An article in a 1993 issue of Asian Survey argued that the post–Cold War Sino-Russian relationship represented nothing less than a “modern, Eastern version of Rapallo”—the treaty between the Soviet Union and Germany in the 1920s that “symbolized a pact between two continental powers united by their real or imagined grievances against the West.”\(^1\) Although this assertion overstates the strength of the current relationship between China and Russia, future Sino-Russian strategic cooperation aimed at undermining U.S. influence and power cannot be ruled out. It is worth American policymakers’ consideration if for no other reason than that the United States will play a large role in determining whether it becomes a reality. Assuming they are able to effectively manage the tension inherent in their bilateral relationship, Beijing and Moscow will raise or lower their level of strategic cooperation roughly according to the extent they believe U.S. power and influence threaten their political, economic, and security interests.

Two U.S. actions, in particular, would push China toward greater strategic cooperation with Russia: the imposition of restrictions on Chinese access to the American technology, capital, and export markets it needs to continue its economic modernization, and the effective recognition and defense of Taiwanese independence. The United States and China normalized relations in the 1970s on the

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understanding that the United States would not promote or support
Taiwanese independence or stand in the way of a peaceful unification
of Taiwan with the Mainland. Taking actions that Beijing be-
lieves contradicts this understanding on Taiwan or denying China
access to the above-mentioned economic resources would effectively
eliminate the foundation of China’s current policy toward the United
States. At the very least, Chinese leaders could conclude that there is
no longer a compelling reason to try to maintain constructive rela-
tions. Many in China would undoubtedly take these kinds of actions
as final proof of the U.S. irrevocable opposition to a united and pros-
perous China. Closer cooperation with Russia and other willing
countries could then be justified, in Beijing’s eyes, as necessary to
defend China’s economic and security interests from an aggressive
and hostile American power.

China and Russia need not form an actual alliance for their relation-
ship to cause problems for the United States in a number of interna-
tional settings. The two countries could complicate U.S. policy in the
Persian Gulf by increasing the quantity or quality of weapons sales to
countries like Iran, or even Iraq. Of course, this can be done without
any overt cooperation between Moscow and Beijing. China and
Russia might find common cause in opposing U.S. influence in the
Korean Peninsula. This would require closer diplomatic and strate-
gic cooperation, but not necessarily an alliance in the formal political
and military sense. The two countries can also share intelligence.
Access to Russian intelligence resources could be very useful to Bei-
jing during a crisis centered on Taiwan to follow the U.S. defense
posture in the region before and during the crisis.

China and Russia can also work to generally undermine U.S. estab-
lished international norms by opposing American initiatives in the
United Nations, or developing economic relationships that bypass or
ignore the World Trade Organization and other international eco-
nomic regimes. They can also provide weapons and financial assis-
tance to countries that are the object of punitive U.S. sanctions, like
North Korea, Iraq, or Cuba. The threat this kind of behavior poses to
U.S. interests should not be overstated. What Russia and China can
do to undermine U.S. global power is limited by their own political
and economic shortcomings. Nonetheless, over time China and
Russia could emerge as the foundation of a broad coalition of states
that believe they will benefit by the diminution of U.S. power and influence.

There are significant obstacles to close Sino-Russian strategic cooperation over the long term. There is widespread dissatisfaction in the Russian Far East (RFE) with the 1991 border arrangement.2 (Refer to Figure 8.) The head of the Russian demarcation group for the eastern section of the border resigned in 1996, arguing that ceding territory to China was counter to Russia’s national interests.3 Alexander Lebed, a figure of national prominence, echoed this theme at a press conference in 1997.4 Russian officials in the RFE also warn that the new border demarcation will allow China to construct a major new port facility on the Tumen River that will undermine the economic viability of the Russian ports of Vladivostok and Nakhodka.5 These security and economic criticisms derive added emotional weight from claims that the border agreement requires Russia to transfer land that holds the remains of “tens of thousands” of Russian soldiers who died “defending the motherland” in border clashes with Japanese forces in 1938.6

Local leaders in the RFE have been quick to exploit these issues to bolster opposition to the border agreement, and in turn strengthen their own political positions. Yevgeny Nazdratenko, the “unsinkable” governor of Maritime Territory, is the clearest example of this. Nazdratenko won 70 percent of the vote in a December 1995 election by playing on local fears of China and disgust with officials in Moscow. He focused in particular on local Russians’ fears of illegal Chinese immigration and the adverse impact the 1991 border agreement had on the economy.

2The Russian Far East consists of the Primorski (Maritime) and Khabarovsk regions, the Sakha-Yakutia Autonomous Republic, and the Amur, Magadan, and Sakhalin provinces. It extends geographically from Russia’s Pacific coast to roughly the Lake Baikal region.


6Ibid.
agreement will have on Maritime Territory’s economic prospects. Nazdratenko swore that he will not allow the border agreement to be implemented as long as he is governor.

To be sure, Nazdratenko’s rhetoric is largely populist bluster that, as yet, has only marginally affected Russia’s official relationship with China. Nonetheless, in 1996 he was enough of a concern to Moscow that Yeltsin’s government attempted (and failed) to have him re-
moved from office.\textsuperscript{7} In that same year, then-Russian Foreign Minis-
ter Yevgeny Primakov described the border agreement as “vital” to
Russia’s relationship with China and warned, rather vaguely, that “if
localities do not give up their interests, the fate of the Russian-
Chinese border agreement . . . will become a problem.”\textsuperscript{8} Again, local
resentment toward the Chinese has yet to have a significant impact
on the overall Sino-Russian relationship. However, over the longer
term it could limit or at least complicate official relations between
Beijing and Moscow.

Nazdratenko’s exploitation of local Russian fears of illegal Chinese
immigration is the product, to some degree, of real demographic
pressures on Sino-Russian relations. Eight million Russians living in
the RFE face roughly 100 million Chinese in the PRC’s neighboring
regions to the south.\textsuperscript{9} In Russia’s Maritime Territory these pressures
are even more acute, with the 2.3 million Russian residents con-
fronting more than 70 million Chinese in neighboring Heilongjiang
and Jilin provinces. The net outmigration of almost 500,000 Russian
citizens from the RFE since 1991 has only heightened Russian con-
cerns over the demographic imbalance. The two countries tightened
their visa regime in 1993 to reverse the growth of the Chinese illegal
population in the region, estimated to range anywhere from 200,000
to over two million in 1992. The new visa arrangements did reduce
the number of Chinese illegally living in the Russian Far East, but at
the expense of dramatically reduced border trade with China.\textsuperscript{10} Even
with the new visa regime, Russian anxiety and suspicion stemming
from demographic pressures will play a complicating role in Sino-
Russian relations for years to come.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{7}Current Digest of Post-Soviet Press, “Nezavisimaya Gazeta Makes Nazdratenko’s Case
Against Border Secession to China,” October 30, 1996, downloaded from Lexis-Nexis.
\textsuperscript{8}Xinhua, “Primakov Stresses Border Agreement,” Beijing, August 5, 1997, cited in
World News Connection, insert date: August 6, 1997, document id: 0eeihbr03atk16.
\textsuperscript{9}This figure represents the combined population of China’s Northeastern Provinces:
Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning. Although the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region
borders Russia, the bulk of its population lies much further to the southwest, along the
Sino-Mongolian border.
\textsuperscript{10}Moltz, 1995, p. 121.
\textsuperscript{11}These demographic issues are discussed in more detail in Sherman Garnett, “The
Russian Far East as a Factor in Russian-Chinese Relations,” SAIS Review, Summer-Fall
1996.
Central Asia is a potential object of contention between China and Russia. Whether Russia takes measures to counter China’s growing influence in Central Asia has been described by some analysts as “one of the great uncertainties of the region.”\textsuperscript{12} Other observers of the region are less equivocal, contending that Central Asia’s natural resources and important geographical position will “unavoidably cause it to become contested territory” between China and Russia.\textsuperscript{13}

China’s official policy toward the region appears to be conservative—to promote regional stability and expand economic ties. In a speech to the Russian Duma in 1997, Jiang Zemin declared that China and Russia will work to uphold the other’s “national dignity” and safeguard their “respective due status and legitimate rights and interests in the international arena.”\textsuperscript{14} Such rhetoric implies that Beijing is not seeking to displace Russian influence in Central Asia. This probably reflects actual Chinese sentiment on the issue. As long as Russia is a force for stability and works against the growth of radical Islamic or Pan-Turkic elements in the region, there is little reason for China to oppose its continuing influence there.

This approach toward Russia’s presence in Central Asia will change if instability emerges in the region that is beyond the ability of Russia or the Central Asian states to control and has an adverse impact on Xinjiang’s stability. This would create a much greater incentive for Beijing to support particular governments in the region with arms or financial assistance. It would also prompt a greater Chinese military presence on the Sino-Central Asian border as Beijing attempts to control the flow of destabilizing elements into the XUAR.

Regardless of Chinese declarations of concern for Russia’s “national dignity” and perhaps genuine satisfaction with the status quo regarding Russia’s influence in Central Asia, China’s policy of expanding economic links with the countries of the region is effectively under-


\textsuperscript{14}Xinhua, “Text of Jiang Speech to Duma,” appearing in World News Connection, insert date: April 25, 1997, document id: 0e97qqk02rrq91.
mining Moscow's influence there. The reality of the Chinese economic boom and the Russian economic bust is causing a shift in the economic orientation of sections of the Central Asian region from the north to the east. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this process is that it is occurring independent of intentions or desires in Beijing or Moscow. As long as China maintains its open economic policies toward Central Asia and its economy continues to grow, it will inevitably become more important to many areas of Central Asia than is Russia.

Russian leaders are not likely to quietly watch as China gradually but inexorably displaces the influence their country developed in Central Asia over the last 150 years. Russian suspicions of China's expanding presence in Central Asia are already evident. A nationalist Russian paper warned that Li Peng's 1994 tour of Central Asia represented nothing less than "pre-battle reconnaissance" of a region China covets as part of its own traditional sphere of influence.15 For the foreseeable future, China will develop significant economic and political influence only in those areas of Central Asia that lie along or near its western border. However, even this marks the most dramatic change in the region's strategic and economic alignment since the Russian conquests of the 18th and 19th centuries.

China is not the sole outside variable in the Central Asian equation. Other countries, such as Turkey and Iran, are economically and politically active in the region. However, because of its dramatic economic growth, China's role in undermining Russia's dominant position will be the most noticeable at the earliest date. This probably will not lead to military conflict, but it will increase friction in the overall Sino-Russian relationship.

The People's Republic of Mongolia (PRM) is a potential source of tension between Beijing and Moscow. Mongolia shares complicated histories with both Russia and China. It was a satellite of the Soviet Union for the better part of this century. China is home to almost five million ethnic Mongols (roughly twice the population of Mongolia itself) and harbors some concern that the PRM will assist the fledgling independence movement in its Inner Mongolia Au-

As in Central Asia, the issue here is how Russia will react to the expansion of Chinese influence into an area that, until recently, was within Russia’s exclusive sphere of influence.

The most fundamental challenge to China’s relationship with Russia over the long term is the growing difference in the two countries’ relative national power. During the 1990s, China’s economy grew rapidly whereas Russia’s contracted. This trend underlies the enormous reversal in balance of power that is taking place in Northeast and Central Asia. Provided China sustains its strong rate of economic growth, Russia will be hard-pressed to maintain anything more than junior-partner status in any kind of close Sino-Russian relationship. “Strategic partnership” notwithstanding, Moscow has to deal with Beijing on a wide range of issues, some potentially contentious, that invariably arise between two countries who share a long border. As Sherman Garnett explains, in ten years’ time “Russia is likely to discover that it can no longer manage an equal partnership with China.” While avoiding conflict will remain in both sides’ interests, “Russia will likely face a choice between the increasingly close embrace of a more dynamic China and attempting to find regional and global partners to help balance Chinese influence.”

Prospects for an enduring Sino-Russian strategic relationship aimed against U.S. influence and power are also weakened by the fact that most issues of concern to Moscow and Beijing regarding U.S. power do not directly involve the other country. Russia is unhappy with the expansion of NATO and the growing role of the United States in the Caucasus and Central Asia. China is displeased with U.S. actions regarding Taiwan’s political status and the strengthening of the U.S.-Japanese security agreement. Each country lends rhetorical support to the other’s case against the United States. However, neither country is willing or able to offer substantive assistance that might help the other. Furthermore, even if China could have an impact on the expansion of NATO, it does not have a sufficient interest in the issue to risk open conflict with the United States. The same could be said

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of Russia's interest in the Taiwan issue. It is worth pointing out that the most immediate common concern in Moscow and Beijing—preventing the rise of radical Islamic forces in Central Asia—is also one of the primary U.S. policy goals for the region.

Like a formal Sino-Russian alliance, a stark Sino-Russian conflict in the near future is possible, but not terribly likely. Even if China's relations with the United States and the other countries to the east and southeast improve dramatically over the next ten to fifteen years, China will continue to have compelling reasons for maintaining stable relations with Russia and the countries of Central Asia. As noted earlier, Russia has the potential to become an important source of energy resources for China. More generally, China will continue to have a strong interest in maintaining a stable region in order to focus on economic development.