

Russia-China Relations: Convergence and Divergence in Central Asia



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ABSTRACT

Russia and China entered in new millennium as two friendly powers promoting a relationship of strategic interaction and good neighbourliness. Both the great powers have resolved many historical disputes and irritants with an objective of building and strengthening from their constructive partnership to strategic cooperative partnership. Their leaders resolute to built such relationship in consonance with the vital interests of each of the two nations as well as the larger interests of universal peace, security and stability. The Central Asian Region has traditionally been an area of special interest in the foreign policies of both countries. As Russia and China both have important economic interests in Central Asia. The present paper is a modest attempt to investigate the relations of both Russia and China with Central Asian States which are rich in history, along with their economic and political factors closely interwoven. All this need an in depth understanding of convergences and divergences of Sino-Russian relations in Central Asia.

Keywords: Russia, China, Central Asian Region and states, energy.

Introduction

Sino-Russian relations have been improving steadily and have taken positive turn. The process of solution of border dispute between the two countries began at the end of 1980's when a joint border commission was set up. The Russian President Vladimir Putin inherited the process of friendship, cooperation and strategic partnership between Russia and China that took shape in 1990's. He has gone a step further in his efforts to establish a deeper understanding with the leaders of China, intensify and provide new positive to Russian Chinese relation as well as to give a new quality to Russian-Chinese cooperation. In 1994 the two sides agreed on no first use of nuclear weapons against each other. The two countries also detargeted their missiles against each other and an agreement to this effect was signed when Chinese President Zemin visited Russia in September 1994.

Further, in April 1997 an accord on mutual reduction of forces was signed in Moscow by Russia and China. Moreover the successful conclusion of the border agreement between two sides during May 1991 on the Western Sector removed major irritants. In December 1999, it was announced that the border dispute has been finally settled. The signing of the China-Russian Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation, deepening of political mutual trust and the important steps towards cooperation in the economic, military, security and humanities fields. Both nations are also cooperating with each other in Central Asian Region (CAR). Both have some common interests in this

region because this region shares its boundaries with both Russia and China. But this region was the integral part of Soviet Union and after disintegration of Soviet Union the influence of Russia (big part of Soviet Union) is still in excess as compare to other big powers like the US and China.

After disintegration of the USSR, this area became significant due to global politics and its huge energy resources. Both Russia and China are great powers of Asia and share a long border with the states of this region. So it is inevitable that they can not remain silent and being neighbours they constantly make their important role in the CAR. This is natural considering geographical location of the region at the heart of Eurasia and its strategic importance to both great powers. Russia and China recently have moved closer together based on some common interests in Central Asia. The CAR is rich resources of oil, natural gases and hydrocarbon. Energy trade recently has emerged as a strong Sino-Russian interest in Central Asia. Russia has been intensifying its control over oil and gas transit in Central Asia.

On the other hand China has only 2.3 % of the world's oil reserves and 1% of natural gas reserves, but its annual oil consumption accounts for more than 6% of the world total. China's imported oil comes mainly from the Middle East. To improve its national energy security, China has actively sought to diversify its sources of oil over the past few years. The most convenient energy reserves for China are in Russia and Central Asian states. The Chinese Government has

signed several agreements on oil, gas and related pipeline construction with Central Asian countries during the past few years. A contract was signed in 2002 for building an oil pipeline from Western Kazakhstan to western China, was completed in 2005.

Additionally, China has made a \$300 million commitment for the extraction of oil and gas in Kyrgyzstan, it is also involved in \$70 million contract to upgrade 10 drilling installations in Uzbekistan which is apparently a part of an \$600 million aid package offered to the later in 2002, for Central Asian states, China has a huge potential market for energy sales and also an important passageway to link up with the Asia-pacific economic rim and the world market. Both Russia and China are well aware of the problem of Islamic extremism and terrorism in the region. They share a long border with Central Asian States and want stability, security and peace in this region. They have a great desire to abolish radical Islamic forces from Central Asia.

Russia and China have common views on strengthening the SCO and both are trying to make it a development and security based organization. The SCO recently held its annual summit in Bishkek. Although the summit in Bishkek dealt with all issues of the SCO's concern including the struggle against "terrorism, extremism and separatism. In addition, the issues of military, cultural and economic cooperation, energy security and energy cooperation has also been analysed. The heads of the SCO member states noted the important role of the energy resources as a basis for economic growth and security of this region. Moscow and Beijing appear to equate stability with good relations with a particular local leader or regime. They invest heavily in the status quo, which forces them to adopt a reactive, rather than proactive approach to Central Asia security and which in turn leaves them dependent upon events on the ground. Considering the influence that Russia and China have and are likely to have throughout Central Asia in the future, their reactive posture and reliance on local regimes made it difficult for the United States to reduce its own exposure to local instabilities.

Despite of all these common interests between Russia and China there are some divergent also present between these two Asian giants in reference to Central Asia. Russia has been intensifying its control over oil and gas transit in Central Asia. In June 2003, Russia signed a wide ranging set of agreements with Kazakhstan, ensuring a Russian monopoly on the transit of oil from Kazakhstan in the long term. But on August 19, 2007 China signed two vital energy agreements with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, both directly confronting Russia's interests.

The first deal specified the final phase of the Chinese

plan for an oil pipeline stretching all the way to the Caspian Sea. Two thirds of this link has already been completed through the Atasu-Alashankou pipeline and a pipeline stretching from Atyrau to Kenkiyak, while the phase in question consists of a connection between Kenkiyak and Kumol. Most significant was however the second deal involving the construction of natural gas pipeline from Turkmenistan to China which, if completed essentially would break Russia's long-held monopoly on Turkmen gas. Although the deal in itself was no new since it has been circulating for some time, it now seems as if both Turkmenistan and China are intended on finalizing it.

China and Russia have different strategies for intra-SCO relations. Whereas China seeks to work with each SCO member on a state-to-state basis to expand military cooperation, Russia would prefer to strengthen the Commonwealth of Independent States and have the CIS members operate as a bloc within the SCO. When Russia proposed inviting India to the July 2005 summit as an observer, China immediately insisted on inviting Pakistan. This displayed Russia's desire to counter balance China within the organization as well as China's wary reaction to such move.

Russia has always remained the geopolitical alternative for Central Asian States. They are a product of geography, history, economics and culture, which add up to a powerful rationale for Russia to keep a close eye on the region. Russia has assumed a more active posture in Central Asia seeking to minimize China and US presence-political, economic & especially military and reestablish itself as the pre-eminent regional actor. Although China has become more active in economic and trade sphere in Central Asia than Russia and thus they become competitors not cooperators.

Conclusion

However, both the countries have not yet achieved a great success in diluting the US influence in Central Asia. America is still having its military bases in Kyrgyzstan. But simultaneously both these Asian powers have achieved a great success in abolishing the US military bases in Uzbekistan through the SCO. They also nullified the US influence in local regimes of CAR. Besides it, it is also fact that Russia and China have some divergents due to their national interests in Central Asia; energy is core issue of conflict between Russia and China. Somewhere China's direct flow in CAR is a great challenge to monopoly of Russia in energy sector. Besides it, both often counter balance each other's position in the CAR and the SCO. In fact, Russia is very dominant country in the CAR and it cannot tolerate the interference of any other country in this region then whether it is China or the US. China is also

having a deep interest in the CAR; it is not ready to draw its footing from this region at any cost.

Lastly, it is quite clear that despite of common pacing of Russia and China in the CAR is also having mistrust over some important issues. But in reality both

Russia and China know their limitations and to fulfill their national and international interests their cooperation is necessary in this region. Thus the prospects of their cooperation are bright and available divergent would be overcome with the passage of time.

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