Russia's Relationship with China After September 11

PONARS Policy Memo No. 214

Prepared for the PONARS Policy Conference
Washington, DC
January 25, 2002

Celeste A. Wallander
Center for Strategic and International Studies
December 2001

Putin's decision that Russia would join and actively support the U.S. fight against international terrorism potentially changes to a very significant degree Russia's constellation of relations in the Far East. Most importantly, on all three main Russian foreign policy objectives -- establishing itself as a power in world politics, securing the territorial integrity and stability of its vast Eurasian landmass, and participating in international trade and finance – China is less important.

Putin's choice has established Russia as an important U.S. partner in the fight against terrorism. Russia has provided vital intelligence on conditions in Afghanistan and terrorist networks. Russia and the United States are in close consultation in intelligence sharing and the volume, quality, and importance of the information and cooperation has been substantial. There are now serious discussions on giving Russia a decisionmaking role in NATO on issues of counterterrorism and preventing WMD proliferation. Although this does not mean Russia will support NATO enlargement, it does complicate the joint Russian-Chinese opposition to NATO's expanded role in global security.

Furthermore, while Russia does not have a veto over the choices of sovereign countries in Central Asia, in practical terms the willingness of Tajikistan and Kazakhstan to allow the United States to base forces on their territory needed Russian agreement. Putin even went further, and stated that Russia is willing to engage actively in search and rescue missions to aid U.S. forces if needed. Given concerns about the stability of Pakistan and that country's ties to the Taliban, the Central Asian countries became more important for the military operations in Afghanistan as the military campaign developed. In addition, with the focus on creating conditions whereby the Northern Alliance could defeat the Taliban on the ground, it became more important for U.S. aircraft and special forces to operate from the north.

As the campaign against terrorism moves on from the Afghan theater, Russia will likely continue to play an important supporting role, even if the United States does not entirely accept Russia's view of the nature of the terrorist phenomenon in the Caucasus. In addition, if there is a serious post-conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan, Russia's location and support in Central Asia will remain important, as will its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council.

In short, Russia does not need China to be important to the United States. Putin's choice and Russia's actions have brought the countries closer together in cooperation. The United States sees Russia as important to its primary security mission of counterterrorism.

Two implications of Russia's importance and role create problems for China as well. First, Russian-Chinese joint opposition to U.S. abrogation of the ABM Treaty is now a moot point with the Bush administration's decision in December 2001 to withdraw after 6 months. Russia's matter-of-fact response to the U.S. decision, and the fact that the decision does not appear to have fundamentally damaged U.S.-Russian relations, would appear to undercut one of the main pillars of any potential Russian-Chinese strategic partnership. Russia no longer needs the ABM Treaty to claim a seat at the security table with the United States because our partnership against terrorism brings that. For some time Russian experts have recognized that the ABM Treaty is of little practical value to Russian security, and its importance was its leverage with the United States to prevent us dismissing Russia as irrelevant to U.S. policy. Without that benefit needed, Russia's pragmatic response makes sense. Furthermore, if Russia and the U.S. move forward on a framework of strategic stability to reduce offensive nuclear forces, Russia does so by allowing the United States to move forward with programs that may erode China's nuclear deterrent. One of the main diplomatic benefits China was to achieve from its relationship with Russia will be lost, or at the very least degraded.

Second, Russia has significantly downplayed the argument that the war in Chechnya is a purely internal matter. Indeed, the main thrust of Russian policy is that the war there is a manifestation of international terrorism, akin to the September attacks in New York and Washington. Russia is not taking this position to welcome international involvement, of course, but to gain U.S. support for its policies against the separatists. The important point here is that in emphasizing the international linkage Russia is downplaying the "internal matter" warning, potentially eroding the effectiveness of its solidarity with China on the Taiwan issue. It is not that Russia will now say that Taiwan is an international matter, but that it will be less likely to expend diplomatic effort helping China to make the case. The Chechnya/Taiwan link is less valuable to Russia, and less useful to China.

In addition, China becomes less important for managing Central Asian security, and terrorism in the region. Why bother with the Shanghai Six when the important and effective alignment of states is the United States, Russia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan? This does not mean that Russia needs to provoke China, and indeed in November a joint Russian-Kazakh-Kyrgyz-Tajik team announced reductions in Russian troop and equipment numbers on the Chinese border to comply with limits agreed upon in 1995-1997 agreements on confidence-building measures and arms reductions. Regional security cooperation with China remains in Russia's interests. But the difference is that now Russia does not approach the relationship from the same position of weakness as before September 11.

In contrast, the economic issues and incentives in Russian policy on China by no means disappear. The same logic that made China an important market for Russian arms holds. We are unlikely to see Russia pull back from that relationship, precisely because it was not driven primarily by strategic or geopolitical concerns arising from poor relations with the United States, but from the domestic economic stringencies and priorities.

Indeed, we may even see a renewed emphasis on foreign arms markets as a result of Putin's recently announced renewed emphasis on defense reform. In November, Putin said that the

problem of defense reform involves "both the progress of reform and the armed forces' provision with up-to-date equipment and hardware" meaning that the logic behind supporting defense enterprises vital to the expected modernization is strengthened. We should not expect a slackening of the Russian-Chinese arms sales relationship.

Similarly, Russia will remain interested in China as an energy export market, and in potential Chinese investment in its Far East energy resources. In fact, if there is a reduction in global demand due to recession exacerbated by the war on terrorism, China could become more important if its own growth and growing demands are not too badly depressed by a global slowdown.

The next stage of the fight against terrorism also creates interesting prospects for change in Russia's Far East relationships more broadly. If the international community goes ahead with plans to launch a major reconstruction and development project for Afghanistan, Japan is more likely than China to play a substantial and long-term role in post conflict reconstruction, and its involvement may be a mechanism for closer cooperation with Russia. Japan is already active in Central Asia, in international assistance efforts, and in logistics support for U.S. military operations in the region.

The shift in the strategic landscape could extend to Russia's limited role on the Korean peninsula. With improvement in U.S.-Russian relations and moving beyond the ABM Treaty disagreement, it becomes less important for Putin to insist that North Korea is a responsible international actor in order to undermine U.S. missile defense claims. If that is the case, then the liabilities of the continuing division of Korea and the instability created by the failures of the north's regime could become worth shedding, from Putin's perspective. That must be balanced against concern of further destabilizing the regime, and the fear of prompting it to irresponsible action, but it does not seem compatible with a newly confident Russia returned to importance on the world stage in its relationship with the United States to play hostage to North Korea. With the increased value of the relationship with the United States and in light of Putin's consistent foreign policy objective to diversify Russia's economic relations, the Cold War legacy of a divided Korea becomes an obstacle rather than merely a persistent problem.

In short, the combination of Putin's pragmatic foreign policy and the closer U.S.-Russian relationship after the September attacks are likely to cause Russia to slow the development of a "strategic partnership" with China. In keeping with Putin's pragmatic approach and the key role of economic interests in Russia's foreign policy, the arms and energy relationship between Russia and China will continue to develop as long as China is interested and has cash to spend and invest.

Russia's non-confrontational relations with China and the importance of China for Russia's interests in regional security will not change. China is too big and too close to the Russian Federation for Russia to ignore or antagonize it. Since September 11, Russian and Chinese officials have emphasized their common interest in Eurasian stability and in fighting terrorism in Central Asia. The Russian and Chinese foreign ministers also used the occasion of the UN General Assembly session to state that Russia and China have a common approach to fighting terrorism, through respect for international law and with the UN taking a leading role, in a thinly veiled warning against U.S. unilateralism.