

## **Thomas Kunze: The Renaissance of Russian-Chinese Relations. Vladimir Putin's Rapprochement with the Middle Kingdom**

Neither the Russians nor the Chinese have forgotten them – the years of hostility, the years of the fight for the leadership of the communist world. Those years include, for example, 1960, when hostilities threatened to escalate, or 1969, when exactly the same hostilities culminated in the border dispute on the river Ussuri. Russian-Chinese antagonism lasted until the eighties, when Mikhail Gorbachev took over power in the Kremlin, and rapprochement began. Years later, under Vladimir Putin and Hu Jintao, the process of rapprochement consolidated itself, not without some help from the distaste of the two politicians for America's world dominance.

That Russia is searching for a new place in the world is obvious. To strengthen its position, Moscow endeavours to form alliances with states 'that are emerging as important geopolitical players'. These include the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, with whom Russia intends to expand its cooperation systematically: At the end of 2005, a summit conference between Russia and the ASEAN states was held in Malaysia. Moreover, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was founded in 2001, was upgraded, Russia and China being perceived as part of an important alliance of states from then on. In fact, the SCO, which may be regarded as a product of the Russian-Chinese endeavours to establish a multilateral world order, is about to develop into a new global player; thus, it was recently asked by the Iranian head of state, Mr Ahmadinejad, to stand in the way of Western hegemony. What is more, Moscow has intensified its activities in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), i.e. its endeavours to cooperate more closely with India.

That China is the most important state with which Russia is currently expanding its contacts is beyond doubt. This development is encouraged by the current weakness not only of the US but also of the EU, which is split by quarrels about a common foreign and security policy. At the moment, Russian-Chinese relations are better than they have been for many years. When, in March 2006, Mr Putin travelled to Beijing with a delegation of 1000, he was received like a tsar. The objective of this official visit which, at the same time, constituted the climax of the rapprochement process between the two powers so far, was to restore relations as they had existed until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Now that China has acknowledged the Russian Federation as an independent state in 1996 and the Russian-Chinese treaty of friendship of 2001 has created a basis for bilateral cooperation in all areas, the arms business is looking good as well.

When Hu Jintao visited Russia in 2005, it was his goal to win the country as a supplier of raw materials, energy imports from Russia being of vital interest to China. And at a time in which Mr Putin shows less and less interest in forming an energy partnership with a Europe that continuously presses for common values, the Russians desire cooperation as well. Therefore, Russia will supply China with gas from 2015 onwards – the construction of two gas pipelines has already been planned.

Cooperation between Russia and China is specifically successful in the economic field, as the steep increase shows that took place in the trade volume between the two countries over the last few years.

Little noticed by the public but important nevertheless, Russian-Chinese cooperation in the field of space research is growing. This kind of cooperation is economically important especially to Moscow, as it plays a major role in doubling Russia's gross domestic product, a target envisaged for the next decade.

In the field of space research, China seems to be the ideal partner for Russia. To be sure – Moscow is also running projects with Europe and the US; these project partners, however, are hardly able to promote Russia's ambitious plans, especially as China sees its own current space research projects with the US threatened by political differences and would welcome a weakening of the American position in the world.

What is more, cooperation between Russia and China is intensifying in the field of arms: Russia has by now become China's most important supplier of weapons. While in June 2006, Mr Putin still advocated maintaining the military cooperation, which by then had reached a volume of several million dollars, the US imposed sanctions on Russian arms manufacturers in August of the same year. When in addition to this, Washington accused the Kremlin of distributing weapons of mass destruction, Moscow saw the charge as the USA's response to the politics of Mr Putin, who had succeeded in reinstating his country in the rank of a world power.

Military cooperation between Russia and China is well established and will probably be expanded, especially in view of Beijing's predictable interest in Russian weapons. Now that the border disputes between the two countries have been brought closer to a solution through the treaty of friendship of 2001 and the border agreement of 2005, and a large-scale joint exercise of the two countries' armies was held in the summer of 2005, the era of Russian-Chinese confrontation should once and for all be a thing of the past.

Russia especially endeavours to emphasise its new cooperation with China before the world. However, the Russians' increased self-confidence permits them to see that it is only in the field of energy that Beijing crucially depends on cooperation with Moscow. It is indeed in the interest of both partners to establish a close bilateral cooperation – not least in view of the vital desire of both Moscow and Beijing to curb the economic, military, and political influence of the US and Europe on their own countries.