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Consolidating Chinese-Russian Relations

By Jing-dong Yuan

President Vladimir Putin arrived in Beijing on Sunday for a three-day state visit that will be important in three respects. First, his visit comes precisely one decade after former President Boris Yeltsin's landmark December 1992 visit to China launched a new course for Chinese-Russian relations. It takes place against worldwide geostrategic changes since Sept. 11. And this will be Putin's first meeting with newly minted Communist Party General Secretary Hu Jintao, the fourth-generation leader who will succeed Jiang Zemin as head of state next spring.

While there has been a good deal of progress in the relationship over the past decade, the relationship is not problem free. How to deepen the strategic partnership beyond rhetoric within today's global geopolitical environment remains a challenge for both countries. This task is no doubt on the top of Putin's agenda for discussion during his meetings in Beijing.

Despite improved political relations, economic ties are lagging. Trade volume between the two remained an insignificant \$10 billion in 2001, far below the \$20 billion target set by Yeltsin in the mid-1990s. While the potential to increase trade certainly exists in the fields of energy, technology and consumer and industrial products, near-term prospects for growth are not bright.

An exception to this has been a healthy level of military equipment transfers. Russia and China have developed close defense cooperation over the last decade, with China buying Russian conventional weapons systems, including major fighter aircraft like the Su-27 and Su-30, Sovremenny-class destroyers, Kilo-class submarines and S-300 air defense missiles. Russia has also granted licenses allowing China to assemble Su-27s itself.

Regional political cooperation has proven successful within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, founded as the Shanghai Five in 1996 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and renamed in 2001 when Uzbekistan joined the group. Through this forum, these states were able to peacefully delineate their common borders, which stretch more than 7,000 kilometers. Chinese analysts have hailed the SCO as a major development in international relations. They consider it a model for security cooperation in the post-Cold War era as it is a multilateral institution inspired by shared interests, not a military alliance against some third party. Its future will depend on Chinese-Russian initiatives and political commitment from the organization's two anchors.

While the two countries have resolved their border disputes for the most part, certain worries remain. Russian suspicion and fear of uncontrolled, illegal Chinese immigration into the thinly populated Far East is real and the perception of a growing Chinese threat could become an increasingly significant obstacle to friendship.

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What are the prospects for the Chinese-Russian strategic partnership and what can Putin's trip accomplish in this regard? There are three issues.

First, one must place relations in the broader context of an evolving U.S.-China-Russia triangle. The post-Sept. 11 U.S.-Russian strategic relationship weighs heavily, as cooperation with Washington overshadows cooperation with all others, including that with Beijing. But so, too, does China place its relationship with the U.S. ahead of other bilateral relationships.

This leads to the second issue. One should have realistic expectations for the strategic partnership as there are inescapable divergences between their respective national interests, foreign policy priorities and available resources.

Finally, there are ways to deepen future cooperation. Beijing and Moscow have common interests, for example, in supporting the UN Security Council's role on international security, in opposing the weaponization of outer space and in peacefully resolving political disputes.

Putin's visit to China is helping to consolidate the Chinese-Russian strategic partnership, one which will hopefully be strong enough to survive the bumpy road of the challenges that lie ahead.

Jing-dong Yuan is a senior research associate at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies. He contributed this comment to The Moscow Times.

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