

Policy Watch: How multipolar is Moscow?

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has frequently called for the creation of a "multipolar" world in order to limit America's ability to act unilaterally without consulting others, especially him. Putin has encouraged others, including the European Union and China, to join him in opposing American hegemony. Indeed, China and several EU governments, most notably France, have also called for the creation of a multipolar world and an end to the American-dominated "unipolar" one.

It turns out, though, that Moscow does not always want other governments to defy American wishes in the pursuit of multipolarity. There is one area in particular -- the question of lifting the EU arms embargo on China in place since the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown on democracy activists -- where Moscow very much wants the EU and its member governments to respect America's wishes. Moscow is especially nervous about what it sees as French President Jacques Chirac's desire to lift the embargo.

Russian government officials have avoided commenting on this issue, but Russian fears about it are evident in Russian press commentary. Nor have Russian officials criticized the expression of these views -- something they have become increasingly prone to doing when what Russian journalists write differs from Putin administration policy.

In a Jan. 28, 2004, Kommersant article on Chinese President Hu Jintao's visit to Paris and meeting with Chirac, Anton Chemykh noted that if the EU arms embargo were lifted, French arms sales to China would likely follow. "For Russia, by contrast," he noted, "these restrictions are a boon; unable to buy weapons from the EU, Beijing has turned to Moscow."

On Dec. 11, 2004, another article on this subject appeared in the Russian government-owned Rossiskaia Gazeta. In it, Fyodor Lukyanov reported that both France and Germany sought to lift the EU embargo. "France, taking advantage of certain loopholes," the author noted, "is already supplying China with approximately 100 million euros worth of weapons a year.... If the embargo were to be lifted, arms sales by the French and Germans could increase several-fold." Retaining the EU arms embargo, by contrast, would benefit Russian arms manufacturers through providing "a respite from stiff competition with European arms makers."

More recently, an Oct. 27, 2006, Kommersant article by Aleksandr Gabuyev described Chinese support for the EU-3 draft U.N. Security Council resolution on the Iranian nuclear issue, which Russia had reservations about, as being motivated by a Chinese desire to "win many concessions from its European partners in return, notably an end to the European arms embargo imposed in the wake of the events on Tiananmen Square in 1989."

Clearly, these Russian observers want to see the EU arms embargo on China continue not because they share the EU's humanitarian concerns, but because they fear that China will divert its arms sales from Russia to France and Germany if the embargo is lifted.

These concerns are understandable since China and India are the biggest buyers of Russian weapons. Russian fears, though, seem overblown. While India can and does buy weapons from EU countries, it also buys large quantities of Russian weapons. China is also likely to continue buying much of its weaponry from Russia even if the EU arms embargo against it is lifted.

Moscow, though, apparently does not want to put this to the test. There is a time and a place for supporting multipolarity and opposing American hegemony. But when it comes to the question of lifting the EU arms embargo against China, Russia would definitely prefer that EU governments continue to heed American admonitions not to do so.

If it serves to prevent the Russian arms industry from facing European competition in the Chinese market, American hegemony definitely has some advantages as far as Moscow is concerned.

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