

Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership from the Perspective of Historical Factors in Russia's Policy toward China

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Introduction

Russia, after significant changes in its state system and territory due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, was in the 1990s forced to seek new diplomatic targets, and in the process attempted a reappraisal of historical precedents. Following the setback of the policy which was excessively collaborative with the United States, Foreign Minister E.M. Primakov brought up the policy of A.M. Gorchakov who was appointed foreign minister of the Russian Empire in 1856 after Russia's defeat in the Crimean War, emphasizing, "In difficult situations, we must raise our national status through proactive diplomacy, not refraining from it." This shows Russian political elite's tendency to focus on ideal targets with a historical pattern. Here, in observing Russia's policy toward China, we will discuss the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, focusing on the three historical factors behind Russia's major diplomatic targets: status as a great power, awareness of the vulnerability of the eastern territory, and prospects for East Asia.

Strong awareness regarding status as a great power

First, Russia emphasizes its status as a "great power that carries responsibility in the world order" and works out its foreign policies following such self-perception in the international community. The Russian Empire, which inherited the status as the leader of the Eastern Orthodoxy from the Eastern Roman Empire, participated in European international politics through the process of Westernization and modernization by Peter the Great. Russia took pride in rolling back the invasion by Napoleon and protecting the European order. As "guardian of the order" since the Vienna settlement of 1815, it cooperated with Austria in suppressing rebellion in 1849. Nevertheless, Austria joined the side of Britain and France in the Crimean War, and Russia was forced to accept unfavorable peace terms in the Treaty of Paris of 1856. Russia was prohibited from possessing a naval fleet in the Black Sea, and it lost its status as a great power that is a "revered guardian of order." Gorchakov shook up the order after the war through proactive diplomacy, and in 1870 declared the clause on the Black Sea Fleet invalid. This was a symbolic emphasis of Russia's equality with other great powers, and the actual reconstruction of the naval fleet took place some years after this. At political forums for great powers after World War I adding the United States and Japan, the Soviet Union was one of the players, and it was at the center of the world in terms of socialist universalism. During the Cold War,

the Soviet Union became one of the leaders of the two camps in the world and led the way in nuclear weapons, space development, and other areas.

Russia has the memory and heritage of having always been a great power in international politics, and even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia seeks to act as a great power. In addition, it has been a great power independent of the West, and the emphasis on Eurasianism in which “Russia is both European and Asian” has had influence. In reality, it has a limited basis of historical ties with Asian countries, and has difficulties such as an industry structure too dependent on energy export and foreign capital. Nevertheless, in spite of these facts, Russia’s subjective view dictates its policy.

When Russia takes action in East Asia, it takes its approach from the viewpoint of politics among great powers. The Russian Empire was in touch with the Qing Dynasty since the 17th century and thus built a special relationship with China much earlier than other European countries, carrying out land-based commerce and dispatching Russian Orthodox missions to Beijing. In the mid-19th century, when Britain came to have an overwhelming influence in China, Russia’s rivalry with Britain expanded to East Asia, and in order to prevent its influence from declining in China, Russia participated in a new system of diplomacy and seaport trading. Later, the Russian Empire competed with Britain and Japan over imperialistic interests in East Asia. The involvement of the Soviet Union in the Chinese Revolution and the Korean War was based on the perspective of expanding its influence in the world.

At the start of the Yeltsin administration, Russia hoped to participate in the G8 as a free nation, and it distanced itself from socialist China, but in the end it was not accepted as a major Western nation. In response, Russia came to join China in a stance of resisting the overwhelming influence of the United States, and the development of Sino-Russia relations began.

Vulnerable eastern regions neighboring China

Secondly, Russia has vulnerable regions such as Eastern Siberia and the Far East, and it has been devoting resources to its national mission of maintaining these areas. The country has always been concerned to some degree about China with the long shared border. In the mid-19th century, Count N.N. Murav’ev-Amurskii, Governor-General of Eastern Siberia, was concerned that Eastern Siberian cities near Lake Baikal would be at risk unless the Amur River could be secured for use. The need to secure the Amur River and the downstream area before the expansion of Britain was the motivation for his expansionist policy. Murav’ev emphasized that the Qing Dynasty “needs defense by its friend Russia in order to protect the Amur basin from Britain,” and forced Qing to cede what is now the territory of the Russian Far East. Its new territory turned out again to face threats from China, which started large-scale settlement in the Manchuria region, and rising Japan. The scenario the

Russian military feared after the Russo-Japanese War was “another military conflict caused by a Japan-China alliance.” The military conflict between China and the Soviet Union in the 1960s was a major shock. The Soviet Union implemented a policy to encourage people to live in the Far East region, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the population fell to just around seven million. China in its three northeastern provinces has a population of more than one hundred million, and Russians are concerned about the flow of this population into the Russian territory. The governments of the two countries made efforts to settle border problems through compromise, in spite of domestic dissatisfaction. This seems to be because both sides not only sought friendship but also feared future risks in the case that the problems should remain unsolved.

East Asia providing prospects for development

Thirdly, while Russia’s main attention constantly lies in the west, East Asia sometimes provides Russia with prospects for development. The elite of the Russian Empire, which experienced defeat in the Crimean War on the European side, saw new frontiers through the eastward expansion being executed at that time by Murav’ev-Amurskii. During the era of eastward expansion up to the Russo-Japanese War, Russia hoped for economic development and some advocated closer ties with Asian nations. Having seen the failure of a socialist revolution in Germany and the rest of Europe, Moscow came to expect an anti-imperialistic revolution in the countries of Asia and allocated considerable resources to revolutionary movements in China.

For post-Soviet Russia, Europe remains a major market for energy exports, but will not have a large margin of growth going forward. Russia is thus directing the attention of its long-term national development plans toward East Asia. There are high expectations for the plan for energy exports to the Asia-Pacific region, which will see significantly growing energy demand in China and a connection with the United States via the Pacific Ocean. The fact that Russia has had hopes for East Asia many times until now means that it has given its attention, but failed at development many times. Nevertheless, development plans are gradually being realized, such as the start of construction of an oil pipeline to China in 2009, and Russia’s motivation is continuous and real. A sign of Russia’s motivation is the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to be held in 2012 in Vladivostok.

Development and limitations of the Sino-Russian Strategic Partnership

Of the three factors mentioned above, “the Sino-Russian strategic partnership” was established mainly based on the first factor, the need for politics among great powers. Due to problems such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) intervening in Kosovo outside the framework of the United Nations Security Council, China and Russia have shared a stance of resisting the United States. The second factor regarding concerns about the border is also a basis for bilateral relations

between China and Russia. Both governments made enthusiastic efforts in border negotiations, while the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) developed as a confidence-building measure and a process for border demarcation in Central Asia. The Sino-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation, signed in Moscow in July 2001, refers to the historically friendly relations between the two countries. It also stipulates mutual support regarding territorial integrity (Article 4), military technology cooperation between the two countries not being directed at third countries (Article 7), and cooperation in principle in respecting sovereignty and so forth at the Security Council (Article 13). China aimed for modernization of its military arsenal but could not import advanced equipment from the West, and Russia needed a market to maintain its military industry. China and Russia thus also developed relations in arms trade.

That said, when the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 occurred, Russia, which faces the problem of Chechnya, became closer to the United States based on the opportunity for international cooperation against terrorism, and even accepted a US military presence in Central Asia. This was a situation that China had not envisioned, and we can see that Russian foreign policy gives priority to relations with the United States. However, when the Bush Administration began to strongly demonstrate aspects of unilateralism on the issue of Iraq, China and Russia came closer once again. At a summit meeting between China and Russia in October 2004, a basic agreement was announced regarding the remaining border problems. Following this, China and Russia in 2005 carried out large-scale joint military exercises, showing the deepness of their relationship. At the SCO as well, there was a movement calling for the closure of the US military bases in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, the peak was at about that time, and the closeness of the relationship between China and Russia has been weakening. The export of weapons from Russia to China has recently been notably sluggish. The Russian military industry has been expanding to markets other than China, and Russia has come to worry that the modernization of the Chinese arsenal could become a problem in the future. Meanwhile, China has made progress with modernization and is now leaning toward independent production. Russia is passive about drastic arms reduction in negotiations with the United States on strategic nuclear weapons, which some experts say is because Russia is concerned about China's nuclear capabilities closing in on that of the United States and Russia in the future. Russia has accumulated wealth through high oil prices and is now confident about its national power. "The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," a government document published in July 2008, states that Russia is one of the central countries that possess influence in the modern world, and shows an awareness of the shift from a unipolar world led by the United States to a multipolar world. In the Georgian conflict in August, judging that the United States would not have enough available capacity for military intervention, Russia took a strong stance of using military force and criticizing the US policy on Georgia. While Russia recognized the independence of the two

separatist movement regions in the Georgian territory at this time, China and Central Asian countries did not keep pace. Russia welcomed the Obama Administration's more flexible policy toward Russia in 2009, interpreting it as a US compromise, and Russia has demonstrated a stance of improving relations in areas in which it can cooperate such as issues on Iran and North Korea.

Conclusion

The Sino-Russian strategic partnership in recent years has had notable contradictory aspects, and it is unlikely to develop into an alliance. It is likely that a certain level of positive relations between China and Russia will be maintained for some time in the future, as long as there are no drastic changes such as the advent of a new unilateralist administration in the United States. Since China and the Soviet Union were in serious rivalry even during the Cold War, there is also the possibility of a conflict arising if the mutual interests of the countries get too out of alignment. Nevertheless, China and Russia share the same long-term interests in energy cooperation, and confidence building in regard to the border has benefits for both sides. There is thus little chance that the two countries will go so far as to abandon these things as the result of increasing antagonism. On the contrary, it can be expected that relations between China and Russia will continue to develop calmly. (Completed January 25, 2010.)