

# Russian-Chinese Political Relations: General Overview

Vladimir PARAMONOV and Aleksey STROKOV

Central Eurasia Analytic Group

Dr. Vladimir Paramonov and Dr. Alexey Stokov are co-directors of the analytical project “Central Eurasia”, [www.ceasia.ru](http://www.ceasia.ru) (Tashkent, Uzbekistan). They are also co-authors of the five books on Russian and Chinese policies, dozens of analytical reports, and hundreds of articles on different topics of the international relations in Eurasia.

\* 이 글에 포함된 의견은 저자 개인의 견해로 제주평화연구원의 공식입장과는 무관합니다.

The political relationship between Russia and China in the post-Soviet period has thawed and shows signs of increased momentum. In the early 1990s, the relationship was still lukewarm however, it improved markedly in 1996 and received a substantial boost in 2000 with the election of Vladimir Putin.

## Early 1990s

In the early 1990s, a new relationship between Russia and China slowly developed. The new political elite in Russia came to power in 1991 and was headed by Boris Yeltsin however, it made very little headway in any aspect of foreign policy, the relationship with China was no exception. Russia’s main interest was a closer integration with the West. There was also some uncertainty in China about their relations with Russia, after the sudden and largely unexpected collapse of the Soviet system.

The development of the relationship between the two countries during this period was limited to the issuing of joint declarations such as “the need to expand areas of mutually-advantageous cooperation”. At the end of president Yeltsin’s visit to China in 1992 a joint declaration was issued to express the intention of both sides to develop bilateral relations as “relations between friendly countries”. A return visit to Russia by Chinese leader Jiang Zemin in 1994 saw another joint declaration issued to confirm the successful development of relations between the two countries, now described as a “constructive partnership.”

## Mid to late 1990s

Russia re-defined its foreign policy priorities in the mid-1990s based on the “construction of a multipolar system of international relations” subsequently, political interaction with China was enhanced considerably because this concept coincided with the Chinese leadership’s own strategic interests and worldview.

Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin issued a joint statement that described the bilateral relations between the two countries as a “strategic partnership” at the end of a Russia-China summit meeting in Beijing in 1996. This declaration described aspirations rather than the real situation between the two countries however, it reflected the desire of both countries to strengthen their foreign policy positions through a dialogue with the West (especially the USA) and provide a counterweight to American global influence.

This seems to have been the catalyst for a further improvement in Russian-Chinese cooperation. For example, annual meetings between the heads of the two governments were established in 1996. A direct phone link was also established between the Russian State Duma and the State Council of China.

In the late 1990s, the two countries made determined efforts to resolve their border problems and deal with the issue of harmonization of cross-border trade. Subsequently, in 1999 the Russia-China border was legally registered and identified throughout its entire length (except for only three disputed islands on the Amur and Argun rivers). By 1999, more than 100 bilateral agreements had been signed that covered economic cooperation between Russian and Chinese regional authorities.

In the late 1990s cooperation between Russia and China evolved into new cooperation over inter-regional issues. In 1998, in no small part due to the support of China, Russia became a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum that allowed for participation in an organization that dealt with key Asia-Pacific problems.

## Current relations

Political relations between Russia and China received a substantial boost at the start beginning of the 2000s. Russian foreign policy became distinctly more pragmatic under Vladimir Putin. Russia began to devote more attention to improved relations with China and saw this as a key strategy to rebuild Russia’s foreign policy standing in the world, which had been undermined in the 1990s. China also saw a closer relationship with Russia as an opportunity to enhance its regional and global position.

Other factors that helped strengthen relations between Russia and China were NATO's military operations in Yugoslavia in 1999 as well as the subsequent military activities of the USA and its allies in Iraq and Afghanistan. These factors encouraged Russia and China to coordinate their efforts to establish an alternative centre of gravity to counterbalance the West, especially the United States.

Moscow signed The Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation in 2001 showed the interest of both countries to increase the establishment of bilateral relations.

Another equally significant event in the political, or even geopolitical, rapprochement between Russia and China, was the formation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001, which included Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

This acted as a further impetus to Russian-Chinese dialogue. There were now bilateral meetings approximately three times a year that included official visits, in addition to the contacts within the framework of APEC and the SCO. Particular attention was devoted to cooperation on security issues in the Central Asian region, which is in close proximity to important economic and military infrastructure in both Russia and China.

\* \* \*

The widening and deepening political interaction between Russia and China was recognition by the ruling elites in both countries to cooperate and pursue common priorities and the creation of a multipolar world.

A further reason for increased cooperation between Russia and China is their common interest in areas such as terrorism, extremism and separatism. For Russia this refers principally to the North Caucasus, and for China to Xinjiang. Another field of cooperation is the mutual support over a range of foreign affairs issues.

Simultaneously, it seems that the developing political cooperation between Russia and China has an insufficient foundation and is confined to the topic of the construction of a multipolar world order that is mainly motivated by a reaction to the geopolitical entanglements of USA and NATO, rather than by objective requirements for the development of a bilateral political dialogue. Subsequently, it is not impossible that Russian and Chinese relations could once again be dominated by narrow short-term national interests and/or the ambitions of ruling elites if the right combination of circumstances present themselves.

May 9, 2013