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Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation: 
Can a Bear Trust a Dragon?

By Max Verbitz

To some observers who are not indifferent toward Russia, the most basic trends of the country's foreign policy clearly are disquieting, if not alarming. Russia, during almost the entire post-Soviet era (except, perhaps, for a few short years in the early 90s, when there was a "honeymoon" with the West) has never demonstrated a specific willingness to become part of the world democratic community. The titanic efforts made in those years by the Russian ruling establishment to enter the mighty G-7 club appear now to be a complete waste of time and energy: It is as if a capricious child does not know what to do with the expensive toy obtained by persistent asking. Feeling itself a stranger in the (now) G-8, being possessed by messianic fantasies and yearning for its lost superpower status, which sank into oblivion along with the Soviet Union, Russia seems to be trying to establish an international club of its own and head it. This wouldn't be such a problem except some potential members are subjects of concern and even mistrust for the very same G8. It can be considered annoying when Russia shows clear signs of patronizing such odious but comparatively weak militarily regimes as Karimov's Uzbekistan and Niyazov's Turkmenistan; considerably more worrisome are Russia's curtseys towards Iran, whose leader is an extremist with nuclear aspirations. But when the Kremlin is courting the Forbidden City, these games deserve the closest possible look.

Basically, there is nothing reprehensible in any country's quest to normalize its relations with neighbors, and from that point of view Mikhail Gorbachev's visit to China in 1989 was a good start to the process of burying the past of almost thirty years of open confrontation between the two countries, which time and again had developed into
armed border clashes. Boris Yel'tsin's government willingly took the baton, but carried it in an unlikely direction when, in 1992, it opened the flow of military hardware and know-how to China by selling 24 fighter Su-27s. (1) At that time, Russia did not yet appear to harbor any thoughts of China as a potential ally and regarded the giant neighbor just as a very solvent buyer of its armaments—mainly of old Soviet surpluses rather than really new material. Quite soon however, China made clear that it wanted only first-rate merchandise, and proved to be a tough negotiator and shrewd buyer. (2)

Until recently, military contracts between Russia and China were implemented on the basis of more or less special agreements and could not be viewed as part of a larger political strategy, although Yel'tsin's proactive diplomacy toward China (aimed largely at counterbalancing "NATO's move eastward") created a fertile field for what followed in the early 2000s. The trade was driven, on the Chinese side, by the willingness to acquire quite sophisticated weapons at a very reasonable price, and, on the Russian side, by the desperate situation in the military-industrial complex, which was ready to sell anything to anybody just to keep the production lines going and to convince its highly-qualified specialists to stay put. The Yel'tsin regime still was making a show of adherence to democratic principles and the values of the civilized Western world, and despite ample friendly rhetoric from both sides and rather hefty military sales by Russia, immediate military cooperation was not on the agenda at that time.

The whole picture of bilateral ties between Moscow and Beijing began changing with Putin's rise. That this Russian President would turn Russia away from democracy and to authoritarianism (almost back to the Soviet-style totalitarianism now) was predicted early by observers who have always known a simple truth going back to the dissidents: The KGB is not just a line of work or even a vocation—it's a diagnosis. Naturally, along this path to the revival of Russia's past "greatness" (albeit rather ugly by civilized standards) Putin chose a very definite company of fellow travelers and staked his presidency on an eventual complete estrangement from the West.
The turning point in Sino-Russian relations came on July 16, 2001 when, in Moscow, the Russian and Chinese Presidents signed the Treaty for Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation. A careful examination of this treaty leads to the striking, but obvious conclusion that never during its post-Soviet history, has Russia taken such an openly anti-American step. This agreement opens the door to broad Sino-Russian cooperation, with joined actions to offset US "hegemony," arms and technology transfers by Russia and the demarcation of their long-disputed border. Official assurances by both parties that the Treaty is not being directed against any third country notwithstanding, the agreement is just short of being a military alliance.

Nearly five years later, the results of the Treaty (as well as preceding and subsequent agreements) are impressive: Since 1992, military sales by Russia to China have reached at least $20 billion. Russia has managed to sell China enough military hardware to arm a medium-sized European country. The lion's share of the goods went to aviation. The PLAAF (People's Liberation Army Air Force) and PLANAF (the air arm of the Chinese Navy) received about 200 multi-purpose fourth generation fighter-bomber Su-27s and Su-30s of various modifications, along with a license to produce 200 Su-27s and 250 Su-30s domestically. As for the latter (a considerably modernized version of the Su-27), - both purchased and manufactured - China is planning to have over 500 of these aircraft. Also on the agenda this year, is the purchase by Beijing of 40 Il-76 heavy air transports and Il-78 air tankers.

The Chinese Navy has not been left out of the arms contracts; its inventory increased by 12 Kilo class diesel submarines (Projects 877EKM, 636 and 636M), and 4 Sovremenny class destroyers. In addition to the fact that the submarines are considered as possibly the most capable and quietest such vessels in the world, the destroyers are equipped with arguably the most lethal anti-ship cruise missile, the supersonic SS-N-22 Sunburn (or according to the original Russian nomenclature, R-270 Moskit). The Moskit, even by admission of American naval experts, poses a serious threat to US ships (including, possibly, aircraft carriers).
China's air defense capabilities also have been greatly enhanced by the acquisition of 12 battalion units of S-300 PMU-1 and 27 complexes of Tor M-1 SAMs. (8) The former is known as at least comparable to the American Patriot, and the delivery of eight units of the even more sophisticated PMU-2 modification of the system is expected shortly. Since most of these weapons are intended as protection for the ballistic missiles aimed at Taiwan, Taipei’s unease about the deal is understandable.

Likewise of concern for Taiwanese leaders, as well as China's other neighbors, were Russian-Chinese military exercises carried out from 18 to 25 August 2005—the first time in more than 40 years. (9) The scale of the event was considerable; it encompassed 10,000 military personnel, as well as approximately 70 ships and submarines. While the Chinese participated mainly with personnel (around 8,000) and sea vessels (some 60 ships and submarines), the main contributions from the Russian side were advanced air assets, such as 2 Tu-95MS Bear strategic bombers, 4 Tu-22M3 Backfire long-range bombers, Su-24M2 Fencer bombers, Su-27SM Flanker fighters, 10 Il-76 Candid transport aircraft, an A-50 Mainstay air warning command and control aircraft, and an Il-78 Midas air tanker. The public, formal objective of the maneuvers was coordination in the fight against international terrorism, but few missed the real implications for conventional warfare: Anti-terrorist military actions do not require the use of strategic bombers and large scale amphibious operations—whereas an offensive against an island state might…. One may only surmise who proposed the scenario, but the message sent by the exercise seemed clear enough: The Asian-Pacific region is a domain of Russia and China, and no one else should challenge their influence there.

It is possible that only one of the participants, Russia, wanted to send this message to the rest of the world. China, quite possibly, views this partnership in the Pacific as temporary and likely is playing its own game; Russia should be aware that the eventual loser can be the one who deals its partner the winning cards.

China had become a major political factor in the world long before Deng Xiaoping set the country on the path of economic reforms, which now has transformed China into the
second largest economy on the planet (measured by Purchasing Power Parity, or PPP). (10) In the 1960’s, joining the world nuclear club greatly boosted China’s influence on world affairs as a whole, and its authority in the Third World in particular. For the past decade, China has demonstrated a 10% annual economic growth, a pace that requires more and more energy resources. At present, China is the second largest consumer, and the third largest importer, of oil and is desperately seeking new sources of energy. The armed forces of the country are a far cry from the vast formation of under-trained men of the 1970s, who were armed with poor copies of Soviet AK-47 assault rifles and flying inadequate copies of old Soviet airplanes. Nowadays, having absorbed many modern Western technologies and combat experiences, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) - with 2.5 million men, close to 5,000 aircraft, and up to 2,700 warships (not to mention hundreds of strategic and tactical nuclear missiles) - represents quite a formidable force. According to the almost unanimous opinion of military experts, by 2025, or even earlier, China will have all the necessary battle capabilities for invading Taiwan. Even now China’s front line aviation has 400 fourth generation modern combat planes—more than Russia does. (11)

Still, theoretical capabilities and actual plans to launch an aggressive assault are altogether different. The latter enterprise implies and requires firm determination and political will. Does the Chinese leadership possess that kind of will and determination? If China were a democratic country, then the answer definitely would be no. China, however, is in no way a democracy. It is a totalitarian, by some estimates even a fascist state (12), with little regard for human life (as, for example, evident in the Tiananmen Square Massacre, in June 1989). So, the answer has to be yes: China will attack Taiwan as soon as it feels prepared not only to break the Taiwanese resistance, but to oppose, successfully, American forces as well.

With few doubts regarding the future of Taiwan, a question arises whether Russia should beware of China as well. The answer may depend on two aspects: The first of them is, if China sees something across its northern border that might be worth
resorting to force in dealings with its neighbor; and the second, if Russia would be able to curb any dangerous impulses from the south.

It is common knowledge that the natural resources of Siberia and the Russian Far East are enormous and diverse. To get protracted access to those riches at reasonable prices would be a coup for any serious aspirant. It might be easier to obtain the permanent possession of these resources by means short of military force.

The hard reality for the world, and especially for China's neighbors, is that, with a current rate of growth that very likely will remain at 8-10% in the foreseeable future, the increasing demands of the economy and enhanced military muscle, Beijing might try its fortune in the North. It is true that the border disputes between China and Russia have been settled, presumably amicably and finally. However, there are a few realities that have to be taken into consideration.

One issue is the apparent belief (in fairly important circles) within China that in different historical periods, China was robbed of 5 million sq. km of territory. For Russians, the worst part of this historical lesson, as written in Chinese school textbooks, is that Russia is alleged to have seized these originally Chinese lands - Primoriye (Primorsky Krai) and Sakhalin Island - and in place of today's Russian cities of Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, and Blagoveshchensk there were Chinese cities (Haishenway, Boli, and Hailenbyao).

The other reality deals with demography. The Russian Far East is one of the least inhabited regions of the country with only 7 million persons living there. At the same time, the three adjoining Chinese provinces are crowded with about 120 million inhabitants. (13) Illegal migration of Chinese across the border, a problem rooted deeply in the 19th century, has grown into a fairly large modern problem for the Russian authorities. Estimates on the total Chinese Diaspora in Russia vary greatly—from an overly optimistic official 40,000 to a xenophobic figure of 10 million (14)—but it looks like the Russian territories in question hold at least 1 million Chinese. This number shows a
clear growing trend, thanks to the expedited procedure of entry into Russia for Chinese citizens, many of whom opt for settling in Russia. It would be preposterous and a great overreaction to view all those re-settlers as a "fifth column," but this demographic situation could be used by the Chinese military to its advantage.

Does Russia’s leadership recognize this potential threat? Judging by the scope of Sino-Russian military cooperation, the Kremlin either is too trusting towards China or considers the threat too distant to require immediate concern. Given that unwarranted trustfulness is not a typical characteristic of Russian leaders, the current rulers probably believe that the present gains from military sales to China positively outweigh any remotely unpleasant consequences. (It would be worth noting that there might be still another reason for the placidity of the Kremlin - the rampant corruption.) Given the revenues involved, and the likely existence of a very powerful lobby directly profiting by the trade, a countervailing force urging caution would have difficulty being heard.

As for Russia’s ability to oppose a future advance by China, in view of some hard truths of the current developments, it has to be seen as questionable at best. For the past decade, the formidable rate of economic growth has been driving up Chinese defense expenditures. Estimated at around 90 billion dollars for the year 2005, they are expected to reach a figure of something between $120 and $150 billion in 2015, and from $225 to $325 in 2025. (15) For Russia, as only the tenth largest economy in the world (by PPP), with economic growth (5.9% in 2005) that lags far behind China and probable total military spending of slightly over $30 billion in 2005, even comparable goals are unattainable. The best possible illustration of these trends consists of the statistics of production and distribution of Russian armaments in 1992-99 (the figures for 2000-2006 are most likely better, but not by much): While the Russian Air Force received 7 aircraft in that period, 278 were sold abroad (101 went to China); the Russian Land Forces obtained 31 tanks, whereas foreign clients received 435 (of them, China got 140). And so on and so forth for all major weapons systems. (16)
The picture might not look so bleak if Russia held a decisive technological edge over China. However, even the most sophisticated combat assets Russia currently has (although superior to Chinese assets) originated in the Soviet era when the military-industrial establishment was fully supported by the state. Nowadays, Russia cannot afford to be a leader in all spheres of military research and development. Thus, however wide the gap between Chinese and Russian military know-how was, it is now only a matter of time before China catches up and perhaps even surpasses Russian development and production. China's willingness and ability both to bargain and to employ "total intelligence" to obtain advanced technologies in the West also provides a significant edge. (17) (As for the latter option, it is worth recalling that the Soviets, in their time, had immeasurably less freedom of movement and human contacts in the United States than the Chinese have today. Such constraints, nevertheless, did not prevent the KGB from getting access to such invaluable assets as the Walker family, Aldrich Ames and Robert Hanssen, among quite a few others. One can only surmise the proportions of the plenty harvested by the Chinese intelligence from the American technological cornfield.)

Taking all these factors into consideration, Russia appears to have chosen the wrong priority of reanimating its mourned-over past greatness by means of allying with a highly probable adversary. This decision apparently was prompted by a national psychological tradition of hurt pride, and what can be formulated as 'civilizational preferences', which is the feeling among Russian leaders of greater closeness to, say, Kim Jong Il than to Roh Moo-hyun. But, in a decade or two, the newly-found friendship with Russia's southern neighbor might take such a twisted turn that Russia will have to think more about survival as a sovereign entity than nurturing great-power status ambitions.

If so, it is time for Moscow to stop peddling, indiscriminately, such weapons as the capable, legendary Tu-22M3 Backfire bomber (18) and to start seeking common ground with Russia's more genuine partners in Europe and across the ocean.

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Max Verbitz is the pseudonym of a former senior Russian intelligence officer.

End Notes


(5) Vide (3).

(6) Vide (4).

(7) Ibid.

(8) Ibid.


(17) Vide (12).


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