

## The Creation of the Russian-Chinese Border

*Marina O. Dmitrieva*

Far Eastern Federal University,  
Sukhanova st.8, Vladivostok city, Russia

---

**Abstract:** In this article an attempt is made to look at the history of the border between Russia and China through the prism of foreign affairs and bilateral Russian-Chinese relations. Today experts agree that the Russian-Chinese relationship has a definite impact on the development of global politics. However, this influence on the world system is certainly less significant than Sino-American relations. Events on extensive Russia-China border line provide a laboratory for examining shifts in the economic, military and political power of both countries and the resolution of border issues is indicative of improvements in Russian-Chinese interactions occurring within the context of the global political system.

**Key words:** Border % Relationship % Negotiations % Treaty % Balance of power

---

### INTRODUCTION

President V. Putin, at a press-conference on 20 December, 2012, said that the relationship between Russia and China was at “an unprecedentedly high level of trust and cooperation”<sup>1</sup>.

The two countries have made efforts to conduct a concerted policy on the world stage. Their views coincide on such issues as strengthening security in Asia, the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and multipolarity. Russia and China take a common stand on such problems as the fight against religious extremism, national separatism and international terrorism. Both states vote concertedly on a majority of issues at the UN Security Council, General Assembly and in various international organizations. One of the most recent examples of such coordinated actions was the veto of Russia and China to a UN draft resolution providing for sanctions against Syria. Previously, the two countries had taken a common stand against such measures being applied to Iran.

Bilateral interactions include trade, economic and investment ties, cooperation in the energy, science, technology and military fields, as well as cultural exchanges. Russia and China are also developing their cooperation within the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), BRIC (the group of Brazil, Russia, India and China), the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Six-Party Talks and other international bodies.

An important element of the Russian-Chinese partnership is transborder exchanges. For a number of Russian eastern regions (Primorye and Khabarovsk Territories and the Amur Region) China is the major trade partner, an important factor in the local population’s wellbeing and a channel of globalization and regional integration.

The issue of border legitimacy is quite complex. Despite a host of signed treaties that delimited the border, territorial conflicts recurred. However, armed clashes between locals didn’t play a decisive role and border issues were mainly settled through negotiations and the signing of treaties and agreements. The first of them, the Treaty of Nerchinsk of 1689, set the first Russian-Chinese border and determined diplomatic and trade relations between the states. According to the Treaty of Aigun of 1858, the left bank of the Amur River from the Argun River up to the estuary was recognized as belonging to Russia, while Ussuriiskikrai from the Ussuri River confluence with the Amur up to the sea was left under joint occupation until the border was defined.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Vladimir Putin’s press-conference on 20 September, 2012”. President of Russia Website, accessed December 19, 2012, [http://Bpe24\\*e>HpL/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/17173](http://Bpe24*e>HpL/%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B8/17173).

**Corresponding Author:** Marina O. Dmitrieva, Far Eastern Federal University, Sukhanova st.8, Vladivostok city, Russia.  
Tel: +690034, 7(423)2641050.

The Treaty of Beijing of 1860 delimited this region and marked the western border between Russia and China. The right bank of the Ussuri River was recognized as belonging to Russia, while the left was granted to China. The border was also settled along the Sungacha River, Khanka Lake, Belenhe and Tunmenjiang Rivers up to the border with Korea.

The Treaty of St. Petersburg of 1881 granted control over the western part of the Ili region (in the Ili River valley) to Russia. The remaining territory of the region was ceded to China. The treaty reaffirmed all rights and privileges Russia held in western China and Mongolia. In 1911, the Treaty of Qiqihar fixed the border after technical adjustments near Argun.

In 1991, the USSR and PRC signed an agreement on border delimitation in the east, which was finally completed in 2004. Obvious difficulties in border delimitation had emerged in the 1950s after the creation of the PRC, when its leadership advanced a number of territorial demands. S. Golunov points out that “the offensive policy of the PRC regarding border issues throughout 1960s-1970s was determined by a worldwide struggle against the USSR”[1]. At the same time China made territorial claims to Vietnam and Japan and reclaimed Hong Kong.

The armed conflict over Damanskii Island in March 1969 can be considered the peak of confrontation between the USSR and PRC. In September of that year, at a meeting initiated by the Soviet side, A.Kosygin, Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the USSR and Zhou Enlai, Prime Minister of the State Council of the PRC, reached an agreement on resuming Soviet-Chinese negotiations on border issues. However, the parties couldn't reach a compromise and the negotiations were halted.

A significant role in the normalization of the Russian-Chinese relationship was played by M. Gorbachev who, in his speech in Vladivostok in 1986, proclaimed the new principles of the USSR's foreign policy. The head of state conveyed his willingness to meet representatives of the PRC at any level that positively impacted on the Soviet-Chinese relationship.

In May 1989, M. Gorbachev made an official visit to Beijing. The outcome of the state leaders meeting was a formula comprised of eight characters translated as: “To close the past - to open the future” [2]. As a result, in May 1991, the Sino-Russian Agreement on Border Delimitation along its Eastern Section was signed.

After the break-up of the USSR, a new stage in the relationship with the PRC began. The need to define the border between the RF and PRC on the basis of new priorities brought the two states to the negotiating table.

In February 1992, the Sino-Russian Border Line Agreement on its Eastern Section was ratified. For the sake of a quick resolution to negotiations, the parties decided to remove disputed issues from the agenda and postpone discussion of them for an indefinite time.

In December 1992, the Russian President B. Yeltsin made his first official visit to China. The Beijing Declaration signed during this visit reaffirmed the principles of friendship between the two countries that had been agreed during Gorbachov's visit to the PRC in May 1989.

However, the development of the relationship between the two states slowed due to the initial pro-Western foreign policy of B. Yeltsin and increased anti-Chinese attitudes among the regional authorities. Nevertheless, in 1994, continued negotiations led to the Agreement on the Russia-Chinese State Border along its Western Section.

The next step was a conclusion of two agreements between the PRC, on one side and Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, on the other. In 1996 they signed an agreement of mutual trust and one agreeing to the reduction of armed forces stationed in areas along the border in 1997.

In June 2001, on the basis of these agreements they founded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Established initially as a political alliance of five states that aimed to settle outstanding border issues along the former Soviet-Chinese frontier, the SCO today has become a fully-fledged multilateral institution.

In July of that year, Russia and China signed the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness, Friendship and Cooperation. The rapprochement of Russia and China was facilitated by the appointment of E. Primakov as the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs. The pro-Western vector in Russian foreign policy was changed to one which emphasized multipolarity. China as a result became one of Russia's key partners. The idea of a strategic triangle – Moscow-Delhi-Beijing – was also floated, although in practice it wasn't realized.

This transformation of Russian foreign policy was taking place during a period of worsening relations between both Moscow and Beijing with Washington. The former emerged as a result of growing mistrust following on from events in Yugoslavia, NATO's expansion to Russia's borders and disappointments caused by the unrealized expectations engendered through partnership with the West. Tensions between Beijing and Washington were stoked by the crisis over Taiwan, when on the eve of the presidential election in Taiwan the PRC conducted military exercises in the area.

Washington condemned Beijing's actions and sent its warships to the Taiwanese Strait. The situation was exacerbated by the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999.

The Treaty of 2001 between Russia and China facilitated a resolution of border issues, but, at the same time, caused discontent among the public and regional authorities in Russia, who considered the treaty inimical to national interests and a potential threat. Nevertheless, on 14 October, 2004, the two Ministers of Foreign Affairs, S. Lavrov and Li Zhaoxing, signed an additional agreement in Beijing that settled the border line along its eastern sector.

In the Joint Declaration that the Russian Federation and Peoples' Republic of China signed in 2004, it is emphasized that "the agreement on the state border as well as other agreements in relation to the state border have opened additional opportunities for interaction between the two countries' border regions ... that will facilitate an enrichment of Russian-Chinese strategic cooperation and partnership"<sup>2</sup>.

The concession of islands to China had opponents in the Russian Far East. In 2004, members of the Khabarovsk Regional Duma pleaded with the State Duma and the Federation Council to not ratify the agreements under any circumstances. Those opposed pointed out the importance of keeping hold of the fortifications on Bol'shoyUssuriiskiy Island. According to some Far-Eastern economists, as a result of the island's concession Russia has lost US\$3 billion<sup>3</sup>.

Nevertheless, on 21 July 2008, a descriptive protocol that marked the border line along the Amur River was signed and the border problem between Russia and China was finally resolved.

This analysis of the history of the settlement of the border between Russia and China gives grounds for the conclusion that this process depended heavily upon the state of foreign affairs between the two countries and the positions of both states in the geopolitical system.

Negotiations over a border settlement dragged due to the uncoordinated foreign policy of the Russian central and regional authorities in the early 1990s and the desire of the regional authorities to conduct their own independent course. The discontent of the populations of both countries, who believed that the border delimitation was unjust, was another hurdle on the way to the border settlement.

It is remarkable that during the last twenty years Russian-Chinese relations have continued to deepen and strengthen in a context where the power balance between the two states has significantly shifted.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the strategic partnership between Russia and China was established mainly as a challenge to global US hegemony. This was to some extent an imposed rapprochement of two weaker states to counter a stronger one. However, the ever-accelerating development of the PRC is a concern for everyone, including the RF. It raises the question of whether China's strengthening will lead to a new reconsideration of its borders with Russia.

Therefore, the formation of the border between Russia and China was occurring in the context of the development of Russian-Chinese relations. A swift shift in the balance of power in favor of China has forced Russia to make a decision that, if not totally beneficial for her, favors further development of cooperation between these two countries.

## REFERENCES

1. Golunov, S.B., 2002. Rossiisko-Kitaiskaiagranitca in Bezopasnost' iMezhdunarodnoeSotrudnichestvo v Poiase Novyh Granits Rossii. Moskva - Volgograd: NOFMO.
2. Cherniaev, A.S. and A.B. Veber, 2010. Otvechaiana Vyzov Vremeni. Vneshnaia Politika Perestroiki: Dokumentalnye Svidetel'stva. Moskva: Ves' Mir.

<sup>2</sup> "Joint Declaration of the Russian Federation and Peoples' Republic of China of October 14, 2004", The General Consulate of the Peoples' Republic of China in Khabarovsk Website, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www.chinaconsulate.khb.ru/rus/xwdt/t167039.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> A. Gabuev, "RossiiaZakruglilaGranitsu s Kitaem", "Kommersant" Newspaper Website, accessed December 15, 2012, <http://www.kommersant.ru/Doc/914717>.