

Russia's Eastern Exposure

Moscow's Asian Empire Crumbles

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Contemporary analysis of Russian foreign policy understandably focuses on Ukraine and the Caucasus, but real drama is unfolding much farther east. Having lost its European empire in the twentieth century, Russia may find that its biggest threat in the twenty-first is that of the loss of its Asian empire. Stretching for thousands of miles east of Siberia, the Russian Far East is thinly settled and poorly integrated into the rest of the country. In 1867, Russia sold Alaska to the United States because it could neither govern nor defend it. Today's Russia must act soon to prevent a similar scenario on its eastern flank.

Until its fall in 1644, China's Ming dynasty claimed suzerainty over all of what is now the Russian Far East and much of Central Asia. With its own political system lacking the modern concept of sovereignty, China did not establish settler colonies to reinforce its claims to these territories. And so, when Russia began to expand eastward from Siberia into the Far East in the 1600s, it did not encounter any Chinese garrisons.

By 1689, Russian presence in the region was sufficient to prompt the negotiation of the Treaty of Nerchinsk, which defined a formal boundary between the Russian and Chinese spheres. In time, Russia grew overwhelmingly more powerful than China. In 1858, representatives of Tsar Alexander II and the Qing Xianfeng emperor signed the Treaty of Aigun. This treaty, forced on China in the midst of the Taiping Rebellion, formalized Russia's sovereignty over what is now the Russian Far East. In the ensuing 1860 Treaty of Beijing, China further ceded the area that would become the Russian port city of Vladivostok.

Along with the treaties that granted Hong Kong to Britain and opened other ports to Western countries, China's two treaties with Russia reflect the decay of China's imperial court and the rise of the European colonial powers. Although the return of Hong Kong in 1997 closed the book on Western European colonialism in China, the issue of Russian colonialism is still very much open. China's demands for restitution in Asia may be dormant, but they are not settled.

Today, the entire Russian Far East is inhabited by fewer than seven million people. Two million of these live in the Primorsky Territory surrounding Vladivostok, which lies on the Sea of Japan. That leaves a vast territory between Siberia and the Pacific with a total population of under five million. In the popular imagination, it is Siberia that is an empty, frozen wasteland. In fact, Siberia's population of 19 million makes that territory look positively metropolitan compared to the Far East. And like Siberia, the Far East is losing numbers—only faster.

China's population is shrinking at roughly the same rate as Russia's, but with more than 1.3 billion people, China has more runway before it falls off a cliff. Population—or depopulation—is the crux of Russia's problems in the Far East. Twenty-nine of China's 33 provincial-level administrative divisions have populations larger than that of the entire Russian Far East. China's population is shrinking at roughly the same rate as Russia's, but with more than 1.3 billion people, China has more runway before it falls off a cliff. Many people in the Far East are raising the alarm about being inundated by

undocumented immigrants from China, but today's modest influx may be only a small fraction of future flows. Nobody knows how many Chinese currently live in Russia, let alone how many may stream across the porous border in the future.

And then there are the economics of the region. Over time, the Russian Far East has come to depend more and more on investment from China—witness Gazprom's much-trumpeted pipeline deals with China National Petroleum Corporation. In turn, the region will find itself more and more in the position of Mongolia: drawn into China's orbit. Even if China continues to show no interest in exerting influence on Russia, its influence will increase all the same. As long as China is bursting at the seams with people and capital while the Russian Far East remains empty and poor, population and money will flow from China into the Far East.

Today, Chinese labor and capital may seem welcome, even a godsend. Tomorrow might be a different story. Once China has extensive interests in Russia, the Chinese government will face strong lobbying to promote and secure those interests. In the current swell of Chinese patriotism, which includes demands to fix past wrongs, China might decide to reconsider its old treaties with Russia, much as it has in its South China Sea disputes, where China has recently rediscovered the value of vague Ming-era claims to suzerainty. Once China has significant resources at stake in the Russian Far East, and once China is more confident of its preponderance of power over Russia, it may do the same in Russia.

PRIMO PRIMORYE

Some in the West might wonder why China would even want these frozen territories. But, in reality, wide swaths of the region are hospitable, resource-rich, and accessible. In particular, the Primorsky Territory (better known simply as Primorye), with its capital at Vladivostok, is potentially a very desirable place to live. Immediately opposite the Japanese islands of Hokkaido and Honshu, Primorye is the underdeveloped hinterland of northeast Asia. In the southern half of Primorye, average temperature and precipitation levels are comparable to those in Moscow. If not exactly a tropical paradise, Primorye is no Arctic tundra.

Geographically, Primorye and its capital, Vladivostok, seem like ideal links in high value-added Asian commodity chains. Vladivostok is one of Russia's main cultural and educational centers and a major port city. Tokyo, Seoul, Beijing, and Shanghai are all roughly 2-3 hours away by plane, and Vladivostok has direct road, rail, and pipeline links to the Asian interior. China has even raised the possibility of linking Vladivostok into its high-speed passenger rail system. The region needs more infrastructure, but it is starting from a reasonably strong base.

The biggest barrier to development in Primorye has probably been Russia's restrictive visa regime. Russia has designated the Primorsky Territory a special economic zone with reduced tax rates and streamlined administrative procedures, but most outsiders face onerous visa restrictions when visiting Russia. Increased productivity depends on freedom of movement. It would be good for business development in the Russian Far East to make Primorye a special visa-free zone as well as a special economic zone.

Such moves would, of course, flirt with ceding influence to China. But the alternative to institutional reform in the Far East may be complete depopulation. Until 1991 Vladivostok was a closed military reserve. A little openness might go a long way. To be sure, Russia may not be ready to host an Asian San Francisco, but the need for Russia to shift its center of gravity eastward has long been obvious. The tsars understood it. The Soviets understood it. The Kremlin should understand it too. Today's Russia should recognize the value of the Far East and see that it cannot be developed by government

fiat. All three regimes have tried it and failed. By making the Far East a laboratory for more open institutions, it could save the territory—and save the country.