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How Has Chinese-Russian Partnership Been Constructed? A Historical View

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This year 2019 marks the 70th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between China and Russia. In *The People's Daily* dated June 3, 2019, Li Hui, Chinese Ambassador to Russia, wrote an essay with the title “Witnessing the Golden Era of Chinese-Russian Relations” and pointed out that under the leadership of President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries has been developed and now a golden age of Chinese-Russian relations has begun.

Two days later, on June 5, Xi Jinping visited Moscow and held talks with Putin. According to the Xinhua News Agency the two heads of state agreed to develop a comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era. Putin said the Russian-Chinese relationship has reached an unprecedented high level with the Russian-Chinese comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination, not only benefitting the two peoples, but also becoming an important force for safeguarding global security and strategic stability. Following the meeting, Xi and Putin signed a statement on elevating bilateral ties to the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era and on strengthening contemporary global strategic stability.

Chinese-Russian relations have become remarkably close in various fields, including military cooperation. International society is now concerned about the future of Chinese-Russian relations and some observers even insist that these two countries will eventually restore their alliance, signed by Stalin and Mao in 1950. But today's leaders, Xi and Putin, avoid using the word “alliance” and use the word “partnership” when referring to Chinese-Russian relations. This article focuses on the process of choosing the way of establishing “partnership” instead of “alliance” and covers the period up to the conclusion of the Chinese-Russian Treaty of Good Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation in 2001. Article 1 of this treaty states that both countries will develop a “strategic partnership”.

Bitter Experiences of the Collapse of Chinese-Russian Alliance

In 1950, the Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed, guaranteeing China's security through an alliance with the Soviet Union. However, this treaty was not an equal treaty. From the mid-1950s, China tried to establish equal relations with the Soviet Union. In 1958, Khrushchev proposed the construction of a China-Soviet joint fleet, which would have effectively put the Chinese navy under the control of the Soviet navy. An infuriated Mao Zedong rejected this proposal. Since the late 1950s, the Sino-Soviet treaty had become nominal. Then in 1969, military clashes occurred along Chinese-Soviet borders.

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China approached the United States and improved its relationship with the United States to counter the threat of the Soviet Union. But when the United States insisted on continuing the export of arms to Taiwan, the U.S.-China relationship deteriorated in 1981. In September 1982, China launched its independent foreign policy at the twelfth Congress of the Chinese Communist Party. China announced that China does not intend to rely on any big power or big power bloc and would instead develop relations with all countries based on the “five principles of peaceful coexistence.”

In September 1983, the U.S. Secretary of Defense Casper Willard Weinberger visited China and called on China for “strategic cooperation”. It was a call to take joint action against the Soviet Union. However, the Chinese side did not accept the U.S. call saying that China had adopted an independent foreign policy. While maintaining the relationship with the United States, China advanced negotiations with the Soviet Union to normalize relations. After long negotiations, in May 1989, Chinese-Soviet relations were finally normalized.

Yeltsin’s Proposal: The Establishment of the Chinese-Russian Partnership

The Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Then, the Russian Federation led by President Boris Nikolaevich Yeltsin was born. China and the new Russia were forced to establish new state-to-state relations. The Communist Party of the Soviet Union was no longer in power. At that time China had internally criticized Yeltsin for destroying socialism. But China, giving priority to the interest of the state, rebuilt its relationship with Russia based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence.

On December 17, 1992, Yeltsin visited China. The following day, on December 18, he met with Jiang Zemin and agreed to build good-neighborly relations regardless of ideology. At this time the Chinese-Russian Joint Statement on Mutual Relations stated that “the People’s Republic of China and Russia regard each other as friendly countries.”

This joint statement promised that both sides would not allow the use of force or the threat of force. This statement also promised not to enter into a treaty or agreement with a third country that would harm the sovereignty and security of the other party. Furthermore, this statement insisted that the border issue must be resolved through fair and reasonable negotiations. As to the military power deployed in the border area, both sides were required to reduce it to the lowest level appropriate for normal, good-neighborly relations.

Two years later in September 1994, Jiang visited Russia. This was a return visit for Yeltsin’s in December 1992. It was the first visit of a Chinese head of state to Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Prior to visiting Russia, Jiang told reporters in Beijing on August 31 that he would like to work with the Russian President and other leaders to build a relationship for good-neighborly relations and mutually beneficial cooperation in the approaching twenty-first century.¹

The Chinese-Russian joint statement signed by Jiang and Yeltsin in Moscow on September 3, 1994, confirmed that China and Russia already had a new type of constructive partnership. This was the first time the word “partnership” was used in a joint statement between China and Russia. In January

¹ *The People’s Daily*, September 1, 1994

1994, Yeltsin proposed in a letter to Jiang the establishment of a “constructive partnership” for the twenty-first century, and Jiang agreed to this proposal. As to the objective of the establishment of a “partnership,” Chinese Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen, at the press conference in Moscow on September 4, 1994, stated, “It is to stabilize Chinese-Russian relations based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence, not to oppose or make an alliance, nor will it be affected by the changing domestic situation in the two countries and international situation.”²

As already mentioned, Chinese-Soviet relations were normalized in 1989, China and the Soviet Union were trying to develop state-state relations and party-party relations. However, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union broke up and the Soviet Union itself was dismantled. Therefore, there was a need for rules to develop national relations without being influenced by internal and external circumstances. Along these lines, another important joint statement was issued during Jiang Zemin’s visit to Moscow in 1994. The two leaders stated that they would consider it their duty to abolish the use of force, in particular “no first use” of nuclear weapons. They both stated that they would not aim strategic nuclear weapons at each other from now on. Until that time, the Chinese and Russian armies both deployed nuclear missiles and aimed at targets in each other’s country.

From “Constructive Partnership” to “Strategic Partnership”

“Partnership” is originally a term in the business world. Two or more companies often establish a business partnership on equal footing. Sometimes they promote a joint venture. Companies do not have to be the same size but may be from different industries. According to Masaya Shiraishi, a professor from Waseda University, “partnership” has come to be used in the international arena since the 1990s with Russia taking the lead in using the word “partnership.” The earliest example of Russia applying “strategic partnership” to a concrete case was the U.S.-Russian joint declaration announced in January 1994 at the Yeltsin-Clinton summit meeting. The term “mature strategic partnership” appeared in this declaration. Shiraishi writes about the difficult situation which Russia had at that time:

Russia was facing the collapse of socialist countries in Europe and the dismantling of the Soviet Union itself in the post-cold war era. Russia was in a position to be strongly aware of the need to restructure and reorganize its relationships with countries that made up the former Soviet Union and eastern European countries as well as the West and neighboring countries.³

Shiraishi insists that “Strategic partnership is weaker than ‘alliance’, but much stronger than ordinary state-state relations. Both sides mutually respect ‘core interests’ and this partnership is complementary and equal. They want it to last for a long time. Strategic partnership is useful for countries that want to differentiate themselves from regular national relations.”⁴

² *The People’s Daily*, September 5, 1994.

³ Masaya Shiraishi, *Japan’s “Strategic Partnership” Diplomacy-An Overview of the Overall Picture [Nihon no “Senryakuteki Partnership” Gaikou-Zentaizou no Fukan]* (Waseda University: Tokyo, 2014), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.4.

Shiraishi considers “strategic partnership” not as strong as “alliance,” but as a precursor to “alliance,” in other words, as a subordinate concept of “alliance.” However, as mentioned above, China sees “partnership” as an opposition concept of “alliance.”

In January 1994, while “strategic partnership” was used between the United States and Russia, why was “constructive partnership” used in the Chinese-Russian joint statement in September 1994? At that time, Yeltsin was promoting pro-Western diplomacy. According to Yeltsin, it might have been recognized that the partnership with China had not reached the stage of using the word “strategic.”

In April 1996, two years after China and Russia agreed to build “constructive partnership,” the term “strategic partnership” was used in the Chinese-Russian joint statement. Just before visiting China, Yeltsin had an interview with a reporter from the Xinhua News Agency in the Kremlin. He still used the phrase “constructive partnership for the twenty-first century.”⁵ The draft of the Chinese-Russian statement prepared by both country’s Foreign Ministry officials also contained these words “to develop long term stability, good neighborhood, friendship, mutually beneficial cooperation, constructive partnership for the twenty-first century.” On the flight to Beijing, Yeltsin read this draft and criticized it saying: “There is no breakthrough.” He proposed to add “equality and trust, develop strategic partnership for the twenty-first century.” Jiang Zemin agreed to this addition.⁶ Therefore, the upgrade from “constructive partnership” to “strategic partnership” was Yeltsin’s suggestion.

Yeltsin met with Jiang Zemin on April 25 in Beijing. Yeltsin highly evaluated the relationship between Russia and China and stated that the strategic choices of the two countries were in line with the common interests of both countries in addition to saying that there was no problem between two big powers. He also pointed out that the present relationship was a strategic cooperation relationship with full equality and mutual trust. It could be seen that Yeltsin was very optimistic on the current situation and future of Russian-Chinese relations.

On the other hand, Jiang Zemin, after showing that Chinese-Russian relations were constantly strengthening, indicated that the new type of strategic cooperation partnership for the twenty-first century was the correct choice jointly made by China and Russia. Furthermore, Jiang added that this choice was completely in line with the long-term interests of the two peoples and also in line with the objective rule and requirements of post-cold war era international relations.

Efforts to Deepen “Partnership”

But upgrade of “partnership” did not mean that there was no problem to be solved in a hurry. Jiang reminded Yeltsin as follows: “We are negotiating the issue of reducing military power in border areas. China is not and will not pose a threat to Russia. Both delegations will quickly conclude an agreement on the reduction of military power.”⁷ After the Chinese-Russian summit in Beijing, Jiang and Yeltsin flew to Shanghai, and on April 26, 1996, an agreement was signed between China, Russia

⁵ *The People’s Daily*, April 23, 1996.

⁶ Qian Qichen, *Ten Stories of A Diplomat [Waijiao Shiji]* (World Affairs Press: Beijing, 2003), 240.

⁷ *The People’s Daily*, April 26, 1996.

and three Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) that promised to promote confidence building measures in the border areas. This agreement also promised that in the border areas they would not advance against each other and would not conduct military exercises. This agreement is called the “Shanghai Agreement,” because it was signed in Shanghai. The following year, on April 24, 1997, the leaders of China, Russia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan signed an additional agreement on the reduction of military power in the border areas (this agreement is later referred to as the Moscow Agreement). The main point of this agreement was that these five countries would reduce the border zone’s military power to a minimum level, limiting it to only defensive roles.

In the light of the successful results of these five-country summits, these five countries set up an organization called the “Shanghai Five” and decided to carry out ongoing activities. At the summit in Tajikistan in 2000, the security of the region was discussed and the participants achieved a common understanding of the dangers of the three evils (ethnic separatism, international terrorism and religious extremism).

As the Shanghai Five became more active, additional countries wanted to join. Uzbek President Islam Abduganievich Karimov attended the Tajikistan summit meeting with observer status. On June 15, 2001, five years after the formation of the Shanghai Five, the leaders of the Shanghai Five plus Uzbekistan gathered in Shanghai and decided to establish the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Shanghai seemed the logical place, as China was actively making efforts to establish this organization and other countries had no problem in recognizing the importance and visibility of Shanghai.

The declaration of the establishment of the SCO said that the SCO would strengthen mutual trust and good-neighborliness of member countries, and promote friendship and cooperation among member states in the fields of politics, economics, trade, science and technology, culture, education, energy, transportation, protection of the environment, etc. The declaration also advocated working together to promote peace, stability and security in the region. Judging from the contents of the declaration, it can be understood that the SCO was trying not only to oppose terrorism but to become an organization that aims for broad cooperation. At the establishment of the SCO, there is a well-known episode that the leaders of the six countries, including Jiang and Putin, made their first cooperative act the singing as a chorus and in Russian the 1955 classic “Evenings in the Suburbs of Moscow (*Podmoskovnye vechera*).”

Conclusion of Chinese-Russian Treaty of Good-neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation

In 1950 the Chinese-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance and Mutual Assistance was signed with an effective period of thirty years. But it had been nominal since the late 1950s. In 1979, China reported to the USSR that the treaty would not be extended. In 1980 it expired. Later, in 1989, Chinese-Soviet relations were normalized, but no new treaty was signed. This state of affairs was remedied one month after the formation of the SCO, when the Chinese-Russian treaty of Good-neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation was signed on July 16, 2001.

At the signing ceremony in the Kremlin, Jiang said that the new treaty was expressing the determination of both countries that they would forever become good neighbors, good partners and good friends. Jiang added that the new treaty, on the one hand, was sloughing off the cold war thinking, and, on the other hand, was also expressing a new type of international relations that sought security by mutual trust and sought cooperation by mutual reciprocity. So, Jiang evaluated Chinese-Russian relations as a new type of international relations. Putin said that both countries made an important choice in the mid-1990s and established the strategic partnership between the two countries. Putin added that the new treaty was one of the most important elements in promoting the strategic partnership.

In terms of the contents of the new treaty, Article 1 stipulates that both countries will develop “good-neighborhood, friendship, cooperation, equality and trust as well as strategic cooperation partnership” on a long-term basis. There are some interesting contrasts with the Stalin-Mao treaty. For example, in the 1950 treaty, a virtual enemy country was clearly stated: “Japan and any country in conspiracy with Japan.” However, Article 22 of the 2001 treaty states that “the treaty does not compete against any third country.” Therefore, the new treaty does not assume a virtual enemy.

But at the same time, Article 9 states, “when one of the parties recognizes that peace is threatened or there is a threat of aggression, both sides will immediately contact and discuss to remove the threat.” This is the so-called consultation clause. Thus, the new treaty also has the potential to advance military operations. In fact, whether China and Russia invoke this clause depends on the development of the international situation.

Concluding Remarks

As already pointed out, the term “Chinese-Russian partnership” was used by Yeltsin in 1994. However, Yeltsin, who emphasized the relationship with the West, used the term U.S.-Russian “mature strategic partnership.” For the relationship with China, he used the word “constructive partnership”, a somewhat lesser degree of partnership. But U.S.-Russian relations did not progress according to Yeltsin’s expectations. In 1996, Yeltsin proposed to China the future use of the term “strategic partnership for the twenty-first century.”

In Russia, Putin was elected President in 2000. Putin worked with Chinese leaders to build a close Russian-Chinese relationship. In May 2015, Xi Jinping visited Moscow to join the ceremony for the 70th anniversary of the Anti-Fascist War. According to the Chinese-Russian joint statement dated May 9, 2015, both countries have already established a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination.” Both leaders praised themselves for establishing a new model of international relations. They also regard the SCO as a model of a new type of international organization.

At that time Russia had been sanctioned by the international community on the Ukraine issue. On September 17, 2015, at a regular press conference at the Chinese Foreign Ministry, a reporter said that one Russian parliamentarian had recently expressed his view that economic sanctions against Russia would lead to the creation of a Russian-Chinese military alliance. The reporter asked the Foreign Ministry spokesman, “What do you think about this Russian parliamentarian’s comment?” The spokesman answered as follows: “Chinese-Russian comprehensive strategic partnership is based on

equality, trust, mutual support, joint prosperity, and long-term friendship, while maintaining a non-alliance policy. China is not thinking about competing with any third country.” He denied the possibility of an alliance with Russia.

Yang Chuang, Professor of the Foreign Affairs College, admits that the idea of a Chinese-Russian alliance has come up, and pointed out that this idea is based on “cold war thinking”—to oppose an alliance with an alliance. Yang Chuang said that China will not choose a military alliance with Russia if there is no fundamental reversal in the international situation.⁸ Yang Chuang added that “alliance politics” before World War One and World War Two piled up flammable material leading to international crises and incidents and finally the outbreak of world wars. This historical experience must be remembered. In the post-cold war period, the Chinese-Russian strategic partnership is superior to the old alliances. Yang Chuang’s perspective is not uncommon among Chinese researchers.

⁸ Yang Chuang, “Russia’s Foreign Policy Coordination in a Changing World,” [Bianhua Shijie Zhong De Eluosi Waijiao Zhengce Tiaozheng] in *Chinese-Russian Strategic Partnership Conversation: Present Problem. Proposal* [Zhonghe Zhanlue Huoban Duihua: Xianzhuang. Wenti. Jianyi] ed. Wang Qi (Central Translation Press: Beijing, 2014), 253–254.