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China's Rapid Political and Economic Advances in Central Asia and Russia

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China and Russian Far East: the possible scenarios of interaction

China's economic rise would have different implications for different parts of the world. In the case of the Russian Far East, the Chinese economy's vitality and Moscow's actual neglect of the Far East, despite a variety of plans to change the situation for the better, could lead in the long run to the attachment of the Russian Far East to China, even, possibly without direct Chinese involvement. The Russian Far Easterners' approach to China could not be understood unless their relationship with Moscow is taken into account.

Alienation of ethnic Russians and the possible scenario

The vitality of the Russian Far East was due to the direct support of Moscow. It had a huge subsidy from the Central Government that had led to the creation of the Far East industrial-military facilities and attracted migrants from European Russia to the region. After the collapse of the USSR, all of the investments had dried up; and the region entered a period of long decline. It would be wrong to assume that Moscow did not try to improve the situation, and plans to improve the Far East had been launched. In the last few years, the plans changed with kaleidoscopic speed. Still, they brought little or no results to the average residents of the Far East; and the funds were either stolen by corrupt bureaucracy or misused. While locals had

received little, if anything from Moscow, they regarded Moscow as the force that prevented them from using the available resources.. The locals receive nothing from the operation of those companies that extract the natural resources in the Far East, and all taxes go to Moscow. Secondly, the locals resent Moscow's restriction of local trade with foreign neighbors. All of this leads to resentment against the central government.

2008 events and repercussions

One could assume that 2008 was a watershed in the locals' approach to Moscow. Locals were engaged in a profitable car business, exporting cars from Japan and reselling them; business was booming. Still, in 2008, Moscow decided to stop the practice on the ground that Japanese cars created unfair competition for Russia-produced vehicles, thus, creating a problem for Japanese cars to enter the Russian Far East. A big demonstration took place in Vladivostok. The local riot police refused to disperse the demonstrators, and Moscow sent riot police to disperse them. The Russian riot police (Omon) treated the demonstrators quite brutally. The events led to overwhelming indignation among the locals and intensified and crystallized their feeling that Moscow regarded the Far East as its colonial appendix. Some of the locals were so outraged that they posted on the Internet the call to blow up the trans-Siberian railway or pipeline. After these events, the views of most locals became increasingly anti-government as was demonstrated by the phenomenon of the "Far Eastern partisans."

In the summer of 2010, a group of young boys in the Far East engaged in the systematic murder of members of local law enforcement. The overwhelming number of posts on the Internet expressed absolute support of the partisans. One could assume that the public mood, extremely anti-government and implicitly anti-Moscow as the symbol of not just the regime but also the

central government, would not improve in the future. And one might also assume that the public's displeasure will grow if the economic situation would not change much. And this feeling defined local attitudes toward their neighbors, including China. And their views of China became different from those of Russians in European Russia.

The Far East and China

Who could suggest that Far Eastern Russia would be much less antagonistic to China than other parts of Russia? The racist/anti-minority feeling is spreading in Russia and led to several major riots (2006-2010). There was also the dislike of the Chinese, leading to the close of a major market in Moscow (2009) with mostly Chinese trade. Nothing of this sort happened in the Far East. Here are recorded no anti-Chinese riots and no demand to limit Chinese trade and, implicitly Chinese presence.

Instead of animosity, there was interest in China/Chinese, manifested in the popularity of studying Mandarin, which competed successfully with the European languages and even English. This cultural linguistic rapprochement is well encouraged by Beijing through the web of Confucius Institutes, the place for study of the Chinese languages and culture.

The sense of tolerance toward the Chinese was highlighted by a slow changing of China's image in the minds of increasing numbers of ethnic Russians. And these changes are related to the change in the general perception of the Far East, the transformation of the East into a peculiar "West." Most Russians, at least those in the big cities, are European-oriented. They see in West Central Europe the model to follow. For them, it is the country of a high standard of living, protection, the rule of law, and a broad security net. "West" in this case lost any relationship with a particular geographical destination and cultural/historical framework and "Westernism"

could well be an attribute of Eastern countries, such as China. Russians' interest in China could also be due to the absence of visible mistreatment of Russians as a people of different race. An increasing number of them feel secure enough to travel and work in China. The sense of security is also underscored by the appreciation of the country's legal and, in a way, political system. And quite a few Russians, tired of the corruption/abuses of the native bureaucracy, are pleased by the China government's tough punishment of corrupt bureaucrats.

All of these features of China—increasing economic growth, nondiscriminatory treatment of Caucasians, Russians in our case, and protection against bureaucratic abuses—push Far Easterners closer to China; they become increasingly connected to China by webs of economic and personal ties.

What could be the repercussion of these trends? One, of course, should not be oversimplistic here. To start with, the Russian Far East's gravitation to China is predicated on the continuity of China's economic growth and its transformation into a peculiar type of Eastern "West"—whose authoritarian or even semi-totalitarian make-up goes along with a high standard of living, personal security and a modicum of personal freedom. The gravitation of the Russian Far East to China is also predicated on the continuous inability of Moscow to improve the living standard of Russian Far Easterners. Finally, this trend could be altered or deformed by some crisis of nature and implications that could not be predicted. Still, if the above-mentioned trends continue—as has been the case for the last twenty years—the Far East's attachment to China becomes quite a likely occurrence even if China would have no pressing reason to be in charge.

As a matter of fact, some residents of the Russian Far East assume that they would be much better off if they would find a different geopolitical sponsor; and during the 2008

demonstration some of them carried the signs: “Give Vladivostok to Japan.”