

Russia's Choice of Alliance: Balancing or Bandwagoning?

Ko Sangtu

Introduction

During the post-Cold War era, Russia's foreign policy has undergone numerous changes. Initially, Russia's foreign policy, under Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, promoted a pro-Western approach; Kozyrev advocated close cooperation with the West, expecting Western assistance in Russia's transition to democracy and its development of a market economy. In addition, Russia hoped the West would treat Russia as an equal partner in the international arena. However, to Russia's disappointment, the West's support fell short of Russia's expectations. Against this backdrop, political opponents criticized Russia's foreign policy as "romantic."

The Yeltsin administration subsequently altered its foreign policy course drastically, launching its so-called Eurasianism policy. Eurasianism did not call for avoiding confrontation with the United States if such confrontation was inevitable. Evgenii Primakov's appointment as foreign minister in January 1996 represented clear evidence of the Russian foreign policy shift. The transition in presidential political power in Russia—from Yeltsin to Putin—also created a new turning point.

Vladimir Putin embarked on a path of multivectorial diplomacy. He visited more countries in the first year of his presidency than Boris Yeltsin did during his entire two-term presidency. Even the "axis of evil" countries could be considered potential friends of Russia. For example, Putin visited North Korea for a summit meeting with Kim Jong-il,

becoming the first Russian leader ever to visit North Korea. Thus, in just a few years after the end of the Cold War, Russian foreign policy had transitioned from a pro-Western approach, to Eurasianism, and finally to a multivectorial approach.

Yet many analysts expected Russia to seek vigorous cooperation with China after the end of the Cold War in an effort to counter the United States' geopolitical superiority. In fact, Robert Donaldson argues that the 2001 Good Neighborly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Russia and China meets the requirement of an alliance because the treaty involves cooperative responses to threats to the security of both parties. Similar to the US-Korea and US-Japan security treaties, this Russo-Chinese treaty includes provisions of mutual consultation in cases of military threat from outside. Donaldson asserts that Russia intends to enter into a quasi-alliance with China, pointing to the brisk arms sales between the two states as evidence.¹

However, Richard Weitz disagrees. He argues that the two strongest countries—Russia and China—failed to form an anti-American alliance despite having both the capacity and the incentives to counterbalance the United States' power. Weitz admits that Russia has improved its relations with China to such an extent that it has helped arm a neighboring and once-hostile rising power, but he believes that this recent normalization has still not reached the level of joint effort required to counterbalance the United States, pointing to the fact that economic and societal contacts between Russia and China are extremely low compared to their military collaboration.²

Such conduct in the arena of foreign affairs suggests that Russia is continuing to vacillate between its aspiration to keep the United States' global ambitions in check and the state of reality that requires it to bandwagon with the United States.³ Further evidence of this vacillating

¹ Robert H. Donaldson, "The Arms Trade in Russian-Chinese Relations: Identity, Domestic Politics, and Geopolitical Positioning" *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003): 709–732.

² Richard Weitz, "Why Russia and China Have Not Formed an Anti-American Alliance" *Naval War College Review* 56, no. 4:39.

³ Ariel Cohen, "Yankees in the Heartland: US Policy in Central Asia," in *Eurasia in Balance: The US and the Regional Power Shift*, ed. Ariel Cohen (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 85.

tendency is found in Putin's policy in the post-September 11 foreign policy arena. Following the terrorist attacks, Putin demonstrated his readiness to support the United States' position in the war against global terrorism. Moscow expected United States' backing for its ongoing Chechen war in exchange for its policy of renewed friendship with Washington. Thus, the main question of this article relates to Russia's attitude toward the United States. The article will attempt to determine whether Russia seeks to strengthen its relationship with the world's only remaining superpower or instead ally with China to balance the unilateral position of the United States.

Conditions Affecting the Alliance Decision

Many contending theories have tried to explain the causes of alliance formation and continuation. Realists concentrate on the function of alliance as a mechanism for aggregating capabilities, particularly in terms of military strength. A military threat usually provides an impetus—albeit a temporary one—for military alliances; however, once the common threat disappears, the alliance usually becomes fragile.⁴ Although power is an important part of the equation in balancing benefits and losses through an alliance, it is not the only element to consider. James Morrow provides a variety of other relevant explanations for the alliance decision, asserting that nations consider not only enhanced security, but also those values—such as ideology, economic ideals, and material gains—that are regarded as the basis of a nation's survival and power.⁵

When confronted by a significant external threat, states may either “balance” or “bandwagon.” Balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat, whereas bandwagoning refers to aligning with the source of danger. According to Walt, balancing behavior is much more common than bandwagoning, which is—in principle—dangerous because it rewards the belligerent behavior of great powers. Strong powers

⁴ Karl W. Deutsch, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area: International Organization in the Light of Historical Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 156.

⁵ James D. Morrow, “Alliances: Why Write Them Down?” *Annual Review of Political Science* 3, no. 1 (2000): 63.

are more inclined to use force if they assume that others will be unlikely to balance against them.⁶ Several factors may affect the propensity for states to select their course between balancing and bandwagoning. Walt presents hypothetical conditions favoring balancing or bandwagoning, identifying three factors affecting the decision: the dimensions of threat, the availability of allies, and the security climate.

First, the weaker the state, the more likely it is to bandwagon rather than balance. Weak states can do little to affect the outcome and are likely to side with a hegemonic state. In contrast, strong states can turn a losing coalition into a winning one; thus, they can afford to promote a balancing strategy. Second, states will have little choice but to bandwagon when would-be allies are limited in number or unavailable altogether. On the other hand, they will mobilize resources against their foes when they are confident that allied assistance will be available. Finally, states more readily decide to follow a policy of balancing during times of peace because a false choice of an alliance partner will not necessarily be fatal to the nation's survival. However, in wartime, statesmen tend to be extremely cautious regarding such decisions—even going as far as to defect from the losing side when an opportune moment presents itself.⁷

Based on this theoretical elaboration, this article will examine the conditions that Russia faces in establishing its foreign policy toward the United States. First, the discussion will examine Russia's capability under Putin to address the United States' dominance in international politics. Second, the discussion will scrutinize whether China can be a reliable strategic partner to Russia. Finally, it will examine the security climate of the post-Cold War era.

Shift in Power Equation between Russia and the United States

From a military perspective, the United States enjoys its dominant position in the international power distribution. It spent \$455.3 billion for the military sector in 2004, equivalent to 47 percent of global military

⁶ Stephen M. Walt, "Alliances: Balancing and Bandwagoning," in *International Politics: Enduring Concepts and Contemporary Issues*, 6th ed., eds. Robert J. Art and Robert Jervis (New York: Longman, 2003), 111.

⁷ Walt, "Alliances," 112-113.

spending, which suggests that the United States nearly possesses the minimum power required to vanquish the entire rest of the world. Moreover, the United States' ties with powerful allies, such as NATO, Japan, and South Korea, further compound this military clout.⁸

In light of this dominating power, Putin sought to reduce the power disparity between the United States and Russia through economic development, preferring a more independent and self-reliant approach. The Putin administration has consistently emphasized trade, not aid, by focusing on creating opportunities for Russian producers in international markets rather than obtaining outside support for unviable domestic industries. He has—for the first time in the post-Soviet period—begun to repay Russia's foreign debt on schedule.⁹

During his presidency, Putin has relied on Russia's traditional strengths—namely, oil, natural gas, pipelines, and arms—as the core of his national development strategy. Oil has been the driving force behind the rapid growth of the Russian economy, which reached a rate of 7.1 percent in 2004—a record among G8 countries. The trade surplus increased from \$59.8 billion in 2003 to \$87 billion in 2004, which led to a steady budget surplus. Putin established the Stabilization Fund in the budget to accrue the windfall profit from the increasing world oil prices; the fund reached \$76.6 billion in November 2006, enabling the Russian government to pay off the bulk of its foreign debt.¹⁰ Thus, the Kremlin seems to be on the brink of attaining the first part of Putin's inaugural goal: enhancing Russia's power and prestige and regaining influence in the former Soviet republics.

The high economic growth under Putin has benefited from high energy prices, and Moscow has taken advantage of the security instability in the Middle East and OPEC's escalating price policy to increase Russia's share of the global oil market. As a result, Russia has been welcomed as a reliable global energy supplier in various regions, including the United States, the Caspian Sea region, Northeast Asia, and Western Europe.

⁸ *SIPRI Yearbook 2005: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security*, appendix 8A.

⁹ *The Economist*, November 29, 2001.

¹⁰ *RIA Novosti*, November 1, 2006.

Russia emerged as an important energy supplier to the United States particularly after September 11. Prior to the attacks, the United States imported the majority of its oil—51 percent—from the Middle East, but only one percent from Russia.¹¹ After the attacks, the United States sought to lower its dependence on the Middle East. At the 2002 Moscow summit talks, Putin and Bush declared that Russia would ensure timely and reliable energy supply for the global economy.¹²

Putin has also demonstrated a shift in the Russian position on the development of the Caspian Sea energy resources. Previously, Moscow had insisted that the Caspian Sea energy sources must be developed with the agreement of all littoral states—or not at all. However, Putin has relaxed such requirements. Furthermore, Russia has also softened its opposition to the United States-sponsored pipeline project, which will transport oil from the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea.

Moreover, the Putin administration has identified Northeast Asia as an emerging market for Russian energy. China, Japan, and Korea need to diversify their energy imports to guarantee the steady development of their dynamic economies. Although Japanese companies have started to develop Sakhalin natural gas reserves that would meet the demand of the northern region of Japan, Russia's energy reserves in Siberia would surely meet such needs more effectively. The greatest energy project in East Asia is the pipeline being constructed to connect Siberia and Northeast Asian countries. In fact, both China and Japan have demonstrated energy diplomacy toward Russia as they compete for a Russian decision favorable to their interests.

Finally, Moscow has attempted to increase its gas exports to Western European customers. Russia supplies enough natural gas to cover a third of Western Europe's total demand. These gas exports are motivated not only by profits, but also by the belief that the greater Europe's dependence is on Russian gas, the more Russia will be accepted as an integral part of the continent.

The economic boom under Putin has led to the revitalization of the Russian defense sector. As Table 1 indicates, the growth rates in military expenditures have been rapidly increasing, and the total amount almost

¹¹ *Knight Ridder/Tribune Business News*, May 24, 2002.

¹² *Itar-Tass News Wire*, May 24, 2002.

doubled from 1999 to 2004. This development presents a striking contrast to the fate of its defense industry, which suffered the greatest damage during the reform period. Between 1990 and 1996, overall production of the defense industry was reduced by 53 percent.¹³

Such investment in the defense industry led to an increase in Russian arms exports. As Table 2 indicates, exports have nearly doubled, from \$3.7 billion in 1999 to \$6.2 billion in 2004. China has become Russia's main client, accounting for 40 percent of the total weapons exported from Russia from 1999 to 2004.

Table 1. Russian military expenditures

Year	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
At constant (2003) US\$m	10,400	14,100	15,700	17,400	18,500	19,300
As a percentage of GDP	3.4	3.7	4.1	4.3	4.3	3.9

Source: SIPRI military expenditure database 2006.

Table 2. Weapons exported from Russia (in US\$m, at constant [1990] prices)

Recipient	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	Total	%
China	1,378	1,694	2,917	2,379	1,961	2,161	12,490	40.70
India	873	422	679	1,514	2,340	1,694	7,522	24.51
Iran	244	323	352	319	423	261	1,922	6.27
Algeria	133	226	365	84	143	246	1,197	3.90
Vietnam	144		72	121	7	240	584	1.90
Others	985	1,352	1,132	1,127	782	1,594	6,972	22.72
Total	3,757	4,017	5,517	5,544	5,656	6,196	30,687	100.00

Source: SIPRI military expenditure database 2006.

¹³ Nodari Simonia, "Economic Interests and Political Power in Post-Soviet Russia," in *Contemporary Russian Politics: A Reader*, ed. Archie Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 272.

Toward a Eurasian Alliance between Russia and China

After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the United States discovered the strategic importance of Central Asia, which could help provide critical air access and base rights to the United States-led operations in Afghanistan as well as a launch pad for the war against Iraq. The United States wanted to use former Soviet military facilities, but it did not want to give the impression that it was thrusting itself into the sphere of Russian influence. Thus, the United States consulted with Russia twice—in October 2001 and again in April 2002—about its involvement in the area.¹⁴

Russia assisted the United States in the war in Afghanistan more than any of the US NATO allies. Russia not only consented to the United States military being stationed in its own backyard, it also provided the United States and NATO troops with the information the Soviet army had gathered from its decade-long war in Afghanistan. In fact, Putin tried to use the war against terrorism to improve Moscow's deteriorated relationship with the Bush administration. He was keen to equate the United States' war on terrorism with his own country's campaign in Chechnya, which had been criticized by the White House on the grounds of human rights violations.¹⁵

Once Russia gave tacit consent to the United States military presence in Central Asia, Uzbekistan emerged as a principal strategic partner to the United States, receiving steeply increased aid from Washington. In the supplemental 2002 United States aid budget, Uzbekistan was allotted \$155 million, despite receiving merely \$83.5 million prior to September 11, 2001.¹⁶ Such expansion of United States' influence in Central Asia made both Russia and China concerned regarding United States hegemony in the region. Both countries shared a need to check the United States' enhanced position.

These efforts soon found strong resonance within the region. Shocked by the color revolutions—which some asserted were backed by United States' interests—the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia leaned

¹⁴ Cohen, "Yankees in the Heartland," 73.

¹⁵ Timothy J. Colton and Michael McFaul, "America's Real Russian Allies," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 6:46.

¹⁶ Cohen, "Yankees in the Heartland," 74.

back toward Moscow, which perceived the erupting democratization in the region as both a challenge and a threat.¹⁷ The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) became the main vehicle for promoting confidence building among Russia, China, and Central Asian countries. Terrorism and separatism have subsequently become the most important issues for the organization. In October 2002, China and Kyrgyzstan conducted the first bilateral antiterror exercise within the SCO framework, marking the Chinese People's Liberation Army's first maneuvers with another country's military. The Chinese military also transferred small arms, ammunition, and other military equipment to Kyrgyz security forces. Russia deployed its warplanes at Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan, while the United States troops were forced to leave Uzbekistan. Thus, as SCO member countries rid themselves of the United States military presence and Chinese leaders began to favor a preeminent security role for Russia in Central Asia—as a hedge against the growth of radical Islamic and American influences—Russia has successfully improved its strategic position in the region.¹⁸

In terms of Russia's attitude toward the United States, Russia changed its cooperative policy into one of deterrence, which was possible because of its ability to rely on Chinese support. This Russo-Chinese relationship had been further strengthened by the two countries' military technology cooperation. Russia's arms sales to China have constituted the most salient dimension of the growing security cooperation between the two countries. Since signing an agreement for military-technical cooperation in December 1992, China has purchased more weapons from Russia than from all other countries combined.¹⁹

Such extensive arms sales are not unprecedented. After achieving a high rate of economic growth in the wake of reform politics during the 1980s, China started to purchase arms on the world market. However, the Chinese regime's brutal repression of the democracy movement in 1989 caused Western countries to place an embargo on arms sales to China.

¹⁷ Hannes Adomeit, "Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne: Moskaus Ambitionen sind größer als sein politisches Gewicht," *Internationale Politik* 61, no. 7 (2006): 11.

¹⁸ Robert M. Cutler, "The Shattering of the Sino-Russian Entente over the Shape of Central Asia?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, November 21, 2001.

¹⁹ United States Department of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China* (Washington, DC, 2002), 40.

However, the rapprochement between China and Russia coincided with the Western sanctions; thus, Russia remained the only supplier ready to help China advance its military modernization. The willingness to transfer sophisticated weapons technology to an emerging neighboring power that had long been an antagonist demonstrated that Russia had fewer strategic concerns about arms trade harming Russia's geopolitical position.

The increasing confidence building with China lessened the concerns in Russia. In fact, Russia and China signed the Sino-Russian Good Neighborly Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in July 2001. Although the treaty is not a traditional alliance, it fills a legal vacuum that has lasted for decades—since the abrogation of the mutual defense agreement between Moscow and Beijing.

Confrontational Cooperation between Great Powers in the Post-Cold War Era

The end of the Cold War put an end to the antagonistic rivalry between the Western and Soviet blocs. The security structure in the post-Cold War era became increasingly complex as the question was no longer simply a determination of allies and enemies. As a result, countries must consider their decisions more carefully. For example, China has a strategic partnership with both the United States and Russia. In addition, the United States prefers unilateral solutions to international problems, a policy that has been criticized by Russia, China, and even European countries.

During the past decade, Sino-Russian joint statements have criticized various American policies. The two governments have issued numerous joint communiqués in which they have denounced various Washington policies and called for a multipolar rather than unipolar world. Both China and Russia have also jointly sponsored resolutions in the United Nations opposing the abrogation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Most recently, they urged the United States and its allies not to intervene militarily in Iraq without the United Nations' approval.

The collapse of the former Soviet Union has also resulted in Europe and the United States drifting apart as Europe has become increasingly critical of the United States. Europeans took the end of the Cold War as an opportunity to reduce military spending; the average European defense budget eventually fell below two percent of the GDP—unlike the United

States' defense spending, which remains above three percent.²⁰ Along with the transition in power, a widening perception gap has become evident in the past decade; the case of the war in Iraq provided striking evidence for this, as the United States and its European allies have maintained different perceptions of threat.

The United States has placed great importance on so-called rogue states and, accordingly, on the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Washington also possesses the military might to remove such threats. As a strong country, it may resort to force more quickly and be less patient with diplomacy. Meanwhile, most Europeans have taken a calmer view of the risks posed by the rogue states and have learned to live side by side with the "axis of evil" states—supported by their history in dealing with both Hitler and Stalin. Europeans have historically faced a different security environment from Americans, who live in a seemingly secure environment shielded by two oceans. For Europeans, security challenges include ethnic conflict, migration, organized crime, poverty, and environmental degradation resulting from failed states.

Yet the biggest tension surfaced in the relationship between Russia and the United States, for whom the concept of strategic partnership does not even meet the definition of rhetoric. The Jackson-Vanick Amendment, issued in 1974 to limit trade with the Soviet Union due to Jewish emigration issues, has not yet been annulled by Washington. In other words, this relic of the Cold War era demonstratively remains effective. Furthermore, Republican senator John McCain called for a boycott of the G8 summit in St. Petersburg in his speech at the Munich security conference in February 2006. He asserted that Russian politics had deviated from the path to democratization and taken up the incorrect path to authoritarianism. A few months later, Vice President Dick Cheney blamed Russia for stopping gas delivery to the Ukraine in comments he made at the summit meeting involving countries from the Northern Sea and Caspian Sea areas. He further clarified that Russia must not use oil and gas as instruments of political pressure.²¹

²⁰ Robert Kagan, *Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (New York: Random House, 2004), 25.

²¹ Adomeit, "Rückkehr auf die Weltbühne," 8.

Meanwhile, for the majority of the political elite in Russia, the former Soviet republics—save the Baltic countries—are regarded as a sphere of influence. Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov revealed his perception that Russia was a dominant power in Eurasia at a 2004 Washington press conference. Even liberalist Anatolii Chubais, who was the architect of shock therapy during the Russian market reform, came up with the idea of a “liberal empire in Eurasia.”²²

Today, US-Russian relations are often described as a “Cold Peace” or “renewed Cold War.” It is evident that a close relationship similar to the one between the United States and the United Kingdom will not be realized in the near future. Russia will be neither an ally nor an enemy of the United States.²³ In the contemporary international environment, Russia can stand against the United States without fear of becoming involved in a war because today’s international order is based on a spirit of peaceful cooperation.

Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, three factors affect the decision to balance or bandwagon—namely, the capability for deterrence, the availability of allies for balancing, and the international security climate. Russia’s growing confidence in its economic strength is, as Putin argues, crucial for recovering its superpower status as Russia needs enormous financial backing for military modernization. The Russian economy continues to grow rapidly, providing funding for the military sector—an area long neglected during Yeltsin’s presidency. Thus, the renewed aspiration for a superpower role in the international arena is moving closer to materialization.

Second, the contemporary world power structure is characterized by a unipolarity. The United States accounts for almost half of the world’s military expenditure. In addition, it maintains military alliances with major powers. In this power constellation, it is nearly impossible for Russia alone to seek to balance the United States’ power unless another

²² Cohen, “Yankees in the Heartland,” 84.

²³ Nikolas K. Gvosdev and Dimitri K. Simes, “Rejecting Russia?” *The National Interest* no. 80 (Summer 2005): 5–8.

major power supports Russia's attempts. Relations between Russia and China have strengthened, especially as military technical cooperation between the two has reached a level of military alliance. Thus, Russia seems to be seeking to alter the unilateral structure of the international order with the help of China.

Finally, the international security environment was peacefully transformed after the end of the Cold War. The acute, ongoing confrontation between the East and West abruptly faded. Strategic choices as to whether to establish an alliance no longer decide national survival, and the danger of military conflict among major powers has decreased. Moreover, the international confrontation line has blurred. European allies often oppose the United States' military interventions in international conflicts. Although Russia initially supported the United States in the Afghanistan war, subsequent Russo-US relations have deteriorated as the United States' influence increased in Central Asia. Russia has changed its strategy into one focused on balancing the United States' power in the region. Russia can freely take a confrontational position against the United States because such attitudes rarely lead to a military showdown. Thus, the international security environment is so favorable that Russia can freely choose between balancing and bandwagoning.

Russia initiated and soon abandoned its bandwagoning attitude toward the United States shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks. It now seems to be neither an ally nor an enemy of the United States. The convergence of Russia and China in their strategic position will impact on the international security structure, as both Russia and China clearly aspire to be superpowers in the long run. This constellation promotes Russia's policy of confronting the United States and cooperating with China for the time being.