

China and Russia strengthen strategic ties

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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev's visit to China on September 26-28 is a further sign that Moscow and Beijing are consolidating their ties in order to counter the US and its main ally in North East Asia, Japan.

Medvedev and Chinese President Hu Jintao issued a joint statement that called for "comprehensively deepening strategic cooperation," amid mounting threats and challenges in the Asian Pacific region. The statement emphasised mutual support for each other's core interests—Russian support for Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang, and Chinese support for Moscow's "efforts to promote peace and stability throughout the Caucasian region and the Commonwealth of Independent States".

While not naming the US, the statement was clearly directed against Washington. In 2008, Russia waged a war with the US-backed Georgian regime to support the independence of two Georgian provinces. In Asia, US-China tensions have sharpened during the past year as the Obama administration has intervened aggressively in the region over a range of issues—from selling arms to Taiwan to backing South East Asian nations in their territorial disputes with China in the South China Sea.

Just as significant was a second joint statement marking the 65th anniversary of the end of World War II. The two countries condemned attempts "to glorify Nazis, militarists and their accomplices, and to tarnish the image of liberators". The statement was aimed not only at Western criticisms of the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, but also right-wing nationalist politicians in Japan who whitewash the crimes of the wartime militarist regime.

"The fascists and militarists schemed to conquer and enslave us two nations, other countries and the whole

[Eurasian] continent. China and Russia will never forget the feat of those who checked the two forces," the statement declared. It went to proclaim that the "glorious history" of Soviet-Chinese wartime cooperation against Japan "has laid a sound foundation for today's strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia".

The statement was directed against Japan in particular. It came during a bitter diplomatic row between China and Japan over the disputed Diaoyu islets (known as Senkaku in Japan) in the East China Sea, triggered by Japan's detention of a Chinese trawler captain.

Medvedev began his trip by visiting the northeastern Chinese city of Dalian, where he paid his respects to Soviet soldiers who died fighting to expel the Japanese army from Manchuria in August 1945. Significantly, he also paid tribute to Russian soldiers killed in the 1904-05 war between Tsarist Russia and Imperial Japan—a conflict between two imperialist powers.

Following Medvedev's visit, China's official Xinhua news agency accused Washington of "protecting large numbers of militarist war criminals in Asia", especially in Japan, after the end of World War II. The comment also accused the US of betraying the post-war agreements among the Allies, which included China. Xinhua highlighted the fact that under the 1945 Potsdam agreement, Japan had to return all territories annexed during and prior to the war. However in 1971, the US unilaterally handed the Diaoyu Islands back to Japan, despite China's objections.

In Japan, the joint statements by Russia and China have been interpreted as a common front against Japan. Russia and Japan also have a longstanding territorial

disagreement over four of the Kuril Islands closest to the northern Japanese island of Hokkaido. The *Yomiuri Shimbun* warned last week that China and Russia were “presenting a united front in their claims over Japanese territories”.

Medvedev originally planned to visit the Kuril Islands on his way home—the first Russian leader ever to do so. Tokyo responded by summoning the Russia ambassador and warning that a visit to the Kurils would “seriously hinder” Russo-Japanese relations. Moscow responded by declaring that “no approval” was needed for the Russian president or any citizen to visit the islands. While the trip was postponed due to “bad weather,” Medvedev announced that he would visit the islands in the near future.

In July, Russia conducted “Vostok 2010”—its largest military exercise in the Far East since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. The naval manoeuvres took place around the Kuril Islands, provoking protests from Japan. The exercise, together with ambitious plans to expand the Russian Pacific fleet over the next decade, indicate that Moscow is determined to reestablish a strong presence in the Pacific.

Moscow and Beijing are already cooperating in countering US influence in Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) formed in 2001 with four Central Asia republics—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Last month, the SCO held a major 16-day joint military exercise, “Peace Mission 2010,” in Kazakhstan. While the official scenario was “counter-terrorism,” the scale of the exercise, which included around 5,000 troops, 1,600 tanks and armoured vehicles as well as 50 war planes, suggested a joint drill in conventional warfare.

The Russian-Chinese “strategic partnership” is also based on expanding economic ties. Medvedev’s visit marked the completion of an oil pipeline from East Siberia to the Chinese city of Daqing that will deliver 15 million tonnes of oil to China annually for 20 years. The pipeline is part of a \$US25 billion “loans for oil” agreement that China signed last year with Russia’s state-owned energy giants.

By securing oil via land, China lessens its reliance on sea routes to the Middle East and Africa that are currently under the control of the US navy. Russia is also seeking to reduce its dependence on the European energy market by building pipelines to supply not only China, but also Japan and other Asian countries.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin, who was in China ahead of Medvedev’s visit, attended a groundbreaking ceremony in Tianjin to initiate a \$5 billion oil refinery to be jointly developed by Russia and China. Sechin told his Chinese hosts that Russia was “ready to meet China’s full demand in gas” as well. Disputes over prices have stalled a 2006 agreement to deliver 60 billion cubic metres of gas annually to China from 2011. The latest talks agreed that gas supplies would start in 2015 for the ensuing 30 years.

Medvedev called on China to invest in Russia on a large-scale to modernise his country’s decaying industrial base. During Medvedev’s trip, a joint venture was planned between China’s FAW Group and the Russian GAZ Group to manufacture heavy trucks in the Urals. China now makes half of the world’s trucks and is starting to export vehicles. In the past decade, trade between Russia and China increased 12-fold, allowing China to overtake Germany as Russia’s largest trading partner.

The closer strategic and economic ties between China and Russia are a reaction to the Obama administration’s efforts over the past year to forge closer ties with Japan and other Asian countries to undermine Chinese influence in the region. All these steps heighten tensions in Asia and the potential risk of conflict.



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