

Will China Colonize and Incorporate Siberia?

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In June 2010, the *Xinhua News Agency* reported that China had leased a total of 426,600 hectares in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast (District) – popularly known as Birobidzhan – and the Khabarovsk region of Russia to Chinese farmers. This has caught Russian nationalists’ attention; they have called the arrival of waves of farmers the beginning of “the Chinese conquest” of Siberia.

A floating population of tens of thousands Chinese traders and seasonal workers continually moves back and forth across the border, one of the longest in the world. The immigrants settle not only in border areas but increasingly deeper into Russian territory, and some backlash is imminent. These developments raise several questions for Russia as to the migration’s impact, China’s long-term plans for Siberia, and potential Chinese dominance in the region. And yet, diplomatic relations between China and Russia have never been better. China and Russia enjoy mutual cooperation in the spheres of defense, technology, energy and bilateral trade. Why would China take any steps which would destroy such mutually rewarding relations?

China has allocated a definite place for Russia in its policies: it is primarily a source of raw materials and an outlet for goods not suitable for what they consider more discriminating markets. Siberia is particularly important due to the natural resources it contains: copper, zinc and other raw materials. The region is also well positioned to facilitate land-based transit of various resources from Africa and the Middle East that would otherwise have to cross pirate-infested waters. Russia has proved itself a stable and reliable trade partner, at least under the Putin and Medvedev’s presidencies. Aside from geography, the sheer number of Chinese willing to invest in the Russian economy makes their relationship a natural one. Russia has the resources and markets China needs and China the financial capital to infuse much-needed investments into the Russian economy. In January 2011, Sergei Luzyanin, deputy director of Moscow’s Far East Institute, said that Europe simply “cannot compete with China in terms of investments into the Russian economy.”

The pair maintains a business-like relationship and inconvenient issues such as human rights and media freedom, upon which western countries at times fixate, do not impinge on their bilateral affairs. The United States’ persistent attempts to indict China and Russia for their support of Iran’s nuclear program have also functioned to tighten their relations.

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International analysts have long hypothesized about the Russian Far East in the wake of increasing Chinese inflow. Some conjecture that Chinese economic control over these areas is not an “if” but a

“when” issue. Others argue that increased Chinese activity in Siberia is the natural consequence of Sino-Russian cooperation and that the idea of Chinese expansionism is somewhat exaggerated. A third group maintains that while China has long-term goals to dominate the region, it has no precise plan and timetable.

Deceiving Demographics

The demographic problem is the greatest challenge that now faces Russia. The low birth rate paired with reduced life expectancy has the potential to seriously undermine the country’s future. In 2009 Russia recorded a positive demographic growth rate for the first time in years. But it remains to be seen whether this turnaround will be sustainable, or whether it’s merely the product of increased immigration of ethnic Russians from ex-Soviet republics.

Approximately six million people live in the entire Russian Far East (Eastern Siberia), while more than 90 million Chinese live in China’s northern provinces. Only about 40,000 to 75,000 of these live in the Russian Far East (although, since reliable statistics are difficult to come by, this number might actually be larger). Siberia seems an ideal place for China to relieve some of the population pressure and overcrowding. Moreover, most experts estimate that between 50 and 70 million Chinese peasants lack adequate agricultural lands of the type that can be found in Russia in former collective farms, where the Russians themselves are now reluctant to work.

A decade ago many Chinese workers came to Vladivostok and Khabarovsk to earn some extra money with the expectation to return home soon. Today this has changed. In 2006 a report in *The Asia Times* entitled “The Chinese Are Coming” stated that “now every second Chinese arrives in Russia” with no intention of going back to China, and that most of them should no longer be classified as “free migrants.” Many of them carry false documents and even fake Russian citizenships. China has deliberately promoted the migration of its citizens to the Russian Far East, fuelling concerns that by as soon as 2025, it will be possible to start talking about “China’s Siberia.”

Professor of the University of Moscow, Vilya Gelbras, who conducts research on Chinese migration, notes the year 2002 as a benchmark. On the basis of data collected by Russian border guards in the Far East in the years 1998-2001, between 450,000 and 490,000 Chinese crossed the Russian border and then returned home. In 2002 this number increased by 55 percent. During the same period approximately 35,000 Chinese were allowed to settle permanently in Russia. In 2002 alone, 27,200 Chinese settled in Far East Siberia. In 1998, only 7.8 percent of Chinese immigrants said that they wanted to settle in Russia; in 2002, the percentage jumped to more than 35 percent. In an article published in *Russia in Global Affairs* (March-April 2005), Gelbras suggests that “now, considering all the information gathered, we can definitely say that Chinese migration to Russia” is neither “a spontaneous migration of people” nor some “search for a promised land” but a “specific form of the movement of manpower that serves the flow of goods.” Chinese authorities stimulate themselves this cross-border flow.

Such a workforce movement would not be a problem if immigrants assimilated with local communities. But this is not the case, and the situation has undeniable parallels with that of Muslim immigrants in Western Europe. There is also an array of other problems associated with Chinese immigrants, including the smuggling of raw materials to China. Forest products and millions of cubic meters of illegally felled trees and lumber are exported to the Chinese city of Manzhouli, southeast of Chita, where wood-processing factories can be counted by the hundreds. The Chinese

have effectively avoided paying taxes and managed to take control of several companies that have become *de facto* monopolies in the food supply. In the Russian city of Blagoveshchensk on the Amur River, a 1755-mile-long waterway separating Russia and China, the factory producing Kvass, a popular Russian beverage made out of rye bread, is now owned by Li Lihua, a Chinese businesswoman. He Wenan, a Chinese entrepreneur, has specialized in the construction of shopping centers, along with running the most expensive hotels in town. In Chita, Chinese investors have bought a former tank factory and converted it into a truck manufacturing plant.

All indications show that the Russian Far East is fast becoming (if it has not already become) economically dependent on China. Its future is in the hands of the local Chinese, not Russian local authorities. The Chinese cultivate the land, which the Russians are not motivated to do on their own. Local authorities and businessmen don't complain about dwindling Russian manpower beyond the Amur River as they can easily replace native workers with Chinese who are willing to work 12 hours a day or more.

These short-term economic benefits for individual Russians are accompanied by tangible social trends. In the late 1990s, Russians found it unthinkable to marry Chinese, but today, Russian women hardly hesitate to take Chinese husbands, who are perceived as harder workers and softer drinkers than Russians.

Scenarios for Siberia

If Siberia is in fact awaiting a Chinese Future, a number of scenarios might unfold over the next decade. The worst-case scenario for Russia is not only the continuation of ethnic Chinese migration but a substantial rise of it in response to changes taking place in northern China. Russia's Far East would then become predominantly inhabited by ethnics Chinese, resulting in a decisive change in the nature of a region already far-removed from European Russia.

Military aggression, which seems highly improbable for now, cannot be totally ruled out in the long term. Although it is a fact that the Russian army lacks the latest modern weaponry, historically its strength has always lain in its number of troops, not in its cutting-edge technology. At Poltava in 1709, Galicia in 1914 and Stalingrad in 1942, the Russians did not liberate or retake these lands because they had more advanced military technology at their disposal or developed cleverer tactics, but rather because they had a large numerical superiority over the enemy. This numerical advantage would dissipate entirely in the face of the Chinese armed forces, which are ten times larger. The inferiority of Russia's conventional forces is also aggravated by the shortage of conscripts, a consequence of the country's demographic decline. However, with regards to nuclear weapons, Russia's total of approximately 10,000 nuclear warheads surpasses China's total of approximately 240 nuclear warheads. The Russian economy may lag far behind China's, but the Russian Army is still a frightening force and should not be underestimated.

For instance, in June and July 2010, Russian armed forces conducted Vostok 2010, a series of 10-day unprecedented military exercises. These were made up of a set of strategic exercises that involved 20,000 troops, up to 70 warplanes and 30 warships from the Far Eastern, Siberian and Volga-Urals military districts, as well as the Pacific Fleet. Designed primarily to put the military to the test, these wargames were also a warning to Chinese military officials who were present during the exercise. Vostok 2010 simulated a response to a possible attack from China. It included the firing of live ammunition, simulated airborne assaults and amphibious assault landings.

A third scenario consists of various actions taken by Russia to counteract Chinese efforts to entrench itself in East Siberia. The demographics indicate that sooner or later China will have some sociological influence and political clout in the region. Russia may soon become a raw material appendage to China should the present trend continue.

In July 2000, while traveling to the Russian Far East, then Russian President Vladimir Putin declared that unless concerted measures were taken, “Russians in the border regions will have to speak Chinese, Japanese and Korean within a few decades.” In December 2006, at a meeting of the Russian Security Council, he asserted that previous governmental measures had failed to eliminate problems, including the progressive decline of the Russian population in the region and the imbalance between domestic production and international demand, mostly in neighboring China. He also highlighted how the lack of transportation and information networks prevented the integration of the region with the rest of the Russian Federation, resulting in its economic isolation.

Putin’s priority was to develop an action plan for the development of the energy sector, infrastructure, transport, logistics and public services with a view to create new economic opportunities, attract investors and incite workers to relocate to the area, halting in turn the expected population decline. During Chinese President Hu Jintao’s official visit to Moscow in 2006, the Russian and Chinese governments agreed to cooperate in the areas of trade, agriculture, construction, transportation, public utilities, the service sector and the development of natural resources. In order to facilitate cooperation and minimize trade disputes in these areas, both countries concurred to draft a joint action plan. The result was the “Russia-China 2009-2018 Cooperation Program,” which emphasizes that China build factories in northeast China and utilize raw materials from Far Eastern and East Siberia. It was approved in September 2009 by Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Hu Jintao. Moreover, during a visit to Vladivostok in January 2007, Putin said the government would provide approximately US\$3.8 billion for the construction of facilities and infrastructure necessary to host the September 2012 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vladivostok.

In 2008, at a conference on the socio-economic development of the Kamchatka Krai region in the Russian Far East, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said that there is a need to raise the level of industrial production and the inflow of workers because the threat of loss of territory is serious. Accordingly, the central government in Moscow and the governor of the Amur Oblast, Oleg Kozhemyako, launched a program to lure citizens from the now-independent former Soviet republics to depopulated border areas of China. Ethnic Russians living outside the Russian Federation territory are estimated at between 20 and 30 million, two thirds of them living in the neighboring former Soviet republics.

Another Russian bid to thwart Chinese encroachment in the Far East is Putin’s pet Eurasian Union project. The Russian-led bloc, established on the basis of the already existing Customs Union of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Russia, would constitute an economic bulwark against both Chinese expansion into Far East Siberia and the former Russian/Soviet empires.

A final possible, converse scenario, which seems to be taking shape, is a deepened Sino-Russian partnership, as both countries wish to benefit from the exploration of Siberia and this can be achieved, at least nominally, through closer ties. Diplomatic and economic relationships are on a solid footing at present and there are few theoretical obstacles to further collaboration, should both parties desire it. China can bring in expertise and workers, with Russian consent, to start building facilities and populating various settlements, both new and old. Cooperation would especially

facilitate exploitation of raw materials, which are indispensable for both countries' long term economic growth.

Thin Ice

Sino-Russian relations as they stand today have never been better – the two countries are strategic partners in goods and arms trades, and intensive cooperation even occurs at the international level, within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the UN Security Council, the BRICS and the G20.

But China's encroachment into Russian territory may finally upset this tenuous balance. If Beijing does not change the situation, this could push Russia, finally, into the arms of the West. For Russia, the advantages of a tactical alliance with China are in fact doubtful. A tenable partner for the exploitation of the Siberian deposits would be Japan. However, the problem with this option is the standoff over the return of the Kurile Islands to Japan.

China always showed a marked reluctance for overly warm relations with any one country. So what is the significance of the alliance with Russian through the SCO? Chinese action in the Senkaku Islands and other disputed sea territories surrounding the Middle Kingdom should make Moscow uneasy. The Russians have no guarantee that Chinese rapprochement will last for a long period of time and that the strategic partnership will remain the backbone of Russo-Chinese relations.

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