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Russian-Chinese Relations: A Study in Contemporary Geopolitics

The disappointment which a number of Russian politicians feel over the way their country's relations with the West evolved in the decade following the end of the Cold War, has led many of them to discuss various „eastern options“. Since 1994, one hears the talk of new axes, alliances and partnerships with countries ranging from India to Iran to Iraq, but above all, with China. This harkens back to a traditional adage of Russian diplomacy: when checked in the west, look for opportunities in the east. This largely self-contained elite discussion received much wider attention in December 1998 when then Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov casually mentioned the need for creating a „strategic triangle“ consisting of Russia, China and India. The offer found no immediate takers and was subsequently downplayed by Primakov himself, but it left a trace. Never before had a senior Russian leader been so explicit about the idea of counterbalancing the global domination of the West, led by the United States, by means of a Eurasian alliance. A few months later, during the Kosovo crisis, Russia and China moved even more closer together in their opposition to U.S. „hegemonism“. Symbolically, as the Russian military forces were holding their first major exercise dubbed „West-99“ which for the first time in a decade again designated NATO as the enemy, a visiting high-level Chinese military delegation was given unprecedented access to Russian nuclear bases. Moscow and Beijing are beginning to live up to the notion of a strategic partnership through taking a common position on the issue of theater missile defenses in Asia, which they oppose. There are signs that Moscow is relaxing its self-imposed restrictions regarding the quality level of the arms and technologies it sells to China.

Only recently, the Sino-Russian relationship was carefully analyzed and found to be of rather limited nature.¹ Is this changing now? Is a new geopolitical realignment in the works? Will the current Moscow-Beijing *entente* eventually lead to an alliance? Or, conversely, are the inherent constraints in the bilateral relationship strong enough to keep China and Russia from forming an anti-Western bloc? Or, to completely reverse the discussion, can it be that the present improvement in the Moscow-Beijing ties is only a short-term phenomenon, and in the medium and long term the two countries will collide again, as China becomes more powerful and assertive? What, in short, are the prospects and limitations of the geopolitical relationship which is likely to be among the most important and complex anywhere in Eurasia?

Geopolitics, of course, is only one aspect of the broader Russo-Chinese interaction. Economic relations, cross-border migration, contacts at regional and local levels, and not least among ordinary people, the impact of information technology and the exponential growth of communication, leading to cross-cultural influence, i.e. everything which is usually associated with the world of the future, is not covered by geopolitics. A narrowly geopolitically-focused perspective is not just deemed to be old-fashioned and plainly obsolete, it can be distorting and misleading. Still, it is highly useful for a number of important reasons. First, much of the government-to-government bilateral relationship between Beijing and Moscow today *is* about geopolitics. There is little else, at least for the moment, to back the claim of a „strategic partnership“. Second, the bulk of Chinese and Russian elites are keen students or at least admirers of geopolitics, which informs many of their actions. Third, for much of the outside

1 Sherman Garnett. Limited Partnership. A report of the Study Group on Russian-Chinese Relations. Washington: Carnegie endowment for International Peace, 1998; Dmitri Trenin. Russia's China Problem. Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 1999.

world it is the prospect of a geopolitical realignment of China and Russia – and not, say, the chances for their economic cooperation - which evokes the most intense interest.

This article starts with an assessment of the new status quo between Russia and China, the vaunted *correlation of forces* between them, which has undergone dramatic changes in the last ten years. It then proceeds to take stock of the geopolitical gains resulting from the improvement in the bilateral relations. Lastly, it examines the potential for geopolitical cooperation and conflict between the two countries in the future.

Role Reversal

The starting point for any discussion of contemporary Sino-Russian geopolitics is recognizing and assessing the new standing of the parties vis-a-vis each other. The first fundamental change concerns the **position that Russia and China hold in Asia**.

Most Russians lamenting the passing of the Soviet Union usually compare their country's decline with the apparent new omnipotence and omnipresence of their erstwhile global rival, the United States. Still, the change of fortunes between Russia and China is only slightly less dramatic. In 1989, when President Gorbachev came to Beijing to repair the 30-year old Sino-Soviet rift, the USSR still included the five Central Asian republics; Mongolia was a loyal Moscow ally, and home to some 75,000 Soviet military personnel; so was Vietnam, with its strategic naval and air facilities. Laos and Cambodia were Soviet clients. India was a quasi-ally, under the 1971 treaty. In Afghanistan, even after the Soviet withdrawal, a pro-Moscow Najibulla regime continued to hold Kabul. As long as Soviet aid flowed, Moscow retained a measure of influence in Pyongyang.

Ten years later, along the former Soviet border, China has four neighbors, and Russia is only one of them. The others, Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the new Moslem states, are engaged in a careful balancing act between Russia, China and the West. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), a most useful framework for the dismantlement of the Soviet Union, has turned out to be virtually useless as a tool for post-Soviet integration. Mongolia, having shaken off Moscow's tutelage, has for the first time in its recent history adopted an independent foreign policy posture. Vietnam and its neighbors in Indochina have gravitated toward the ASEAN. Ironically, Russia was constrained to become a supporter of the Afghan coalition which had ousted Najibulla, but the coalition has been defeated by the Taleban forces which now control at least three quarters of the country, including the capital. In 1997, many Russian political leaders and top military commanders sincerely feared that the Taleban would march across the former Soviet border and take over the entire region up to the Volga delta. These fears have since been proven false, but even without the Taleban, Russia finds it increasingly difficult to help maintain stability in the once dormant Central Asia. To add insult to injury, Moscow has found itself excluded from both the Korean nuclear energy (KEDO) project and the Korea peace talks. The ties to India have grown stale and deteriorated. In short, Russia has ceased to be a political superpower in Asia and it faces a hard task of asserting itself even as a major regional player.

China, by contrast, has gone some way to becoming a regional power in Asia-Pacific. The „gathering of Chinese lands“ has achieved important results. In 1997, Beijing achieved a historic reunification with Hong Kong, to be followed by reabsorption of Macau at the end of 1999. After this, only Taiwan will remain on Beijing's reunification agenda. China's claims to the South China Sea have been repeatedly reasserted. Beijing's diplomatic stature has also grown. From Kashmir to Korea, its influence is acutely felt and often sought by the local and regional forces. Whether it is nuclear proliferation in South Asia or the stand-off on the Korean Peninsula, Beijing is a key outside player. In Central Asia, it is quietly supplanting Russia's waning influence as it moves to diversify its sources of energy supply and to protect

its rear. Beijing diplomats have been issuing statements on the conflicts in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans. In a symbolic recognition of its new role, China has evidently become the single most important country from the perspective of the world's only superpower, the United States.

The change in the **relative economic weight** between Russia and China is equally, if not more drastic. In 1989, the U.S.S.R. was still the world's third largest economy, after the U.S. and Japan. It produced substantially more goods and services than China. Ten years later, Russia has been demoted to the 16th place, in terms of its GDP. By contrast, China, due to its phenomenal growth rate since the start of Deng Xiaoping's reforms, has been able to surpass its former mentor several times over. Even if Russia starts to grow again at a decent annual rate of 3-4%, which is not yet in sight, its relative decline vis-a-vis China will continue. By 2010, the margin of difference between them can be tenfold. Even in per capita GDP terms the gap is fast closing. Thirty years ago the Soviet Union dominated China in this respect by approximately seven to one. Currently, China accounts for about 60% of Russia's level, and some of its coastal provinces have surpassed Russia's national average. Russia's technological lead over „backward China“, historically the source of Moscow's pride, is also becoming history.

In 1989, the Soviet army was the most potent **military force** in both Europe and Asia. In the following years, it has gone through unprecedented decline. In 1997, e.g., it was officially admitted that the Russian military did not possess a single army division that was combat-ready. The quantity and quality of the forces deployed in the Far East have gone down significantly. Their power projection capabilities have been drastically reduced, and problems with the discipline abound, as weapons arsenals catch fire and blow up, and conscripts take to the taiga to escape hazing. The defeat of Moscow's attempt to subdue rebellious Chechnya by military force has become an emblem of a thoroughly new phenomenon – Russia's military weakness. By and large, Russia has missed on the revolution in military affairs. As a result, many have become convinced that, in any hypothetical major military conflict Russia would probably lose if the war remained conventional. Consequently, reliance on nuclear weapons for national defense has never been more pronounced in the Russian military doctrine and strategy. Clearly, this has implications not only for the West, but for the East - i.e. China – as well. Some Russian military officers privately admit that in a conflict with China the main Russian defenses along the border, including all the principal cities, will be overrun in a matter of days, leaving the General Staff with few options other than going nuclear.

China, for its part, has been steadily, if slowly modernizing its vast, although still primitive armed forces. Since 1992, it has been able to do this with the help of steady Russian transfers of arms and military technology, at the average annual rate of about \$1 billion. In a pathetic symbol of the changed fortunes of the two states in the defense area, Russian military enterprises have been constrained to sell their products to China – or face closure. Recently, the People's Liberation Army has been buying more Russian-made combat aircraft than the Russian Air Force itself. Even in the nuclear field, there are projections that China may get even with Russia in the next 10-15 years if the latter continues on its path of decline and Beijing adopts an ambitious nuclear build-up policy.

In 1989, the last year of the Soviet census, the country's population reached 282 million, which made it the world's third largest. In 1999, when Russian census was canceled due to the lack of funding, the country's population dropped to 146 million – two million less than when the USSR was dismantled. This figure roughly equals the combined population of China's three north-eastern provinces which border on the Russian Far East. As to the Far East itself, its population has been declining faster than the national average, about 9% in the last decade of this century. Across the Amur and the Ussuri rivers, some 5 million Russians are facing around 130 million Chinese. Even if the entire population of Russia were resettled

along the Chinese border, that would redress the imbalance with North-East China only temporarily. The population decline in Russia will continue unabated, and the country may lose as much as 10% of its current population in the next three or four decades. China's population will continue to grow from the current 1.2 billion, and Beijing's family planning policy will only moderate that growth, not arrest it. It has become commonplace in Moscow and Vladivostok to refer to the huge Chinese demographic „overhang“ in the border area as a prime security concern.

Thus, the collapse of the Soviet Union, which itself was a result of a quarter of a century long decline, has dramatically reversed the geopolitical dynamics of Eurasia as a whole. Long an assertive and expanding center, Russia has been on the defensive all around, losing ground to the historical rivals and to the new states which for centuries were its provinces. It strives to project an image of a still great power, to win time and restore the status quo, but it has found this increasingly difficult. China, by contrast, is not a status quo power. In the past 150 years it has suffered from too much humiliation at the hands of Europeans, including the Russians. It is now looking forward to coming back to the world stage as a strong independent force to be reckoned with. In the Sino-Russian relationship, roles have been reversed. Never since the two countries have established permanent contacts three hundred years ago, has Russia been the weaker, the less dynamic and the less confident of the two. This new distribution of power and influence, this newly prevailing „wind from the East“ is more than a passing phenomenon. Even assuming that Russia's economic crisis will be eventually overcome, and allowing for inevitable and increasing difficulties in China as its transformation deepens, it is unlikely that the traditional geopolitical relationship between the two countries – i.e., Russia's preponderance – will be restored. Russia's relative decline vis-a-vis China will probably continue well into the 21st century. This change in stature has wide-ranging implications for both countries, and for the outside world. For the time being, however, the reversal of roles has helped to establish a more equitable relationship from which both Russia and China have been able to draw important benefits.

Positive Gains

It would be absolutely wrong to argue that the new geopolitical environment in Asia, in the short to medium term, is inherently inimical, or even threatening to Russia. The end of the 25-year-long cold war between Moscow and Beijing has brought both countries important benefits. This concerns above all the 4,400-kilometer long common border, once the scene of bloody armed clashes. Since 1991, a series of agreements have been signed which led to the delimitation, demarcation and the partial demilitarization of the border. Of its entire length, only three river islands currently controlled by Russia remain contested. Beijing is no longer raising claims to some 1.5 million square km of territory annexed in the 19th century by Czarist Russia through „unequal treaties“. The border which for three decades had been a source of tension and a likely site for large-scale conflagration has become a zone of tranquility.

Both governments have felt confident enough to decrease and dealert their military forces facing each other. Confidence-building measures are in place. The nightmare of a Sino-Russian conflict has become remote. In fact, both countries' General Staffs have designated different risks and opportunities. Beijing's main axes of strategic interest run to the south and south-east; Moscow feels the pressure of NATO enlargement and NATO interventionism in the west and the heat of instability in the south. Instead of confronting each other face to face, as they did in the past, Russia and China are actually standing now back to back to each other and feel so much more secure.

What is more, the border agreements and the military detente have been extended to the three former Soviet republics in Central Asia. Together with Mongolia, from which all Russian forces were withdrawn in 1992, they now form a huge buffer zone between Russia and China in Inner Asia, limiting their direct contact to Chinese Manchuria and the Russian Far East. The rise of the new states lowers the prospect for the resumption of a Cold-War type confrontation, though it could revive the traditional schemes of the struggle for the zones of influence. For the time being, however, both China and Russia abstain from this kind of competition. Beijing and Moscow are concentrated on the domestic needs rather than outward expansion.

Another major change is linked to the emergence of regionalism in both Russia and China. For the first time in 500 years, centralized political control in Russia is no longer absolute. Popularly elected provincial governors, legislators and city mayors are wielding real power and occasionally challenge the federal authorities. In a parallel development, China's provinces have been becoming more assertive vis-a-vis Beijing, eager to preserve their particular interests. As on the Russian side, these interests have much more to do with gaining (or preserving) economic advantages than with power politics.

Thus, although this may appear paradoxical, the dramatic reversal of geopolitical roles between Russia and China has resulted in a more peaceful and equitable relationship which is mutually satisfying and valued by both. Whether this relationship will continue depends on how the longer-term interests of the two countries will interact.

Convergence of Interests and Its Limitations

In their rhetoric, Moscow and Beijing employ many like-sounding formulae. However, a geopolitical *tour d'horizon* allows one to see both convergence of interest and important differences which limit cooperation and may even point to conflict.

Multipolar world

Both Russian and Chinese leaders use the concept of multipolarity as the shorthand for the desired state of international relations in the post-Cold War era. Yet, taken on its own merit, the concept in the longer term can probably suit Beijing much more than Moscow. China is on the way to become a regional power, whereas Russia's fortunes continue to decline. Having ceased to be for the first time in history a self-contained and self-sustained universe, Russia will soon discover that its territory falls within the zones of attraction of several power centers, and, moreover, that some of Russia's own regions start to gravitate in different directions. The North-West from Kaliningrad to Karelia to Kola, e.g., would move to „meet“ the European Union, whereas Khabarovsk and Primorie would become part of China's „near abroad“. It will require more than an average effort on behalf of the Russian leadership to respond to this new challenge creatively, and work out a new geopolitical model for the Russian state - both in terms of its domestic structural organization and its relation to the outside world.

This, however, is yet a task for the future. For the time being, Moscow and Beijing continue to use the rhetoric of multipolarity as a code word for their opposition to what they see as the domination of the world arena by the United States. This reminds one of the anti-hegemony platform that Washington and Beijing used to characterize their alignment in the late 1970s-1980s, when both perceived the Soviet Union as an adversary. There are important differences, however, which will be described below.

The United States

The Cold War-era triangular relationship has undergone a fundamental change, both in structure (with the diminishing of Russia's role) and in meaning (America no longer has a better relationship with China and Russia than these two have between themselves). In the early 1990s, when it briefly appeared that Moscow could become Washington's strategic ally, the Chinese grew concerned – for such a change would have meant, to them, a U.S. – engineered encirclement of the People's Republic. The failure of the Russo-American strategic partnership, which became evident in the dispute over NATO enlargement, brought relief to the Chinese government. By the mid-1990s, Sino-Russian relations reached the level of public cordiality which is no longer present in the U.S.-Russian case. In 1996, Moscow and Beijing agreed on a formula for a long-time partnership.

Having started with verbal expressions of opposition to „hegemonism“, Russia and China have found it useful to work together on specific issues, such as Iraq, the Balkans and theater missile defenses, in an attempt to contain U.S. assertiveness, or at least to get some leverage vis-a-vis Washington. In general, this has not worked, but has increased the self-confidence of both governments. After the Kosovo crisis, both countries' militaries have come to see themselves on the receiving end of American-led international interventionism. The NATO operation against Yugoslavia has resulted in the intensification of political and military contacts between Moscow and Beijing. The UN Security Council has become de-facto split with China and Russia routinely teaming up against the United States and its allies.

Still, all this cooperation, or even strategic alignment is likely to fall far short of an anti-American bloc. China, by culture and tradition, prefers to act alone; Russia would probably reject the role of a junior partner that it would be offered in any hypothetical coalition; most important, both countries, whatever their current differences with the United States and their opposition to the „unipolar world“, need good relations with America for a host of economic, financial and other reasons. For Moscow, the most vital foreign policy issue is debt restructuring and relations with the international financial institutions, where Washington plays a paramount role. Russia's economic development is doomed without access to Western technology and capital investment. For Beijing, suffice it to mention that China's trade with America is worth ten times its trade with Russia.

Japan

It is still too early to speak about a „triangle“ with Beijing, Moscow and Tokyo as its three corners: the level of mutual dependency among the three is far too low. However, from the Russian point of view a solid relationship with Japan is a necessary second pillar of Moscow's Asian policy, which otherwise would be too slanted toward China – to Russia's disadvantage. No meaningful economic integration of Russia into Asia-Pacific is possible without Japanese participation in the development of the Russian Far East. As for Japan, the rise of China is displacing it from the long-held position as the number one nation in Asia. From Tokyo's perspective, an active and successful policy of engagement toward Russia would serve as a hedge against a too dominant China.

Russia finds itself in a situation where the natural Sino-Japanese rivalry presents Moscow with an opening. It needn't make a choice between the two; rather, developing ties with one would strengthen its position with respect to the other, and vice versa.

Even though both Beijing and Moscow remain suspicious of a resurgent Japan, China's fear is much stronger. Even though Russia and China expressed concern over the expansion of Japan's role in the bilateral defense relationship with the United States, China is more worried. Russia, by contrast, has acknowledged the stabilizing effect of the U.S.-Japan

security relationship which effectively places Japan's defense policy under American control – something which the Chinese are yet to recognize.

Moscow and Beijing have voiced their objection to the U.S.-driven plans for a theater missile defense system in East Asia, but Beijing's interests are more directly implicated than Moscow's. Interestingly, however, China shares the Japanese view on the status of the Kurile islands – a vestige of the times when the USSR was regarded its chief adversary.

Korea

China and Russia, no less than America and Japan, are clearly interested in the successful management of the situation on the Korean Peninsula – both the stand-off between South and North Korea and the incipient crisis within the North. The two countries, however, are able to exercise very different degrees of influence on the situation on the Peninsula. Whereas Beijing is the only international player with a real access to the Pyongyang leadership, Russia can only watch the situation from the sidelines. China, unlike Russia, is also party to the Korea peace talks – by virtue of the 1953 armistice agreement. Moscow's pleas to broaden the talks to include itself (and Japan) have fallen on deaf ears in Washington as well as in Beijing. China is reluctant to give up its exclusive position as one of the two outside powers – alongside with the U.S. – involved in the peace process.

The Chinese hope that Korea, which historically used to gravitate toward China, will once again assume this familiar posture. In the future, however, a reunified Korea may indeed see its ties with Russia, the weakest major power in North-East Asia, as a natural and relatively benign counterweight to the domination by the two regional hegemony and historical overlords, China and Japan. If this happens, Moscow's relations with Beijing will become more delicate.

Central and Inner Asia

On their flanks, Russia and China border on a potentially very unstable region of the former Soviet Central Asia. Potentially, this is an immense powder keg. Ethnic and religious conflicts in that part of the world can spill over both to the north and the east. The new states in the region are all too fragile, with the post-Soviet regimes remaining vulnerable to domestic unrest inspired by political Islam. *Faute de mieux*, Beijing even prefers that for the time being Russia exercise a leading role in the region, through elite contacts, limited military presence and even the moribund institutes of the CIS. Interestingly, the post-Soviet border treaty, the confidence building agreement and the force reduction accord were negotiated and signed by China with the three Central Asian states and Russia simultaneously, as multilateral documents.

Russia, however, no longer has sufficient leverage with its southern neighbors. Like Beijing, Moscow sees the growth of Western influence at elite level and the spread of political Islam and Turkic nationalism at grassroots level in Central Asia as a cause for concern or even a threat (in the latter case). The Western presence in Central Asia is overwhelmingly of economic nature and is of private character. However, the Central Asians' participation in the NATO Partnership for Peace program, including the staging of joint exercises, and Uzbekistan's membership in GUUAM, a U.S.-backed loose association of former Soviet republics, is being read as a sign of growing American and European political and security attention given to the region. This Western geopolitical „trespassing“, however, pales in comparison to the threat of domestic conflict, intra-state rivalry, and the spread of political extremism, coupled with the exponential growth of drugs trafficking from Central Asia.

Much like the West, China sees Central Asia primarily as a source of energy supplies for its growing economy. Ever since 1991, Beijing has been successfully cultivating ties with the

governments in the region, winning their support for the Chinese pipeline projects. So far, Russian and Chinese interests in Central Asia do not collide. In the future, they might, especially if both governments continue to espouse the traditional form of geopolitical thinking with its emphasis on zero-sum gaming.

Since 1990-1991, Mongolia has been enjoying true independence – due in large part to the benign neglect simultaneously demonstrated toward it by China and Russia, each preoccupied with its domestic problems. On the other hand, pan-Mongolism, initially feared in both Russia – because of the two ethnically close republics – Buryatia and Tuva (of which the latter was an independent state between 1921 and 1944), and in China – due to the existence of the autonomous region of Inner Mongolia, has remained dormant and non-provocative.

If Mongolia manages to use this pause to construct a viable market economy and a durable system of political institutions, which would win it international recognition in America, Europe and Japan, it can become an anchor of stability in Inner Asia, a useful transit corridor and a meeting place for Russia and China. If, on the other hand, Mongolia fails to get on its feet, it will be a source of tension, likely to solicit both Russian and Chinese response. In the worst-case scenario, Mongolia may come under the domination of China, or turn into an area of competition between China and Russia.

The two other areas of Inner Asia worth mentioning are Xinjiang and Tibet. Both have an indigenous population which is distinctly non-Chinese, both have been subjected to a policy of Sinicization, both have political movements aiming at separation from China. Moscow, currently a champion of territorial integrity, gives moral support to Beijing. It professes little sympathy for the Turkic independence activists in Xinjiang and has no interest in interfering with Beijing over the human rights situation in Tibet. The domestic pressure in Russia in support of the Dalai Lama is very light, producing virtually no impact on the government's policy course.

Taiwan

Moscow's official view that Taiwan is part of China ruled from Beijing has remained unchanged during the decades of Sino-Soviet confrontation. Since then, Russia's ties with Taiwan have been carefully confined to economic, cultural and other non-political issues, never provoking a protest from Beijing. Throughout the 1990s, Beijing's support of the Russian position on Chechnya, including during the 1994-1996 war, can be regarded as a downpayment for Russia's understanding of any action the PRC may take with respect to Taiwan. At the end of the decade, in the wake of the crisis over Kosovo, both Moscow and Beijing strongly advocate non-interference in the internal affairs of states over secession issues.

Moscow is actually content that Beijing's strategic activism is directed at Taiwan, where Russia does not have any significant interests which could be affected by a crisis. Thus, China is likely to continue concentrating its military resources at a significant distance from the Russian border and for a very special kind of mission. The Taiwan issue, Moscow appreciates, is a permanent source of tension and mutual suspicions in Sino-American relations, preventing too close a collaboration between those two countries. Russia is happily providing China with arms and equipment which Beijing has been purchasing with an eye for the evolving situation across the Taiwan Strait. A continued stand-off in the area works to increase China's dependency on Russian military supplies. Still, if and when push comes to shove, and Beijing resorts to military measures against Taipei, leading to U.S. involvement in whatever form, Moscow will face a hard choice, for openly becoming China's ally and military supply base will irreparably damage its relations with America and Japan.

South Asia

There is little justification at present for the new idea of an emerging Sino-Russo-Indian „triangle“. All three countries are important players in Eurasia, and relations among them will help shape the future of the continent, but in the foreseeable future the specter of the strategic triangle will remain a figment of wishful thinking of those who would do anything to upset the „unipolar world“.

It is important to note, however, that here, too, the Cold War confrontation lines have recently become relaxed. There is no longer a situation where two of the three countries were engaged in parallel stand-off with the third, China. Moscow and Beijing are no longer maintaining exclusive client relationships with New Delhi and Islamabad. India has normalized relations with China, and Russia has warmed up to Pakistan. Indeed, nuclear proliferation in South Asia warrants cooperation among America, China and Russia with the aim of preventing a nuclear war between India and Pakistan and helping the two countries to stabilize their strategic relationship.

The Russian Far East

Still, it is the Russian Far East, and not some third country, which may become a prime factor in the future Sino-Russian relationship. Unless Russia wants to de-facto lose the region, already semi-detached from the rest of the country, it will need to seriously develop it. Developing the Far East calls for a much more intimate relationship with China than heretofore – in particular where it concerns the import of Chinese labor. While at present there are few Chinese residents in the Russian Far East – 20.000 or so in Primorie, most of them temporary, their number is likely to grow, and not only east of the Urals. Even now, the number of Chinese semi-permanent residents in Moscow is roughly estimated to be around 50.000. Some projections assume that by mid-21st century the Chinese diaspora in Russia may reach 7 million, which will make them the second largest ethnic group in the country after the Russians themselves. A failure to construct a mutually satisfying relationship *under such conditions* could result in a conflict with ethnic and even racial overtones which in turn could lead to a full-fledged Russo-Chinese confrontation. This danger is very remote now, but it shouldn't be overlooked.

Conclusion

The above analysis leads to the following principal conclusions:

- Russo-Chinese political relations are likely to remain stable in the short and medium term. Both countries fully enjoy the post-1989 *detente*; the convergence of interests has allowed Moscow and Beijing to demonstrate *entente* in an attempt to bolster their position vis-a-vis the United States. This convergence, however, is unlikely to evolve into a true anti-American alliance because a confrontation with the West is something both China and Russia are painstakingly trying to avoid.
- Such an alliance can only be produced by the United States itself should Washington challenge the supreme national security interests of Russia and China *simultaneously*. This would leave Moscow and Beijing with little choice than to embrace each other – something which they would rather not do of their own free will. At present, this scenario appears highly unlikely.
- The prospect for conflict between Russia and China is also remote in the next 10-15 years, for the agendas of either government are largely inward oriented; and where they are not, they do not intersect. The two countries are standing back to back to each other, preoccupied with opportunities and risks elsewhere.

- This happy state of the relationship may end in the longer term when the disparities of national power will become obvious and lead to China impacting more directly and decisively on the situation inside Russia. This will produce tension resulting either in an institutionalized appeasement policy by Moscow or in an open conflict between it and Beijing.

It should be noted that these conclusions rest on the premise of Russia continuing to exist in the medium and long term as a more or less coherent whole. Should the processes of disintegration of the old fabric of the Russian state and society grow too strong, and the countervailing processes of new state and society building remain weak and ineffectual, the world – including China – will be challenged with an unprecedented and possibly impossible task of managing a geopolitical catastrophe of enormous proportion. This, however, is a subject of a separate research.

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