

Strategic Partnership in a Unipolar System: The Sino-Russian Relationship

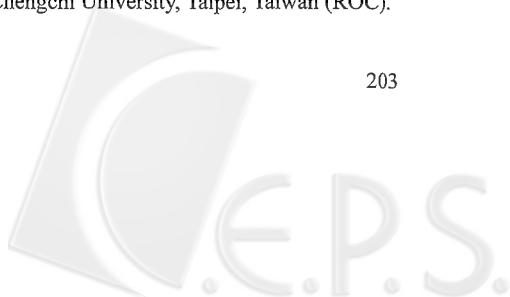
SANGTU KO

This paper examines post-Cold War Sino-Russian cooperation to explain why strategic partnerships evolve within the current unipolar geopolitical system. In the process, it explores why China and Russia pursue not alliance, but partnership, and the difference between the two. Analysis shows that, primarily, the unipolar system created by the U.S. preponderance of power affects the pattern of cooperation, as China and Russia believe alliance against the only superpower would be ineffective and thus seek instead to enhance their political influence through a new model of cooperation—strategic partnership. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the U.N. Security Council are prominent examples of organizations in which the Sino-Russian partnership attempts to impact on international politics.

KEYWORDS: strategic partnership; unipolar system; Sino-Russian relationship; Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO); U.N. Security Council.

SANGTU KO is Director of the Graduate School for Area Studies and Chief of the Russia Center at the Institute of East and West Studies, Yonsei University, South Korea. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Free University of Berlin, Germany. His major fields of research and teaching are Russian foreign policy and regional integration in Northeast Asia. Recent articles include "Conflict Management in the Post-Cold War Era: Preventive Diplomacy and PKO" (2005) and "Change of U.S.-Russia Relations after the September 11 Terrorist Attacks" (2002). Dr. Ko can be reached at <stko@yonsei.ac.kr>.

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In sharp contrast to the past, relations between China and Russia are thriving. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, military tension between the two was so great that several border skirmishes erupted. A new era in Sino-Russian relations began with collapse of the Soviet Union. At their historic 1996 summit, in one of the most dramatic diplomatic turnarounds in global politics in the past decade, Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin (江澤民) announced that their countries were forming a strategic partnership. The advent of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership has perplexed many analysts, generating conflicting interpretations.

One perspective contends that China and Russia cooperate to counter U.S. geopolitical superiority—a position articulated by Ariel Cohen and John Tkacik in a recent article. The authors argue that the historic 2001 "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation"—the first such official agreement between the two nations since the Sino-Soviet alliance treaty of 1950—signals that a major shift might be occurring in the geopolitical power balance in Eurasia, perhaps with serious implications for the United States and its allies.¹

Robert Donaldson echoes this view, contending that the Friendship Treaty meets the minimum requirement for an alliance, as it provides that the signatory states will immediately consult with each other in the event of an external military threat. In addition, the Sino-Russian arms trade is thriving. Donaldson characterizes the relationship between the two nations as an entente, a type of alliance.² Kenneth Waltz further argues that "wrong" U.S. policies toward China and Russia have more closely aligned the two and encouraged the formation of a new balance of power to counter U.S. supremacy.³

¹Ariel Cohen and John J. Tkacik Jr., "Sino-Russian Military Maneuvers: A Threat to U.S. Interests in Eurasia," *Backgrounder* #1883 (2005).

²Robert H. Donaldson, "The Arms Trade in Russian-Chinese Relations: Identity, Domestic Politics, and Geopolitical Positioning," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (December 2003): 709-32.

³Kenneth N. Waltz, "Structural Realism After the Cold War," *International Security* 25, no. 1 (Summer 2000): 5-41.



Other analysts embrace the opposing view. Richard Weitz argues that significant obstacles still block China and Russia from forming an anti-American alliance despite their shared need to counterbalance U.S. power. He acknowledges that Russia has sufficiently improved relations with China to be willing to help arm the neighboring and once-hostile rising power, yet believes recent normalization has not enabled the joint effort required to offset U.S. power, principally because Russia fears becoming junior partner to a much more populous and economically dynamic China.⁴ Another obstacle is the historic distrust existing between China and Russia. Victor Baryshnikov stresses that despite three previous alliance agreements, China and Russia have never been true friends.⁵

Concerning Russian attitudes toward the United States, Dmitri Trenin characterizes Russian foreign policy as "bandwagoning," as when President Vladimir Putin began actively helping the United States counter international terrorism.⁶ Angela Stent similarly contends that Russian foreign policy has shifted back from Eurasianism to Europeanism, citing Putin's support for stationing U.S. troops in Central Asia, essentially Russia's backyard.⁷

In principle, China too has sought friendly relations with the United States. Chinese economic interests in particular greatly favor the United States over Russia. As of 2005, China's trade with the United States amounted to US\$200 billion, while trade with Russia never exceeded US\$30 billion.⁸ William Wohlforth argues that many countries—such as China—actually seek to cooperate with the United States, even while speaking of counterbalancing its power.⁹

⁴Richard Weitz, "Why Russia and China Have Not Formed an Anti-American Alliance," *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 4 (Autumn 2003): 39.

⁵Victor Baryshnikov, "The History and Development of Sino-Russian Relations: From Three Alliances to the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation," *Far Eastern Affairs* 32, no. 2 (2004): 77.

⁶Dmitri Trenin, *The End of Eurasia* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002).

⁷Angela E. Stent, "Russia: Farewell to Empire?" *World Policy Journal* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2002): 88.

⁸National Bureau of Statistics of China, www.stats.gov.cn.

⁹William C. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security* 24, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 5-41.



If cooperation between China and Russia is not intended to counter-balance U.S. power, the two are not pursuing an alliance, but a strategic partnership—a specifically post-Cold War phenomenon. This implies that shifts in the international system wrought changes that are now apparent in new patterns of interstate security cooperation. The principal post-Cold War structural feature affecting interstate cooperation is the unipolar system, which contrasts with the Cold War bipolar system and the pre-World War II multipolar system.

This paper analyzes Sino-Russian cooperation to explain why strategic partnerships evolve in a unique manner under a unipolar system. It argues that China and Russia are pursuing partnership rather than alliance due to the international power structure in which their rapprochement is occurring.

To substantiate this position, the paper first presents a conceptual and theoretical discussion of alliances and strategic partnerships. It then examines the unipolar system created by the United States, at present the only world superpower, and discusses how the power constellation impacts on the behavior of states seeking to form alliances. Finally, on two levels it assesses recent Sino-Russian strategic partnership trends to highlight the significant attempts China and Russia have made to deter American unilateralism. First, it explores bilateral ties between China and Russia. Second, as strategic partnership implies more than just bilateral cooperation, it examines the actions these two states have taken in common on two international fronts—in the United Nations at the global and in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the regional level.

Alliance and Strategic Partnership

Realist theory provides the most exhaustive exploration of the causes behind alliance formation and maintenance. Among alliance functions, realists focus on aggregating capabilities, that is, military strength. They primarily contend that a balance of power deters war and that alliances are combining tools for reaching power equilibrium in an international



system comprising states with diverse capabilities.¹⁰ Glenn Snyder's analysis suggests the international power structure delimits the choices states can make and, thus, greatly affects alliance formation.¹¹ He contends that alliances form most freely in a multipolar system that permits quasi-anarchic conditions, which allows states to realign as necessary to balance power and creates flexible and unpredictable alliance.

A bipolar system, in contrast, restricts alliance choices. The Cold War simplified and reduced alliance alternatives to a choice between the United States and the Soviet Union. However, Snyder's exploration covers only multipolar and bipolar systems, not the unipolar system, a new epochal phenomenon. The United States now enjoys unchallenged primacy in international relations as the only superpower. This unipolar system further narrows alliance choices, so that most often the only option is the United States. However, states encounter difficulty in becoming a superpower ally in a unipolar system, as few have sufficient benefits to offer to offset the costs to the superpower, as recent U.S. conduct bears out.

William Riker's theory of political coalitions supports this view that economics dictates alliances and that states base decisions to enter alliances on the expectation that rewards will exceed costs. Thus, the minimum required for a winning coalition strictly dictates alliance size.¹² In the post-Cold War era, the United States is reluctant to assume new allies, as no military adversary can counter its power. The addition of members to its alliance structure minimally enhances its total strength and disproportionately increases its obligations.

This perspective has a converse corollary for nations that are not close U.S. allies. China and Russia have neither motivation to ally with each other, as the resulting alliance could not counterbalance U.S. power, nor credentials that make them attractive to the United States as an ally.

¹⁰Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979), 97.

¹¹Glenn H. Snyder, "Alliance Theory: A Neorealist First Cut," *Journal of International Affairs* 44, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1990): 103-23.

¹²William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962), 182.



This makes Sino-Russian strategic partnership a potentially meaningful alternative for the two states.

The origin of the term "strategic partnership" in international politics is difficult to pinpoint. Most likely it emerged from contacts between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1990 bilateral negotiations on how to build a post-Cold War European security order. "Strategic partnership" was used to denote the form of cooperation they entered into in order to obtain mutual gains in establishing or distributing their spheres of influence.¹³

The prominence of the concept as a feature of modern diplomatic discourse since the 1990s corresponds with the strong impact on international politics attributed to the arrangement. The principal means of distinguishing strategic partnership from alliance concerns military force. Strategic partnership poses no military threat to any other country, whereas alliance suggests a common power adversary. It offers political remedies for disputes, versus recourse to threat or use of military force.

The United States has used strategic partnerships simply to establish its influence zone around its core alliance system. It has offered them to East European countries in lieu of the formal alliances they requested after leaving the Soviet alliance system. It preferred this option, as it provided security cooperation without cementing security commitments to countries new to its zone of influence. With Ukraine and Romania in particular, strategic partnerships provided the United States with an alternative to alliances to extend influence.¹⁴

While the United States uses strategic partnerships to widen its influence and strengthen its unipolar primacy, China and Russia exploit them to aggregate their respective influence and pursue a multipolarity, as they share an interest in enhancing their political role in the international arena. This contradicts the traditional realist contention that states invariably ally in order to balance power. On the contrary, as Charles Doran avers, states

¹³Sean Kay, "What Is a Strategic Partnership?" *Problems of Post-Communism* 47, no. 3 (May/June 2000): 15-24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 18.



do not always act to enhance power, but to achieve role aspirations.¹⁵ The demise of the antagonistic bipolar world elevated the significance of political and economic influence above military capability. That is, a state's importance now depends on international status and relevance as measured by political and economic roles, rather than by military power. Moreover, states aspire to a political role in the international arena with a broader understanding of their own national interests, one not based solely on concern for territorial security.

This paper argues that China and Russia seek "balance of role" through strategic partnership in the unipolar system, because "balance of power" vis-à-vis the United States appears unattainable. "Partnership," as in "strategic partnership," connotes mutual, bilateral cooperation. For it to be "strategic," it must entail building a larger framework for global and regional security, rather than just bilateral cooperation.

The Unipolar System in the Post-Cold War Era

In his 1999 essay, Samuel Huntington describes today's world as a uni-multipolar system. He sees a unipolar system as one with a single superpower and many minor powers, a schema that does not fit contemporary international politics, as we live in a hybrid world order comprising one superpower and several major powers. He posits that global politics have moved from the Cold War bipolar system to a uni-multipolar configuration and predicts a genuine multipolar system within a few decades.¹⁶

From a military perspective, however, the present international system is distinctly unipolar, as table 1's heavily skewed power distribution depicts. Total U.S. military expenditure in 2004 was US\$455.3 billion, a full 47 percent of global military spending. This suggests that the United

¹⁵Charles F. Doran, *Systems in Crisis: New Imperatives of High Politics at Century's End* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 148-50.

¹⁶Samuel P. Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 2 (March/April 1999): 35-49.



Table 1
2004 Military Expenditure of Ten Major Spenders

Rank	Country	Spending (US\$ billion)	World share (%)
1	United States	455.3	47
2	United Kingdom	47.4	5
3	France	46.2	5
4	Japan	42.4	4
5	China*	35.4	4
6	Germany	33.9	3
7	Italy	27.8	3
8	Russia*	19.4	2
9	Saudi Arabia	19.3	2
10	South Korea	15.5	2
World total		975.0	100

Sources: *SIPRI Yearbook 2005*, appendix 8A.

*Estimated figure.

States alone possesses nearly the minimum power required to vanquish the entire rest of the world. U.S. ties with powerful allies, such as NATO, Japan, and South Korea, further compound this military prowess.

Despite the lack of a clear external threat, such alliances will not likely collapse in the near future. Indeed, the United States has continued to strengthen its cooperation with major allies. In 1996, for example, President Bill Clinton signed the New Guidelines for U.S.-Japan Defense Cooperation, which allows Japan to deploy self-defense forces in Asia and the Pacific to assist U.S. military operations.¹⁷ NATO redefined its mission to broaden the domain of its military operations to the so-called "out of area," which includes not only Eastern Europe but the Middle East. This revision allowed NATO troops to wage war in Kosovo and Afghanistan.

Never before has such a power disparity existed as that between the United States and all other major powers. This circumstance might

¹⁷Mike M. Mochizuki, ed., *Toward a True Alliance: Reconstructing U.S.-Japan Security Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1997).

move China and Russia closer together, aware that such action would not significantly alter the global imbalance¹⁸ but might curb U.S. unilateral tendencies through checks from international institutions and diplomatic maneuvering. Since a unipolar system significantly impedes the formation of an alliance, China and Russia have resorted to strategic partnership rather than a full-fledged alliance directed against the United States.

Bilateral Cooperation between China and Russia

The leaders of China and Russia initiated rapprochement when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's first visit to Beijing in 1989 brought about the resolution of the Sino-Russian border dispute. Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin, met Jiang Zemin seven times between December 1992 and December 1999. In a decade, Sino-Russian relations developed from the initial "normalization of relations" to "constructive partnership" in 1994 and then to "strategic partnership" in 1996. During the period, the institutionalization of encounters between Chinese and Russian leaders resulted in annual summits between their presidents, and in December 1996, the two prime ministers agreed to meet biannually.¹⁹

The frequent discourse between senior Chinese and Russian officials demonstrated their strengthening diplomatic cooperation. As a result, the two nations have regularly supported each other's security concerns. China has expressed understanding for Russia's methods of dealing with the Chechen conflict, while Russia has backed China on the "one China" policy and separatism in Xinjiang (新疆) and Tibet (西藏). Both have supported the peaceful resolution of nuclear proliferation problems with regard to Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

¹⁸Harsh V. Pant, "The Moscow-Beijing-Delhi 'Strategic Triangle': An Idea Whose Time May Never Come," *Security Dialogue* 35, no. 3 (September 2004): 311-28.

¹⁹Ying-hsien Pi, "The Dynamics of Sino-Russian Relations," *Issues & Studies* 32, no. 1 (January 1996): 28.



Table 2
Russian Arms Exports 1999-2004 (US\$ million, at constant 1990 prices)

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total	%
China	1,378	1,694	2,917	2,379	1,961	2,161	12,490	40.70
India	873	422	679	1,514	2,340	1,694	7,522	24.51
Iran	244	323	352	319	423	261	1,922	6.27
Algeria	133	226	365	84	143	246	1,197	3.90
Vietnam	144	–	72	121	7	240	584	1.90
Others	985	1,352	1,132	1,127	782	1,594	6,972	22.72
Total	3,757	4,017	5,517	5,544	5,656	6,196	30,687	100.00

Source: SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, March 10, 2005.

Improved relations between the former adversaries have eased border tensions, with the border demilitarization talks that began in November 1989 yielding various military confidence-building measures. In 1994, the Chinese and Russian authorities adopted a "no first use" of nuclear weapons policy. In 1998, they established a direct presidential hot line, the first such line between China and another government.²⁰

Russia's arms sales to China are the most salient dimension of their growing security cooperation. Their December 1992 military-technical cooperation agreement has resulted in China purchasing more weapons from Russia than from all other countries combined.²¹ The annual values of these deliveries in recent years ranged between US\$1.5 billion and US\$3 billion (see table 2), making China the Russian defense industry's largest client, with a total share of about 40 percent.

Brisk Sino-Russian arms sales are not surprising. The economic growth spurred by the reform policies of the 1980s allowed China to begin significant purchases in the world arms market. When its brutal suppression of the 1989 democracy movement prompted Western countries

²⁰*Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network Daily Report*, May 5, 1998.

²¹U.S. Defense Department, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China* (Washington, D.C., 2002), 40.



to place an embargo on arms sales to China, Russia emerged as the only willing supplier for China's military modernization. Indeed, rapprochement between the two coincided with the Western sanctions. Bilateral trade nearly tripled between 1988 and 1993, with the initiation of Russian arms sales to China as the main impetus.²²

Russia's willingness to provide sophisticated weapons technology to an emerging, neighboring power that had long been an antagonist might seem counterintuitive, but it suggests that the Russian leadership had little concern that the arms trade with China would harm Russia's geopolitical position.²³ The Russian Foreign Policy Concept, proclaimed in 2000 shortly after Vladimir Putin assumed office, described the main task of the Sino-Russian partnership as bringing the scale of economic interaction into conformity with the level of political relations, which implies that Russian leaders are content with arms-led economic cooperation.

As China and Russia negotiated the Friendship Treaty, some members of the Russian State Duma (Gosduma) proposed a military alliance. In contrast, continued preference for the status quo and a risk-averse foreign policy led China to eschew military alliance, particularly as Beijing hoped to reassure neighbors and the United States that its economic ascendance represented no threat that might prompt a U.S.-led containment policy.²⁴ Indeed, in 1978 Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平) shifted China's focus from "revolution" to "modernization." Having allied with the Soviet Union in the 1950s and joined a "pseudo-alliance" with the United States in the 1970s, China launched an independent foreign policy of peace to create a durable, favorable international environment conducive to economic reform and the liberalization essential to its national goals.²⁵

²²Ya-chun Chang, "Peking-Moscow Relations in the Post-Soviet Era," *Issues & Studies* 30, no. 1 (January 1994): 91-92.

²³Alexander Yakovlev, "The Third Threat: China as Russia's No. 1 Enemy?" *Far Eastern Affairs* 30, no. 2 (2002): 26-41.

²⁴Qingcai Liu, "China's Contemporary Foreign Policy and Chinese-Russian Relations," *Far Eastern Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2004): 12-19.

²⁵Xinbo Wu, "Four Contradictions Constraining China's Foreign Policy Behavior," *Journal of Contemporary China* 10, no. 27 (May 2001): 293-301.



China aims to quadruple its GDP between 2000 and 2020 and become a mid-level developed country by 2050—a development aspiration that requires a peaceful international environment. Thus, as long as a growth policy positioned to serve its political and economic national interest dominates China's agenda, its independent foreign policy of peace will endure and any other foreign policy position will be avoided.²⁶

While the efforts to build a Sino-Russian alliance were unsuccessful, the Friendship Treaty at least filled the legal vacuum that persisted for more than a decade after the Sino-Russian rapprochement began. Both nations had continued to improve relations in the absence of a legal basis following abrogation of the 1950 mutual defense agreement.

The treaty definitively terminated territorial disputes between the two nations and emphasized their resolve to "turn the border into one of eternal peace." Prior to the signing, President Putin had to overcome resistance from the governors of Primorskii and Khabarovsk Krai in the Russian Far East, who had refused to return their disputed territories to China.²⁷ Putin and President Hu Jintao (胡锦涛) championed the treaty as "a successful example of resolving border disputes for all nations of the world."²⁸

Strategic Cooperation in the SCO

The partnership between China and Russia gained strength, first and foremost, at the bilateral level, but it assumed a strategic component when the two nations extended cooperation beyond bilateral relations. In 1996, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan signed a border treaty with China and agreed on a set of border confidence-building measures

²⁶Guoli Liu, "Leadership Transition and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 8, nos. 1 & 2 (Fall 2003): 103-4.

²⁷Elizabeth Wishnick, "Russia and China: Brothers Again?" *Asian Survey* 41, no. 5 (September/October 2001): 807.

²⁸Konstantin Vnukov, "Russia-China: Enhancing Partnership and Cooperation," *Far Eastern Affairs* 32, no. 4 (2004): 54.



and military force reductions. Signatory states chose to institutionalize this successful security dialogue rather than simply disband after signing the agreement. What began as a loose forum evolved into a regional security institution assuming in 2001 the name "Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (SCO). The "Shanghai Five" negotiation process, which had started in 1996, eventually became an organization, which translated their strategic partnership idea into practice in Central Asia.²⁹

The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which recruits Uygur, Tajik, Kyrgyz, and Chechen militants from across the region, attacked Kyrgyz army units as the Shanghai Five leaders met in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, prompting the formation of a Bishkek anti-terrorist center in 2001. The following year, in the Chinese People's Liberation Army's first maneuvers with another country's armed forces, China and Kyrgyzstan conducted the first bilateral anti-terror exercise under the SCO mandate. Moreover, the Chinese military transferred small arms, ammunition, and other military equipment to Kyrgyz security forces.

The SCO has grown more important since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States. In the beginning China and Russia considered the subsequent overt U.S. stance against terrorism beneficial, given their own growing concerns about ethnic nationalism and Islamic fundamentalism within their territories. Therefore, immediately after September 11, Jiang Zemin expressed support for the U.S. government and deferred the Sixteenth Party Congress to November from the customary September in order to meet President George W. Bush in October 2002 for the third time within a year.

On Russia's behalf, Putin decided to share in the burden of Central Asian counter-terrorism responsibilities and opened Central Asia to the United States. He supported U.S. and Western troops in Afghanistan and provided them with intelligence gathered during Russia's decade-long Afghan war. Moreover, Putin accepted the ongoing U.S. military presence

²⁹Anatoly Klimenko, "Russian and China as Strategic Partners in Central Asia: A Way to Improve Regional Security," *Far Eastern Affairs* 33, no. 2 (2005): 11.



in Central Asia after the Afghanistan war.³⁰ After 2002, however, Putin changed course, and again determined to stem the erosion of Russia's regional security influence. Behind this foreign policy shift stood the concerns of nationalist-oriented political and security elites. Russian officials initially tolerant of U.S. military deployment as a temporary concession feared the burgeoning strategic presence of a "non-regional power" in Central Asia.³¹

Similarly, while China wanted to limit instability in Central Asia—especially any that could encourage separatist movements in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (新疆維吾爾族自治區)—and it recognized that U.S. troops might enhance stability, it also disliked the ongoing U.S. military presence. This discomfort derived from its view of U.S. troops in the region as part of a U.S. strategy to curb the development of Chinese power.³²

China and Russia made their shared opposition to the U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan explicit during their July 2005 SCO summit in Astana, Kazakhstan. SCO leaders in a joint statement demanded that coalition countries set a deadline for withdrawing troops from their countries, given that the SCO provision of land-based infrastructure was for the temporary deployment of military forces, something that was no longer necessary now that the active military phase of the Afghanistan campaign had ended.³³

In the following month, China and Russia held their joint military exercises. They invited SCO defense ministers to watch the "Peace Mission 2005" maneuvers in Vladivostok, the Shandong Peninsula (山東半島), and nearby offshore waters, which involved nearly 10,000 troops as

³⁰Roy Allison, "Strategic Reassertion in Russia's Central Asia Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 278-79.

³¹Nadia Alexandrova Arbatova, "Russian-Western Relations after 11 September: Selective Cooperation versus Partnership (a Russian View)," *The Political Quarterly* 73 (August 2002): 160; and Lena Jonson, "Russia and Central Asia: Post-11 Sept. 2001," *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 19, no. 1 (2003): 83-94.

³²Russel Ong, "China's Security Interests in Central Asia," *Central Asian Survey* 24, no. 4 (December 2005): 425-39.

³³*RIA Novosti*, July 5, 2005.



well as aircraft, warships, and submarines.³⁴

Russia has been escalating its military presence in Kyrgyzstan. In early 2006, it augmented its Kant air base near Bishkek with an "anti-terrorist" ground force. Three years ago, Kyrgyzstan had permitted 500 Russian servicemen and 20 aircraft to be deployed at the Kant airbase, the first foreign base to be established by Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the most prominent example of the reconstitution of a significant Russian presence, especially in view of its close proximity to the U.S. airbase at Manas in Kyrgyzstan.³⁵

The SCO, built around the two largest countries in Eurasia, has become a powerful intergovernmental arrangement that today involves over a quarter of the world's population. Russia is regaining the strong authority it enjoyed as part of the former Soviet Union. Chinese leaders favor a preeminent Russian security role in Central Asia to help prevent abrupt changes in the region and the growth of either U.S. or Islamic fundamentalist influence.³⁶ The SCO is viewed as a pivotal component of a potential "stability crescent" arching from Europe across Central Asia to Southeast Asia.

Like the 1996 Sino-Russian summit communiqué establishing their strategic partnership, the SCO founding document declares that it does not signal opposition to any external third party. It contends that the SCO is chiefly aimed at providing comprehensive security—from economic to military—within the member countries' own borders. However, the SCO's declared defensive purpose has not forestalled U.S. wariness, given that it is the only international security organization in which Washington does not have at least a foothold.³⁷

These reasons suggest why the SCO's creation might be seen as the first step in a Chinese and Russian policy of renouncing the U.S. vision of

³⁴*China View*, August 2, 2005.

³⁵*Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 21, 2006; and *RFE/RL*, October 22, 2003.

³⁶Mark Burles, *Chinese Policy Toward Russia and the Central Asian Republics* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1999), 8.

³⁷Klimenko, "Russian and China as Strategic Partners in Central Asia," 8.



a world dominated by a single pole. Even so, it does not signal a military strategy aimed at creating a multipolar system, but simply that U.S. hegemony is not absolute, which allows Russia to regain its security leadership in Central Asia with China's cooperation and approval.

Strategic Cooperation in the U.N. Security Council

The creation of the SCO has actively abetted regional cooperation between China and Russia. In world issues, they hold similar positions and favor a post-Cold War order with the United Nations primary in global decision-making—a position that serves their self-interest, as they enjoy considerable power as permanent members of the U.N. Security Council and as nuclear states. In the 2002 Beijing summit joint statement, Jiang and Putin reiterated their consensus on promoting a multipolar world with a central U.N. role.³⁸ Bobo Lo likens this desired "Concert of the World" to the early nineteenth century "Concert of Europe."³⁹

Despite their efforts, the U.N. Security Council policy outcomes envisioned by China and Russia have proven substantially elusive. Still, China and Russia have clipped the wings of U.S. unilateralism to an ever-greater extent by pushing selected international issues into the U.N. framework. In their dealings in recent years with international concerns on Kosovo and Iraq, their emphasis on the centrality of the United Nations has explicitly resisted U.S. unilateral approaches.

In the Kosovo war, the United States failed to secure a U.N. mandate for military force. The conflict between Serbian forces and the largely Albanian population of Kosovo escalated throughout 1998, and by September it prompted the U.N. Security Council to pass Resolution 1199 demanding that both parties cease military action and pursue political dialogue. China

³⁸ *Beijing Review*, December 26, 2002.

³⁹ Bobo Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership: Russia's Evolving China Policy," *International Affairs* 80, no. 2 (March 2004): 296.



betrayed its lack of support for even this moderate resolution by abstaining from the vote, while Russia voted for it on the understanding that it did not mandate use of force. Shortly after voting, Yeltsin ordered Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov to do everything possible to prevent military intervention by the Western powers.⁴⁰

In effect, the United States bypassed the United Nations and urged its European allies to bomb Yugoslavia, despite China's and Russia's strict interpretation of Article 51 of the U.N. Charter as sanctioning individual or collective self-defense only against interstate aggression, not, as the United States held, on behalf of an ethnic group within a state.⁴¹ NATO allies followed the U.S. lead to stop the genocide of Kosovo Albanians and, by doing so—to the chagrin of both China and Russia—set the precedent that the protection of human rights is more important than respect for national sovereignty. In particular, China and Russia were worried that the United States would apply the Kosovo model to Tibet and Chechnya.⁴²

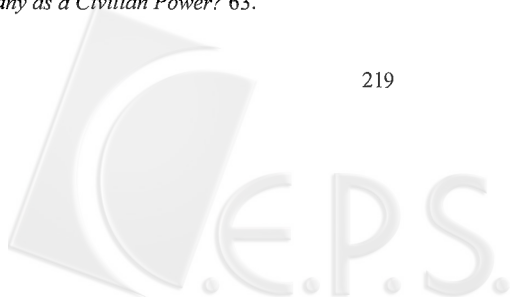
Shortly after September 11, 2001, the NATO allies gave their full backing to the U.S. war on international terrorism. They viewed the attack on the United States as an attack on Europe also, declared solidarity with the Americans, invoked the NATO clause guaranteeing aid to allies for the first time in NATO history, and participated in the U.S.-led military offensive to oust the Taliban regime from Afghanistan.

However, the European allies split when the United States escalated its war to include Iraq in 2002. A full U.N. mandate for military force and military support from major European allies—including France, Germany, and Belgium—eluded the United States. Chancellor Helmut Schroeder of Germany chose not to include German troops in the multinational forces, objecting that diplomacy had not been exhausted in dealing with Iraq's nuclear program. He advocated the "German way," stating that Berlin,

⁴⁰Max Otte, *A Rising Middle Power?* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000), 202.

⁴¹Hanns W. Maull, "Germany's Foreign Policy, Post-Kosovo: Still a 'Civilian Power'?" in *Germany as a Civilian Power?* ed. Sebastian Harnisch and Hanns W. Maull (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 107.

⁴²Nina Philippi, "Civilian Power and War: The German Debate about Out-of-Area Operations 1990-99," in Harnisch and Maull, *Germany as a Civilian Power?* 63.



rather than Washington, should decide German foreign policy.⁴³ This implied a German common cause with Russia that had a historical precedent in the 1922 Rapallo Treaty between the two nations—both alienated from the emergent Versailles system—which secured diplomatic recognition for Russia from a capitalist nation for the first time.⁴⁴

This subtle realignment of Russian and German interests is significant. The United States wants above all to prevent its allies from supporting the multipolar balancing dynamic that the Sino-Russian strategic partnership advocates, but developments are moving in that direction. Germany since unification has been realigning its long-term foreign policy priorities along those lines. Similarly, in their comprehensive partnership established in May 1997, France and China agreed to foster international multipolarity. Robert Kagan laments that the perception gap between the United States and some of its European allies has been eroding the former accord of the trans-Atlantic alliance.⁴⁵

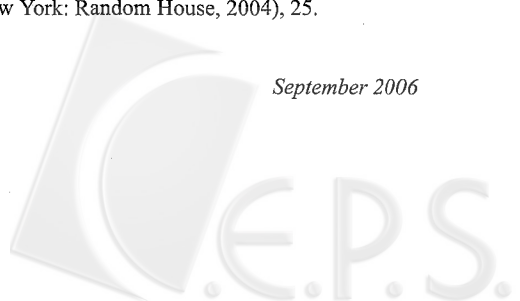
Tensions between China and Russia on the one hand and the United States on the other are clear, but no longer derive from Cold War thinking or hostile relations. Indeed, Beijing favors good relations and non-confrontation with the United States, as the Sino-American summit meeting between Jiang Zemin and Bill Clinton in 1997 illustrated. Through this summit meeting, Beijing aspired to break out of its post-Tiananmen (天安门) isolation and win a lifting of sanctions against nuclear technology and military weapons, and the removal of U.S. objections to China's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Conversely, Washington's engagement with China aims to secure adherence to international nuclear nonproliferation and human rights norms. Its engagement policy also prioritizes gaining China's cooperation in preventing regional conflicts, notably on the Korean peninsula. Not

⁴³Regina Karp, "The New German Foreign Policy Consensus," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (Winter 2005/06): 66.

⁴⁴Igor Bratchikov and Dmitrii Liubinskii, "Germany: The Mechanism of Strategic Partnership," *International Affairs* (Moscow) 48, no. 3 (2002): 150.

⁴⁵Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power* (New York: Random House, 2004), 25.



least, U.S. commercial interests fuel U.S.-China rapprochement. The nuclear cooperation agreement concluded at the 1997 summit opened the multi-billion dollar Chinese market to U.S. exports of nuclear reactors and technology.⁴⁶

Putin, even as he further collaborates with China, also carefully presents the Sino-Russian relationship as a non-alliance that does not target any third party.⁴⁷ China and Russia have publicly insisted that their strategic partnership has no military implication. Their goal instead is to deter or constrain U.S. dominance in international politics through a multipolar world dynamic perhaps best embodied in the vehicle of the United Nations. This vision gains credence as ever-fewer Security Council permanent member states see their interests and values coinciding with those of the United States. During the Cold War, it was 3:1:1, with China in a shifting middle position between the West and the Soviet Union. Now, it is 2:1:2, with the United States and the United Kingdom opposing China and Russia, and France occupying the middle position.⁴⁸

Through strategic cooperation, China and Russia have compounded their effectiveness and become a united power in the U.N. Security Council. Indeed, virtually all five permanent members easily reach consensus on resolving international problems peacefully through political solutions, as recent votes on North Korea and Lebanon indicate. In keeping with this, China and Russia disfavor preemptive strikes, such as those against Kosovo and Iraq.

Conclusion

As shown above, alliance formation is largely affected by the characteristics of the international system. That is, alliances assume different

⁴⁶*Christian Science Monitor*, October 30, 1997.

⁴⁷Lo, "The Long Sunset of Strategic Partnership," 304.

⁴⁸Huntington, "The Lonely Superpower," 42.

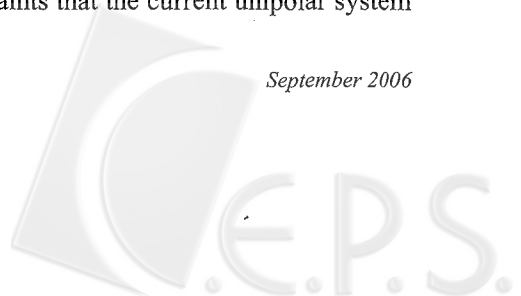


patterns and meanings under multipolar, bipolar, and unipolar systems. The post-Cold War era has generated a unipolar system dominated, from a military standpoint, by the United States, responsible for nearly half of the world's total military expenditure and still in charge of the alliance system it established during the Cold War. Current conditions do not support new alliances capable of counterbalancing U.S. primacy. Moreover, the superpower has no interest in forging significant new alliances. As it already enjoys the minimum power required to prevail in a military conflict, new alliances would present an unnecessary encumbrance.

This context makes the new concept of strategic partnership attractive. The end of the Cold War bred more fluid "partnerships" among states formerly polarized into two antagonistic blocs dividing "enemies" from "allies." This model for international cooperation prevails as one of the few options for less powerful states unable to form alliances of choice—either with the United States or other nations—and as a workable alternative to traditional alliances based on military cooperation. What China and Russia currently pursue is not military but political deterrence. They seek first to check the U.S. unilateral position in international politics, and eventually to alter the unipolar system itself.

Developments in Sino-Russian relations carry theoretical implications. The realist focus on traditional foreign policy concepts such as alliance is relevant in a multipolar or bipolar system, where power balance or threat balance is critical. Emphasis on strategic partnership gains credence in a unipolar system, where role balance in international politics is feasible.

China and Russia have pursued strengthened positions in international politics to contest U.S. primacy. To that end, they have improved bilateral relations and closely cooperate within organizations at both the regional and international levels. Regionally, they have achieved significant success and a self-reliant security area by founding the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Globally, they have made more limited but substantial and mounting gains in securing the United Nations as an organization with the authority and responsibility to solve international issues. China and Russia have moved from enemies to partners, with relations only likely to strengthen. Even so, constraints that the current unipolar system



presents make seeking an alliance to counterbalance the United States an improbable goal.

The discussion above establishes that, from a military perspective, the United States is the only superpower. Politically, however, it needs the support of other major powers, as its recent difficulty in enforcing international sanctions that they oppose demonstrates. In sum, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership offers a template for checking U.S. unilateralism.

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