



China-Russia Relations:

Guns and Games of August: Tales of Two Strategic Partners

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The third quarter of 2008 was quite eventful for Russia and China as well as their bilateral relationship. The 29th Summer Olympics in Beijing opened and concluded with extravaganza and a record 51 gold medals for China. Shortly before the opening ceremony on Aug. 8, Georgia's attacks against South Ossetia – a separatist region of Georgia – led to Russia's massive military response, a five-day war, and Russia's recognition of their independence. Thus, the August guns and games brought the two strategic partners back to the world stage. One consequence of the Georgian-Russian war is that China's "neutrality" is widely seen as a crisis in China's strategic partnership with Russia.

Beyond the Olympics, Ossetia, and chaos in world financial markets, Moscow and Beijing were able to move their relationship forward: an additional border agreement was signed to end the border disputes of the previous 400 years, bilateral energy talks at the deputy ministerial level were launched, long-stalled military sales started to show some sign of life as the two sides resumed discussions for the 38 *Il-76* and *Il-78* military cargo planes, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) managed to keep a delicate balance for both internal and external politicking while elevating its observers' status by creating so-called "Dialogue Partners," and 1,000 Chinese children from the earthquake-devastated areas – many more than the original proposed number of 50 by Medvedev when he visited China in late May – spent several weeks in Russia's resort areas.

China's "strategic ambiguity"

In the early morning of Aug. 8, 2008 when President Dmitri Medvedev was on vacation and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was in Beijing attending the Olympics Games, Georgia launched a military offensive to surround and capture Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. In the 14 hours before Russia's intervention, 1,700 were killed, including 12 Russian peacekeepers, and many parts of the region were devastated, according to Russia's account. Putin blamed Washington for Georgia's war saying "If what I presume turns out true, then there is a suspicion that there are forces in Washington that deliberately fueled the tensions in order to create an advantage to one of the presidential challengers." On Aug. 12, Medvedev and French President Nicolas Sarkozy reached a six-point plan for cease-fire. Vice President Dick Cheney visited Tblisi on Sept. 2-3 and offered \$1 billion in U.S. economic assistance to Georgia.

Putin, who was in Beijing for the Olympics opening ceremony, immediately informed the Chinese in his meeting with Premier Wen Jiabao on Aug. 8. China's immediate reaction, according to Putin, was that "nobody needs the war," which was also President George W. Bush's reaction. Meanwhile, China expressed serious concern over the escalated tensions and armed conflict in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and urged the relevant sides to exercise restraint, ceasefire immediately, and resolve their dispute peacefully through dialogue. An official *Xinhua* news analysis worried about the possible escalation and spread of the conflict in the region and beyond. The same analysis also directly quoted, without any reference, the sharply different views of Medvedev and Putin on the one hand and Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili and Bush on the other. In his meeting with Bush on Aug. 10, President Hu Jintao was indirectly quoted as saying that all sides to the conflict must demonstrate restraint, stop hostilities in the nearest future and sit down at the negotiating table to find a mutually acceptable solution. In a way, Beijing did not publicly and explicitly support Moscow.

A Chinese source pointed to the dilemma: "Russia and Georgia are countries with which China maintains diplomatic relations and friendly ties, hence it should hold a very cautious stance so as not to damage these relations." What the sources did not say is that Washington, too, is part of this list of "friendly" nations with whom China did not want to jeopardize relations. Strategic ambiguity, if not neutrality, is perhaps the only rational stance for Beijing. Moreover, because Washington has been Tblisi's strongest supporter, a more cautious approach to the still evolving situation is therefore needed.

There were some exceptions among China's carefully balanced posture of evenhandedness. One of them was China's decision to send \$1 million in humanitarian aid to South Ossetia, to which the Russians publicly expressed appreciation. Meanwhile, China's official ambiguity contrasted sharply to the critical views of Georgia and the U.S. in China's internet chat rooms, including those run by the official media outlets.

Six days after the Russian troops halted their military offensive on Aug. 12, the Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev arrived in Beijing for a "working visit." The situation in the Caucasus was discussed in his one-hour closed-door meeting with Chinese counterpart State Councilor Dai Bingguo. Very little, however, has been disclosed so far. Two days after the end of the Beijing Olympics and two days before the SCO's annual summit in Tajikistan, President Medvedev declared that Moscow recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Beijing's immediate official reaction was a news release by the official *Xinhua News Agency*, citing the negative reactions from various Western capitals (U.S., UK, France, Sweden, and Germany). Toward the end, this *Xinhua* news "round-up" noted "the two regions broke from central Georgian rule during wars in the early 1990s after the collapse of the former Soviet Union, but their self-proclaimed independence is not recognized internationally."

China did not immediately react to Moscow's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, with good reason as Presidents Hu and Medvedev were to meet the next day prior to the opening of the SCO's eight annual summit. During the meeting, Medvedev briefed Hu on Russia's stand and the situations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Hu said the Chinese had noted the latest changes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, hoping that the relevant parties would

appropriately resolve the problems through dialogue and consultations. Chinese media reported that in the meeting Hu stated:

At present, China-Russia strategic cooperative partnership maintains a good development impetus. Not long ago, both sides exchanged in-depth views on major issues related to China-Russia energy negotiating mechanism and energy cooperation, and *conducted explorations on the operation of the China-Russia strategic security consultation mechanism and the third round of consultations* [emphasis added]. The smooth operation of the aforesaid two mechanisms and other mechanisms between the two countries will increase both sides' political mutual trust, strengthen the two countries' strategic cooperation, and play an important role in upgrading the level of China-Russia strategic cooperative partnership.

It is unclear exactly how the two sides "explored" the "operation of the China-Russia strategic security consultation mechanism." The Patrushev-Dai talks on Aug. 18 in Beijing looked like a "strategic security consultation," but Chinese media never referred to the meeting as "the third round of consultations." What was clear from the Hu-Medvedev meeting in Dushanbe was Beijing's lack of unambiguous support of Moscow's policies toward South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

According to Chinese sources, the Russian Foreign Ministry presented a revised proposal for the Dushanbe Declaration, requesting that a statement be included on joint action on security and conflict prevention issues, but China did not agree to the proposal. Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang reiterated China's official position on Aug. 28 that "China assumes a principled position on analogous issues: all problems need to be resolved through dialogue and consultations." As a result, the Dushanbe Declaration adopted a posture of "neutrality" as its third clause states: "The member states of the SCO express their deep concern in connection with the recent tension around the issue of South Ossetia, and call on the relevant parties to resolve existing problems in a peaceful way through dialogue, to make efforts for reconciliation and facilitation of negotiations."

The same document reiterates:

In the 21st century interdependence of states has grown sharply, security and development are becoming inseparable. None of the modern international problems can be settled by force, the role of force factor in global and regional politics is diminishing objectively.

Reliance on a solution based solely on the use of force faces no prospects, it hinders comprehensive settlement of local conflicts; effective resolution of existing problems can be possible only with due regard for the interests of all parties, through their involvement in a process of negotiations, not through isolation. Attempts to strengthen one's own security to the prejudice of security of others do not assist the maintenance of global security and stability.

The participants of the Dushanbe meeting underline the need to respect historical and cultural traditions of every state and every people and the efforts aimed to preserve in accordance to international law unity and territorial integrity of states as well as to encourage good-neighbourly relations among peoples and their common development.

Aside from these familiar principles, the Declaration does contain a somewhat more comforting statement for Russia: “The member states of the SCO welcome the approval on 12 August 2008 in Moscow of the six principles of settling the conflict in South Ossetia, and support the active role of Russia in promoting peace and cooperation in the region.”

Russia’s story

SCO’s position, along with that of China, was at least a disappointment for Russia, despite the effort of the Russian leaders to explain it away. *Gazeta*, a Moscow daily, believed “the SCO has given Russia exactly the amount of support that corresponds to their interests in the international arena, without hurting their relationship with the United States and the European countries and without *seriously offending* [emphasis added] Moscow. The joint declaration the SCO members adopted at the summit in Dushanbe on 28 Aug. is a classic example of the art of diplomacy.” Separately, some Russian analysts equated the wording of the Dushanbe Declaration with the statements of many EU members after the Medvedev-Sarkozy plan was signed.

The SCO’s apparent neutrality, nonetheless, may not be a surprise for Moscow. Two days before the SCO summit, Russian political analyst Vyacheslav Nikonov argued that Russia should not expect China’s support in this issue. “China has domestic problems. This is not only Taiwan but also Xinjiang Uyghur Region and Tibet. This problem will be a barrier to approving Russia’s decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia.” For the same reason, “Russia cannot count on 100 percent support from the SCO but understanding of a considerable number of its members, or perhaps even all, is quite feasible. But there will be no formal support,” he said.

Meanwhile, a source in the Russian delegation to Dushanbe revealed that the SCO leaders orally expressed their approval of Moscow’s line, but in the Declaration they supported the principle of territorial integrity and opposed using force in interstate relations. President Hu was quoted as saying that he “understood the Russian position, but he explained that we’ll be unable to officially side with Moscow.” Later, the Kazakh president was quoted as apologizing for having failed to support Moscow due to different reasons.

To explain the discrepancies between SCO’s informal and formal positions, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explained in his press conference after the summit saying, “Russia didn’t seek to persuade its partners to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Unlike certain Western partners, we prefer that every country should make its mind without any external pressure.” Moscow knew about U.S. envoys’ visits to other states, where they “told them what to say regarding the problem.” “Such sort of boorishness is not inherent in our political tradition,” Lavrov told the journalists. In his address, President Medvedev was said to have even thanked his colleagues “for the understanding and the unbiased assessment of Russia’s peacekeeping role.” A week later, the Russian ambassador to Beijing expressed his “appreciation” for China’s “understanding” of Russia’s position. Vitaliy Tretyakov, dean of the Moscow State University Higher School of

Television, took a step further by claiming that the “silence” of China was in fact “recognition of Russia’s right to do what it did.”

In mid-September, Prime Minister Putin offered his own story. “This [China’s] position has absolutely not disappointed us. Moreover, we perfectly understand the People’s Republic of China’s foreign and home political priorities and do not want to put them in some uncomfortable situation,” Putin said in an interview. “We have openly told our Chinese partners about this. I said it myself while attending the Olympic opening ceremony in Beijing. We relieved them from this responsibility in Russian-Chinese relations before hand... In terms of international law, one country’s recognition is enough for the appearance of a new entity under international law.”

China’s “independent foreign policy”: beyond the Georgian-Russian conflict

The more Russia tries to clarify the situation, the less the West seems to believe it. For many, China’s cautious “neutrality” is a departure from, if not a betrayal of, its strategic partnership with Russia. Such a view misreads the state of the Sino-Russian relationship. Western perception of the Beijing-Moscow relationship seems to have swung from exaggerating its strength, or possible “threat” to the West, to one of overplaying their differences. Neither is right. Both focus on the superficiality while ignoring the substance. To begin with, the timing of the conflict was an irritant for Beijing. China did not like any war at the historical moment of hosting the Olympics, whether Russia was part of the conflict or not. Given the complexities of the ethnic conflicts dating back to the 1920s and the U.S. looming large in the background, China’s cautious reaction was expected, if not desirable for Moscow.

Since the outbreak of the conflict, several leading Chinese analysts observed that the Georgian-Russian conflict is in essence between the U.S. and Russia. While there was finger pointing between Moscow, Washington, and Tbilisi regarding who made the first move, it is inconceivable that a small Georgia would dare to take on its giant neighbor without explicit support from Washington. Indeed, Washington was not only aware of Georgian military actions before they started, it also explicitly sided with Tbilisi for the August surprise, which may have contributed to Saakashvili’s recklessness and miscalculation.

China’s “harmonious world” means stability of the existing international system, despite the fact that the West dominates the system. Indeed, China would like to see, as much as the West would, the stability and continuity of the existing international system, from which China has benefited enormously. Beijing has been on good terms with all three players in the crisis (Moscow, Washington, and Tbilisi) and does not want to take sides among the three. Doing so may please one side but inevitably at the expense of China’s relations with the others. Keeping amicable relations with all of them is perhaps the least harmful for China.

The abrupt switch of the Western perception of the Beijing-Moscow relationship from one of “threat” against the West to the premature celebration of its obituary is rooted in misreading the Beijing-Moscow strategic partnership, which is essentially a normal relationship without the mutually binding commitment in a typical military alliance. It is largely a pragmatic approach to “conduct strategic coordination without alliance and close relationship without excessive dependence” according to a Chinese analyst. Moreover, there is a willingness to develop the

more cooperative aspects of their relationship while managing those of disagreement and competition. Such a relationship, strategic or not, is the result of a long and sometimes painful learning experience in the second half of the 20th century – that bilateral relations between Moscow and Beijing oscillated between excessive dependence (particularly China on Russia) and almost zero interaction. Within this context, even if the Russians did not get all of what they wanted from China and the SCO summit in late August, this is far from the beginning of the end of their strategic partnership.

Much of this “normal” nature of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership also constitutes the reason behind the SCO’s “neutrality.” All of the SCO’s Central Asian states were former Soviet republics. Many, if not all of them do not want to see any slight replay of the Georgian-Russian conflict in their part of the world. That concern, however, remains a distant possibility, given that the SCO provides a framework for its members to resolve disputes and to achieve common purposes of security and development. The key to SCO’s stance toward the Georgia-Russian conflict, however, lies in the nature and structure of the regional security group. Far from becoming a military bloc like NATO in which members are obligated to defend one another, the SCO is a large and diverse community of nations. If its observer members are included, the SCO would consist of almost half of the world’s population, the three largest nations (Russia, China and India), and almost all major civilizations: Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Confucianism, all of which have become nuclear powers. Meanwhile, the SCO charter allows considerable space for individual members to pursue their own policies for their own interests. There is simply no obligation for SCO members to automatically commit themselves members of typical military alliances would. Given these reasons, Moscow perhaps never explicitly asked or demanded public support from the SCO members over the South Ossetian conflict.

Under these circumstances, the SCO’s Dushanbe Declaration may mean quite a lot for the Russians as it supports the “active role of Russia in promoting peace and cooperation in the region.” The member states of the SCO also “express their deep concern” over the tension around the issue of South Ossetia and call for peaceful means through dialogue for reconciliation and facilitation of negotiations. This can be seen as directed to both sides, particularly Georgia, which started the ball rolling on Aug. 8.

The expectations that Beijing and Moscow are heading toward some sort of “separation” is, therefore, an overstatement at best. It is also largely derived from the West’s own experience and practice, which insists on unity because of (or by, of, and for) uniformity. Hence, NATO members must be democracies and the EU must be European, Christian, and perhaps white. Applying the same “recipe” to the SCO and recent Sino-Russian relations, which have largely transcended the past practice of alliances, may lead to nowhere.

Last if not least, Beijing’s public “neutrality” toward the Georgia-Russian conflict should not be a surprise in that it has been the pattern in China’s diplomacy since the 1980s. In almost all cases ranging from international crises (Korea, Iran, Kashmir, etc.) to bilateral disputes (South China Sea with ASEAN, East China Sea with Japan, border settlements with Russia, Vietnam, India etc.), China has opted for dialogue and compromise, rather than confrontation or taking sides. The same operational principle has also applied to difficult issues such as Taiwan and Hong Kong, for which China negotiated with Britain for the ending of colonialism there in the 1980s.

In contrast, India, which is a democracy, used force to take Goa from Portugal in December 1961. Since the adoption of its “independent foreign policy” in 1982, China seldom judges others along the friend-foe fault line but according to a more pragmatic, independent, and case-by-case approach. Even with its allies such as North Korea, China will be critical of its neighbor’s policy if it is destabilizing. The Georgian-Russian crisis simply provides another chance for China to display the independent nature of its foreign policy.

It is still “Western civil war,” stupid!

Perhaps more than anything else, China’s caution regarding South Ossetia resulted from its deep concern regarding the possibility of the return of the Cold War, or the last stage of the “Western civil war” (William Lind cited by Samuel Huntington, 1993), which was said to have ended in 1991 when the Soviet Union collapsed. Although the Cold War did provide China with strategic opportunities, a new round of the Cold War may well mean uncertainties and create instabilities that serve no one’s interests.

“South Ossetia is a crisis with far reaching consequences,” declared veteran Chinese political commentator He Liangliang in early September. “It is, nonetheless, a crisis of the West, not one for China.” He argued that the root cause of the crisis was America’s relentless effort to squeeze Russia’s security space, which is necessary for any “normal” major power. Ever since Peter the Great, stated He, Russia has pursued an unrequited affection of joining Europe. Such sentimentality was particularly keen at the moment when Russia has largely recovered from its difficult transition from the wreckage of the Soviet Union. Western policies such as NATO expansion, “color revolution,” missile defense, among others, had created a Russia feeling betrayed and enraged. South Ossetia was, therefore, Russia’s strategic counter-move. Unfortunately, neither the Russian-speaking Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who majored in the Cold War history, nor German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who grew up in the Soviet-type system, seem to have understood this “West complex” of the Russians, argued He.

In retrospect, it is remarkable that just a few months ago the young President Medvedev was widely described and expected to be “liberal” and “pro-West.” In early June, Medvedev offered in Berlin his grand blueprint for a Euro-Atlantic community from Vancouver to Vladivostok. Within this community, Russia and Europe were said to share common roots, history, values, and thinking. A month later, the Russian president again talked of the “Medvedev doctrine” at the G8 summit in Japan. On the same day, however, Secretary Rice and the Czech Republic signed the missile defense agreement, to the dismay of Moscow.

Putin, too, began his presidency with an unambiguous Westpolitik (visiting Britain for his first foreign tour as Russian president, toyed with a “hypothetical” idea of Russia joining NATO, and “confessed” to the visiting U.S. Secretary of State Albright of his “European essence” and his Asian superficiality of practicing judo and eating Chinese food). Overtime, however, Putin became increasingly Euro-Asian, meaning moving away from a Euro-centric stance.

Even Boris Yeltsin, father of the Russian Federation, began with an obsession of Western style political democratization and economic “shock therapy.” Prior to his sudden exit from power at the end of 1999, Yeltsin chose Beijing to remind the West of Russia’s huge nuclear arsenal, in a

manner more like “a recidivist Soviet premier.” In between, the man who brought down the Soviet empire became progressively more disillusioned with the West.

Perhaps it is time for the West to reflect its current Ostpolitik (missile defense, NATO expansion, etc.), not necessarily only for West’s own interests, but also those of the Russians. The alternative, of course, is to stay the course in making Russia a “problem” for the 21st century. If this remains a possibility, China will be better off staying out. This “neutrality,” according to He Liangliang, is an indicator of China’s maturity, not a crisis, in its diplomacy.

Chronology of China-Russia Relations July-September 2008

July 9, 2008: President Hu Jintao and President Dmitry Medvedev meet in Toyako, Hokkaido, on the sidelines of the G8 summit. The two agree to promote bilateral strategic and cooperative partnership, and express their determination to give priority to the development of a long-term and steady partnership.

July 17, 2008: One hundred Chinese children affected by a devastating earthquake in Sichuan Province arrive in the Kemerovo region to spend three weeks in a regional children recreation center. A total of 1,000 Chinese children from the quake area would go to Russian resorts during the third quarter.

July 21-22, 2008: Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov visits China and signs with his counterpart Yang Jiechi the “Additional Protocol-Description of the Line of the Russian-Chinese State Border in its Eastern Part,” which means the territorial issue between Russia and China has been finally resolved after 40 years of negotiations. In Beijing, Lavrov also meets President Hu Jintao.

July 25, 2008: Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Council of the Foreign Ministers meets in Dushanbe, Tajikistan to finalize documents for the annual SCO summit, including the drafts of the Dushanbe Declaration, a new mechanism for the SCO to interface with “dialogue partners,” an agreement to establish an expert group for the development of criteria of adopting new members, and an agreement on fighting terrorism and illegal circulation of arms.

July 26-7, 2008: Vice Premier Igor Sechin visits China to launch a new mechanism of China-Russia energy negotiations. Sechin meets Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, Vice Premier Wang Qishan and managers of the China National Petrochemical Corporation and the China Nuclear Industry Corporation.

Aug. 7-8, 2008: In response to Georgian attacks on Ossetian separatists, Russian troops invade and occupy South Ossetia and from there launch attacks into Georgia proper.

Aug. 7-9, 2008: Prime Minister Putin visits Beijing. In addition to attending the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, Putin holds “informal talks” with President Hu, Premier Wen, and former President Jiang Zemin.

Aug. 17-18, 2008: Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev visits Beijing and meets State Councilor Dai Bingguo to discuss bilateral, regional, and international issues including the situation in the Caucasus.

Aug. 27, 2008: Presidents Medvedev and Hu meet on the sideline of the SCO summit in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. They discuss the situations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Aug. 28, 2008: The 8th annual SCO summit is held in Dushanbe. Russia assumes chairmanship until the next session of the Council of SCO Heads of State in Yekaterinburg, Russia in 2009.

Aug. 28, 2008: Deputy Foreign Minister Alexei Borodavkin meets Chinese Ambassador to Russia Liu Guchang and informs Liu about Russia's decision to recognize independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Sept. 3-4, 2008: The SCO conducts the 2nd phase of the “*Volgograd Anti-Terror 2008*” antiterrorist exercise in Russia's Volgograd. The goal is to practice teamwork between the units from each SCO member state.

Sept. 11, 2008: SCO's Business Council holds a session in the East-Siberian city of Irkutsk chaired by Dmitry Mezentsev, the Council's president. The participants discuss issues of setting up a SCO energy club, public health, insurance, and social security of population of the member-states, as well as a SCO university.

Sept. 25, 2008: Vice Premier Wang Qishan separately meets in Beijing chiefs of the delegations to the first SCO Economic and Trade Ministerial Meeting. Wang propose three principles for promoting regional economic cooperation: promoting investment and trade facilitation in a down-to-earth manner, building networks to promote economic convergence, and encouraging enterprises to carry out exchanges and strengthen cooperation in pooling capital.

Sept. 27, 2008: Foreign Minister Yang meets Foreign Minister Lavrov in New York City during the 63rd UN General Assembly. The two discussed bilateral, regional and global issues.