



Dmitri Trenin

Vitali Tsygichko

WHAT IS CHINA TO RUSSIA: *COMRADE OR MASTER?*

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: More menace than challenge

Good day, Dmitri,

There is one urgent question that has descended from the realm of high theory to the sphere of practical policy. I am very worried about it, and would like to pose it as a topic for discussion with you in our electronic correspondence, although it is certainly not a new topic for you.

Here is the question: recently, observing the behavior of our southern neighbor—China—I have to conclude that it is returning to its imperial traditions ever more and acting accordingly. Today the Celestial Empire, with its powerful, dynamically developing economy as well as the most numerous army in the world, is a center of power, attempting to strengthen and enlarge its influence not only in the Asia-Pacific, but also far beyond its limits. Moreover, relying on historical tradition, the new Middle Kingdom is shunning no means to achieve its hegemonic aims and is acting more and more brazenly.

And I say without reservation: in my view, the openly hegemonic direction that Chinese foreign policy has taken poses a direct threat—or, to be more precise, an entire collection of threats and challenges—to Russian interests in the Asia-Pacific region.

What conclusions should Russia draw, and how should it correct its foreign policy?

Sincerely,
Vitali Tsygichko

From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: Soft power

Hello, Vitali,

Speaking of threats and challenges, it seems to me that you are describing everything in unjustifiably gloomy tones.

Yes, China is a growing center of power at the global level. In the distant future (mid-century) China may become the world's largest economy. The increase in China's economic weight will be accompanied by an increase in its political influence. China's military power—both conventional and nuclear—will continue to be improved. At the same time, China's *soft power* will continue to grow, based on its growing attractiveness and its ability to influence the desires



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and behavior of other countries. Figuratively speaking, *without leaving its shores*, China will gradually *twist* its surrounding *space*, forcing other countries and peoples to orient themselves toward the Middle Kingdom.

But China is not going to be like the Soviet Union or Japan of the 1930s. Its expansion will not be predominantly territorial in nature, and basically will not be achieved by military means. The Chinese *divisions* will be transnational corporations with their headquarters in Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, and so forth. PRC military aggression against Russia is extremely improbable in the foreseeable future (let us say, 15-20 years). "Shunning no means" and "acting brazenly" cannot be said about 21st century China, which, on the contrary, is acting scrupulously and prudently.

Yours,
Dmitri Trenin

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: Military games

Dmitri,

I cannot agree with your idea that China's "expansion will not be predominantly territorial in nature, and basically will not be achieved by military means."

That China is acting scrupulously and prudently is true. It is for this very reason that it is important for us to understand why, in September 2006, it conducted a 10-day Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) exercise that was unprecedented in scale, involving the Shenyang and Beijing military districts, the two most powerful of the seven Chinese districts. These are the very regions that border on Russia: Shenyang abuts the Russian Armed Forces' Far Eastern district, and Beijing the Siberian military district. During the exercises, Shenyang units advanced 1,000 km into the Beijing district, where they combated units from the latter. As is clear to any military expert, the exercises were practicing the conduct of an offensive operation against Russia and Kazakhstan. In practice, a troop exercise of such great scale is generally conducted to check strategic concepts that have already been developed as well as operational plans that have been adopted by the military.

But these exercises were undertaken during a period when our political and economic ties were at their highest point! Such a frank show of force should have clearly said to our country's leaders that China is ready to unleash a war against Russia if its policies do not meet Chinese interests. It is strange that neither the political nor the military leadership of our country reacted in any way to this military demarche.

Vitali Tsygichko

From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: Look inside

Vitali,

I am confident that the Russian military is attentively studying the scenarios of the Chinese exercises. I do not believe that your conclusion about the aims of the exercises that were carried out is substantiated. It would seem that you yourself are puzzled by your conclusion, since you immediately write that the exercises were conducted during a time, "when our political and economic ties were at their highest point." If your conclusion is valid, then one of the following two things is true: either Beijing, acting so illogically, simply undermined its own long-term strategy, or the PLA leadership acted independently of the leadership of the PRC. Otherwise, your conclusion is not valid, and a more in-depth analysis is necessary.

However, if we develop your thought about the Chinese threat, then we should concentrate on the development of Russia itself or, more precisely, of our eastern territories. The development of the Far Eastern and Eastern Siberian districts and their dual integration—into Russia as well as the Asia Pacific region—is one of the most important geopolitical problems facing Russia today. The solution to this problem, however, depends on Russians themselves—the political leaders, businessmen, federal and regional elites, as well as, in the end, the public. If Russia loses the Far East and Siberia (and China takes them), it will happen not because of Chinese expansion, but because of Russia's inability to develop. I hope that this it will not occur. Russia has an officially acknowledged and completely agreed-upon border with China. The Russians themselves, and no one else, answer for what happens inside these borders. Russia's "Chinese problem" is located inside them.

Yours,
DT

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: Check the textbooks

You see, Dmitri, if it is impossible to change the current negative trends of social and economic development in the Russian Far East, then as a result of Chinese demographic and economic expansion this territory may become its protectorate. Under certain circumstances we cannot exclude the possible annexation of a number of regions in the Russian Far East, possibly with the aid of military force, since official Beijing considers these territories to be temporarily "alienated" and historically belonging to it. You can even judge these Chinese territorial claims by looking at *school geography textbooks, where a number of Russian Far Eastern regions are included within the country's borders.*

A key concept that Chinese theorists use to understand the development of the world today is the idea of "survival space," which, in my opinion, is used to ensure security and the state's vital activities, as well as its scientific, technical, and economic development. The so-called "strategic boundaries" of this space are the territorial and spatial borders within which the state, with the aid of the military, is realistically capable of protecting its interests.

The "survival space" includes all spheres of the state's vital activities, on land, at sea, under water, in the air, and in space. The dimensions of "survival space" are determined by a country's economic, scientific, technical, social, and military capabilities (the "total power" of the state). According to Chinese theorists, the strategic boundaries of the "survival space" of strong powers extend far beyond their state borders, while the "survival space" of many weak countries has strategic boundaries that do not always correspond to the "total power" of these states, which can sometimes lead to weak countries losing some of their territory. In their opinion, a majority of countries today are striving to establish new strategic boundaries for their "survival space" that correspond to the state's real power. Hence, it follows that China must enlarge its "survival space" in accordance with its growing economic and military power at the expense of weaker neighbors, including Russia.

This theory, which justifies using force to solve international problems, became the basis for Chinese foreign policy long ago and has been completely confirmed by recent events. China has territorial claims against 11 of its 24 neighbors, including India, Japan, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Russia, and is trying to annex territories that it considers disputed, including by force.

Military force was and remains the most important political factor, and, as recent history shows, China is actively making use of this factor in its relations with all of its neighbors.

Now I'd like to go back to my previous e-mail about the PLA exercises. In China these sorts of events can only happen through a decision of the country's highest leadership, which completely governs the military and sets military policy and military strategy. Therefore I cannot agree with you regarding political and military analyses of the strategic exercises undertaken by the Chinese army.



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Any military expert knows that exercises on this scale are undertaken at the final stage of a multi-year program to train troops to enact strategic and operational plans in the military theater of operations. The geography of these exercises and the offensive nature of the tasks undertaken leave no doubts that Russia played the role of the “potential adversary.”

A show of force is an ancient, traditional Chinese political method. It is clear that the exercises were a well thought out, and primarily political action, giving us to understand what “potential adversary” Russia will have to deal with, what the strategic plans of this adversary will be if relations turn sour, and how it should treat China.

To conclude, I have to say that the Sino-Russian border agreement in no way guarantees our security in the Far East. Chinese political practice indicates that it will easily violate any agreement that does not suit it for one reason or another. In the second place, the border agreement is strictly classified and it is not known to the general public. Meanwhile, a number of serious American publications asserts that this agreement was concluded for a period of just 20 years, after which time the parties must return to negotiations on this question. The fact that the text of the agreement has been held secret speaks in favor of this assertion.

Vitali T.

From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: Thorough research

Vitali,

The formulation of Chinese foreign policy is a far more complex and contradictory process. You give your reading of the concepts proposed by Chinese theorists. Maybe it is close to the truth, but whether it is or not can only be established after serious analysis and comparison of these texts with real life. Furthermore, one must take into account the fact that the policies of any modern state are not simply based on theoretical constructs. *From without* any policy will appear more logical and more complete—and sometimes more ominous—than it really is. On the contrary, one’s own policy seems less focused, more eclectic, and frequently weaker than it appears from outside.

As far as the secret agreement is concerned, it is very hard for me to imagine a Russian president who would conclude a clearly unfavorable, secret *agreement that is also only valid for 20 years. In principle, when the moment of truth comes* it should still be welcomed. It is hard to imagine what could induce the head of the Russian state to agree to such a massive surrender of fundamental national interests. Moreover, from your reasoning it follows logically that there is no special need for such complex and secret constructions: “the Chinese easily violate any agreement.”

I object to automatically interpreting the vagueness that exists as evidence of the existence of a Chinese threat. China is a topic that is too serious for Russia for it to be discussed in a wholly complimentary spirit or, on the contrary, with a predetermined *incriminatory bias*. But it absolutely must be discussed—on this, I think, we are in agreement. In my opinion, China should neither be thoughtlessly admired because of its new power nor instinctively feared. It requires attentive and thorough study. Otherwise errors are inevitable.

DT

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: Russia is being used

OK, then let’s examine this question attentively and thoroughly.

Russia has an important place in the Chinese geopolitical game, and Beijing is doing everything possible to ensure that our country remains in its sphere of influence. First of all, Russia is extremely important for China as an economic partner: as a supplier of the energy resources

needed to continue the country's economic modernization, and as a supplier of modern weaponry for its army. Therefore, the Chinese will do everything possible to strengthen their economic and political position in our country. The enormous activity of the Chinese lobby in Russia, which is operating successfully at all levels of government, testifies to this.

Sino-Russian cooperation today is developing rapidly in the economic, political, military, and other spheres. It goes without saying that the development of good-neighbor, mutually advantageous relations between our countries can only be welcomed. However, the current trend and the content of these relations must be based not on the immediate political situation, as it is now, but on a clear understanding of our long-term national interests and a sober analysis of the far-reaching aims of current Chinese policy, taking into account its geopolitical ambitions, for which it is actively using Russia.

Vitali

From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: Re: Russia is being used

I support the call to recognize Russia's long-term interests and the formation of policy on this basis, not on the basis of the immediate political situation. At the same time, foreign policy everywhere has always reflected the concrete interests of ruling elites (with corrections to make them democratically legitimate—where democracy exists), their world view and prejudices. Russian foreign policy is determined and will be determined by concrete—and partially competing—interest groups with various ideologies and prejudices. The rapprochement with China has a material basis, which cannot be ignored.

For China, Russia is a strategic rear and an enormous resource base. It is natural that China try to keep Russia in its field of "amicable gravitational pull" and to increase its access to various Russian resources—from natural resources (energy and ecological) to technological resources (weapons and space). Chinese influence on Russian decisionmaking, first and foremost on questions related to cooperation with the PRC, exists, but there is no "Chinese lobby in Russia, which is operating successfully at all levels of government," although, of course, over time it could arise.

Yours,

DT

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: What about Russia's interests?

I am also greatly worried by the clearly observable Chinese influence over our foreign policy of late, which is pushing an anti-American and anti-Western bent. This is clearly against basic Russian national interests.

China, in trying to turn our country into its "strategic rear and resource base," will never be interested in our economic and political development. Therefore, the present eastern focus of our policy helps, using your terminology, to "twist space" in the interest of China, but not in the basic interest of our country.

I would also like to mention the important tool of Chinese regional policy that is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China needs this organization, first of all, to strengthen its influence in the region and its control over the region's natural resources. As the strongest regional power, China would like to predominate in this organization and use it in its own interests to the maximum extent possible (which the Chinese proposal to completely fund all SCO energy projects alone indicates. In addition, this organization helps to ensure freer access of Chinese goods to the markets of SCO countries). It does not have to worry about its own market, as it has no competitors. Only Russia is a serious competitor to China within the SCO



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framework, as the former is seriously trying to prevent the attempt of the latter to dominate the organization.

No one threatens China's land borders. China can solve its domestic problems, such as separatism, by itself. In other words, the country is self-sufficient militarily, and only needs military cooperation under the SCO framework in order to free its hands if any conflict should arise that affects its interests in the region.

In the near future these circumstances may already be the source of serious conflicts, given the clear differences in the economic and political interests of Russia and China. The current problems between the region's countries over energy supplies disagreements within the SCO, and many other problems are obviously only the beginning of growing contradictions. It is clear that the Chinese understand this well and are prepared for a similar turn of events, in the military sphere as well.

V. Tsygichko

From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: Our own choice

Vitali,

The evolution of Russian foreign policy is a separate topic of conversation. Russia's "withdrawal" from the western orbit, moderate (thus far) anti-Americanism, and political rapprochement with and even formation of a bloc together with the PRC (for example, in the U.N.), are facts that are determined by the Kremlin's new course of action in the international arena. They are, however, the result of a conscious choice made by the Russian leadership, and not the result of a "Chinese attack."

Of course, the Chinese leadership considers rapprochement between Russia and the United States to be extremely undesirable, as it would make Russia an instrument of U.S. policy with respect to China. Nor would Beijing welcome a Russian rapprochement with Japan, if it is to the detriment of Chinese interests (for example, in the area of energy security).

I agree that the SCO can primarily be viewed as "China in Central Asia." With the help of the SCO, Beijing obtained the possibility of developing relations with five former Soviet republics without irritating Moscow. Russia, for its part, obtained the option of "watching over" the development of these relations and from time to time influencing them. For China, the initiative to create the SCO was a sign of the activation of foreign policy, which until the mid-1990s had remained fairly passive. For Beijing, the creation of the SCO also meant the formation of favorable external conditions for the stabilization of the situation in Xinjiang (which was traditionally called West Turkestan), as well as access to alternative energy supplies.

The SCO is a positive addition to regional security. First, because of the fact that its informal cochairmen are the PRC and Russia; second, because its members have come to include all of the Central Asian states, with exception of Turkmenistan; third, because states like India, Pakistan, Iran, as well as Mongolia participate in SCO work as observers. There is also the SCO-Afghanistan channel. The main areas of SCO activity—security and development—logically result from the approach of obtaining security *through* development. Here Moscow and Beijing are secretly in competition within the SCO framework. Russia does not want to allow the Chinese to get into traditional security issues (*bases-alliances-exercises-weapons*), but at the same time is jealous of Beijing's attempt to transfer the center of gravity to development issues (*credit-trade-investment*). The solution may be the division of spheres of responsibility, but Moscow, apparently, considers Central Asia to be a region where Russian interests must remain predominant in all fundamental areas.

D. Trenin

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: Bad model

Dmitri,

In my opinion, Beijing has a lot of different plans. Its political plan is to try not to allow a rapprochement between Russia and the United States, Japan, and other western democracies, which would be able to prevent its plans for regional hegemony. That is why it is afraid of democratization in our country and is intensively pushing its own authoritarian political model on our political elite—successfully to date, unfortunately.

There are many propagandistic Chinese slogans that have now firmly entered into the lexicon of Russian politicians. This includes the “special Russian path towards democracy,” “Russian society’s unpreparedness for western principles and standards of democracy,” and the “vertical of power,” as well as other views that justify our country’s slide into bureaucratic authoritarianism.

I have already mentioned Russia’s importance for China as a stable supplier of energy as well as modern weapons and technologies. This is why China is doing everything it can to draw our country into its orbit of economic and geopolitical interests, including through the declaration of the friendship between our peoples and other measures, such as declaring the “Year of Russia” in China and the “Year of China” in Russia. All of this creates a facade, behind which hide utterly pragmatic purposes that by no means coincide with our national interests, since the prospect of becoming simply a supplier of raw resources to China is the worst future we can imagine. And we are already quite familiar with the concept of “friendship between peoples” from our recent communist history and know how that ended.

If we examine the economic side of the two countries’ relationship, then we must first note the practical absence of Chinese investment in our industry, agriculture, and infrastructure. They are only prepared to invest money in our energy projects. This can be explained by two basic reasons. First, they don’t need any extra competitors on our domestic and foreign markets. Cheap Chinese goods have taken over our shelves. Today these are not only consumer goods, but also electronics, automobiles, machine tools, and industrial equipment, and soon they will include high-tech goods too. All of this does not help in the development of our currently very weak industrial base. Second, the Chinese would like to preserve us as their source of raw materials and get control over our energy resources, by putting money into our projects. But the intensive development of our economy would require a sharp increase in domestic energy consumption, which undoubtedly would also affect the volume of energy supplied to China. Thus, the innovative development of our economy is by no means in their interest. These circumstances form the basis for China’s economic policy with respect to Russia, as is confirmed by Sino-Russian trade statistics and the content of the majority of the agreements that have been concluded.



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From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: It depends on us

Vitali,

The Chinese leadership is concentrating on geopolitics, the global economy, and global strategy. They consider democracy as a tool through which the United States is trying to promote its own concrete interests. In this they are united with the inhabitants of the Kremlin. The Chinese are not so much afraid of Russian democracy (they are more likely skeptical about its prospects), as they are of chaos and a return to the pro-American policies of the early 1990s.

Nobody from outside is pushing the authoritarian model on the Russian leadership. The responsibility for the state of the Russian political system lies with the Russian leaders who built

this system and the large part of the Russian population who support this system. The Russian political system will unavoidably change when interest groups mature and it can no longer satisfy these interests in its present form. Neither China, on the one hand, nor the United States, on the other, have anything to do with this.

Furthermore, there are clearly visible changes in Sino-Russian relations. CCP Chairman Hu Jintao's visit to Moscow in March 2007 demonstrated that Sino-Russian relations are becoming more and more pragmatic. At present Beijing is primarily interested in getting energy from Russia, and Moscow in increasing its economic return from ties with China. In this regard, the short passage in the Foreign Ministry's Survey of Russian Federation Foreign Policy dedicated to relations with the PRC is indicative: "the partnership between the two countries is not so much *strategic*, as *pragmatic*."

The development of Sino-Russian economic relations faces a number of problems. For instance, the price that the Chinese are willing to pay for Russian gas is several times lower than the price of gas on Gazprom's western European markets. The Chinese, for their part, are not satisfied with the quality of the Russian industrial products (commercial airplanes), which they have purchased. Russians sometimes hope for political deals (as they say, "in the name of improved relations"), an area in which the Chinese are particularly pragmatic. Russians will have to learn how to compete on the Chinese market, to look for niches where they can push their goods and services. Without this Russia will end up supplying energy and raw materials to China, as well as weapons and military technologies.

As for sober analysis, China will probably continue its upward trajectory and the space around it will continue to be twisted. Losing out to China in the area of development, Russia will likely "fall" in the direction of its eastern neighbor. It can be saved through accelerated self-development. Whether this project succeeds or not depends on Russians. We should not fear China, but the inability to retransform Russian society, the economy, and the political system into a viable and effective organism.

D. Trenin

From: Vitali Tsygichko
To: Dmitri Trenin
Subject: Younger brother option

We truly should not fear China, but clearly understand its strategy and long-term plans with regard to Russia in order to formulate sensible policies that correspond to our national interests on this basis. The current bilateral relationship is determined by the goals and current policies of both parties. Therefore, the assertion that everything depends on us ourselves and China plays no role here seems, in my opinion, to be an attempt to avoid impartial research and the consideration of China's strategic goals and practical policies vis-à-vis Russia, as well as to avoid the acute problems that must unavoidably appear in the process of realizing this policy. Unfortunately, our leaders, in going for a political bloc with China, do not understand or do not want to see the consequences of this course of action, which, if continued, will unavoidably lead our country to become the Middle Kingdom's "younger brother," and farewell to the great-power ambitions of our political elite. Finally, I would like to agree with you that only accelerated development will give Russia a chance not to become a Chinese protectorate.

From: Dmitri Trenin
To: Vitali Tsygichko
Subject: It sounds too alarming

Vitali, I too would like to note the areas where our positions coincide. I agree with the need for impartial research and a discussion of China's strategic aims. I view the *code of silence* on this topic as a vicious matter, although it is possibly caused by the best of intentions ("not to provoke a neighbor," "not to wake evil," etc.). Finally, I am convinced that forming a strategic bloc

with China is not in the interests of Russia, and not just because any great-power ambitions will fall victim to it.

Sino-Russian relations are not only more complicated, but also more contradictory than they appear in the speeches of the Russian president and the CCP chairman. Russia's leaders, whatever they say publicly and however strongly they suspect the United States of trying to *drive a wedge* into "model" Sino-Russian relations, will not accept a *strategic* bloc with China. It's enough to analyze the real development of the two countries' relations in the energy sphere, or look more closely at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, at the development of the whole system of relations in Central Asia. The Kremlin was not enthusiastic over China's test of an antisatellite weapon in early 2007. Russia's clear move to get away from the limits imposed by the U.S.-Soviet Treaty on Intermediate-range and Shorter-range Missiles (INF Treaty) is officially based on arguments about plans for the deployment of a U.S. antimissile system elements in Central Europe. The move, however, appeared much earlier than U.S. plans became known. Apparently, the real concern is deterring possible threats on Russia's southern and eastern borders.

However, I am not ready at this point to add China to the list of probable Russian adversaries. Although you don't say it directly, such a conclusion can easily be implied. This is methodologically wrong: everything for and against must be discussed, all sides of the problem investigated, and the dynamics of recent changes analyzed; otherwise, you cannot get a reliable conclusion. Instead, you will simply strike an "analytic alarm," which may be useful as a counterweight to nonjudgmental perceptions of our neighbor, but will also be as one-sided as the absence of any criticism.



Your DT



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