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SEPTEMBER 11 AND MAJOR POWER RELATIONS IN NORTHEAST ASIA

Mark Hong, Nan Li, and Bhubhindar Singh *

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Introduction

This brief paper assesses the response of the three major powers of Northeast Asia – China, Japan and Russia – to September 11. We review two aspects: how September 11 affected their ties with the US, and second, how it affected the relationship among themselves. We also touch on their likely response to a US-led attack on Iraq.

China

While China had become more suspicious and hostile toward the US after the EP-3 incident in April 2001 and the ensuing comment by President Bush that the US would "do whatever it takes" to defend Taiwan, its US policy changed significantly after September 11, toward more cooperation with regard to the US war on terrorism. China had sent a team of counter-terrorism experts to the US to share intelligence on the Taliban and Al Qaeda, allowed US warships to stop in Hong Kong on their way to the war in Afghanistan, voted for the US-sponsored UN resolution condemning terrorism, provided aid to Pakistan (the staging area for the Afghan war), and most recently toughened its rules on the export of missile technologies to countries that may harbour terrorism. These are in contrast to the usual Chinese opposition to US-led military campaigns such as the one in Kosovo. The cooperation is largely driven by Chinese calculation that China can benefit from the war: it may divert US attention and resources from the "China threat"-related issues, legitimise China's own fight against the Uighur "separatists" in western China, and eliminate an external safe haven for these "separatists."

But China also has caveats about the US war. It insists that the US provide concrete evidence, avoid civilian casualties, and consult with the UN. China is particularly against expanding the war to Iraq. Underlying the caveats are the Chinese concern that the US war may be an excuse for completing the containment-based "encirclement" of China, thus undermining Chinese influence in Central, South, and Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.

With regards to China's relations with Russia, Beijing was first concerned about Moscow's seemingly whole-hearted tilt toward the West following September 11, particularly in policies such as allowing US military deployment in Central Asia. But as Russia begins to realize the security ramifications of the expansion of US military presence

into southern Caucasus from Central Asia, and shows its opposition regarding an US invasion of Iraq, relations are improving. This is reflected in Russian Premier Kasyanov's visit to China in late August 2002, which reportedly involved negotiation of lucrative contracts in energy and technological development and arms sales.

China and Russia have also been cooperating in institutionalising the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).They agreed on joint military exercises at the Moscow meeting of the heads of defence forces of the SCO in May 2002, and approved the SCO Charter at the St. Petersburg meeting of the heads of state of the SCO in June. China is also likely to engage the European Union more positively after the latter showed its displeasure toward US intention to attack Iraq. China however has become more wary of Japan, which has deployed naval forces overseas after September 11 and seemed more supportive of the US war.

Japan

As a previous victim of a terrorist attack (by a Japanese cult using sarin gas in a Tokyo subway in 1995), Japan came out strongly against the terrorist attacks and offered its full moral and diplomatic support to the United States. Realizing the severity of the threat, Japan has responded to the calls for assistance by the United States to counter terrorism. Japan announced several support measures to contribute to the US-led war against terror. These included a flurry of diplomatic visits to some key countries in the Middle East to garner support for the war and a massive assistance programme focusing on refugee assistance and reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan.

An important measure was the passing of the Anti-Terrorism Special Measures Law by the Japanese Diet in October 2001. This law allowed the Japanese Self Defence Force (JSDF) to support the US troops in the international fight against terrorism, e.g., sending six Maritime SDF ships with 1200 member crew to the Indian Ocean. The Japanese government has extended the mission, originally due to end in May 2002, by six months.

Japan's support to the US-led war on terrorism has won broad domestic approval and from the international community. Japan's active participation is a significant departure from Japan's monetary contribution to the 1991 Persian Gulf War, and has enhanced US confidence in the US-Japan security alliance. Though it may be regarded as symbolic and limited to rear echelon support and intelligence, Japan's deployment may signal a more active military role alongside the US in future crises.

However, the next test for Japan would be the forthcoming US-led attack on Iraq. The US has urged Japan to expand the anti-terrorism law to include the possible war against Iraq, by the despatch of its Aegis destroyers. Being the US' principal ally in Asia, Japan faces a difficult choice whether to support a seemingly inevitable US-led action against Iraq, which would be politically and legally difficult given the constraints of the anti-terrorism bill and its Peace Constitution, or remain on the sidelines and thereby incur American displeasure.

Japan's relations with Russia and China remain unaltered following the September 11 incident. Although united in the fight against terrorism, the outstanding issues among them continue to define Tokyo's bilateral relations with Moscow and Beijing. Japan's problematic relationship with China had dropped to a 30-year low due to a spate of thorny issues - the

controversial history textbook, PM Koizumi's visit to the Yakusuni Shrine, the issuing of visas to Taiwanese leaders and the Shenyang Japanese Consulate incident, where China detained five North Korean asylum seekers in May 2002. Japan's relations with Russia are at a stalemate due to the stalled negotiations on the Northern Territories issue, which has prevented both countries from signing a peace treaty.

Russia

After his accession in January 2000, President Putin frequently declared that Russia was a European country. The opportunity to show his pro-western credentials came with the events of 9/11, when he whole-heartedly committed Russia to support the US-led war against terrorism. Russian support took the form of intelligence sharing; opening of Russian airspace to humanitarian flights; not objecting to the efforts of Central Asian states to cooperate with the US; and through arms deliveries, helping the Northern Alliance to fight the Taleban in Afghanistan.

Putin astutely seized the opportunity to equate the Chechen rebels with terrorists. Though it upset some generals, nationalists and communists, his decision was a strategic move. Putin realized that Russia needed western support to join the WTO, obtain western investments and gain access to western markets. In order to achieve these aims, Putin has been restrained in his reactions to the US renunciation of the ABM Treaty, to NATO expansion and to the expansion of the US presence and influence in Central Asia. In turn, Russia received token *quid pro quos*: Russia and the US signed a formal document on the reduction of their nuclear arsenals to between 1700 and 2000 warheads each; a Russia-NATO joint council was set up; Russia became a full member of the G-8 (both the EU and US having accepted in mid-2001 that Russia was a market economy); and the West muted criticism of Russian atrocities in Chechnya. Two other examples of US-Russia cooperation are the offer of Russian oil supplies to replace Gulf oil in an energy security deal, and the recent operation to remove uranium materials from a disused Serbian nuclear reactor.

The biggest challenge to US-Russia cooperation is Russia's recent activities with the "Axis of Evil" countries: Putin's meeting with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Vladivostok; Russia's interest to build five more nuclear power plants in Iran, which is also related to Russian interest to sell arms to Iran; discussion between Russia and Iraq of a $40 billion economic cooperation plan over 10 years (which Russian officials downplayed as simply a wish-list by Russian oil companies). Russia appears ready to acquiesce to US military actions against Iraq as long as the US guarantees that post-Saddam Iraq will repay the $8 billion debt owed to Russia and that Russia will gain fair access to Iraqi energy and weapons markets. Putin seems to realize that only by cooperating with the US can Russia secure its economic interests in Iraq, provided there is no double-cross!

In short, Russia has dramatically re-oriented its foreign policy in a strategic move to secure its economic interests. However, recent Russian overtures to the three countries are signals that Moscow is capable of pursuing its own economic and diplomatic interests and should not be taken for granted. In another such signal, Foreign Minister Ivanov, speaking on the occasion of the Iraqi Foreign Minister's visit to Moscow, stated that Russia might veto any UNSC resolution by the US to approve or support the invasion of Iraq. With these shifts, there is also less talk of the strategic alliance with China despite the landmark treaty of friendship and cooperation signed in 2001, since China has also tried to accommodate the US. The Russian-US entente is probably unwelcome to China, though it maintains a discreet

silence on this. Russian relations with Japan are cordial but are unable to progress further as long as the territorial dispute over the Southern Kuriles remains unsettled.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, two main points need to be highlighted. First, although all the major powers are united in the war against terrorism, this arrangement is only temporary, with each major power exploiting the war against terrorism for its own objectives. Once the war is over, it will be back to politics as usual and the clash of national interests. Relations between the major powers are defined more by thorny bilateral issues, which would keep the security environment in Northeast Asia very competitive.

Second, all the three countries are wary of the US war against terrorism expanding to Iraq. For China and Russia, the war on Iraq could signal enhanced US primacy, with increased control over Iraqi oil and continued unilateral behaviour in the international security environment. Moscow and Beijing are deeply concerned that the war may become an excuse to expand US influence in Central and Southeast Asia, which may in the long run diminish not only their influence but also undermine their interests. For Japan, the wariness comes from more legal and political concerns at home. Moreover, Japan's participation in the war against Iraq might further destabilize the already strained relationship with China.

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* *Mr Mark Hong is Visiting Senior Fellow, Dr Nan Li is Fellow and Mr Bhubhindar Singh is an Associate Research Fellow at the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.*