



Sino-Russian Border Security

Anthony Rinna

4 July 2016

Contrary to the claims of analysts and pundits, the China-Russia relationship is not as friendly as it seems and there is mistrust between Beijing and Moscow. But changes to Sino-Russian border security could help alleviate tensions between the two powers.

Seeking to build their own respective influence in East Asia, China and Russia have entered into an ostensible mutual embrace. For Russia, this is part of its so-called “pivot to the East”. The two sides have sought to increase their cooperation in the defense and economic realms, especially in terms of closer economic integration, joint military exercises, and coordinating responses on issues of global concern such as placing restrictions on arms proliferation and militarization. In May 2015, Russian Ambassador to China Andrei Denisov [highlighted](#) the need for a Sino-Russian relationship built on the basis of economic development and sustainable security.

At present, the China-Russia relationship is [not as profound](#) as many analysts and pundits suggest. Such is the nature of a relationship built on oil markets and the whims of global politics. Nevertheless, no matter what shifts or weaknesses in China-Russia ties may occur, one thing that the two countries cannot escape is the reality of geographic proximity. The Russian Far East’s closeness to the economic powerhouses of China and Japan opens the region to investment from these areas. The Russian Far East’s sparse population combined with a wealth of natural resources presents Moscow with a unique quandary. For Russia, the task at hand is to develop the Russian Far East to a sufficient degree while also securitizing it from external exploitation.

Geopolitics casts a shadow over the border

Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

Most read

[The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities](#)

[Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug](#)

One of the major stumbling blocks to a culture of sustainable security is persistent mistrust at the highest levels of government in Beijing and Moscow. Despite public displays of solidarity at the diplomatic level in China and Russia, the two countries remain wary of one another. Internal and external observers often view the China-Russia relationship through the lens of geopolitics, namely, that the China-Russia relationship is driven by rivalries both within their bilateral relationship, as well as outside, in terms of a desire to contain the United States' power in global affairs.

Much of the modern China-Russia relationship, despite the alarmism propagated by some observers, remains opportunistic for both parties. No number of agreements—neither on the energy trade nor economic initiatives such as the agreement to jointly develop China's "New Silk Road" economic initiative with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union integration structure—can assuage the lingering feelings of strategic mistrust between the two countries, be it in the economic or military realm.

Despite the post-Cold War drawdown of armed forces on the frontier, the Sino-Russian border remains militarized, exemplified by the deployment of 12,000 Chinese troops to the border in 2014, possibly in response to Russian nuclear drills near the border due to take place later that month. The failure to move beyond a geopolitical worldview in the China-Russia relationship will make sustainable security all the more difficult. Not only will persistent mistrust between China and Russia perpetuate fears based on traditional, military security, but it will also make it more difficult for the two sides to cooperate on border security. Indeed, security tensions on the Sino-Russian border are nothing new, as the two sides engaged in a border conflict that lasted throughout 1969. Despite the end of open conflict after approximately six

Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

months, the tense atmosphere on the border persisted until 1991 when the two sides finally resolved their border demarcation disagreement.

In spite of the ostensible resolution of border disagreements between the two countries in 2001, anger arose among Chinese netizens in late 2015 when news reports [highlighted](#) the construction of border markers signifying the return of 4.7 square kilometers of land from Russia to China. The anger came from what appeared to be China's inability to demand more land from Russia, which Chinese nationalists believe to be rightfully theirs in light of acquisition of land belonging to the Chinese Empire by the former Russian Empire in the 19th century.

Necessity overrides high politics

Far removed from the mechanism of high politics at the official level is the day-to-day reality of cross-border interaction between Chinese and Russians living along the border, as well as the issue of Chinese migration to the Russian Far East. According to [a report](#) on life in the Russian Far East many Russians remain skeptical and wary of Chinese consumption of Russian land and material assets. But many locals also protest the heavy-handed and centralized nature in which Moscow conducts its governance over the Far East. The region's increasing economic dependence on China and continuing political subjugation to Moscow means that many local residents are increasingly turning to China for their everyday needs, which includes engaging in shuttle trading and importing Chinese cars.

Two major changes in the management of Sino-Russian border security should therefore occur. One is a move away from a strict dependence on reactive measures, to a more proactive approach, explained below. A second is to

divorce the happenings of high geopolitics between the two nations' capitals from realities on the ground, especially by building interethnic relations so as to create a culture of trust and cooperation during times of geopolitical uncertainty in the China-Russia relationship.

Aside from regular border patrol and law enforcement activities along Russia's Far Eastern borders, Russian security authorities also utilize the concept of *Border Security Zones*. Dating back to the Soviet era, these are essentially small, barely-populated areas along the Russian borders with several countries, including China and North Korea prohibited from entry without permission from the local FSB (Russia's federal domestic security service). Nevertheless, with not only the existing and growing presence of Chinese living in Russia but also the increased trade relationship between the two countries, border security based strictly and exclusively on prevention and interception on the part of Russian law enforcement is not a viable means of border security. One solution to this problem is concentrating on developing the interrelationship between the Chinese and Russian border communities.

Community relations in border enforcement and security

Russian authorities could potentially pursue a border security policy based in the concept of *community policing*. The concept of community policing is based on the notion of building working relationships between law enforcement and local communities. Instead of trying to catch and apprehend criminals, community policing entails interaction between civilians and law enforcement as part of the latter's patrol duties. This has been implemented with relative success in American cities with high racial tensions such as Philadelphia. Not only does it increase public trust in the police, but it makes communities more willing to be forthcoming about criminal activity in their areas.

One particular fear for Sino-Russian border security is the potential for organized crime groups to exploit cross-border activity and border communities. It can be easy for criminal elements, ranging from petty smugglers to larger criminal enterprises to blend into local Chinese border communities. In fact, Chinese organized crime groups such as the triads have become increasingly more powerful in the Russian Far East than the traditional Russian *mafija*. While that is not a problem specific to border security, a Sino-Russian boundary line that is difficult to protect can only make the jobs of criminals operating in the region easier. Many Chinese migrants in the region end up being caught up in the machinations of criminal organizations as a way of contending with racial discrimination and the possibility of deportation.

Through members of Russian law enforcement in border areas interacting with members of the Chinese communities in Russia's borderlands, trust between the two sides can be built. Over the long term, if mutual feelings of respect and good working relationships between law enforcement and the community are established, the ability for the two sides to cooperate on the prevention and interdiction of criminal activities such as drug smuggling and human trafficking can hopefully weather any major potential shifts in geopolitical realities.

Elsewhere, Tadaatsu Mohri, writing for the Brookings Institution, asserts that Japan-Russia cooperation on combating trans-national crime can be a way of reducing the greater strategic tensions inherent in the Japan-Russia bilateral relationship due to the ongoing territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands/Northern Territories. Mohri specifically cites existing cooperation on the Sino-Russian border as a case of successful trans-boundary collaboration.

Yet while this relative success with respect to the Chinese-Russian border may have helped to alleviate tensions on the strategic level, the distance of the

common Sino-Russian border and their respective populations from officials in Beijing and Moscow necessitates an even more community-focused approach. This will require the development of language and cultural skills among members of the Russian law enforcement community. For example, Russian education officials are [working to implement](#) Chinese language study as a component of education in preparation for Russia's United State Examination.

The establishment of working relationships between Russian law enforcement and members of the Sino-Russian border community will take time. Yet in the long term interests of Russia's far eastern border security, it is a worthy endeavor for Russian border security services to pursue. While political relations between states at the elite level are often unstable or at least inconsistent, ties between populations are often more stable. Given the distance between the Sino-Russian border populations and the governments in Beijing and Moscow, an approach distanced from high politics will likely provide a better solution for sustainable border security. Such an approach would entail fostering relationships between law enforcement and border communities, particularly among immigrant and ethnic minority groups on the frontier.

Manzhouli Gate on Sino-Russian border. Image by Quatro Valvole via [Wikimedia](#).

Anthony V. Rinna is a specialist on Russian security policy in East Asia with the Sino-NK scholarly research group. He currently resides in South Korea.

Share this page



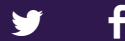
Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Useful links

[Login](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[Accessibility](#)
[Terms & Conditions](#)
[Privacy policy](#)