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Misreading Medvedev's China Mission by Yu Bin

YU Bin is (byu@wittenberg.edu) Senior Fellow for the Shanghai Institute of American Studies and regular contributor to the Pacific Forum's Comparative Connections (www.csis.org/pacfor/ccejournal.html).

No matter how presidential Dymitry Medvedev may act, his late May summit in Beijing has been discounted in the West as routine, unsubstantial, and overshadowed by the meetings of his predecessor, Vladimir Putin. The "growing" conflict of interests between Russia and China over various issues – trade, energy, military sales, to mention a few – has also been the focus of media coverage. In keeping with this image, (now) Prime Minister Putin's visit to Paris a week after was described as more "presidential" than Medvedev's east-bound mission. These assessments miss important aspects of the evolving and broadening relations between the two largest nations on the Eurasian continent.

Symbolism and Substance

Medvedev's two-day visit to China was designed to reaffirm continuity and stability in Russia's China policy. In the past eight years, China has had considerable experience working with Putin as Medvedev served as head of Putin's 2000 presidential election campaign headquarters, presidential chief of staff (2003-05), and deputy prime minister (2005-08). This time, the Chinese side got a closer look at Medvedev and how he and Putin coordinate policies toward Beijing. In the longer run, Medvedev has to develop his own line and policy adjustments may be unavoidable. When that happens, China does not want to be surprised. This was why the summit was "quickly arranged" upon an invitation of Chinese President Hu Jintao right after Medvedev's inauguration May 7.

China was Medvedev's first foreign visit outside the Commonwealth of Independent States; he was the first foreign head of state to visit quake-ridden China; and a Russian rescue team was among the first to arrive and was the only foreign team to have found any survivors. Despite the hectic relief effort preoccupying his hosts, the Beijing summit went ahead with a normal and predictable outcome: a joint declaration to reaffirm the consensus on various global issues and the signing of several commercial agreements, among them a $1 billion contract for a gas centrifuge nuclear enrichment plant. President Hu also made a four-point proposal for enhancing high-level trust, promoting pragmatic cooperation, socio-cultural exchanges, and cooperation in international affairs. Immediately after Medvedev's Beijing visit, Premier Wen Jaibao and his Russian counterpart Putin agreed to set up a joint energy commission at the vice prime ministerial level.

Medvedev's visit, therefore, was both symbolic and substantial for Moscow and Beijing.

A Normal Relationship

Despite its lofty title, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership that has existed since 1996 is a normal relationship with several "bottom-lines" including non-interference in each other's domestic politics, border security, and stability. Beyond that, it has evolved into a complicated interactive process that includes both cooperation and competition. Under President Putin, some contradictions were visible: relatively high-level trust vs. low-level social interactions; frequent diplomatic coordination vs. substandard economic interactions; strong governmental intervention in bilateral economic relations vs. mediocre returns, etc. Fourteen years ago, former President Yeltsin tossed out the idea of building an oil pipeline to China. To date, the world's emerging manufacturing giant (China) and energy superpower (Russia) are still talking. In the past few years, once thriving Russian military sales to China have virtually halted.

These issues, or bottlenecks, are not desirable for Russia or China. None of them, however, has spilled over into other issue areas or become politicized, thanks to the thickening web of connections and the institutionalization of governmental contacts. This is substantially different from two other types of bilateral relations: the "honeymoon" of 1949-60 and the hostility that dominated relations from 1960-89 when problems were either ignored or allowed to explode.

Young President as China's "Old" Friend

Medvedev's visit occurred as Moscow and Beijing face growing challenges from the West: a new round of NATO expansion and missile defense, mounting protectionism in the West and surging energy prices – and China has to deal with Tibet and the Olympics. Their respective policies, however, may not be identical. Even if both oppose U.S. missile defense and NATO's expansion, China may not want to see deepening of the Russia-West breach to a point that it has to take sides. In economic areas, Russia is one the few Western nations that benefits from high energy costs. Nonetheless, its declining manufacturing capability and reluctance to become China's "raw material supplier" led to its first trade deficit with China ($8 billion in 2007) since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization – a community of nations including Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirgizstan – needs to infuse new ideas for both internal cohesion and external relations.

It remains to be seen how President Medvedev will be able to deal with these problems. Some of them may be irresolvable given the growing structural difference between China's manufacturing capability and Russia's raw-material based recovery. Russia may have to realize that China is no longer willing to purchase from Russia a large quantity of air and naval armaments based on Soviet R&D unless Moscow is

willing to elevate China to the level of India in military sales and technology transfer.

Still, Medvedev seemed to have injected fresh air into a routine and institutionalized relationship. Despite his youth, the Russian president is described as China's "old friend," thanks to his co-chairmanship of China's "Russia Year" (2006) and Russia's "China Year" (2007). At the same time, Medvedev is widely regarded in the West as liberal and presumably pro-West. Even Putin, who presided over the recovery of Russia from Soviet ashes, has yet to have bridged the West and East – the dream of any Russian leader, Czar or Communist commissar.

Medvedev has at least four years to build this image. His Russia, however, is quite different from that of Putin eight years ago. So is China.