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The Rise of Russia, Sino-Russian Relations, and U.S. Security Policy

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Boston College

Brief



Institute for Strategy

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Introduction

Russia's re-emergence as an influential European great power is all but inevitable. It possesses the underlying natural and human resources and the political will to develop the military capabilities necessary to reorder its strategic environment to enhance its security. Russia's conflict with the Ukraine, its military intervention in Georgia, and its hardening resistance to U.S. missile defence cooperation with Poland and the Czech Republic all reflect the determined revival of Russian great power presence in international politics.

Especially the United States and China will be affected by Russia's re-emergence, because improved Russian capabilities not only affect their security, but could also lead to contrary effects on U.S. and Chinese security. Therefore, Russia's re-emergence could have a significant impact on firstly, U.S.-China relations and secondly on the U.S. as a global actor with far-flung strategic commitments.

Russia as a European Power

Russia's re-emergence in Europe will not require a significant recovery of the Russian economy or significant advancement in Russian military technologies. Its proximity to Europe's major powers means that a basic Russian ground force capability can challenge regional stability. Moscow's dependence on oil exports for economic growth may be unwise policy for long-term economic development, but oil exports can provide the revenue to enable long-term increases in Russian defence spending. In 2009, Russia announced a 26 per cent increase in its defence budget.¹ The long-term decline of the Russian population poses a challenge to Russian economic development. Nonetheless, the demographic trends of the major West European states are equally discouraging for their own security. Germany, for example, is experiencing significant population decline. Moreover, most of the Russian population resides in European Russia. Thus, Russia will remain the largest European state well into the twenty-first century.

In August 2008, a poorly equipped and poorly trained Russian army defeated the Georgian army and compelled European and U.S. acquiescence to Russian use of force against a potential candidate for membership in NATO. NATO and the United States have also acquiesced to Russian coercion against Ukraine. As Russian capabilities continue to develop, it will have improved ability to challenge the status quo throughout Eastern Europe.

(1) ITAR-TASS, March 17, 2009, in Open Source Center (OSC), doc. no. CEP20090317950310.

Russian Vulnerability to Chinese Power and Sino-Russian Cooperation

In contrast to Russia's long history as a European great power, most of Russian history in Northeast Asia has been characterised by strategic irrelevance. When Russia expanded into Northeast Asia in the decades following the Crimean War, it encountered minimal resistance. China was in decline and Japan had yet to emerge as a regional power. But after Japan began its naval build-up following the 1894-95 Sino-Japanese war, it quickly attained naval and ground force superiority in the northwest Pacific and inflicted a devastating blow on the Russian military during the 1904-05 Russo-Japanese war. Russia did not recover its great power presence in Northeast Asia until the later stages of the Cold War in the 1970s. During the long intervening period, Russia was preoccupied by critical strategic challenges in the European theatre. In the early 20th century, Russia focused its resources on the rise of German power. Following the 1917 communist revolution, its recovery after World War I and the civil war, the Soviet Union once again focused Russian capabilities on German power. After World War II and until the mid 1960s, the Soviet Union focused its capabilities on American power in Europe.

The Soviet Union's brief Cold War experience as an East Asian great power ended in failure. By the mid 1970s, it had deployed sizeable numbers of ground forces along the Sino-Soviet border, advanced strategic aircraft and intermediate range ballistic missiles in the Russian Far East, and began development and deployment of the Soviet Pacific Fleet. But the Soviet Union opened its military front with China just as the Reagan administration reengaged the United States in escalated Cold War competition in Europe. Moreover, the proximity of the large Chinese population to the Soviet Far East enabled China to deploy large numbers of troops on the Soviet border at less expense to China's other priorities, despite China's economic backwardness and the political instability of the Cultural Revolution.

Contemporary demographic trends in the Russian Far East are devastating for 21st century Russian power projection capability. At the end of the Cold War, there were 14 million Russians in the Far East. In 2009, there were approximately 7 million Russians in the region. In the absence of Soviet-era controls on population movement, the better-educated Russians are leaving the region.² More serious for Russian interests is that the younger generation is leaving the Far East, so that among the remaining residents, very few are of childbearing age. Meanwhile, Russian sources indicate that each year, there are over 100,000 new foreign migrants in the Russian Far East and that over 90 per cent of these

(2) BBC Monitoring, November 16, 2008, in OSC, doc. no. CEP20081124950332.

migrants are Chinese. In 2009, as many as 300 Chinese cross the border each day looking for work.³ Even allowing for Russian exaggeration of Chinese immigration, these trends suggest that the demography of the Russian Far East is gradually returning to the situation of the late nineteenth century, when ethnic Russians were the minority. Climate and demography also impede Russian regional infrastructure development. There remains only one railway line connecting the Far East to western Russia. The regional road network is primitive and there is minimal power generation throughout the Far East.

Russian military presence in the Far East cannot adequately defend Russia's border or control immigration from China. The Russian Pacific Fleet has only 18 ocean-going ships, nearly all of which are obsolete. The Russian air presence in the Far East is equally troubled. The Chinese Air Force has purchased more modern aircraft from the Russian defence industry than the Russian Air Force.⁴ Whereas Russia cannot sustain its economic, military and demographic presence in the Far East, northeast China is one of China's most vibrant industrial and agricultural centres with a population of over 150 million Chinese. Deployed throughout this region are Chinese ground forces supported by logistical networks and well-supplied military bases. Given the contrary trajectories in Russian and Chinese demography, economic development, military modernisation, and the trends in cross-border migration, it is not an exaggeration to conclude that the Russian Far East is Russian because of Chinese forbearance.⁵

Russian preoccupation with the U.S.'s continued presence in the European theatre and its vulnerability in the Far East to Chinese power, compels Russia to cooperate with China. While Vladimir Putin has developed an assertive Europe policy and challenged the United States on multiple issues, he has preserved cooperation with China. In particular, there is ongoing Sino-Russian defence cooperation. Russia still needs arms exports to finance its defence industry and China still needs Russian weaponry. In early 2008 and 2009, Russia and China concluded an agreement for the sale of 100 Sukoi aircraft engines and surface-to-air missiles to China and are negotiating the transfer of other important arms and military equipment, including heavy-lift helicopters and advanced radar systems. There is also the likelihood of a Russian sale of Su-33s to China to equip its planned air-

(3) ITAR-TASS, February 21, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CEP20090221950034; BBC Monitoring, September 21, 2008, OSC, doc. no. CEP20081007950269.

(4) Yezhednevnyye Novosti, November 28, 2008, OSC, doc. no. CEP2081202330001; BBC Monitoring Service, December 8, 2008, OSC, doc. no. CEP208120895008. On Chinese and Russian aircraft, see Air and Cosmos, November 28, 2008, OSC, doc. no. EUP20081208177002.

(5) Cf., Lo, "Ten Things Everyone Should Know about the Sino-Russian Relationship."

craft carrier.⁶ China and Russia continue to carry out joint ground force exercises, anti-smuggling and anti-terrorist exercises along the eastern border.

Sino-Russian energy cooperation continues to develop. In 2009, the two sides reached agreement on Chinese loans to Russia for the completion of a branch of the East Siberian pipeline in 2010 that will initially deliver 15 million tons of oil per year to China, approximately a 60 percent increase in annual Russian oil exports to China. There is also planning for a second East Siberian pipeline branch to China and for additional oil sales of 30 million tons per year, which could potentially provide China with 25 percent of its total oil imports in 2014.⁷ Bilateral trade and investment also contributes to cooperation. In 2008, China was Russia's second largest trade partner and the second largest source of foreign investment in Russia.⁸

In Central Asia, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization facilitates cooperative anti-smuggling exercises and anti-terrorist measures. Despite China's dismay at Russia's invasion of Georgia during the Beijing Olympics, China managed to balance its interest in avoiding any suggestion of Chinese alignment with Russia against the United States with its sympathy for Russian resistance to U.S. "hegemony" and its contribution to constraining U.S. strategic activism.⁹

Russian Accommodation of Chinese Revisionism in Central Asia

Sino-Russian cooperation endures despite Chinese challenges to Russian interests in Central Asia. The Chinese military dominates eastern Central Asia. Its armed forces border Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Of these three countries, Russian military forces only border Kazakhstan, so that China dominates the strategic environment of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Although both Russia and China border Kazakhstan, Chinese ground forces are better-equipped and better trained than Russian ground forces, meaning China also dominates Kazakhstan's strategic environment.

(6) On the Sukoi engines, see Kommersant-Vlast, March 9, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CEP20090310358001; ITAR-Tass, February 4, 2008, OSC, doc. no. CEP20090204950104. On the helicopters, see Zhongguo Wang, March 12, 2009, Open Source, doc. no. CPP20090313701004. On the air defense and radar systems, see Kommersant-Vlast, March 9, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CEP20090310358002. The Su-33 is discussed in Jane's Defense Weekly, October 28, 2008.

(7) Interfax, February 17, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CEP20090217964095; ITAR-TASS, March 18, 2008, OSC, doc. no. CEP20090318950434; Strait Times, February 5, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CPP20090205094001.

(8) Xinhua, March 19, 2008, OSC, doc. no. CPP20090319968105.

(9) See Zhu Feng's "Russia-Georgia Conflict: Testing China's Responsibility?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., November 2008.

Economically, Chinese influence pervades most of Central Asia. 80 percent of Kyrgyzstan's trade is with China and China dominates Tajikistan's foreign trade as well. Current trends suggest that China will soon become Kazakhstan's most important trading partner. Chinese official aid and private investment also contribute to Chinese political influence throughout the region. A major source of Chinese economic influence in Central Asia is its energy diplomacy. Its investment in the Kazakhstan's Caspian oil fields and the Kazakhstan-China gas pipeline has enabled Kazakhstan to reduce its dependency on the Kazakhstan-Russian pipeline for revenue from energy exports.¹⁰ China is also constructing a second Central Asian pipeline that will connect Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan with Shanghai and Guangdong and that will similarly reduce their dependency on Russia.¹¹ Russia does not have the resources to compete with Chinese economic penetration of Central Asia. On the contrary, to develop its domestic oil and gas pipelines, Russia has depended on loans from importing states.

Russia cooperates with China despite China's ongoing challenge to the regional status quo and to Russian security interests. Russia does not resist Chinese revisionism in Central Asia because Russian vulnerability in Northeast Asia leaves Russia no choice. China can hold Russian security in the Far East hostage to Russian cooperation in Central Asia.

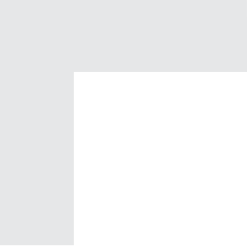
Balancing U.S. Security Interests in Europe and Asia

The re-emergence of Russia as a European great power and of potential U.S.-Russian conflict will not be matched by Sino-Russian conflict. Russia must accommodate the rise of China and ensure Sino-Russian border stability. China and Russia will thus each confront a one-front conflict while the United States will confront a two-front conflict. The combination of Russia's re-emergence and the rise of China thus pose a security challenge to the United States. In order for the United States to reduce the likely high cost of Russia's re-emergence in Europe, it must reduce the burden of its NATO treaty commitments to Russia's immediate neighbours.

Strategic accommodation between the new NATO members in the Baltic and in Eastern Europe will be critical to make the cost of NATO expansion manageable

(10) Bloomberg News, December 7, 2007, at http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601072&sid=apEo_TyBgH5U&refer=energy. On competition in Central Asia, also see Bobo Lo, "Ten Things Everyone Should Know about the Sino-Russian Relationship," Policy Brief, Center for European Reform, December 2008.

(11) "Central Asia: Turkmenistan-China Pipeline Project Has Far-Reaching Implications," RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, April 10, 2006, at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1067535.html>. The second and third pipelines are discussed in Xinhua, March 6, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CPP20090306136020; Strait Times, February 5, 2009, OSC, doc. no. CPP20090205094001.



to U.S. security in Europe as the United States simultaneously contends with the rise of China in East Asia. Equally important will be securing a greater contribution from the major west European powers, including Germany and France, to balancing Russian power. They can do far more to provide for their own security. The alternative for the United States is unilateral management of a two-front heightened conflict with two great powers. This outcome would be detrimental to U.S. security and economic health. Moreover, given China's economic dynamism, it is not at all clear that the United States could simultaneously contend with Chinese and Russian power, so that West European security would suffer, as well. Accommodation of Russian security interests along its European borders, revision of the European status quo and the emergence of Europe's democracies as major contributors to European security are thus necessary for both U.S. and European security.