

China-Russia treaty: a reaction against aggressive unilateralism in Washington

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Superficially, the broad friendship pact between Russia and China, signed last week in Moscow should be a positive sign of diminishing international tensions. After all, the two regimes have regarded each other as a military threat ever since their political rift in the early 1960s. They fought a border war in 1969 and, in 1980, in an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and enmity, allowed their previous treaty signed in 1950 to lapse.

In fact, however, for all its cautious diplomatic phrasing, the Good Neighbourly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation is a further symptom of the global political instability being produced by the increasingly aggressive and unilateral foreign policy of the United States administration. China and Russia have been compelled to reach an understanding, temporary and tactical perhaps, to counter definite US threats to their strategic and economic interests—a move that has the potential to further ratchet up international frictions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Jiang Zemin signed the treaty on July 16, just two days after the US conducted its latest interceptor missile test in the Pacific as part of US President Bush's plans to accelerate the development of his National Missile Defence (NMD) program. Both Moscow and Beijing have protested against the NMD plan, which Bush claims is aimed only at defending the US against missiles from "rogue states" but will inevitably degrade the effectiveness of the nuclear arsenals of other countries, including Russia and China.

According to Russian and Chinese officials, the agreement does not represent a military alliance and is not aimed at "any third country". However, even though the US is not explicitly named, the purpose of the treaty is unmistakable. Jiang said it would enhance "our efforts in building a multi-polar world and establishing a fair, rational international order"—"multi-polar world" being the key code words for a world not dominated by one superpower, namely the US.

Spelling out Beijing's concerns about the direction of US policy, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhu Bangzao commented: "You must not build your own security on the basis of damaging other countries' security. If large states

have concerns, these must be examined together and joint solutions found."

In a separate statement, Russia and China stressed "the basic importance of the [1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile] ABM treaty, which is the cornerstone of strategic stability and the basis for reducing offensive weapons" and advocated "maintaining the treaty in its current form". The Bush administration has arrogantly insisted that it will press ahead with its anti-missile plans even if Russia refuses to amend the ABM treaty, which prohibits the building of such missile interceptor systems.

Other aspects of the friendship treaty are also pointedly aimed against the US. Underscoring previous Russian and Chinese protests against the US-led bombing of the former Yugoslavia, the two countries pledged to uphold the norms of international law "against any actions aimed at exerting pressure or interfering, under any pretext, with the internal affairs of the sovereign states".

Both Moscow and Beijing opposed NATO's flouting of national sovereignty in the Balkans, conducted under the banner of humanitarian concern, fearing that the potential exists for future interventions on similar pretexts in areas such as Tibet and Chechnya. In the treaty, Russia explicitly recognises China's sovereignty over Taiwan—one of the areas of growing tension between Beijing and Washington.

Russia is particularly concerned about NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe and the states of the former Soviet Union. Putin warned in an interview with the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* that the expansion would prolong Cold War divisions. "In the West, everyone says, 'We don't want new divisions in Europe, we don't want new Berlin Walls. Good. We completely agree. But when NATO enlarges, division doesn't disappear, it simply moves towards our border.'"

Russia and China have also been developing closer ties in Central Asia, particularly following the establishment of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. At its latest meeting in mid-June the so-called Shanghai Five—Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan—established a more

formal structure, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was joined by Uzbekistan. The meeting passed a resolution opposing the US anti-missile plans and supporting the ABM treaty.

As well as combatting the spread of Muslim fundamentalism, the SCO is aimed at blocking the further encroachment of the US and European powers, which are each competing to exploit the huge reserves of gas and oil as well as other minerals in the region. The involvement of Uzbekistan in the latest meeting undermines attempts by the US and NATO to align the most populous Central Asian Republic with its allies through the so-called GUUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova) group.

In the course of the visit, Putin and Jiang signed a \$1.7 billion deal to build a pipeline to carry oil from Siberia to northeast China. The 1,500km pipeline, which is to be completed as early as 2005, is part of the developing economic and defence ties between the two countries. The friendship treaty pledged to boost trade from \$8 billion last year to around \$10 billion this year.

The last decade has witnessed an abrupt reversal of the relative economic positions of the two countries. Russia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is just a third of China's, which grew three-fold in the 1990s while the Russian economy plummeted following the collapse of the Soviet Union. China is looking to Russia and the Central Asian republics to supply its rapidly expanding requirements for oil, gas and other raw materials and to Russia in particular to provide sophisticated military hardware.

According to one estimate, China signed weapons contracts with Russia worth \$1.5 billion, amounting to nearly 40 percent of Russia's total arms exports. China already relies on Russia for fighter aircraft, naval destroyers and air-defence systems and is believed to have received new anti-ship missiles last December for installation on two destroyers previously purchased from Russia.

The Bush administration has played down the significance of the new friendship treaty. US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage commented: "This was clearly designed to boost both of their international standing without adding much real substance." An administration official jokingly told the *New York Times* that the Chinese and Russians had known each other since 1300 but had enjoyed only 40 years of friendship through all the centuries.

The dismissive response in Washington is based on the same premise that underlies the rest of the Bush administration foreign policies—that the economic and especially military predominance of the US permits it to act unilaterally and with impunity. Former Clinton adviser Robert Suettinger commented: "The conventional wisdom is

that we are more important to each of them than they are to each other and that this is not a cause of concern." Other analysts have pointed out that Chinese trade with Russia, even if boosted to \$10 billion a year, is tiny compared to the \$115 billion with the US last year.

There are divisions, however, in the US ruling elite, with some sections warning of the dangers of such a cavalier approach. A *Baltimore Sun* editorial expressed concern over the emergence of a bloc hostile to the US. "Only a failure of US diplomacy would allow a true Moscow-Beijing alliance in a military sense to re-emerge. It is against US interests to allow this to happen."

In a similar vein, the *New York Times* commented: "Though neither Russia nor China is a superpower, both are important. When American policies affect their interests, as is the case with missile defence and, for Russia, NATO expansion, Washington should consult with them carefully and not simply proceed according to its own preferences and timetable. Failure to take Russia and China into account will fan dangerous resentments and drive them away from Washington and toward each other."

Such muted expressions of concern are rejected out of hand by the extreme rightwing who demand the Bush administration press ahead and take an even more aggressive attitude.

A *San Francisco Chronicle* editorial argued that the China-Russia treaty provided the perfect pretext for accelerating the NMD project. It bewailed the fact that the end of the Cold War had left the US with "an enemy gap that not even Saddam Hussein, North Korea or Colombia's drug traffickers have been able to fill". It concluded: "[T]he United States has finally found a worthy enemy. The Russia-China alliance can be used by Bush to justify the expense of a missile defence, new and advanced technology, and perhaps, even the militarisation of outer space."

The *San Francisco Chronicle* simply blurts out more openly the unstated intent of the NMD plan, which is not primarily aimed at so-called rogue states but at the United States' rivals—Russia and China, and more indirectly Japan and the major European powers. The Russia-China treaty is simply one of the first consequences of an increasingly reckless attitude in Washington that is sharpening political tensions between the major powers.



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