsin's desire for Russo-Chinese relations to develop into a "constructive partnership." This was not a time when there was much to celebrate in bilateral relations. Border trade recently had reached a serious impasse and trade had begun to fall precipitously. Russians, especially in the Far East and Siberia, became aroused against Chinese immigration and the recently revealed details of the 1991 border demarcation that promised to transfer land to China.<sup>11</sup> The December 1993 State Duma elections had revealed the popularity of nationalist thinking in Russia, some of it directed against China. Yet, Moscow's response was to reassert and even to upgrade its ties with China after Beijing assured it of close cooperation in controlling border trade and regulating migration. It took Beijing some time to comprehend what was intended, but when President Jiang Zemin visited Moscow on 2–6 September 1994 the partnership received official status.

*Stage 4. Deepening the international significance of the constructive partnership.* In a series of meetings in March-June 1995, the intended role of the partnership in international relations became more clearly defined. On 1–2 March, Kozyrev asserted in Beijing the common interests of the two great powers, including Russia's desire to strengthen cooperation with China in the world arena. Opposing hegemonism and a unipolar world, he added that the two countries would strive together to establish a new world political and economic order based on equality and mutual benefit.<sup>12</sup> During Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow on 7–9 May for the celebration of victory against fascism fifty years earlier, Yeltsin again called for raising the level of bilateral relations and establishing true partnership relations. Countering demagogic attacks by Far Eastern governors and media on the demarcation, Yeltsin reassured the Chinese that the signed border treaty is sacred.<sup>13</sup> On 25–28 June, when Li Peng met in Moscow with Russia's leaders, he too stressed that the two countries have much in common in international affairs and do not need to listen to instructions from other countries. The aims of the partnership for shaping the world order were becoming clearer.

*Stage 5. Boosting the constructive partnership into a strategic partnership.* En route to China in April 1996, Yeltsin transmitted his request ahead to the Russian embassy to reword the official document of the summit. He asked to strengthen the partnership by substituting the word “strategic,” for the word “constructive.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, the two sides could better demonstrate the closeness of their new ties and the momentum of the evolving relationship. The Chinese leadership agreed. Although Yeltsin’s ill health from June 1996 to February 1997 made any follow-up difficult, Li Peng’s visit to Moscow in late December, when Yeltsin was beginning to resume work after heart bypass surgery and before he became ill with pneumonia, gave new vigor to plans for converting rhetoric into action.

The November 1997 summit occurred in a new context. After Jiang Zemin’s late October visit to the United States helped to stabilize one bilateral relationship, and Ryutaro Hashimoto’s early November trip to Krasnoyarsk gave momentum to a second, Boris Yeltsin’s presence in China failed to elicit much interest. The centerpiece of this summit was the completion of the border demarcation on schedule, but rather than trumpet this accomplishment the two sides kept the details secret. Obviously, the Russians felt too vulnerable at home to proceed openly at once with what had been decided. Trade figures already were slipping, adding to the doubts that common interests were as substantial as had been claimed. Yeltsin’s stopover in Harbin did little to remedy the poor state of cross-border cooperation. With no recent leap ahead in the rhetoric of partnership, the momentum of Sino-Russia relations was beginning to abate.

The above overview of official relations between Moscow and Beijing indicates a rather steady process of improvement with Moscow taking the lead. After consolidation of the gains of normalization in December 1991, during the first half of 1992, for Moscow China seemed to be of interest secondary to the West. This neglect ended by early fall, as a second stage of friendly relations was achieved. When, in late 1993, internal forces were pressuring Moscow to oppose Beijing’s “quiet expansionism,” Moscow countered by intensifying its relations to the third stage of a constructive partnership. In the first half of 1995, the relationship was strengthened and more clearly targeted. Finally, Moscow had sought and gained an even higher stage of strategic partnership in 1996. Five stages had followed quite smoothly one after the other, but by early 1998 no sixth stage was in sight.

### **Motivations in Russia and China for Close Relations**

In Russia the initial motives for building on normalization did not necessarily give priority to China. They signified a desire to maintain good relations with all of the world’s great powers and with all of Russia’s neighbors. By stabilizing its longstanding border, Russia could better turn its attention to the instability of its new borders with the former Soviet republics. Worried also about economic problems—shortages of consumer goods, a breakdown of supplies and markets for industrial production, and reduced funding for military acquisitions—Moscow came to see in China an economic partner. China was valued as a source of cheap

consumer goods, especially for Asiatic Russia, and became prized too as a purchaser of fertilizer, steel, and other raw materials. Preserving normalization, Russia anticipated border stabilization and regional trade as added benefits.<sup>15</sup>

In autumn 1992, Moscow's motives for upgrading relations intensified. Three problems had come to the fore. Pressure from Japan in withholding economic assistance in search of progress on the territorial dispute had angered Yeltsin personally. A closer relationship between Russia and China would show Tokyo that its pressure and its goal of using economic clout for ascendancy in northeast Asia were in vain. Many in Russia also faulted the United States for insufficient assistance and ingratitude now that Russia/the Soviet Union had made so many concessions, including the risky and increasingly disappointing plunge into shock therapy.<sup>16</sup> If Washington in 1991–92 was expecting to take its place at the top of the new world order, the obvious choice for Moscow was to turn to Beijing to express its refusal simply to fall into line. Finally, growing concern about the plight of the Russian diaspora in Central Asia gave Moscow an incentive to join forces with Beijing in opposing Islamic nationalism and reasserting control over the Near Abroad. The five newly independent Central Asian states found China eager to expand trade but unwilling to countenance maneuvering to reduce Russian influence and to expand Islamic networks across national boundaries.<sup>17</sup> At first, the two countries agreed that cooperation to foster economic development, including trade between Xinjiang and newly independent Central Asian states, would help to deter Islamic fundamentalism, but neither side found the funds for this. Geopolitical understandings came to take precedence. Reasoning that would lead to a partnership already had spread widely in Russia.

Boris Yeltsin felt that his grip on power was threatened by the strong electoral support for extreme nationalists in December 1993. In the following month, the decision to raise Sino-Russian relations to a partnership gave Yeltsin ammunition to claim that he was resisting U.S. hegemonism. When the nationalist mood did not ebb and Western pressure riled Moscow's elite even more, the Yeltsin administration focused the partnership more pointedly on international influence. As the presidential elections of mid-1996 drew closer, Yeltsin further bolstered Sino-Russian relations. Thus, he outflanked his Communist opponents, who could neither criticize Yeltsin for being soft on China nor argue as convincingly that Moscow had turned one-sidedly to the West. Yeltsin could gain credit for better sustaining Russia's military production by increasing arms sales to China.

By 1995–96, many in the Russian foreign policy elite had decided that the first priority was to halt or counteract NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe. Of all the great powers, only China supported Russia in this goal. By joining with Beijing in resisting NATO expansion, Moscow could at least appear to have some international leverage.

Although elections have come and gone, the Sino-Russian partnership means as much to Russia in 1997 as it did at any previous time. As argued above, Russia's motivations are not just short-term electoral effect or temporary warnings to other great powers. At least five motivations show signs of becoming long-term: (1) opposition to perceived U.S. hegemonism and a Western-based world order; (2) oppo-

sition to Islamic nationalism in Central Asia; (3) resistance to Japanese economic power being transformed into ascendancy in northeast Asia; (4) need for military-industrial transformation drawing on cross-national resources; and (5) desire to stabilize borders and strengthen border economies as means to modernization.

China's motivations for improving relations with Russia also evolved over five years. In January 1992, Deng Xiaoping concluded a debate over the collapse of the Soviet Union with a decisive acceleration in China's economic reforms and a firm conclusion that the regional and world environment had become more favorable for China.<sup>18</sup> Avoiding the mistakes of its neighbor and original mentor, the PRC would shift to a market economy and open its border regions as well as its coast to foreign trade. Good neighborly relations with Russia would permit it to pursue these economic reforms while restraining military costs.

In 1992, China was still breaking free of the isolation it had experienced after June 1989. Whereas some Chinese analysts warned that the collapse of the Soviet Union and its socialist system would lead to containment and new pressures on China, and even hinted that in the past socialist countries should have done more to assist each other (a rare sign of revisionism in China over the Sino-Soviet dispute and the slow pace of normalization), the official view optimistically foresaw increased opportunities on China's borders.<sup>19</sup> By expanding economic ties—trade, joint ventures, contract labor, and so forth—with Russia and the Central Asian states, China would accelerate its overall modernization and reduce regional inequalities. The political spillover would be positive, spurring Sino-Russian cooperation within the context of northeast Asian regionalism. Quick to doubt the efficacy of shock therapy and Western assistance for Russia's economy, Beijing anticipated neither that a close liaison between Russia and the West would last nor that Russia would rapidly sour on its preference for ties to the West.<sup>20</sup>

In November 1992, the Chinese seemed surprised to learn that Bill Clinton, who had pledged to get tougher on Beijing, would be the next U.S. president. China's leaders were in no mood to back down, having earlier in the fall—at the Fourteenth Party Congress—congratulated themselves on China's successes, especially in accelerated economic growth. Yeltsin's offer to improve relations found a receptive audience.

Since 1987, with the onset of Gorbachev's "new thinking," Chinese leaders had worried about the close relations Moscow was forging with countries in the West, although indirect criticisms gave rise to a sharper tone only after June 1989.<sup>21</sup> The Chinese never accepted that Russian national interests could be reflected by "universal human values." Normalization of bilateral relations in 1989 was accompanied by solutions to the pressing problems that Beijing had treated as preconditions, but not by a shared vision of the world order. The mood in Beijing was marked by accusations against the West's strategy of "peaceful evolution," anxieties over the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and later in parts of Asia, and a sense of isolation resulting from Moscow's far-reaching rapprochement with capitalist countries. Thus, in late 1992 China's leaders took heart from news that Russia was moving toward an equilibrium between West and East. At long last, the strategic triangle was back in operation.

By early 1994, Sino-American relations had deteriorated. Hopes for a large Chinese economic contribution to Siberia and the Russian Far East were fading, but the merit of a partnership for international influence was more apparent. Beijing sought more maneuverability. It also welcomed stability in Central Asia so that nationalist separatism that had engulfed the Soviet Union would not spread into Xinjiang province. Above all, its theory of multipolarity required a strong and independent Russia to resist the United States.<sup>22</sup>

In 1995–96, Beijing seemed preoccupied with the danger of Taiwan independence and the prospect that the United States and Japan would give at least tacit approval and support to this cause. Partnership with Moscow offered a counter-

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weight. To be sure, Russia had weakened more than Chinese analysts had predicted, diminishing its value as the third side in the strategic triangle. As Jiang Zemin strengthened his position as heir to Deng Xiaoping in the second half of 1996 and prospects for improved relations with the Clinton administration were rising, reformers made the

case that China’s reasons for strengthening relations with Russia had reached a limit. Without retreating in its ties with Russia, China, in this logic, should now tilt the balance somewhat back toward closer relations with the United States along with greater integration into the world economy.<sup>23</sup>

#### **How Do the Russians and Chinese Envision Their Partnership within the Context of Great Power Relations?**

Elites in both countries regard the current world order as unjustly placing too much power in the hands of the United States and its allies. They are searching for ways to raise their own country’s national power without unduly sacrificing economic growth. In China, this has been a preoccupation since at least the beginning of the 1980s and became the subject of intense analysis after the end of the cold war. In Russia, the unexpected loss of power from 1989 to 1992 led to intense reflection on how to serve national interests and regain some power.

Both Beijing and Moscow recognize a great power triangle including the two of them and the United States and call for equality among these powers, without recognizing the United States as a superpower at a higher step on the ladder of powers or the alliance of the United States, the European Union, and Japan as the core of any world system. Both demand that the West abandon claims of universality for values it embraces. They insist that their own “traditional” values must not only resist Western encroachment but also not be subjected to pressure linked to human rights, minority nationalism, democratization, or international military cooperation. In effect, they each have accepted the other’s sphere of influence. Beijing recog-

nizes Russia's preeminence in the Commonwealth of Independent States, and Moscow does not treat China as a threat and recognizes that greater China, including Taiwan and Hong Kong, will firmly establish China as the dominant influence in East and Southeast Asia. The foundation of their common understanding is the belief that the United States wants to keep both countries weak: to deny them their regions of influence, to contain them through strengthened military alliances, and to keep them in their current, unnaturally weak state.<sup>24</sup>

China favors a multipolar world, limiting U.S. power.<sup>25</sup> It welcomes a clear separation between economic integration based on accelerating trade, and political and military competition in rejection of global principles such as human rights. China seeks a gradual transition to a new world political order, allowing more time for the rise of Asian countries as the balance shifts away from the West after two centuries of domination. Disturbed by the rapid decline of Russian power, Beijing is searching for a combination of powers as a counterweight to Washington. It also wants to limit Japan's all-around power, hesitating to recognize Japan as a political great power and denying that it has the right to become a military great power in a literature that dates back many years.<sup>26</sup>

The Sino-Russian partnership fits well into this Chinese worldview. If China cannot gain equilibrium between Soviet socialism and American capitalism, at least it can use Russian nationalism to form a partnership that limits U.S. power. The trick, however, is for nationalism in Russia to remain focused on American hegemonism and on efforts to impose the institutions and principles of the West, without being diverted to the specter of China's rising power on Russia's sparsely settled Asian borders.<sup>27</sup>

Some Chinese equate Yegor Gaidar and pro-Western "radical reformers" in Moscow with negative views on Sino-Russian relations, contrasting them to various Communists and self-proclaimed nationalists across Russia who express sympathy to the Chinese model and a positive outlook on Sino-Russian relations.<sup>28</sup> With this simplistic perspective, they can feel confident of harnessing Russian nationalism. Yet, few critics of China are in evidence among the pro-West reformers, and the Communists and nationalists are sharply divided. The harshest critics of China claim to be strong nationalists and usually take their place among the ranks of harsh critics of the West.<sup>29</sup>

Although it has agreed to a strategic partnership, Beijing has at least four reasons not to feel very confident of its Russian counterparts. First, with Boris Yeltsin's health in doubt, his past record toward China and the West inconsistent, the political battlefield heating up long before the next scheduled presidential elections in 2000, and no consensus yet on what Yeltsin calls the "Russian national idea," China sees political instability ahead. Second, with little sign of Russian economic growth, increasing weakness in Russian military power, and chaotic decentralization that limits Moscow's ability to shape events, China cannot easily define long-term prospects for cooperation. Third, aware that nationalistic local leaders, such as Governor Yevgenyi Nazdratenko in Primorskii krai, and some national figures as well are ready to scuttle the border demarcation agreement and intend to keep Chinese businessmen at arm's length, Chinese leaders

realize that the foundation for close relations is not yet strong. Fourth, Russian leaders have spoken with so many voices about their opposition to the expansion of NATO that Beijing cannot be certain that this is the moral equivalent of Taiwan. These factors create a climate where few in Beijing expect the partnership to strengthen much in the near future, but they also foresee no collapse.

Chinese analysts and leaders are so used to seeing the world through the lens of national power that they have trouble believing that Russian leaders will not reason in the same way.<sup>30</sup> They assume that Russia will weigh its political and military national interests very high, while cautiously persisting in reforms to integrate its economy into the world system. Thus, they almost take for granted that Moscow will continue to oppose U.S. power and seek common cause with Beijing.<sup>31</sup> In the Chinese worldview, this match has a high probability of enduring at its current level and perhaps strengthening.

### **Imbalances in the Pace of Improvement**

New stages in relations have come suddenly through announcements by national leaders. This has resulted in a top-down approach, with politics racing ahead of economics and central relations outpacing local ties. In adopting the goal of an all-around partnership, leaders in both countries recognize the need to raise other aspects of bilateral relations to the level of their joint communiqués. They acknowledge that public opinion, especially in Russia, and the cultural dimension trail even economic relations.

In 1992, there was much talk of bottom-up improvement in Sino-Russian relations. Official relations had barely stabilized after Beijing was forced to stifle its sharp criticisms of Yeltsin of the previous several years and Moscow had to overlook Beijing's sympathy with the Communist plotters in the abortive August 1991 coup, but cross-border trade was seen as giving new momentum to relations.<sup>32</sup> Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Inner Mongolia took advantage of the March 1992 national approval for four border points to lead in the opening to Russia. Heihe and Suifenhe, two of the points, benefited from Heilongjiang's policy of more trading companies and faster growth in trade, and Hunchun and Manzhouli pursued commerce with similar vigor. For a time, it seemed as though economics would bound ahead of politics and local networks would advance beyond national ones. This strategy, however, failed, and in the last months of 1993 the course of relations changed as a result of agreements at the center to curtail visaless travel and in other ways to limit "wild" trade.<sup>33</sup> If from late 1992 through most of 1993 politics had come into balance with economics, then we can date the current imbalance to the transition culminating in Kozyrev's January 1994 visit to Beijing.

Neither Russian nor Chinese leaders in 1994 to 1996 were quick to realize how intractable their economic problems were. They soon agreed on joint measures to reorganize their economic cooperation, turning away from barter trade in suitcases toward solid, commercial transactions between established enterprises. Trade was slow to revive, however, and the switchover in methods proved to be very difficult.<sup>34</sup> Aversion to Chinese imports had scarcely diminished three years later, especially in the Russian Far East.

As political relations grew closer, economic ties remained quite stagnant. It was not a lack of long-run complementarity, but the depth of distrust based on personal experiences that made expanded economic ties difficult. Having earlier based trade on centrally planned deliveries from state enterprises, Russia and China have yet to find economic linkages that work in the era of market competition and contractual trust backed by strong, independent financial and judicial organs.

Moscow and Beijing agreed in 1996 to raise bilateral trade from \$5.5 billion to \$20 billion in the year 2000. Compared to bilateral trade between China and Japan or China and the United States of \$50 to \$60 billion, the target did not seem excessive. For countries pledged to partnership, sharing the longest border in the world, it did not seem unreasonable to raise trade to a much higher level. Yet, almost quadrupling cross-border trade seemed incomprehensible to local observers after three years of failure even to find ways to revive the peak levels of 1993.<sup>35</sup>

Russian reasoning on great power relations is based on a worldview in flux. Public opinion has been aroused over short-term slights, while responding to a succession of election campaigns. Over five years, however, several fundamental shifts have occurred with little chance of near-term reversal. First, Russian leaders turned against the notion of joining a single European community in favor of an equilibrium in which Europe is divided, and Russia remains independent with one foot in Europe and one in Asia. Not only will Europe remain divided, but Asia will also. Russia will play a role of blancing power on each continent, while globally it will assist in balancing East and West. It will do this by securing its own territory, regaining dominance in the expanse of the former Soviet Union, and finding other partners in Europe and Asia. Second, after disappointing results with shock therapy, Moscow turned away from diplomacy driven by market economics in favor of a mixture of national interests. Limited by the reluctance of nationalist and Communist legislators to approve laws necessary for large-scale foreign investment, Moscow has in fact mainly addressed problems other than production.

If foreign investment had risen to the forefront, relations with the United States and Japan might have towered above relations with China. Moscow would not have had the luxury of Hong Kong and overseas ethnic compatriots eager to respond to investment incentives and a very competitive and attractive investment environment. Yet, by concentrating on reassertion of control over the former Soviet republics and Chechnya and on symbolic matters such as Serbian nationalism, Moscow heightened the need to limit U.S. and Western influence. China became the obvious partner for symbolic support. While China would give verbal support to Moscow's war in Chechnya and its hegemony in Central Asia and would oppose

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***“Nowhere in Russian writings could one find a sense of trust in rising Chinese power as a source of long-term benefit for Russia.”***

Western and NATO intrusions into Ukraine, the Balkan countries, and Eastern Europe, Moscow could return the favor with support for Beijing's reunification plans for Taiwan and its free hand in Xinjiang and Tibet. Together, the two could resist Japan's plan to become a permanent member of the Security Council and any future U.S. schemes to make human rights part of a new world order.

Complicating Moscow's overtures to Beijing, however, was the widespread worldview that the principal problem for Russia was not a vague and distant world order, but the shadow of China on its border. In the Russian Far East, Japan's territorial impatience was yielding to pragmatism, while economic relations with Japan were posing no threat. Taiwan was using its financial muscle to lure Russian academics and politicians, as well as business circles, into visits and closer relations, which bothered Beijing.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, an uproar sounded over the 1997 deadline to complete the border demarcation with China, followed by the transfer of an area in Khasan district of Primorskii krai that allegedly would result in Chinese access to the Sea of Japan and ruinous competition with Russia's Pacific ports. A broad consensus emerged that the real danger to Moscow's control over Siberia and the Russian Far East came from China through illegal immigration, economic penetration, or simply a shift in the balance of power that left a sparsely populated territory, too costly for Moscow to support, vulnerable to Chinese subversion and gradual encroachment.<sup>37</sup> No matter how sincere were current Chinese protestations, how could Russians be certain that the vulnerability of distant appendages, and even of Central Asian states where sovereignty had already been lost, would not eventually invite Chinese meddling? Nowhere in Russian writings could one find a sense of trust in rising Chinese power as a source of long-term benefit for Russia. If Russia must sell advanced weaponry, it should at least not sell top-of-the-line SU-35s and T-80s. If it must balance relations with the West, let it not become dependent on relations with the PRC.<sup>38</sup>

Russia has essentially three products to offer the Chinese economy: (1) rich natural resources, mostly in Asia and of great value to a country with a huge, densely settled population and a rapid rate of development; (2) science and technology, much of it compatible with China's basic industries and higher education modeled in the 1950s on the Soviet Union; and (3) armaments, many compatible with China's outdated weapons of Soviet origin. For the resources to reach China in large quantity, Russia must decide, after years of indecision, to develop and export them, and China and Russia must agree to cooperate closely with Japan and international financial circles in a turn to multilateralism. By virtue of this decision, they would be acknowledging that their bilateral partnership is secondary to international forces of economic integration. Hopes for Soviet, and later Russian, science and technology to play a key role in the renovation of industrial enterprises built with Soviet assistance faded as it became clear that on neither side did firms have the funds to proceed with technology transfers, and even if they did, the Chinese would obtain mostly outdated technology unlikely to prove profitable in global market competition. This leaves armaments from Russia as the principal asset with appeal in bilateral dealings. Beijing agreed to buy some of the arms made available, but it had to realize that it was acquiring 1970s tech-

nology while its potential adversaries were developing or might gain access to technology for the twenty-first century.

### **What Problems Threaten the Partnership?**

The first hurdle was border demarcation, scheduled for completion in 1997. In 1991, after nearly three decades of accusations by the Chinese and intermittent negotiations, it appeared that at last a settlement had been reached. Despite grievances over Russian imperialism and unequal treaties in the nineteenth century, China would settle for minor adjustments in accord with international standards of demarcating the midflow of river currents. Some islands on the Chinese side of the flow and a few small parcels of land measuring in the hundreds of hectares would be transferred to China, at the same time as other inconsequential adjustments would favor Russia.

As the initially secret terms of the agreement became known following its March 1992 ratification by the Russian parliament, three stumbling blocks appeared. The most immediate was that residents of the Far East, led by Governor Nazdratenko, decided that what was called a demarcation to delimit a border more accurately, and to take into account changes in river currents, in fact constituted a territorial transfer. In their view, the procedures of 1991–92 violated Russia's Constitution of the time and of 1993, and the loss of territory would be considerable. From 1993 to 1997, leaders in the Far East with support in Moscow fought vigorously to renegotiate the 1991 agreement. The main land transfer involves three parcels in Primorskii krai. In 1996, setting the final demarcation posts there was delayed. Opponents in the Jewish Autonomous oblast, north of Heilongjiang, argued that the demarcation has been conducted improperly; if a different distance between posts had been selected, disputed islands would remain with Russia. In early 1997, the opposition in various territories frantically appealed for help in Moscow, and turned to the Federation Council, which had sent a committee in December to the border and planned to hold hearings.<sup>39</sup>

Even if the demarcation in 1997 had proceeded as planned, two unresolved matters could still haunt bilateral relations. First, Chinese believe that historical treaties guarantee their country access to the Sea of Japan, only fifteen kilometers from their territory in Jilin province. With the transfer of a parcel of land along the Tumen river in the Khasan district of Primorskii krai, China will gain a foothold for eventual access. Despite the shallowness of the Tumen river and the necessity for China not only to undertake massive dredging but also to secure navigation rights from both North Korea and Russia, some in the Russian Far East have decided that demarcation is tantamount to access to the sea, and that, in turn, means construction of a Chinese seaport connected to the city of Hunchun, which will prosper at the expense of Vladivostok, Nakhodka, and the others ports of the Russian Far East. If demarcation must go forward, they are lobbying for an understanding in Moscow that access to the sea will be denied. The only terms on which the Tumen River area delta project, adopted by the United Nations Development Program in 1991, might advance, according to these Russians, is not as an international city shared by three nations but as a corridor to Russian and North Kore-

an ports, leaving China at arm's length. Any such understanding denying future access to the sea could infuriate the Chinese, reviving their sense of lingering injustice from unequal treaties.

Finally, the 1991 agreement set aside the thorny issue of two islands currently belonging to Khabarovskii krai, including one so close to Khabarovsk that it contains many dacha and gardens of city residents and symbolizes the security of the city. Governor Viktor Ishaev has often warned against transferring this land, which would be likely if the same principles of demarcation were followed. He has also objected to Chinese military vessels' plying the Amur river close to Khabarovsk. Local media often report on Chinese poaching and environmental damage. Given

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this background, how can Russia and China agree on a final demarcation?

A second hurdle facing Chinese and Russian officials is the difficulty of realizing a huge increase in trade to \$20 billion in the year 2000. If this means forced mergers of enterprises in defiance of marketizing and privatizing trends, can lower levels be trusted not to sabotage

such plans as being unprofitable? Levels of mistrust are high, fears of deception endure, and the profit motive has become deeply rooted in newly competitive conditions. Pushing from above threatens to bring outdated technologies and management styles back into the picture. Neither northeast China nor the Russian Far East has advanced far enough in building modern financial institutions, revitalized industries, and administrative respect for a market economy to cope well with a new spurt of cross-border economic cooperation. Of course, Moscow and Beijing may try to steer the accelerated trade to central Russia and southern China, where modernization is further along. This would add greatly to transportation costs without necessarily solving many of the problems, and it may expose the hollowness of the partnership between neighbors.

External factors may impinge on the Sino-Russian partnership. There is a contradiction between high-level state-to-state agreements on so-called national interests and the more spontaneous identification of interests by market forces, by information-absorbing public opinion, and by multilateral, nongovernment organizations. Forces largely beyond the reach of national governments can alter the environment in which a partnership operates.

The return of Hong Kong poses the most obvious challenge for Beijing. Beijing must prove to international financial circles that it will nurture Hong Kong's solidly capitalist economy or risk a loss of enthusiasm for its own economic projects. Any threat to the independence of Hong Kong capital could reduce investment funds from Hong Kong, which are vital for Sino-Russian cooperation. The collapse of border trade in 1994, the withdrawal of privileges beginning in 1996

for border economic zones, and the protectionist tendencies of Heilongjiang province in the conduct of its international fair have frightened away Hong Kong and other investors, despite Heilongjiang's slogan, *nanlian beikai* (link to the South, open to the North).

For Moscow, the highest priority must be to entice foreign capital. To the extent that the strategic partnership and arms trade with Beijing cast a shadow on that priority, for instance by frightening Japanese investors, Moscow may decide to downplay them. What it did from 1992 to 1996 when its central government was divided and it lacked a strategy for economic development may not be the best guide for its priorities when economic growth is clearly within reach.

The United States stands a chance of reconciling somewhat with China in 1998 in the course of a second planned summit. Japan is pushing to improve relations with Russia, including a series of summits. If one bilateral relationship improves, the omitted party may worry about a loss of balance. Neither Russia nor China, however, would welcome an abrupt shift in power in favor of the West, and they would likely respond quickly to shore up their own relations.

Public opinion in both Russia and China shows no signs of becoming enamored of the strategic partnership. Russians who want to use the "China card" in military-political ties must face the reality of a weak popular base for a partnership with China.<sup>40</sup> In neither country are people clear on what they get from the partnership. As global information inundates these audiences, they look elsewhere for ways to satisfy personal and national needs. There is no reason to think that a proposed public relations blitz, discussed in Beijing in the aftermath of Li Peng's December 1996 visit, to change China's image in Russia will make a difference. Although Chinese and Russians often assume that they understand each other because of their common socialist past, in fact they do not show much comprehension of each other's search for a national identity.

### Conclusions

Five options loom for the future of Sino-Russian relations. I identify them below, and then draw on the evidence above to predict the likelihood of each.

1. China and Russia do not have an alliance, and the nature of the partnership is quite limited. In fact, it is little more than agreement for consultations. It is unlikely to have much international impact, and within the region it promises to have a benign, stabilizing influence. The status quo can continue.

2. The Chinese and Russians have allowed their rhetoric to race ahead of reality, as reflected in their capacity to resolve bilateral problems, the state of public opinion on each side, and their actual consensus on national interests. Under these circumstances, the strategic partnership will be difficult to sustain. Bilateral problems, such as border demarcation and economic distrust, make this a self-limiting relationship. Conditions for an alliance do not exist, and the outside world need only watch patiently. Indeed, a falling out could lead to a rivalry, with negative consequences for other countries.

3. Through 1996, both countries acted for tactical, short-term considerations. In 1997, they began to use their leverage to improve relations with other great

powers. U.S.-Chinese negotiations are accelerating, and the Chinese recognize that this is their first priority. U.S.-Russian negotiations on the expansion of NATO intensified, and Yeltsin had good reason to claim success through compromise to try to head off a nationalistic reaction favorable to his opponents. Russian-Japanese negotiations have become upbeat as the Russians realize that Japan can meet some of their economic needs and the Japanese see in Russia a counterweight to China. Reasonable concessions by the other powers will balance this partnership.

4. The external factors that drove Moscow and Beijing together in 1992–96 are going to be with us for some time. No major change is likely in Moscow's concern about the eastward expansion of NATO and its overall weakness before the West, nor in Beijing's distrust of U.S. intentions toward Taiwan and the U.S.-Japanese security alliance. If the Sino-Russian partnership represents a response to these problems, why would the two countries want to give up the leverage that they have gained? The partnership will endure and probably will grow even stronger.

5. Both Moscow and Beijing are driven by a degree of frustration and humiliation that will prompt them to still greater resistance to the United States and to an even closer partnership. In the mid-1990s the presence of Boris Yeltsin at the helm had restrained what would otherwise have been a more strident nationalistic outcry, as reflected in parliamentary elections. Russia's cognitive dissonance at abruptly losing the Soviet Union's superpower status without the expected benefits of integration and respect in the new world order will not soon dissipate. Similarly, the Chinese mindset, inculcated by a combination of Communists and nationalists, dwells on the great weight of China's historical humiliation and its legitimate aspiration to become an all-around great power that rights old wrongs and exerts power regionally and globally. An alliance could result if both states simultaneously perceive a crisis in their relations with the United States.

These five options are very different, but they may usefully be conceived as a sequence. Indeed, option 1 refers to the situation that prevailed from 1995 to 1996, when the bilateral relationship served consultative purposes and remained essentially benign. In the final years of this century, however, we can expect that current imbalances and imminent bilateral problems will test the relationship, as indicated in option 2. The relationship could break down, but more likely Moscow and Beijing will work hard to preserve it. In the course of negotiations with other great powers, as option 3 notes, both countries will try to strengthen other bilateral relations. Although the Sino-Russian strategic partnership may lose its prominence, it is not likely to be undermined. Even if negotiations yield some positive results, China's and Russia's discontent with the United States and the West is unlikely to dissipate, as option 4 warns. Long-term forces will continue to encourage closer relations. Nonetheless, only overlapping crises would cause anything like an alliance, as option 5 indicates. At present, options 2, 3, and 4 hang in the balance.

Chinese and Russian common interests do not meet the test of an alliance. Leaders in their sixties and seventies share a bond from the 1950s, extending to

the use of the Russian language and personal networks from former institute days. Many Chinese leaders were educated in Russia. This old socialist bond promotes a degree of shared understanding but in contrast to Chinese expectations in the 1980s, it does not mean a common approach to reforms. The bond is weakening and will not be transferred to later generations.

There also exists a degree of commonality in the worldview emerging in each country. This is to some extent a common vision, vaguely opposed to the traditional enemies of the socialist bloc and imbued with a valiant history of struggle. Yet the Chinese worldview is turning toward Eastern civilization, with the optimism of a dynamic part of the globe, and the Russian worldview is looking back to Slavic civilization in search of the roots of a past gone awry. It is hard to imagine a new ideology or shared purpose that would draw Russia and China together more than it would divide them. After all, they responded to the Sino-Soviet split by blaming each other for a persistent record of distorted and aggressive development. An upsurge of nationalism in each country—to gain leverage in dealing with particular regional problems, to influence domestic politics, and to increase global influence vis-à-vis the United States—means that China and Russia have been marching along parallel tracks. This provides, at best, a moderate foundation for a partnership, not a secure basis for long-term cooperation and trust.

Other common interests—shared geopolitical space and borders that need to be stabilized, coordination to keep arms assembly lines working or acquire improved technology at bargain prices, and cooperation to shape the evolution of northeast Asia as North Korea nears collapse and Japan converts economic strength into political clout—provide more reasons for a partnership. They do not provide a strong and lasting foundation, but if some hurdles can be overcome, they can, with parallel nationalism, keep the partnership on course for at least a decade.

Jiang Zemin's visit to Moscow in April 1997 acquired new significance after Deng Xiaoping died on 19 February. Deng's personal role in Sino-Russian improvements can be traced to 1979, when the Chinese stopped criticizing the Soviet Union for revisionism,<sup>41</sup> and 1982, when Deng sent a personal representative to the Soviet Union.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, China's foreign policy was shifting toward equidistance between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1986–87, Deng guided Beijing's hesitation in embracing Gorbachev, and in 1989–92 he kept relations moving forward despite the losses to socialism. Without Deng, Jiang Zemin will find it easier to follow the established course than to make a sharp change in foreign policy.

For Yeltsin and his successors, stability may not be as easy. There is already widespread fear of a change in the balance of power as China grows stronger and Russia remains in its trough. Although Russia's ambitions may be illusory,<sup>43</sup> they are easier to maintain when there is rough parity between Russia and China than they would be if Chinese power were to pull clearly into the lead. This changing balance sets a limit on the duration of the strategic partnership, but does not diminish its potential significance in the next five to ten years, when the United States is trying to chart a course for an integrated world order that frightens both Russia and China.

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