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The new China-Russia strategic alignment

This July, President Putin of Russia is scheduled to meet with President Jiang Zemin of China to sign a new thirty-year treaty of cooperation between their countries. This treaty will formalize the ever-increasing Chinese-Russian strategic coordination of recent years that is intended to counter the United States around the globe. Why would the leadership of China and Russia believe they need to join for this purpose? At their summit meeting in July 2000, Putin endorsed China's view as expressed in their joint statement that the U.S. "is seeking unilateral military and security advantages" in the world. Putin also criticized the "economic and power domination of the United States" and agreed with China on the need to establish a still undefined " new political and economic order".

The new China-Russia treaty will not only mean a significantly increased political-strategic challenge to the U.S., it will also pose additional military risks. These are illustrated by Russia's sale of advanced weapons systems to China, which it is aiming at U.S. forces, and by the February 2001 Russian military exercises that included mock nuclear attacks against U.S. military units viewed as opposing a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

The relationship between Russia and China went from alliance in the 1950s to deep hostility from 1960 to 1985 followed by gradual normalization during the Gorbachev years. After 1991, Yeltsin continued negotiations to demarcate the disputed border, but kept a political distance because China remained communist, had publicly welcomed the 1991 coup attempt by Soviet communist hardliners and opposed Yeltsin's democratic aspirations.

Yeltsin and the first President Bush had three summit meetings in 1992 and 1993 and Russia declared its intention to move toward a "strategic partnership and in the future, toward alliance" with the U.S. The mutually positive and hopeful initial relationship with the new, post-Soviet Russia also included a signed agreement on reductions in offensive nuclear weapons and a joint decision on modifying "existing agreements" (including the ABM treaty) to permit global missile defense which both Presidents Yeltsin and Bush acknowledged were needed.

Unfortunately the Clinton Administration did not pursue the opportunity for Russian-U.S. agreement on missile defense. In April 1996, facing the prospect that the communist party of Russia might win the scheduled June 1996 presidential election, Yeltsin decided to broaden his political support by agreeing with China on a "strategic partnership" and increased Russian weapons sales. These would help the Russian economy, especially the military production sector, and the "partnership" might draw votes from communists and ultra nationalists who believed that Russia should follow the "Chinese model" of political dictatorship and a modernizing economy.

Through a series of regular summit meetings, China moved the "partnership" with Russia

toward strategic alignment marked by an ever larger component of shared anti-US political objectives (e.g. support for Iraq, opposition to missile defense) along with increased Russian military sales and military cooperation. This was ignored by the previous Administration.

As a result, for the first time in forty years the U.S. faces China and Russia coordinating their international actions. This could have six principal negative implications starting, first, with the fact that Russia has accepted and repeats most of communist China's views about international politics and about the U.S. (for example, that the US seeks to dominate the world).

Second, the Chinese view of the coming July 2001 treaty emphasizes that when one of the parties to the treaty "experiences military aggression", the other signatory state should when requested "provide political, economic, and military support and launch joint attacks against the invading forces." As the American public has learned from the April 2001 reconnaissance aircraft event, China defines not only Taiwan but also most of the international South China Sea and all its islands as its sovereign territory. If the United States should threaten or take any type of counteraction (political, economic or military) against China to uphold the rights of US aircraft or ships in that international air and sea space or to help allies or other countries defend themselves against coercion by China, which has territorial disputes with 11 neighboring countries including Japan and India, China could define this as "blackmail" and a violation of its "sovereignty." It would then hope to draw Russia in militarily, if only as a potential counter threat as suggested by the Feb.2001 Russian military exercise.

A third negative consequence is ever increasing Russian military sales and other support for the buildup of Chinese advanced weapons systems specifically targeted at US air, sea and electronic military capabilities and vulnerabilities in the Pacific. For example the Russian anti-ship missiles that accompany the two Russian destroyers already delivered (and the four more to come) skim the ocean at twice the speed of sound, can carry nuclear warheads and were designed to sink US aircraft carriers. In the 1990s Russia sold China about $9 to $20 billion in advanced weapons systems aimed at U.S. forces (jet fighters, submarines, destroyers, anti-air/missile systems), with another $20 to $40 billion in weapons and high technology sales planned through 2004. The income from these sales also helps Russia further modernized its strategic nuclear forces which currently have 4,000 warheads on about 1,000 ICBMs.

A fourth negative result is that Russia and China are working together and in parallel to oppose any US decision to deploy national or Asian regional missile defenses; they are seeking to persuade U.S. allies to oppose this and refuse cooperation. At the same time Russia has sold China one of its most advanced weapons (S-300), originally designed to shoot down the Pershing medium range missile as well as aircraft and cruise missiles, along with a similar medium range system (Tor-M1) in such quantity that China is now in effect already deploying its own missile/air defense system on the coast.

Fifth, Russia and China have been providing weapons of mass destruction components,

technology and expertise to a number of dictatorships such as North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Libya, which are hostile to the US and its allies. Russia and China have also established military supply links with Cuba and the pro-Castro Chavez regime in Venezuela. The risk of conflict increases as all these dangerous regimes become militarily stronger and also believe that they are backed by both China and Russia.

The sixth negative result is that the ever-closer relationship with China strengthens the authoritarian tendencies within Russia, thereby increasing the risk that it will become more aggressive internationally. While the Chinese government develops relations with the Putin government and military, the Chinese Communist Party has revived direct relations with the communist party in Russia.

The Bush Administration needs to give the China-Russia strategic alignment effective attention. With skill and foresight it is still possible to turn back the momentum by hardliners in both countries toward ever more dangerous confrontation while adopting realistic policies that maintain deterrence and peaceful relations with both Russia and China.

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