

Sino–Russian Relations in Triangular Contexts

By Gilbert Rozman, Washington

Abstract

Sino–Russian relations are being tested in triangular contexts around Asia, involving national identities as well as national interests. South Asia poses the most direct bilateral conflict, followed by Southeast Asia. Central Asia and Mongolia is likely to be the most serious. Divergence over Japan and the Korean peninsula is bound to grow. Given lingering preoccupation with the United States, only a shift in Russian national identity is likely to bring these differences with China to the fore.

Sino–Russian relations remain a puzzle. On the one hand, few doubt that the rhetoric of extremely close relations that Chinese and Russian leaders continue to spout is a mirage. On the other, as issues keep arising over which clear divergence is expected, the two states persist in presenting a common front. Refraining from any direct criticism of each other, both fixate on U.S. power and values. Recently, each rebuked South Korea's initiative to elicit condemnation of North Korea's role in the Cheonan sinking by the other five states in the Six-Party Talks. After China took an unprecedented harsh stance toward Japan with regard to a territorial dispute between the two countries, Russia also upset Japan and other observers with the first visit by its leader to the disputed islands with Japan. Despite much talk of late from Russian officials about the importance of a balance of power in the Asia-Pacific region amidst evidence of China outmaneuvering Russia in Central Asia, the recent visits by Russian leaders to the East Asian Summit (where joint entry with the United States begins in 2011), the G-20, and APEC revealed no corresponding responses. Unraveling these complicated bilateral relations requires a dualistic approach, considering national identities as well as national interests.

Narrowly bilateral aspects of Sino–Russian relations are only one part of the overall picture. The two continue, as in the late 1990s, to put positive political aspects of their relationship in the forefront, struggling economics in the middle, and doubtful cultural ties in the rear. While all three aspects have improved—politics according to Vladimir Putin's insistence on gaining more leverage against the West, economics based on Russia's recognition that the world economy's balance is shifting toward Asia, and even culture as both sides level criticism elsewhere and agree to high-profile symbols of mutual respect—they fall short of solidifying relations. This is especially true as triangular relations in Asia gain more importance for the relationship. These triangular contexts can be divided into five sub-regions: 1) Central Asia and Mongolia; 2) South Asia; 3) Southeast Asia; 4) East

Asia centered on Japan; and 5) Northeast Asia centered on the Koreans. In the background is the global strategic triangle, inclusive of the United States (US–Russia–China) that remains a powerful influence on ties between Moscow and Beijing, as in the Cold War strategic triangle.

Central Asia and Mongolia

The distinctive location of the five countries of Central Asia and Mongolia, landlocked with no other nearby great power, puts them in the foreground in the struggle between Russia's irredentist notions of states that formed part of the Soviet Union and China's resurgent sinocentric view of how to treat border states. China has achieved a masterful diplomatic success over two decades of gaining influence across Central Asia, while arousing almost no official objections from Russia. Their joint presence along with four Central Asian states in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) has smoothed this transition. Yet, the national interests of the two powers are not well aligned, and the potential keeps growing for national identities to shift from overlapping to conflicting in regard to this region. This clash in interests and identities has been clearest from the outset in the case of Mongolia.

National identities have been aligned in blocking any color revolutions (the spread of Western power and values) and rising extremism (the spread of Islamic fundamentalist movements). The U.S. bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan fueled further agreement on the joint threat, despite the apparent shared need to prevent Afghanistan becoming a launching pad for extremist groups. Yet, the U.S. presence is limited, the reset of U.S.–Russian ties is allaying Russian paranoia, and China's gains have potential to refocus Russian attention. Unlike Southeast Asia, where ASEAN has the central role in regionalism, there is no impetus toward a Central Asian political community. Thus, Chinese bilateralism exposes the limited role of the SCO. Russian cultural ties to the elites of Central Asia are gradually declining. Even if China does not exert a strong cultural pull, its intensifying sinocentrism in other sub-regions should be a wake-up

call. Moreover, increasing spillover from Afghanistan, where China is gaining an economic foothold and supports Pakistan, is likely to catch the attention of Russia. Central Asia is too much a part of Russian national identity for Moscow to accept China's economic domination and eventual assertive political pressure, while Mongolia is too much a part of sinocentrism to escape Chinese pressure on Russia.

South Asia

In contrast to inner Asia, South Asia has come to symbolize the Sino–Russian gap in coordination on international affairs. As China's squeeze intensifies on India ("string of pearls" naval facilities, railroad and road construction removing the long impassable Himalayas as an obstacle, assertive territorial demands supported in new ways, dams threatening water supplies, etc.), Russia must decide whether it will back India more tangibly. As the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan declines, Russia's exposure will grow. In 2010 cooperation facilitating the northern supply route and dropping resistance to the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan suggests that the U.S.'s 'resetting' of relations with Russia is having an impact. Obama's November visit to India offered fresh proof of closer U.S.–Indian ties, and past Russian responses of trying to counter U.S. initiatives may be shifting to joint efforts in response to the danger of Pakistan–Taliban reassertion of power in Afghanistan. Russia's inclination to turn a blind eye to China's role in challenging India may be the weakest link in its deference to China. The fiction that it could simultaneously maintain close partnerships with both rising great powers may be tested, as happened fifty years ago when the Sino–Indian war exacerbated the Sino–Soviet split.

Relations between Moscow and New Delhi in the 1960s–80s appeared to be strictly about national interests since communist and democratic identities did not mesh. Each sees the other as a force for great power balance, but there is potential for national identity to play a role since both favor autonomy within a multipolar Asia in a way that suggests opposition not only to past U.S. power, but also to new Chinese power. An outcome where India shifts decisively away from the special relationship may jolt Russia into considering how it can reposition bilateral ties and shared identities. If China is suspicious of the expanded East Asian Summit, Russia embraces the new venue to explore a multilateral security framework with India and the United States that encompasses ASEAN, China, Japan, and South Korea as well as Australia and New Zealand. As an independent voice in Asia, Russia can boost its national identity, and India serves that image more than China.

Southeast Asia

Already in recent years Russian arms sales in Southeast Asia have capitalized on growing alarm about the Chinese military build-up and recent disturbing claims in the South China Sea. Russo–Vietnamese relations have revived in awareness of greater concern about China's military intentions. Given the preference within ASEAN to avoid confrontation, even as many states welcome a reinvigorated U.S. presence, the prospect of a direct conflict of interests between China and Russia is not high. Yet, to the extent China reasserts the claim that the South China Sea is its "core interest" or uses economic pressure on vulnerable Southeast Asian states, there may be appeals to Russia to join the United States in furthering multilateral approaches to problems.

China is especially prone to apply sinocentrism to Southeast Asia, pressing states to defer to it on sensitive matters linked to its broad notion of sovereignty. If this region is far from Russia's borders and of little consequence for its post-Soviet identity, it also is an ideal testing grounds for Asian reorganization, in which multiple powers are engaged and China's intentions are being scrutinized. Russia may be drawn into this process if China is not careful to temper its assertiveness. In 2010 a backlash against China was already occurring, facilitating the establishment of a larger East Asian Summit by ASEAN and raising hopes in Moscow of new opportunities.

East Asia Centered on Japan

As Japan grows alarmed about relations with China, particularly as a result of the Chinese response to the fishing boat incident near the disputed islands in September 2010, Moscow has the option of beckoning to Tokyo or seizing the opportunity to press home its increased advantage. In the fall of 2009, when the then Japanese Prime Minister, Hatoyama Yukio, began his tenure with an overture to Dmitry Medvedev and in the summer of 2010, when the current Prime Minister, Kan Naoto, was welcomed by Medvedev with an upbeat statement on how to deal with the Kurile Islands/Northern Territories issue, Russia appeared to be ready for intensified engagement. Yet, in July 2010 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov omitted Japan when he listed cooperative partners in Asia in Khabarovsk. The State Duma then passed a bill to commemorate the victory over Japan in WWII annually on September 2, which also figures into joint celebration with China. Medvedev soon announced plans to become Moscow's first leader to visit the disputed islands and, after a delay, made the trip on 1 November. Shocked by Beijing's stern posture in relation to territorial disputes, the Japanese were also disturbed by Moscow's tougher stance.

While China and Russia appeared to be in sync on Japan, Russia may have sought to prod Japan to abandon its illusions on how to solve the territorial dispute and diplomatic inertia. In Russia, a desire exists for improved Russo–Japanese relations for economic and great power interests, but also for an identity as an Asian power not just following in China’s shadow. Yet, the impasse is complicated by confusing signals over Putin’s resurgence and Medvedev’s ineffectiveness, casting doubt on any strategy that could highlight modernization, innovation, and a central role for Japan in the development of Russia’s Far East. As Kan focused on improved security ties with South Korea, after restoring trust with the United States, Russia’s critique of the North’s shelling of Yeonpyeong island was seen as only one step toward distancing it from China in Japanese eyes. The identity clash with Japan is far from being bridged.

Northeast Asia Centered on the Two Koreas

Russia seems to be more concerned about a nuclear North Korea than China is, but its approach to the Six-Party Talks echoes China’s. It is more restrained in its criticism of South Korea without explaining how this fits into its overall approach to the peninsula. The backlash against its loss of leverage after 1991, when North Korea reacted angrily to Russia’s normalization of relations with South Korea, overshadows clarification of a new Russian policy towards the Korean peninsula. Claiming to be the only real champion of Korean reunification, distinct from China and the United States, Russia is energized when progress is being made in the Six-Party Talks, but it has little to offer when pressure on the North is needed.

Optimism about ties with Seoul faded fast after normalization. Although in contrast to the second half of

the 1990s, trade had grown sharply during the boom years, Russia does not consider South Korea a major geopolitical player. It is viewed primarily through the lens of the alliance with the United States and the struggle with North Korea, in which Russia gains clout by balancing ties on the peninsula. Despite more urgent need for economic support in the Russian Far East and more provocative behavior by North Korea, Russia’s stance remains close to China’s.

The Triangle with the United States

As Sino–U.S. relations grow more adversarial and the Sino–Russian balance of power shifts more decisively in favor of China, Russia should find it advantageous to shift away from closer ties to China than to the United States. This will be possible if Russia becomes less obsessed with the challenge of NATO expansion and western threats to its revived, but still uncertain, national identity. In early 2011, sentencing Mikhail Khodorkovsky to an additional six years in prison and arresting opposition leader Boris Nemtsov for peacefully demonstrating aroused U.S. protests and in response Russia issued some warnings that this interference in Russia’s internal affairs could damage relations. Forces in Russia appeared indifferent to improving the climate for foreign investors and winning the respect of Western public opinion. Such behavior, consistent with Putin’s approach, makes it likely that China will be preferred to the United States. As one of a small number of states not to send a representative to the Oslo ceremony awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to the Chinese democracy advocate Liu Shaobo, Russia made its choice clear. Unless there is a substantive shift in national identity, Russia is likely to remain tethered to China despite the logic in the above triangles.

About the Author

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