

# Russo-Japanese Relations in the New Strategic Environment

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In the initial years of the twenty-first century, especially just after the September 11 attacks in 2001, Russian foreign policy was expected to take a middle course between the US and China. In those days, Russia seemed intent on establishing friendly relations with the US and every state adjacent to its borders in order to concentrate its attention on pressing domestic issues; Vladimir Putin appeared to realize this priority quite well when he made his personal commitment to support the US decision to start the military operation in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> However, as Putin's experience accumulated and as he became increasingly convinced that the US would pursue its self-proclaimed goals of "democratization" everywhere in the world from the Middle East to Central Asia to the detriment of Russia's interests, he gradually changed his position and distanced Russia from the US and the US-led European states, while steering his country closer to China.

The large-scaled Sino-Russian joint military maneuver carried out in August 2005, the invitation of the Hamas leaders for talks in Moscow in March 2006, and the recent exchange of harsh remarks between US vice president Dick Cheney and Putin over Russian policy towards Ukraine seemed to correspond with this shift in policy stance.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Bobo Lo, *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy*, Chatham House Papers (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2003), 117–118. It should be noted that this is a study clearly focused on the resilience of Russia's great power mentality.

These recent developments raise several intertwined questions for Japanese-Moscow watchers:

First, are these newly unfolded hard-line policies mere tactical steps designed for putting pressure on the US to restrain its hegemonic behavior in the international scene or are they signs suggesting the end of the partnership they have managed to sustain in any event since the end of the Cold War?

Second, will China be a reliable long-term Russian partner against the US regardless of the close economic interdependency that exist between the US and China? To what extent will the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) be an effective instrument in creating a new strategic environment either globally or regionally? Further, is Putin really confident that the present Sino-Russian rapprochement will pave the way to the “multipolar world” that the Russian leader has repeatedly upheld?

Last but not least, what is and will be the impact of the new East-West strained relations on the North-East Asian context, especially on Russo-Japanese relations?

To consider these questions, we should begin with a brief examination of the problem of Russia’s current status in the world order. It is no secret that since the collapse of the USSR, both Russia and Western nations have wondered how to define the new position of Russia in the world configuration. No doubt, even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia was a major power, but in the light of its domestic chaotic conditions it could not be regarded as a power equal to the US or even to other major European powers. Yet with time, both sides came to the conclusion that there were only two alternatives for them to adopt: either Russia should be seen as one of the leading Western powers equally ranked with such powers as France or Germany or as an independence-oriented, non-Western power like China or India that would be expected to strike its own path, showing an inclination to turn a critical eye toward the US and European behavior in world affairs.

Worried about this situation, in the mid-1990s, European nations decided to take the initiative to incorporate Russia into the summit of the Group of Seven as a regular guest power. They were full of expectations that the granting of membership would encourage the Russian leadership to overcome its domestic disorder and move Russia towards a liberal democratic model. The calculation in the same vein produced the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European

Commission and Russia in 1994 (which came into force only in 1997). During these years, the Russian leaders were, by contrast, continuously divided on future orientations. For example, Evgenii Primakov, appointed foreign minister in 1996, strongly advocated building Eurasian partnerships among Russia, China, and India, although there seemed to be little feasibility of this idea. As was expected, Russian political elite greeted Primakov's idea partly with enthusiasm, partly with cynicism.

After the September 11 attacks, the European nations once again took the initiative, proposing in early 2002 that Russia become the eighth member of the G8 in return for the moral and political support Putin offered for "the War against Terrorism." At least for a year or so, Putin seemed to be content with the new alignment. Russia was accepted as a principal member of the Western club.

Some Russian scholars began to call the newly created world power structure "the pluralistic unipolarity," in which not the US alone, but the US with its closely connected friendly powers in the G7 plays the role of the polar actor.<sup>2</sup> According to this definition, on the one hand, the non-US member states of this group, although hardly comparable in power potential to the US, have a chance to exert influence over US foreign policy as far as the circumstances permit in a pluralistic framework; on the other hand, in order to be a member state of this group, it is supposed to cope with international threats and conflicts in cooperation with the US and other member states. More importantly, the non-US member states are supposed to acquiesce in a superior US role in world affairs; in return for this cooperation, a fully fledged member can expect that it will be treated more favorably in the international politico-economic order than China, India, or other newly emerged states. In the case of Russia, the establishment of the NATO-Russia Council was a good example of this special treatment, and the Russian accession to the WTO seemed to ensue in the near future (at latest during 2002–2003).

However, seemingly, the two incidents taking place one after another since 2003 severely tested the above-mentioned special linkage in the power structure. The first was the war in Iraq: as is well known, Russia,

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<sup>2</sup> On this concept, see Aleksei D. Bogaturov, "Pliuralisticheskaia odnopoliamost' i interesy Rossii," *Svobodnaia mysl'* 2 (1996): 25–36. See also Bogaturov ed., *Sistemnaia istoriia mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii v chetyrekh tomakh 1918–2003*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauchno-obrazovatel'ii Forum po Mezhdunarodnym Otnosheniam, 2003), 583–584.

aligned with France and Germany, made every effort to prevent the US-led coalition forces from attacking Iraq, but only to see their persistent protests had no effect. Contrary to the tacit understanding implied in “pluralistic unipolarity,” the US with the support of the UK and Japan totally disregarded both the UN Security Council and the opposition of the three major states. No doubt, Putin must have drawn from this bitter experience an unforgettable conclusion that although membership of the G8 gave Russia great power status, the military power of the US was so preeminent that its serious balancing act with the European states was not enough to curb its hegemonic ambition.

The second was the so-called “color revolutions” in the former Soviet Union. The revolutionary changes began in Georgia in November 2003, spreading to Ukraine in December 2004, to Kyrgyzstan in February 2005, and ended with antigovernmental riots in Uzbekistan in May 2005. Evidently, the chain of events shocked Putin. Up to this time, the former Soviet space, with the exception of the Baltic area, was regarded by the Russian leaders as Russia’s sphere of influence. They have long taken it as a matter of course that the leaders in newly independent states would continue to hold a political system similar to the Russian “managed democracy,”<sup>3</sup> while providing Russia with a secure environment. Certainly, it would have been difficult for the Russian leaders to deny the assumption that behind the scenes, the US supported these revolutionary changes with the purpose of reducing Russia’s traditional sphere and in the end damaging the Russian great power status. Putin must have drawn from these incidents another lesson that given the differences between Russia and the US in terms of their value systems, even strategic collaboration with the US and the European states would not ensure Russia great state status in a stable way.

Thus, the brief overview of the recent developments of international relations of Russia strongly suggests that Russia’s present assertiveness is not a mere feint, but a reflection of the distrust that, no doubt, is deeply rooted in its political culture and has been provoked by the recent US behavior in the minds of the Russian political elite. It should be added, though, that however nominal the great power status may be, it is too

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that influential Russian commentators and newspapers denote politically desirable conditions with this term. Vitalii Tret’iakov, *Nuzhen li nam Putin posle 2008 goda?* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia Gazeta, 2005), 13–16.

comfortable for them to relinquish it by quitting membership of the G8 or other Western institutions such as the NATO-Russia Council. Therefore, Putin is likely to keep Russia in these institutions, without making a decisive departure for the Eurasian partnership. In this sense, Russia's Western orientation is still kept alive. This is a starting point for the examination of the second question: How stable is the Sino-Russian partnership?

No doubt, China and Russia make good partners both psychologically and economically. On the psychological level, both are under strong pressure to democratize their domestic political systems from the US and the European states. Naturally, the leaders of both nations share the same apprehensions about cultural globalization that levels the ground for political homogenization. And economically, the sharp rise in energy prices combined with China's aggressive economic growth prompts the Chinese leaders to ensure access to Russia's rich oil and gas reserves. Putin is a man intellectually prepared for Russia's energy-related strategy. Before coming to power in the late 1990s, he had finished a master's thesis arguing that "Russia's natural resources base will not only secure the country's economic development but will serve as the guarantor of the country's international position."<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important targets that the Russians have set in its long-term energy plan is to diversify its energy markets, which, in turn, requires Russia to open up markets in Asia. In this sense, China is an indisputable partner in this calculation.

Yet, in spite of this "favorable" interdependency and the positive trends, there are several issues casting a shadow over the future of Sino-Russian relations.

First, for both China and Russia, the other is a trade partner of minor importance. While Russian trade with the European states amounts to almost half of its total, China's main trading partners are other Asian countries, followed by the US. This is in part due to the Sino-Russian trade structure; for Chinese businesses, the Russian market is too far for them to transport large amounts of low-cost commodities. The Siberian

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<sup>4</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, "Vladimir Putin and the Geopolitics of Oil," in *The Energy Dimension in Russian Global Strategy*, The James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy's study paper (Houston: James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy of Rice University, 2004), 17.

railway is not yet fit for this purpose; the Russian government and Russian businesses, on their part, hope to heighten the industrial infrastructures with the help of sophisticated Japanese, US, and European technologies. In a word, economically, the US, Europe, and Japan have much more to offer either China or Russia than trade between the two. Some Russians go on to say that China needs only Russian energy resources, and that economic ties with Russia would only serve to make Russia a raw materials supplier for China.

Second, related with the aforementioned point is the salient contrast in the demographic trends in China and Russia. According to a Japanese scholar, while the population in the Russian Far East lost roughly one million from 1991 to 2001, in a neighboring Chinese province (Heilongjiang Province) alone, the population increased by three million in the same period.<sup>5</sup>

Given this startling gap in the demographic trends and a sparse population in the Russian Far East and Siberia, it is no wonder that the Russian residents feel threatened with unmanageable population pressure from the south. Although both Russian and Chinese governments have taken serious measures to cope with the illegal immigration problem in the last decade, the fundamental difficulty seems to remain unsolved or even compounded by the differences in the economic growth rates. Sooner or later, the Russian government will have to face a dilemma: either it will legalize Chinese migration to meet the demands from the regional labor market at the risk of incurring Chinese economic dominance, or it will be forced to take stricter measures to regulate Asian immigration at the cost of economic stagnation in the eastern part of its territory.

Third, there is still a potential territorial dispute between the two neighbors. No one can deny the significance of the agreement in October 2004 concerning the jurisdictional procedures over the remaining three disputed islands: Bol'shoi Ussuriiskii, Tarabarov, and Bol'shoi. The resolution of the territorial dispute was indeed a great achievement for both governments. Yet, there still remains room for skepticism. Some Russian scholars are still concerned with references made by the Chinese

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<sup>5</sup> ITO Shoichi, "Putin jidai no Churo kankei: Roshia toubu chiiki o meguru 2kokukan kankei o chusin ni" [*Sino-Russian relations in the era of Putin*], in IWASHITA Akihiro ed., *Roshia Gaikou no Genzai I* [*Russian Foreign Policy Today I*], *Making a Discipline of Slavic Eurasian Studies 2* (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2004), 77–78.

leaders in 1964 and 1989 to “the lost hundred and fifty thousand square kilometers,” expecting that the Chinese people in general will be informed of past claims involving them in the new territorial dispute in the meantime. Judging from the situation, the final resolution of the Sino-Russian territorial issue still needs to be published in China and accepted by the Chinese people.

Fourth, there is a contest over influence in Central and South Asia. The SCO is a suitable instrument to dispel distrust of each other as well as to suppress the threat of terrorism, separatism, and extremism. Moreover, in July 2005, it succeeded in issuing a joint declaration to limit US influences in this area by demanding that the US army pull out of Uzbekistan. Yet, the SCO seems to be indecisive about its future role in regional and world affairs. Although it effectively serves as a forum to expressing anti-American opinions, the leaders of the member states could not make a decision regarding which state among the observers would be admitted as an official member of the organization. If India is permitted to join the organization, the SCO would evolve into a powerful architecture on the Eurasian continent. But almost a year has passed since India was given observer status, and as to this point, nothing has happened. Presumably, this was due to the struggle between Russia and China for the leadership of the organization. Although they repeatedly express the desire to construct a multipolar world, they are not yet determined to make the SCO a reliable power center for challenging US hegemony.

Fifth, the Sino-Russian rapprochement will in the long run touch upon the problem of Russian identity. In other words, however useful it would be as a countermeasure against what the Russian leaders think as rude interference in Russian domestic affairs by the US and European democratic nations, the one-sided orientation towards China would surely raise uneasiness in Russian hearts and minds. In spite of the differences in the historical experiences and religious traditions, the majority of people in Russia have considered themselves as belonging to European Civilization.

To sum up, the arguments in this section suggest that apart from the rhetoric about the new stage in the strategic relationship, China could not be appreciated as a stable partner for Russia against the US and Europe. For both China and Russia, it is unrealistic to counterbalance the US and Europe, given the present power distribution in the global structure as well as moral and cultural perceptions in both Russia and China. So far, the

benefits brought about by the cooperative relations between them seem to be limited to immediate, mainly defensive objectives such as relatively small-scale economic cooperation, insurance against potential turmoil, or agreement to maintain the present status quo around the two countries. Nevertheless, even these modest benefits may have different meanings in the context of Northeast Asia. This last point is related to the theme of the third section.

The first problem concerning the change of strategic circumstances in Northeast Asia is the following: are bilateral relations between Japan and Russia influenced and determined by US-Russian relations as they were in the Cold War years? In my view, the answer is no, because there is neither a functional bipolar system nor a tangible Russian threat to the Japanese people. Today, either the Russian or the Japanese government could formulate its policy towards the other without taking into consideration the US-Japan alliance.

Certainly, Russo-Japanese relations have been stagnant since Putin took presidency, due, as a matter of fact, to the diplomatic failure of the preceding decade; the leaders of both Japan and Russia had exaggerated and boosted the possibility of a resolution of the territorial dispute with their imprudent statements, causing a deep sense of disappointment among the Japanese public. (Boris Yeltsin irresponsibly disclosed his intention to resolve the dispute by 2000, and the Japanese side optimistically regarded his remark as a serious promise to make a final decision in favor of the Japanese side.) In any case, the present blunt Russo-Japanese relations have hardly any connection with the present unfriendly atmosphere in US-Russian relations.

Then, what is the impact of the Chinese factor? As we mentioned above, the Sino-Russian rapprochement has had almost no effect on the US or Europe, as was demonstrated by the Sino-Russian joint military maneuver of last August. While China seemed to make use of the occasion to threaten the Taiwanese, the US showed no serious concern about this seemingly provocative gesture.

However, the problem here is whether or not the same conclusion is applicable in the case of the strategic triangular partnership among Sino-Russo-Japanese relations. To speak plainly, to what extent is Japan's regional isolation in the past few years the result of a Sino-Russian rapprochement?



The closer relations between China and Russia seem to have generated different strategic meanings towards Japan for the two partners. In the case of China, closer relations with Russia have already paid dividends: firstly, they have given the Chinese leaders a better bargaining position vis-à-vis Japan, and they showed greater confidence in maintaining a stronger position following Koizumi's visits to the Yasukuni Shrine; secondly, the rapprochement contributed towards creating the perception in the region that China transformed itself into a dominant power indispensable for coping with regional affairs, thwarting Japan's bid for regional leadership; thirdly, China could make use of the improved relations with Russia for monopolizing the role of hosting the six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. (Thanks to China's soft approach, North Korea has made great progress in manufacturing its nuclear technologies and missiles.) On top of these benefits, the SCO paved the way for China to expand its influence into Central Asia, hindering Japan from establishing its influence in this area. Thus, China has already reaped a rich harvest from the Russian linkage.

Compared with the Chinese case, the Russian accounts are slightly different. It is true that Russian leaders have shown an increasingly assertive position over territorial disputes since the start of the twenty-first century. In 2005, for example, several high-ranking Russian leaders paid a visit to the so-called Northern Territories, underscoring their allegation that since the islands belonged to Russia, there was no need to negotiate over them. German Gref, minister of economic development and trade, went on to announce that the ministry was determined to implement a fourfold increase in expenditure to improve the social infrastructure of the territories in the next budget when he visited the islands. As expected from these incidents, Putin's visit to Tokyo in November 2005 produced nothing diplomatically.

But interestingly enough, no comment from the Japanese side linked these approaches with the improved Sino-Russian relations. According to Japanese Foreign Ministry officials, Putin's uncompromising attitude during negotiations is due solely to the favorable Russian economic conditions that resulted from high energy prices. Evidently, the Japanese side sensed Putin's approach to regional politics when he decided not to accept the Chinese offer on the oil pipeline from Angarsk to Daqing at the end of 2004. Instead, the Russian government announced that it had

decided to adopt the route stretching from Taishet to Nakhodka.<sup>6</sup> Although this did not mean ultimate victory of the Japanese plan, the decision signaled to the Japanese government that the Russian side was keen to engage in geopolitical calculations; the more closely Russia connected its economy to China, the more it would be dependent on the latter not only economically but also politically in the Northeast Asian context. And in order to ensure its influential role in the region, Russia needs to avoid the establishment of an economic structure heavily weighted towards China. Thus, while Russia's foreign policy aims to further strengthen its relations with China against the US at the global level, its regional interests in Northeast Asia dictate improved relations with Japan and South Korea, both closely connected with the US.

The analysis of Russia's changed stance up to this point strongly suggests that there is a possibility for Japan and Russia to improve the present stagnant relations. Hitherto, Japan has regarded the resolution of the territorial dispute as the ultimate goal of its relations with Russia. But, in view of the above-mentioned new strategic circumstances in general, and the North Korean nuclear program in particular, it should reconsider its diplomatic means and ends. If Japan wants to be a global player, as is shown by its bid for a seat on the UN Security Council, it has to approach Russia as well as China both regionally and globally. At least Japan needs to elaborate a comprehensive Northeast Asian policy based on its global stance, instead of a mixture of bilateral relations.

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<sup>6</sup> Gilbert Rozman, "Sino-Japanese Competition over the Russian Far East: Is the Oil Pipeline Only a Starting Point?" in IWASHITA Akihiro ed., *Siberia and the Russian Far East in the Twenty-first Century: Partners in the "Community of Asia"*, Slavic Eurasian Studies 6, no. 1 (Sapporo: Slavic Research Center, 2005), 1–20; National Institute for Defense Studies Japan ed., Higashi Ajia Senryaku-gaikan 2006 [*East Asian Strategic Review 2006*] (Tokyo: Kokuritsu insatsu kyoku, 2007), 169.