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The Russian Far East: A Chinese Future?
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Historical Background

In his memoirs, when he recounted his first visit to the Soviet Union in 1955, the former Federal German Chancellor Konrad Adenauer recalled how Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev was deeply concerned about China. He wrote:

Khrushchev again spoke about Red China. He declared that Red China was the great problem.

“Just think, Red China already has a population of over six hundred million. Its yearly increase is twelve million. They all live from a handful of rice. What,” and he clapped his hands together, “what will come of all this?”ⁱ

Khrushchev then went on to ask for Adenauer’s help in dealing with China.

In his memoirs, Henry Kissinger commented on Russian fears of China:

No Soviet leader could overlook the demographic realities. Close to a billion Chinese were pressing against a frontier that their government officially did not recognise – in Chinese high school textbooks large areas of Siberia are shown as Chinese – confronting a mere thirty million Russians in a barren Siberia so forbidding to the Soviet nationalities that throughout history it has had to be forcibly colonized by convict labour. In 1974, when I visited Vladivostok, after having been to Tokyo, Osaka, and Seoul, I noted with a start of surprise that this was not a teeming Asian city, but a provincial European one; in fact it was geographically closer to Honolulu than to Leningrad, and much nearer to Peking than to Moscow. I began to understand the near hysteria in Soviet leaders brooding on China.

Kissinger went on to state:

...no ‘compromise’ of Chinese boundary claims could alter the fact that sometime in the next generation the disparity between Soviet and Chinese power in Asia would first narrow and then tilt the other way; from then on, Siberia’s future would depend increasingly on Peking’s goodwill, which no Chinese government could ensure for eternity.ⁱⁱ

Post-Cold War Sentiments...

The normalisation of Sino-Soviet relations that occurred during the Gorbachev era has not removed Russian concern about China, even though the inter-state relationship since then has been a good one, with Russo-Chinese relations a lot warmer than both US-Russian and Sino-US relations.

The end of the USSR and subsequent opening up of the Russo-Chinese border in 1988 has enabled a significant inflow of Chinese 'shuttle traders' and workers into the regions of the Russian Far East (RFE). This inflow has led to expressions of concern from politicians and officials in the RFE. One of the foremost regional governors, the Governor of Khabarovsk Krai, Viktor Ishaev, told Vladimir Putin at a Security Council meeting in February 2003, that Chinese migration amounted to "a quiet conquest of Russian territory." As "principal evidence confirming China's intentions," Ishaev cited "Chinese maps on which parts of Russia were marked by the same colour as the territory of China."ⁱⁱⁱ The former Vice-Governor of Primorsky Krai Vladimir Stegny, said in August 2000, that he feared that by 2050, China's population growth would overextend that country's carrying capacity, necessitating territorial expansion to satisfy the need for water, air, and land.^{iv}

In June 1999, Vitalii Poluyanov, Chieftain, the Ussuri Cossack Army, said that:

The 'yellow peril' is rising.... We see the overpopulation of the neighboring nation. They will come here, give birth to multitudes of slit-eyed people and then claim political autonomy.... Even if we shoot and kill a million Chinese a year, this problem won't go away.^v

This sentiment is probably widely held throughout the RFE. Public opinion polls taken in the RFE reveal a deeply rooted suspicion of the Chinese, and a strong aversion to the possibility of immigration from the People's Republic of China. There is a widespread belief in the RFE that the Beijing leadership has a programme of 'Moving to the North', i.e. a covert plan to colonise the RFE.

...Tempered by Reality

The reality, however, is that there are very few Chinese permanently living in the RFE. There were far more Chinese living in the RFE prior to 1937, and they made up a far greater percentage of the population than they do now. At the end of the nineteenth century the Tsarist leadership was also concerned about the Sinification of the RFE, and the demographic balance. Anatoly Kulomzin, a Tsarist official who played a major role in the colonisation of Siberia and the Far East, urged the Tsar to increase the land available to peasants in the RFE in order “to strengthen our bulwark in the Far East against the waves of the yellow race.” He feared that the entire country east of the Yenisei river would inevitably form a government independent of Russia.^{vi}

Nevertheless, although the degree of Sinification is in fact very low, Russian fears are in many respects understandable. The RFE is a demographic vacuum, northern China by contrast, is extremely densely populated. By one estimate, there are 63,000 Chinese nationals per one Russian, per one kilometre of the Russian-Chinese border. Population density pressure was estimated at 380,000 Chinese per one Russian per one kilometre inside a one-kilometre band of the same border.^{vii} Even a small number of Chinese migrants could in the long-term result in large-scale Sinification. Logic dictates that RFE’s demographic vacuum may in the long-term be filled by the Chinese.

In broader terms the fear of possible Sinification of the RFE raises the issue of the future of this region. Furthermore, the future of this region is integrally linked to the future of the entire Russian state. A region that is two-thirds the size of the USA, and comprises just over one-third of the Russian Federation has a population which is smaller than that of inner London. How can Moscow hold on to this region in the long-run? However, given the RFE’s importance as a source of natural resources, and its interface to the Asian-Pacific basin, the region clearly cannot be relinquished. If it does eventually fall under non-Russian control then the Russian state as we currently know it will cease to exist. The famous nineteenth century Russian historian Vasily Klyuchevsky wrote in his ‘Course of Russian History’ that “the history of Russia is the history of a country which has colonized itself.” The de-population of the RFE runs the risk of Russia decolonising itself, and so losing even more of its identity.

Stalin could solve these sorts of problems by forcing Russians to live there, and post-Stalinist Soviet leaderships could persuade Russians to remain there with various financial and other incentives. The post-communist Russian leadership lacks such levers, and it is hard to see how it could regain these types of instruments. Various incentives could perhaps be offered, but it is unlikely that it would persuade more than a tiny number of Russians to relocate from the European parts of the Russian Federation to the RFE.

Moscow may then face the dilemma of having no choice but to permit the migration of non-Russians into the RFE if this region is to flourish economically, and if Russia wishes to be an Asian-Pacific power. In July 2000 Vladimir Putin said that “if we do not make a real effort to develop Russia’s Far East, then in the next few decades, the Russian population will be speaking mainly Japanese, Chinese and Korean.” Putin’s successors may find that they have no choice other than to look east.

A US Example?

Russia may perhaps look to the USA as an example of the potential of immigration from a large neighbour to transform a country. The inflow of Mexican immigrants could have far-reaching ramifications for the United States. The conservative scholar Samuel P. Huntington, for example, has argued that the inflow of Hispanic immigrants into the USA could pose a serious challenge to the traditional, Anglo-Saxon character of the USA later in the twenty-first century.^{viii} Huntington has commented that Hispanics currently constitute about 12 per cent of the population of the USA, and some projections predict that Hispanics could make up one-quarter of the country by 2050. Almost half of Los Angeles is Hispanic, and Huntington notes that “in 2003, for the first time since the 1850s, a majority of newborn children in California were Hispanic.” Huntington argues that the current wave of Hispanic immigrants make less effort than other immigrants to learn English, so forcing the development of bilingualism in certain parts of the USA, and warns that the country could face the danger of a de facto split into Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parts.

Huntington warns:

No other immigrant group in U.S. history has asserted or could assert a historical claim to U.S. territory. Mexicans and Mexican Americans can and do make that claim. Almost all of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Nevada, and Utah was part of Mexico until Mexico lost them as a result of the Texan War of Independence in 1835-1836 and the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848. Mexico is the only country that the United States has invaded, occupied its capital—placing the Marines in the “halls of Montezuma”—and then annexed half its territory. Mexicans do not forget these events. Quite understandably, they feel that they have special rights in these territories. “Unlike other immigrants,” Boston College political scientist Peter Skerry notes, “Mexicans arrive here from a neighboring nation that has suffered military defeat at the hands of the United States; and they settle predominantly in a region that was once part of their homeland.... Mexican Americans enjoy a sense of being on their own turf that is not shared by other immigrants...”

Demographically, socially, and culturally, the *reconquista* (re-conquest) of the Southwest United States by Mexican immigrants is well underway. A meaningful move to reunite these territories with Mexico seems unlikely, but Prof. Charles Truxillo of the University of New Mexico predicts that by 2080 the southwestern states of the United States and the northern states of Mexico will form *La República del Norte* (The Republic of the North).^{ix} Various writers have referred to the southwestern United States plus northern Mexico as ‘MexAmerica’ or ‘Amexica’ or ‘Mexifornia’. “We are all Mexicans in this valley,” a former county commissioner of El Paso, Texas, declared in 2001.

Challenges for Moscow

The extent of the Sinification of the RFE is far less than that of the Mexicanisation of the south-western states of the USA. A fear that large-scale Chinese immigration into the RFE could resemble the influx of Mexicans into the USA, with all its implications, is one reason why both Moscow and regional leaderships have been reluctant to permit permanent Chinese settlement in the RFE. Just as Mexico lost territory to the USA in the nineteenth century, so also did China lose territory to the Russian Empire. How many people today are aware that Vladivostok and Khabarovsk were once Chinese cities? By what Chinese Communist leaders term 'unequal treaties', China lost about 1.5 million square kilometres to the Tsarist Empire in the latter half of the nineteenth century.^x In August 1964 Mao-Tse Tung referred to the annexation of Chinese territory by Tsarist Russia and stated that, "we have not yet presented our account for this list".^{xi}

What if the demographic vacuum is filled by the Chinese? Could the account be presented then? Could Charles Truxillo's 2080 *República del Norte* scenario for the south-western USA be repeated along the Sino-Russian border? The great eighteenth century Russian scientist Mikhail Lomonosov stated that "Russia's power will grow with Siberia". This statement appeared on posters in Soviet schools as late as the 1980s.^{xii} What will happen to Russian power if the RFE is subject to a Chinese *reconquista*? In June 2000 Bill Clinton said that he hoped he would be the last US President who could not speak Spanish. Will a Russian President one day make a similar observation about speaking Chinese? How will the USA respond, if in several decades from now it finds itself confronting a greater China, controlling the open-water Arctic shoreline of what is now the RFE, with Chinese ICBM silos dotted around the wide open spaces of this region?

At the same time as Moscow ponders the dilemma of the possible Sinification of its far eastern provinces, it has also to contend with a shrinking Slavic population, and a growing Moslem one.^{xiii} Moslems make up about one-seventh of the population of the Russian Federation, and they have a higher birth rate than Slavs. A Russian expert on Islam, Aleksey Malashenko, stated in 2005 that he does not expect Russia to become "a Moslem society in several years, although maybe in half a century we'll see something surprising".^{xiv} In November 2006, the director of the Federal Migration Service, Konstantin Romodanovsky, said foreigners should not be allowed to create "ethnic enclaves" in which they outnumber "native Russians" in any district or region of the country.^{xv} This dilemma may prove unavoidable for Moscow.

Islamisation in the Volga-Urals, Northern Caucasus and parts of European Russia, along with Sinification of the Far East? Russia's greatest challenge over the next few decades may be to ensure that it remains Russian. Alexander Belov, head of the Movement Against Illegal Immigration said that "Russia is historically a Slavic, Orthodox Christian land, and we need to make sure it stays that way".^{xvi} He has also warned that "history is a fight between races and religions".^{xvii} Russia's development in the twentieth century was characterised by much turmoil. The twenty-first century may prove to be no less tumultuous.

Notes

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