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The China Card and Russian Roulette

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Those who have been watching closely all the ups and downs in Soviet and Russian relations with China during the last four decades would conclude that these relations recently have moved into a new phase. While still far from exhibiting the close cooperation and mutual support of the "great friendship" in the 1950s, both countries have abandoned the confrontational relations typical of Sino-Soviet rivalry in the late 1960s and 1970s, and appear willing to cast aside some of their differences which had coincided with the disintegration of the former USSR and the initiation of liberal reforms in Russia. In fact, it seems as if both Russian and Chinese political leaders, as well as some leading Russian opposition members, are trying to use the possibility of much closer political, economic, and military interaction between the two states as an additional lever for pressure in their policies vis-a-vis the West, and particularly the United States. Russian politicians, including those in the presidential and the governmental camps, no longer try to lecture China about democracy and human rights, and, during discussions on NATO enlargement and other points of disagreements with the West, speak frequently about the need to forge a much stronger alliance with China.

It seems that the Chinese leaders recuperated relatively quickly from the shock caused by the double disintegration of the Soviet communist regime and of the Soviet multinational empire, and decided that China, with its rapid economic growth in the early 1990s, could extract certain benefits from Russia's weakened position and its sometimes poorly guided transition toward a market economy. By 1992-1993, thousands of government-supported Chinese companies were set up to deal with Russia's new entrepreneurs, especially in regions close to the Russian-Chinese border.
As a result, Chinese populations in major Russian Far Eastern economic centers have increased rapidly, particularly in the Russian industrial and naval center of Vladivostok. Aside from the growing amount of trade across the common border, the Chinese side has established contacts with Russian weapons manufacturers, as well as directly with the Russian military; the sales of modern Russian weapons to China have become an important source of hard currency revenues for the Russian government.

In addition, the Chinese government and communist party officials, aside from maintaining official channels of communication, have begun to establish direct contacts with the leaders of major Russian political parties and opposition movements. While relations between the Chinese Communist Party and Gennadi Zyuganov's Communist Party of the Russian Federation have been described by both as a matter of maintaining relations between comrades-in-arms, the Chinese Party recently hosted as its guest Yuri Skokov, the co-leader of the nationalist Congress of Russian Communities, and, most recently, Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who volunteered to establish party-to-party ties with the Chinese communists "immediately." Upon his return from China, Skokov, an influential politician with good contacts in the presidential camp and in the Russian military-industrial complex, called for the establishment of a strategic alliance between the two countries, and stressed that "such an alliance between Russia and China, if it would be treated with understanding by the rest of the world, could become a serious basis for a new world order, or, if you want, for the construction of the world of the future." (1)

The Chinese have successfully trained a large number of experts with good command of the Russian language and a sophisticated understanding of the complicated processes taking place in Russia. This training was facilitated by the countries' similar political and economic systems and by the common tasks they faced of modernizing their predominantly peasant societies. During the Soviet and Russian reform efforts and the period when Russia was still attempting to reorient its foreign policy toward improved relations with the West, the Chinese closely followed developments in the former Soviet republics, and were actively touting there the so-called Chinese path of
reform. The dominant attitudes of the new Russia elite in favor of political stability, as well as the strong attitudes in the Russian society in favor of maintaining law and order at that time could not be ignored. The use of force in the resolution of conflicts between the executive and the legislative branches of power in Russia in 1993, as well as Russia's aggression against Chechnya, with thousands of casualties among the civilian population and among the military, however, closed doors on Russia's once-strong criticism of the bloody massacre on Beijing's Tiananmen Square and of China's continued violations of human rights.

The Chinese side had been studying public attitudes in Russia, and could not fail to notice the unpopular character of Yegor Gaidar's liberal economic reforms, as well as the frustration evident both among the elites and at the grassroots level concerning the loss of Russia's empire and its great power stature. The efforts of the Chinese leaders to maintain regular contacts with a wide range of political forces and parties in Russia, and to support many Russian experts in China, allowed them to advertise their path of reform, and to build a relatively strong "pro-Chinese lobby" among the Russia elites.

The emergence of pro-China sentiments among the Russia elites also was facilitated by the resurgence of anti-Western and anti-American attitudes in Russia. Some politicians in Moscow tried to project radical alternatives to current Russian foreign policy as a tool in their struggle against the Yel'tsin administration. Thus, they held out "the possibility of entering a strategic alliance with China based solely on an anti-American basis," (2) a concept that was intended also to further their own political interests. (3)

At this point, one can expect both countries to play the card of improved relations with each other in order to strengthen their bargaining power vis-a-vis the West, and especially vis-a-vis the United States. Bearing in mind the growing strength of Russian communists and nationalists on the eve of the parliamentary elections in December of 1995, and as the Russian presidential elections of June 1996 approach, one can expect further acceleration of this process, and a more flexible attitude of the Russian leadership toward China in light of growing ties between the Chinese government and
the Russian opposition. Both countries are facing a very painful problem of leadership succession, and one cannot rule out the possibility that in one of these countries, or even in both of them, certain political forces might want to come to power and to consolidate it by entering the new stage of confrontation with the West.

At the same time, the potential danger of such an alliance and its confrontational, anti-Western character should not be exaggerated. In this case, as always in politics, it is important to distinguish between militant statements issued by politicians for domestic consumption, and practical reality. It seems unlikely that current political and economic elites in both Russia and China would want to start again a major conflict with the West since many reasonable persons are aware of the possible consequences of such a development, especially regarding the fate of reforms in both countries. To advance their economies, both Russia and China would need continuous access to Western markets, foreign investments, technology, and, in the case of Russia, a considerable amount of imported food products. So far, the benefits of cooperation with the West have been yielding more substantial results and benefits to both countries, and especially for the ruling elites, than any attempt at a new round of confrontation could. Yet the growing strength of domestic entrepreneurs and the nationalist attitudes of the general public and the elite inevitably will lead to some change in the orientation and nature of their respective countries' foreign policy.

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