

# RUSSIA AND CHINA:

## RECONCILIATION OR STRATEGIC FRIENDSHIP

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### Need to Re-conciliate: From Brothers to Foes

The postwar period has witnessed an unbreakable Sino-Soviet brotherhood after their joint victory in the anti-imperial Japan. The key words that have described the bilateral relations were: ideological soul mates, peers and allies. The Soviet Union and its Marxist-Leninist ideology was the model of the newly established People's Republic of China. Yet, the turning point of the bilateral relations has happened in the late 1950s/1960s. The former close friends have entered a long-lasting deteriorating trend of bilateral relations afterwards. It started with the end of the 1950s and worsened in the 1960s. The cold war setting pushed the Soviet to integrate China into the camp against the U.S. hegemony, which was reflected in the attempting project of establishing long-wave radio stations in China and joint fleet in 1958. The crack between the two has originated ever since. After it has been refused, the Soviet Union has withdrawn the large amount of Soviet skilled experts from China and tore up 243 bilateral contracts. China has gone through huge losses and difficulties due to the crash of the bilateral relations. The summit of worsening relations took place in 1969, when the Soviet armed conflict

provoked Treasure Island. Massed troops also appeared on the long and disputed territory line.

Why and how does the reconciliation carry out between the two? What factors work in the case of Sino-Russian rapprochement? Researches on reconciliation have devoted to finding out through what lane former hostile countries could overcome the "zero-sum game" and arrive at a healthy bilateral relationship. Substantive reconciliation between former hostilities requires countries to learn how to live together with each other not only without emerging conflicts but also get convinced that the counterpart is not a threat. The social-psychology serves as an important foundation of a stable peace, which avoids certain domestic backlash. Therefore, the former questions could be transferred to: Have the Sino-Russian government as well as their societies prepared to a substantive reconciliation?

### Government-to-Government Reconciliation in Complexity

The normalization of relations between the two parties was initiated since the late 1980s. Deng Xiaoping showed an open attitude to end the past and have a new start with the bilateral relations. The summit meeting was realized in 1989, ►

which marked the rapprochement. In the 1990s, Moscow and Beijing have shown an accommodating attitude to each other. The start of reconciliation is nothing about economics or other ends but the political needs. The changing international environment and the reassessment of strategic arrangement could explain the more and more frequent political interaction: Yeltsin visited Beijing in 1992 and 1996, while Jiang Zemin visited Moscow in 1994, 1995 and 1997.

A series of accommodating policies could be marked by easing the territorial conflict between the former antagonistic countries. Moscow decided to withdraw its troops from Mongolia and accomplished the whole process in 1992, and ever since 1995 Russia reduced 150,000 troops from the Far East. The two parties have also agreed on some essential issues in the domestic, regional and international level: on the Taiwan, Tibet, and Chechnya issue; to reach a consensus on joint anti-terrorism; to carry out further cooperate in the field of trade, economy, and military.

The convergence of interests has served as one of the main force of conducting reconciliation between Russia and China, while divergence between interests could prohibit deepening reconciliation. Two great powers attract great attentions in many fields, such as geopolitics, energy, and economy. The bilateral relations have been complex, while the driving force of further reconciliation is therefore not straightforward.

China has been one of the largest energy consumers, while Russia has been one of the largest

producers of oil and gas. A 1,000km oil pipeline bridged eastern Siberia of Russia and China's main oil base-Daqing in 2010. Encouraging cooperation in this sphere is expected. Yet, in the energy sphere, Russia and China's interest is far more complicated than matching. Russia wanted to sell its gas to China, while China demanded the oil from Russia. The non-complimentary relations in the energy sphere have kept Sino-Russian economic integration at a moderate degree. The two went through a long and tough negotiation but without agreement on the price and volume of the gas. Russia requires amounting amount of investment, while China needs an affordable price. But, this process cannot be reversed.

Interest convergence and divergence exists also in the strategic arrangement of the two countries in Central Asia. Both China and Russia have a significant strategic interest in Central Asia. China has more than 3,000 km long common border and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and three Central Asian countries. Several cross-border ethnic groups live along these borders. The emerging East Turkistan problem bothers China as well. A stable Central Asia backups the economic development in western China. CIS countries were the Russian former sphere of influence. It has always been on the priority agenda of Moscow.

At the initiative stage of reconciliation, Russia participated in a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) delegation. Moscow also coordinated China with the CIS countries. With the coordination of Yelstin, China and CIS countries have agreed on the force reduction, limitation of resorting to force, and no serious military activities within 100km of the common border in 1996. These accommodating policies have brought credibility, which contributed to the further reconciliation.

Nonetheless, the conflicts in the area of resources, trade and energy have brought instability of Sino-Russian strategic arrangement in this area. Putting the interest under an institutional framework is necessary, which could limit conflict and identify com-

### CIS Leaders



mon interest. Under this background, China and Russia initiated the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

### Unprepared Societies ?

Reconciliation is beyond conflict resolution. In order to bring about a stable peace and eradicate zero-sum perception, a substantive reconciliation calls for a fundamental change of the social psychology. As a result, researchers found it is necessary to study reconciliation through socio-economic aspects.

Are the two societies prepared for a substantive reconciliation? The serious Pass-control to Chinese tourists mirrors certain tension between the two societies, especially in the Far East area. Except for the positive image of Russia/Russian in Chinese media, the people from Far East fears that the Chinese are out to trick Russians through unfair trade, steal their resources, and expand to their territory through legal and illegal migration. Despite the strategic friendship at the governmental level, there has been a domestic backlash at the Far East district. The immature of reconciliation is mirrored by the negative perception towards Chinese that held by the Far East Russian. The Russian society in the Far East has not yet given up the hostile perception of China's intention.

### Uncertainty: Questions about Where the Bear is heading for?

Both China and Russia have gone through great transactions in the post-Cold War period. The two have chosen different paths and arrived at different results. In the term of economic development, the current history has witnessed a great success of the "China Model": the annual growth rate of GDP has remained around 10%. China gradually gains confidence on the world stage. On the contrary, Russia has a long history of ego-searching after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Russian economy has stagnated comparably, though before the financial crisis in 2008, the mounting energy price had

contributed to the economic growth. The democratization was also questioned by the Western media. Where should the bear heading for in a dramatically changing world? "Swing back into Washington's fold"? Or engage itself more into the Eastern, especially cooperate more with China?

The bear has shifted its position on and on. Yeltsin put emphasis on the relations with China due to the geopolitical concern. Yet, after Putin came to power, the West turned to be overweighing especially after 911, while amid the "colorful revolution", Moscow denied its former decision.

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In sum, Moscow swayed its attention due to the strategic arrangement. Beijing feels a psychological blockade fueled by the shifting position of Russia. As a result, the substantive reconciliation surpasses the strategic friendship. The bear and the dragon have transcended the former hostility to a certain degree, but are still distant from arriving at a substantive reconciliation.

### Note:

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The draft of this article is based on my presentations, the feedback contributed by the other participates and the further discussion at the 11<sup>th</sup> annual Aleksanteri Conference: "The Dragon and the Bear: Strategic Choices of China and Russia".

