

On the US-Russian-China Triangle
By Pan Zhenqiang, Shanghai Institute for International strategic Studies
Beijing, May 22, 2006

Sometimes one cannot help but think how things could change, independent of personal hopes of any individuals. The US-Russian relations are a case in point. The Moscow Treaty, which US President George W. Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin signed on May 24, 2002, was hailed by the two top leaders as an event of historical importance. With agreements on nuclear-arms reductions and a new NATO-Russia relationship, both reassured that they would make further intensive efforts to forge a new US-Russian partnership. A new era of US-Russian relations seemed to arise on the horizon, especially as President Bush declared that the week's summit meetings in Russia would mark a major milestone in "liquidating the legacy of the cold war."

What impressed people further was that the two leaders seemed to have particularly succeeded in putting their new friendship on a higher level of newfound trust, marked by surprising buoyancy and personal fondness. The two men came to look each other in the eye and they both appeared to like what they saw. As some widely-reported comment by the American president went, Bush looked into Putin's eyes, got "a sense of his soul," and found him trustworthy. Putin evidently shared Bush's warm sentiments, declaring that an important Cold War milestone had been passed, and that "Russia is no longer America's enemy".

Exactly 4 years later, however, we see that the above expectations haven't all come true and President Putin is now no longer a man to be admired in Washington. He is regarded as a dictator-type ruler, who has been back-pedaling Russia into an "authoritarian" and "undemocratic" regime.

Vice-President Dick Cheney made sharp remarks against Russia and Mr. Putin at a conference of former Soviet Union state leaders on May 4, 2006. He stated that "in Russia today, opponents of reform are seeking to reverse the gains of the last decade." He found that in many areas "from religion and the news media to advocacy groups and political parties, the government has unfairly and improperly restricted the rights of the people." Cheney also voiced his strong displeasure at Russia, which is seeking self-interests by using energy resources to blackmail. These actions "have been counterproductive and could begin to affect relations with other countries," he declared. Undoubtedly, Cheney's statement indicates the dramatic change in mood over Moscow in Washington, which is now imbued with dissatisfaction and disappointment. At the bottom of the sentiments is the fear that Russia seems to develop into a more assertive and unfriendly power at the expense of US interests. Instead of becoming a true partner, Russia now seems to be at odds with the US policy on almost all the global as well as regional vital security issues in Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Middle East in particular.

On the other side, Moscow has just as many complaints against the US behavior. The 9/11 terrorist attack occurred barely one year after Putin became president of the Russian Federation. The then new Russian president evidently wished to strengthen cooperation with Washington in the hope of mending the damaged relations, which had remained from the Yeltsin time. So, for Russia, the 9/11 event provided a window of golden opportunity. But while Putin – in his attempt to construct a partnership with Washington – was willing to help the US overthrow the Taliban regime in the war in Afghanistan, he feels that he received almost nothing in reward. Instead he feels that the US have continuously tried to interfere in Russia's domestic affairs, and to keep Russia down abroad.

Against this background, few feel surprised at how Moscow responds. In the recent Russia's State of Union speech, Putin held up against Cheney's swipes. "We must always be ready to counter any attempts to pressure Russia in order to strengthen others' positions at our expense," Putin said. Then he quipped: "As the saying goes, Comrade Wolf knows whom to eat, it eats without listening and it's clearly not going to listen to anyone."

What merits special attention is Putin's stress on the importance of Russia's military build-up as a priority in order to boost Russia's security. "The stronger our military is, the less temptation there will be to exert such pressure on us," he argued. When referring to the US military development, Putin pointed out that Russia's military budget is 25 times less than that of the United States. "Their house is their fortress - good for them," he said. "But that means that we also must make our house strong and reliable." To that end, Putin in particular stressed the value of nuclear deterrence, indicating that his government would soon commission two nuclear submarines equipped with the new Bulava intercontinental ballistic missiles - the nation's first since the Soviet era - while the land-based strategic missile forces will get their first unit of mobile Topol-M missiles. The new missiles and warheads, which can change their route to a target that an enemy would be unable to calculate, are said to allow Russia to preserve a "strategic balance" without damaging the nation's economic development goals.

Some feel that this particular use of language, as well as the moves from both sides, sounds similar to the language used during Cold War times. One famous US Russian expert even laments that while the two countries are just out of the Cold War, they seem now to enter a new period of the Chilly War.

The Sino-Russian relations, on the other hand, are better than ever before. Ever since Yeltsin and Jiang Zeming signed their first agreement in April 1996 of building the China-Russian bilateral relationship into a strategic partnership of coordination, based on equality and trust, and facing the 21st century, this relationship has been developing steadily and with increasing momentum. It is no exaggeration to say that the Sino-Russian relations are better today than at any time since the end of the Cold War. Building on the progress of the bilateral cooperation, the two countries are planning to host the Year of Russia in China in 2006, and the Year of China in Russia scheduled in 2007. Reflecting the height that the bilateral cooperative relationship has reached, the two events are designed

to further carry the strategic partnership into the new century. The maturing of the bilateral relations has manifested itself in many aspects. But the following are perhaps the most salient highlights of the development:

1. Politically, the two countries have resolved all their major political problems, including border issues, thus raising their mutual trust to a new level. Furthermore, the two countries have signed a series of legally binding agreements, which serve to provide an important political basis and legal guarantee for strengthening the bilateral cooperation. Among these political and legal documents, the China-Russia Treaty of Good-neighborly Friendship and Cooperation signed in July 2001 and the Outline on Implementing the Treaty in October 2004 are perhaps of most significance as these documents have provided working guidelines for the cooperative measures, especially during the 2005-2008 period, and opened up new prospects for full-fledged strategic coordination in the long-term future. As a result, the bilateral relationship between the two countries has been firmly put on a sustained track and been ensured correct orientation. The political interaction has been highly institutionalized. In this regard, the regular frequent exchanges of visits of the top leaders and subsequent summits have played an extremely positive role in helping to build genuine confidence and trust between the two countries. Since 2005, Putin and Hu Jintao have met five times. The personal trust between the heads of the two countries also helped prompt solutions to new situations and problems whenever they occurred.

2. Economic cooperation has become the material basis for the Sino-Russian relations. The two countries are mutually complementary in their economy and trade relations, thus providing great potentials for the gigantic development in this field. Trade volume between the two countries has seen continuous advancement in recent years, from 15.76 billion US dollars in 2003, to 29.1 billion US dollars in 2005. During Putin's visit to China in March 2006, the two countries signed a series of cooperation agreements covering across-board areas, including economy, trade, energy, investment and technology, etc. According to predictions of both governments, the bilateral trade volume will reach 60-80 billion US dollars by 2012. By 2020, the Chinese investment in Russia will reach 12 billion US dollars. It is worth noticing that big joint projects on energy and technology interaction occupy a particularly important space in the development of the bilateral cooperation. In future, the two countries pledge to forge an "energy coalition" unprecedented in scale. A number of agreements were reached regarding Russia's massive supply of various energy resources to China. These agreements, among others, include decisions 1) to complete building an oil pipeline in Russia's Far East to link up to China's territory at the cost of 11.5 billion US dollars by 2008; by then, Moscow will be able to provide 10 million tons of crude oil to China annually; 2) to complete building a 3000-kilometer long Western pipeline of natural gas in Russia's territory at the cost of 10 billion US dollars by 2011, by which Moscow will be able to supply 30-40 billion cubic meters of gas to China annually; 3) to increase Russia's supply of electricity to China to the level of over 10 million kilowatts by 2020. If all these and other related cooperative measures are implemented, Russia is going to be one of the most important partners to China in the world energy market, providing Beijing with 20 percent of all its energy imports by 2011. By 2015, half of Russia's energy exports will

go to China. In addition, the two countries will continue to strengthen and expand cooperation in the areas of civil aviation, space exploitation, agriculture, labor services and other technological areas.

3. In the international and security areas, China and Russia have continued to develop and expand cooperation. The cooperative areas are wide-ranged, including international security, anti-terrorism, prevention of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, reform of the United Nations, fight against organized crimes and drug trafficking, prevention of deterioration of the ecological system, elimination of poverty and control of pandemics. In all these fields, the two countries hold similar views, and feel growing need to support each other in order to defend their respective core interests and to promote global and regional peace and stability. The two countries also played a lead role in creating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has contributed greatly to the peace and stability in Central Asia. What is noteworthy is the thriving military cooperation between China and Russia. The two countries have witnessed a growing interest from both sides in strengthening military contacts, for example exchange of visits by military personnel at various level, conducting joint military exercises, and expanding arms transfers, etc. All of them are deemed of special significance to both countries.

Progress in the Sino-Russian relations does not, of course, suggest that there are no problems in the ties of the two countries. But problems do pale compared to the gluing elements that continue to bind the Moscow and Beijing together. In the future, the Sino-Russian relations will continue to be characterized by the principles that both sides firmly believe to be essential in keeping the bilateral relationship sound and healthy. These principles, as Hu Jintao once summarized, are: 1) reinforcing mutual support in the spirit of political and trust; 2) expanding cooperation to achieve win-win results; 3) promoting all-round exchanges to deepen mutual understanding and friendship; and 4) strengthening communication and coordination for peace and development.

The differing courses of development in recent US-Russian and Sino-Russian relations seem to be beginning to cast their impact on the international situation in general and on the major powers' relations in particular, for better or worse. Questions are being whispered, if Moscow and Beijing would eventually be allied, and if the US-Russia-China triangle, which used to be the prime framework for the major power's relations in the large part of the Cold War, will emerge once again as the defining element for the world restructuring in the post Cold War era.

The latter is most likely to happen. The reasons for this are manifold: 1) In an increasingly multipolar world, the US-Russia-China triangle will remain one of the major power's structures. This contributes to a world strategic framework for international peace and stability. There are many other triangle relations in the power's configuration that would also be important for the evolution of the world situation. It now seems to be a time where the split of the world powers into conflicting groups has reemerged. 2) Unlike in Cold War times, there is no peer competitor against the US today or in the foreseeable future. In the

US-Russia-China triangle, both Moscow and Beijing are nothing more than rising powers. Neither has interest or capability to challenge the US' leading position as the only world superpower in international affairs. It is precisely for this reason that both Beijing and Moscow have repeatedly pointed out that strengthening cooperation between the two countries is not against any third parties, especially not against Washington. 3) For all the positive development of the Sino-Russian cooperation, both China and Russia have explicitly expressed their strong interest in developing cooperative relations with other major powers, including the United States. Both countries are in fact pursuing an independent, non-allied policy, aiming at making more friends rather than making more adversaries. The evident closing ranks by the two countries seem more a response to the US unilateralist and confrontational policy than forming a union for expansionist ambition at the expense of the US interests. Clearly, moves from both Russia and China are defensive and not offensive in nature.

That said, it should also be acknowledged that a confrontational element does remain in the US-Russia-China triangle, generated from deep-rooted mistrust and suspicion combined with ideological prejudice on all sides, which were all passed down from the Cold War years. As long as it persists, it will always be possible to poison the atmosphere of the relations among these three countries, and give rise to miscalculations and a malignant chain action/reaction cycle. Given this situation, concerted efforts of all the three major powers are required in order to have a new sound triangle relations in the future.