



EXTERNAL THREAT AS A DRIVING FORCE FOR EXPLORING AND DEVELOPING THE RUSSIAN PACIFIC REGION

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MOSCOW CENTER

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Summary

Ever since the mid-19th century, Russia's policies in the Pacific have focused on two interconnected tasks: gaining and maintaining the status of a Pacific power and protecting the country's eastern territories. There were no continuous external threats of losing these territories, and Petersburg's/Moscow's interests in the region were limited to extracting its natural resources, as well as creating a buffer zone and a foothold for further eastward expansion. Thus, the efforts to explore and protect the region were intermittent and did not transform into a sustained development strategy. The Kremlin's current drive to the east, for the first time in Russian history, has strong economic underpinnings and serves to reinforce Russia's position in the Asia-Pacific region by expanding its economic presence there.

Key Themes

- The Russian state's policies vis-à-vis the country's Far East have predominantly been driven by non-economic considerations due to the region's remoteness, climate, geopolitical conditions, and sporadic threats to regional security. The government became actively involved in the region when foreign powers increased their activity in close proximity to Russia's borders, which was perceived as a threat to the country's territorial integrity.
- Russia's position in the Far East was mainly reinforced through Russian settlements there, fortifications along the Chinese border, and the creation of military-oriented transportation infrastructure, as well as military and export-driven mining enterprises.
- Today the Far East is treated by the Russian government as a transit corridor, a raw material base, and a geographic foothold for the drive into the Asia-Pacific region. However, in keeping with tradition, the Kremlin invokes threats to regional security to convince the public of the need to redistribute some resources toward the eastern part of the country. At the same time, there is a danger that the end of the "threat from the East" will result in the end of yet another escalation of the government's eastern policy.

Recommendations

Russia's presence in the Asia-Pacific requires a strategy that is consistent with regional realities and the country's potential. A long-term development strategy for the country's eastern territories must also be formulated. It should adequately address the relevant internal and external challenges rather than focus on repelling external threats.

The Far East can become a viable platform for Russia's economic integration into the Asia-Pacific only if Moscow starts treating the region as an equal part of the Eurasian political and economic space.

The Kremlin's current "turn to the East" and its increased attention to the fate of the Russian Far East raise a number of legitimate questions as to their essence, substance, and possible results. The main question is whether there are grounds to say that Russia now has a fundamentally different strategy in the Pacific,¹ or whether it will present the country and the world with a modification of the old imperial policies that are well known to anyone even vaguely familiar with the last 150 years of international relations in East Asia and the Russian Far East. To what extent are the past experiences reflected in the new course? How long will it last? And what are its possible ramifications?

The answers largely depend on the recognition of the causes and motives of this touching concern that the Center is bestowing upon this peripheral region, whose population is two times smaller than that of the Russian capital. The authorities and analysts have different takes on this question. Some explain it by the Kremlin's intention to provide for the "economic revival of Russia, in which Moscow and Western Siberian oil and gas sent to Europe are not alone as engines of growth"² and to "ensure Russia takes a proper place in the emerging regional economic architecture."³ Others believe that Moscow harbors noble intentions of developing Siberia and the Far East by tapping into the Asia-Pacific region's potential.⁴ Some are convinced that the Kremlin's increased focus on Asia is "a typical manifestation of Russia's expansionist and great-power aspirations,"⁵ predicated upon a wish to strengthen its status as a great Eurasian power.⁶ Another group of skeptics is of the opinion that Russia's turn to the East is clearly a bluff, and in reality "Russian policymakers do not want to 'go East,' but rather to redefine the West."⁷ In doing so, they are not trying to secure their own place under the sun but simply "an autonomy within the Western world."⁸ I think that even a brief historical analysis of the reasons behind the Center's sporadic interest in the country's eastern peripheries and the ways and means it uses to solve local problems will help us to better understand the essence of the current "turn" to the region and predict its future.

On December 20, 2006, in the latest of many similar decisions, the Security Council of the Russian Federation resolved to accelerate the development of the Russian Far East. The situation in the region was described as critical and harmful to national interests. Addressing the Council members, Vladimir Putin stated that the "decline in the population and deep imbalances in the district's structure of production and foreign economic contacts" and the ineffective use of the region's natural competitive advantages "pose a grave threat to our political and economic positions in Asia and the Pacific, and... to the national security of

Whenever an external threat of losing its eastern territories emerged in the past, it became one of the most important factors - if not the most important one - forcing the Russian Center to pay close attention to its eastern periphery.

Russia as a whole.”⁹ That’s a familiar refrain. Even a cursory glance at the historical record reveals that the external threat of losing the eastern territories had previously been one of the most important factors – if not the most important one – forcing the Russian Center to pay close attention to the eastern periphery. We will examine the various manifestations of this threat below.

The Historical Dynamics

Russia’s Siberian and Far-Eastern epic, which traces its roots to the 15th century, has two distinct major phases. The first, the socioeconomic one, spans the period from the early 16th century to the first half of the 19th century. Those were the years of the mostly chaotic exploration of Siberia (the Far East was explored to a much lesser extent). Two factors propelled Russia eastward at that time: material gain for the government (revenues from Siberian furs and caravan trade with China) and the energy of the freedom-loving volunteer settlers. Climate, distances, and opposition from Beijing were among the major restraints on settling the region.

The second phase, which can be described as imperial and military-strategic, covers the period from the second half of the 19th century into the 20th century. Having entered into a number of treaties with China and Japan,¹⁰ and upon gaining control over the northeastern Pacific Coast, Russia established itself as a Pacific and global power. This stage was characterized by St. Petersburg’s, and subsequently Moscow’s, strategic interests, which consisted of trying to expand Russia’s “security perimeter,”¹¹ while also increasing the country’s influence in Asia and protecting its territorial gains in the region.

During the first phase, European politicians considered East Asia a back-water territory, but starting in the 1840s, the leading European powers and the United States elevated it to the sphere of their prime interests, gradually forcing stagnating Asian states to open up to the West. Naturally, the Russian holdings in the Pacific have attracted the attention of other great powers – primarily Great Britain – beginning in the middle of the 19th century. At that time, St. Petersburg first faced the two-pronged problem that Russia has been tackling for 150 years: **maintaining its status as a Pacific power and securing its eastern periphery.**

Numerous attempts have been made every 25-30 years or so since then to address this problem, although they have been occasional and sporadic rather than being systematic or planned. In each of these instances, the central government had been prompted by escalating military and political tensions in the Russian East to pay closer attention to the region, and had been forced into greater attentiveness to the facts of life in East Asia and the Far East by an event or a sequence of events that it perceived as threatening Russian holdings in the Pacific. Each of these stages had been preceded by time periods of varying lengths when the threats had formed and been recognized and assimilated, since

a certain amount of time was needed for the leaders of the country to become aware of the threat and to undertake specific measures.¹²

In every instance, the Center's enthusiasm was exhausted after eight to ten years. During this period of time, the danger had passed or subsided and the central bureaucracy's interest in the region weakened. The government then turned its attention to the western or southern regions of the country, with the Far East returning to the stage of inertial development. The state always lacked the means, the energy, the time, and the will to develop this vast territory systematically. Paradoxically, each of the cycles stood on its own, and the lessons learned in the past were forgotten and remained practically unsolicited in the future.

Soon after Eurasia's northeastern peripheries were incorporated into the Russian state, it became evident that the territory's natural, political, demographic, and economic capacity for self-development is minimal. Its developmental trajectory was to a great extent contingent upon (1) the Center's imperial ambitions; (2) the ideology of the country's leadership; and (3) the state policies – its population's activities, energy, potential, and needs mattered much less. These three factors were not constant; they fluctuated as the domestic and international context changed, but they were key in shaping the cyclical nature of the Russian state's Far East policies, as was noted by historians¹³ and economists.¹⁴

Meanwhile, Russia's Eastern Seaboard has always played an important role in the country's Pacific policy. Russia's great power aspirations, reflected in the claims of its political elite to dominance over the enormous territory, were one of the main factors that has always determined the Center's policy vis-à-vis the Far East, and thus the fate of the region. For Russia, large territorial possessions served as "a primary indicator of its influence in international affairs."¹⁵ The territory was conceived of not only as the country's eastern frontier but also as a foothold for farther expansion eastward.

The great power idea forced the Center to constantly keep the situation in the East in mind and remind the public from time to time of the territories' importance to Russia, as well as of the need to develop the Far East and strengthen the Pacific vector of the country's foreign policy. However, there was a great distance between political declarations and theoretical justifications – even if they were supported by top-level documents – and practical actions. The mere presence of this territory within Russia's borders and its protection cost the state a lot. Its exploration and development required much more money, which the state was always lacking. Thus, active steps toward the development of the region were not taken unless relevant threats were recognized at the top of the political hierarchy. After that, special political decisions were made, its financing became a priority,

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and a slew of economic, military, and socio-demographic changes were implemented. These actions were aimed at strengthening Russia's position in the Far East and fending off real or potential threats to its security.

Setting the pre-1850 period aside, we will focus on the military and strategic stage of Russia's colonization of the Far East.

Having determined what sparked the Center's interest in the Far East, we can identify the periods of its active involvement in the region. There are four such periods: 1854-1861; 1896-1903; 1931-1939; and 1966-1975. The first two can be described as attempts to secure Russia's eastern borders through territorial expansion. The last two are characterized by efforts to develop and consolidate the country's own territories.

1. The Fight for Amur

By the mid-1720s, the Russian government had recognized the importance of the Amur River as "the most convenient route to the Pacific Ocean." However, Russia's genuine interest in the Amur River region dates back to the late 1840s and was directly related to the European states' active engagement in East Asia. The results of the first Opium War that England and France fought against China were not Russia's only concern. St. Petersburg was also alarmed by the English plans for colonization of the Amur region. Moreover, it was feared that Russia might lose Siberia altogether.

The governor general of East Siberia, Nikolay Muraviev, who assumed his post in 1848, expressed such concerns in one of his first reports to Tsar Nicholas I. "Many a time have I heard in St. Petersburg that Siberia might break away from Russia," Muraviev wrote. "Your Majesty, I became convinced that this apprehension is quite natural and not for the reasons believed in the capital..."¹⁶ The governor general pointed to the main culprit: the English in the Amur River region, who "pretending to be simple tourists or innocuous scientists are gathering all the intelligence that the English government needs."¹⁷

The Crimean War and the threats to the integrity of the Russian holdings in Kamchatka and the Sea of Okhotsk Basin forced Russia to take specific action in the East. From 1854 to 1856, Muraviev had sent reinforcements, arms, and supplies up the Amur River for Kamchatka three times, which made it possible to repel the Anglo-French squadron's attack on the Russian Pacific territories at Petropavlosk. After Russia's loss in the Crimean War, an influential faction in the Russian government, represented by Chancellor Prince Alexander Gorchakov and Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolayevich, called for immediate steps to strengthen Russia's positions in the Far East.¹⁸ In addition, just like the prior English efforts, the American plans to colonize the Amur River Basin¹⁹ strengthened St. Petersburg's resolve to take control of the region. As a result, the Russian-Chinese Aigun (1858) and Beijing (1860) treaties were signed, confirming Russia's ownership of the Amur River territories.

However, Russia's eastward drive was essentially over at that point. The tsar's

administration shifted its attention to the country's internal problems and other parts of the world – Europe, the Middle East, and Central Asia. After Governor General Muraviev retired in 1861, the Far East lost an active and influential lobbyist. In 1867, Russia sold its North American territories to the United States. For a quarter of a century, the Far East was relegated to the backburner of Russia's domestic and international politics.

2. The Manchurian saga

The second period of Russia's active involvement in the East is distinct and tragic in some respects. First, the tsar's court was unwilling and unable to identify the real enemy for quite a while. Second, it chose the wrong way to counteract the threats to Russia's national interests. Finally, it expanded the scope of its activities beyond the Russian border. Naturally, the events followed a different scenario – in part because the actual development of the Russian Far East received little attention at that time.

At the end of the 19th century, the Russian foreign policy establishment saw no serious threats from either dormant China or rapidly-developing Japan. Even when they perceived a possibility of war, Russian diplomats and military officials were entirely convinced Russia would triumph. "If there is a war [with Japan], we will no doubt win it," War Minister Alexei Kuropatkin wrote two months before the fighting broke out.²⁰ St. Petersburg was far more afraid of English intrigue and the strong American position in China. These fears were further fueled by the escalating tensions with China during the Ili region dispute of 1880, in which British diplomats played a significant role, as well as by the British and American activities in the vicinity of the Russian border on the Korean peninsula.

A potential conflict with England and the lack of fortifications on Russia's borders in the Far East, along with the inability to maintain continuous army supply lines, forced the tsar's court to consider the idea of building the Trans-Siberian railway,²¹ which was festively inaugurated in Vladivostok in May 1891. However, the tsar's government overestimated its own strength and misidentified the sources of threats, which led to an erroneous choice of strategy. Just as in the middle of the 19th century, the Russian rulers focused on expanding the country's territory at the expense of exploring and fortifying the land and resources that Russia already controlled.

The new phase of Russia's active involvement in the Far East was brought on by the results of the Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895, which elevated Japan to the rank of the dominant power in Northeast Asia. The tsar's government committed most of its efforts and resources to participating in the partition of China, the construction of the Chinese Eastern and the South Manchurian railways, and the creation of a new foothold for East-Asian expansion in Port Arthur and Dalny (Dalian), leased from China in 1898. Nevertheless, the architects of Russia's

The beginning of the Japanese aggression in Manchuria in September 1931 caused the Kremlin to take urgent steps to strengthen the Soviet Far East.

policy in the Far East continued ignoring the Japanese threat, believing that the main danger still came from England. Sergei Witte claimed that the emperor decided to take over Port Arthur and Dalny after he had been informed by Russian Foreign Minister Count Muraviev that "... if we do not occupy these ports, the English will."²² Hotheads in the tsar's entourage even suggested annexing Manchuria and Korea.

The tsar's government erred in moving Russia's defenses beyond its borders. Only the defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 forced St. Petersburg to abandon this strategy and turn its attention to fortifying the Amur River region. Here the main emphasis was placed on populating the region with Russian settlers. Some steps to encourage peasant resettlement were taken; the construction of the Amur Railroad was accelerated; incentives for the migration of Russian laborers were created; and steps were taken to develop agriculture, trade, and industry.

Despite all of these efforts and the two-fold increase in government investments in the Far East (from 55 million to 105 million rubles per year²³) from 1909 through 1914, this period in the history of the Russian Pacific can hardly be called particularly active. Too much effort was expended beyond Russia proper; Manchuria and the Chinese Eastern railway – not the Far East – continued to attract capital and resources.²⁴ Besides, after the Russian loss to Japan, many in St. Petersburg believed that Russia would have to leave the Pacific Coast entirely, which also tempered its enthusiasm.²⁵

3. The Japanese Challenge: 1931-1939

The first period of Russia's involvement in the Pacific was provoked by England; the second one was a response to the actions of England, Japan, and the United States, and the third one came about as a result of the Japanese militarist policies in China. The Japanese aggression in Manchuria in September 1931 caused the Kremlin to take urgent steps to strengthen the Soviet Far East. In the fall of the same year, the Defense Committee of the Council of People's Commissars made a decision to reinforce the region's defenses.²⁶ A special committee was created in December to develop the plan to reduce the military threat to the region. In April 1932, the Far East Navy contingent was established, and in 1933 a decision was made to reinforce the military infrastructure in the Far East by building fortifications, airfields, fuel repositories, strategic roads, warehouses, and air defense facilities.

The military industry was growing very rapidly. The Far East's share in the Soviet Union's total economic expenditures was increasing year after year. In 1932, the capital construction expenses in the area were 5 times higher than they had been in 1928; by 1937 these expenses had grown 22.5 times.²⁷ The resources were primarily channeled into the military infrastructure and military industry. On April 13, 1932, the Council of People's Commissars made a decision to construct the Baikal-Amur Railroad, designating it as "an object of extreme importance."

In fact, Stalin openly declared that the massive construction projects in the Far East were needed to counteract the growing Japanese threat.²⁸

The population growth and the changes in its makeup also played an important role in the region's defensibility. The Soviet migration policy was driven primarily by geopolitical considerations: it sought to ensure the security of the country's eastern border by populating it with trustworthy and mobile citizens, who would be ready for the challenges of the times. The Chinese and Korean population was squeezed out and subsequently deported in 1937-1938; the "untrustworthy elements" were expelled; and people flocked to the Far East, thanks to the draft and Komsomol recruitment. All of these measures resulted in the significant increase of the region's population and its Slavic component (for example, the population of the Khabarovsk region increased by 87.1 percent from 1933 to 1939). Men outnumbered women 100 to 72, and young adults (ages 20 to 34) comprised 41 percent of the total population. The region where individual farmers still predominated in the late 1920s quickly turned into the land of hired laborers and kolkhoz members.²⁹

The Second World War, which broke out in Europe in 1939, again shifted the Kremlin's attention to the West, but the defense potential created in the Far East in the 1930s and the palpable defeats suffered by Japan at the hands of the Soviet Army in the battles of Lake Khasan in 1938 and Khalkhin Gol (Mongolia) in 1939 helped to deter Japan from entering the war against the Soviet Union.

4. The Sino-Soviet standoff: 1966-1975

The Center turned to the region again during the Cultural Revolution in China, when anti-Soviet sentiments reached their peak. It was also the time of the war in Vietnam. Beijing's anti-Soviet rhetoric, accompanied by tensions along the Sino-Soviet border, prompted the Soviet leadership to take another close look at the Far East. In the spring of 1967, the Kremlin returned to the idea of building the Baikal-Amur Railroad. The idea was primarily shaped by military and political considerations, with economic expediency taking a back seat. Construction began in 1974. In July 1967 and May 1972, the Communist Party Central Committee and the Council of Ministers adopted two resolutions on the comprehensive development of the Far East. Capital investments in the region grew significantly.³⁰

Moscow revived the idea of "demographic reinforcement" of the Chinese border zone. To implement it, 23,900 families were resettled "voluntarily to the collective and state farms in the Khabarovsk, Primorye, Amur, and Chita regions" from 1967 to 1970.³¹ In 1972, the so-called "northern allowances"³² were instituted in the southern regions of the Far East and Eastern Siberia in an attempt

The Center again increased its attention to the country's Far East Region during the Cultural Revolution in China (when anti-Soviet sentiments in that country reached their peak) and the war in Vietnam.

to anchor the population within the Chinese border zone. As a result, that decade saw the largest migration increase in the Far East in the entire post-war period – 1.4 million people moved to the region.³³

The region's military potential had grown a lot as well. Starting in May 1969, fortified zones were erected along the entire length of the Russian-Chinese border. The border guard contingent at the Chinese border had grown from 10,300 troops in 1965 to 51,300 in 1970.³⁴ The number of Soviet ground forces rose from about 15 divisions in the mid-1960s to more than 60 divisions by the early 1980s. SS-20 missiles were deployed.³⁵ The Pacific Fleet “metamorphosed from a coastal ‘lake flotilla’ of 50,000 men to the largest and most powerful component of the Soviet Navy, with 150,000 men and 800 ships operating between Madagascar and California.”³⁶

The end of the Vietnam War in 1975, Mao Zedong's death in 1976, the subsequent changing of the guard in China, and the improvement of Sino-Soviet relations substantially reduced tensions along the Soviet Union's eastern border. At the same time, the Kremlin's relations with the United States and Western Europe deteriorated. In the second half of 1970s, the Soviet leadership started losing interest in the Far East. In the following three decades, the Soviet and then Russian leaders mostly paid token respect to the Far East. Moscow has clearly had other things on its hands. The regional development programs (for the periods 1986-2000 and 1996-2005) were not implemented for the most part. In the 1990s, the Far East was practically left to its own devices.

5. More of the Same or an Entirely New Approach? 2006-20(??)

A number of factors suggest that the increased attention the Kremlin pays to the Far East today is somewhat different from the cases described above. The Center was concerned with territorial expansion and protecting the state back then, while now the region's future is at stake.

Starting from General Secretary Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok speech up until today, the Kremlin's declared goal for developing the eastern regions of the country is Russia's integration into the Asia-Pacific. Nevertheless, for a long time, no concrete steps were taken to attain the goal. Evidently, the Russian bureaucracy, the business community, and the public were not ready to once again immerse themselves in the problems of the remote East at the expense of the close and familiar West. The search for other, more effective inducements to turn the country to the East brought the Kremlin back to the almost-forgotten factor of external threat.

The subject of the region's possible secession from Russia was brought up soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The nature of the threat was immediately branded as “Beijing's nefarious schemes.”³⁷ But even in the first half of the 1990s, the experts also started talking about the harmful consequences of the region's economic degradation and its infrastructural detachment from European Russia, which poses a threat not only to the region itself but also

to the rest of the country. By the end of the decade “it became clear that Siberia and the Far East are not merely synonymous with ‘might’ but represent Russia’s future.” “The country’s domestic, foreign, economic, and military policies will be increasingly determined” by the direction of the regions’ development and its outcomes.³⁸ The appreciation of the Far East’s geopolitical significance and the understanding that it may be lost have slowly begun to enter the minds of the country’s political elite.

In July 2000, Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke of the threat to the “existence of the region as an inseparable part of Russia.”³⁹ In August 2002, he uttered a sentence about the region’s “enormous strategic importance” for the entire country, which may have become essential to the future succession of events.⁴⁰ In November of the same year, the Security Council of the Russian Federation was discussing questions of guaranteeing national security in the Far Eastern Federal District. Addressing the Council, the president pointed out the reasons behind such close attention to the region, stating that its “serious demographic, infrastructural, migration, and environmental problems,... economic imbalances, and social tensions... limit Russia’s potential for successful integration into the Asia-Pacific Region.”⁴¹

Thus, the Russian Pacific’s integration potential rather than the Center’s concerns about the state’s territorial integrity or the life of the region’s residents became the driving force for the Kremlin’s decisions on the development of its Far East Region. The authorities merely used the talk of security threats and losing the Far East as an argument to divert the state’s resources to the region. However, this took a few more years, while the Russian leadership was bracing itself for decisive action and preparing the political and business communities for the turn to the East. The regained confidence of the ruling elites – absent in the first decade after the Soviet collapse – strengthened their resolve to act. The elites have also realized the importance of the rise of Asia and the repercussions of the growing gap between the pace of development in Russia and China. Finally, they have come to regard Russia as an “energy power that is indispensable to the global economy”⁴² and capable of being effective on the Asian markets.

As was noted above, the threat to Russia’s national security was invoked at the Security Council meeting of December 2006 in the run-up to the decision on the accelerated development of the Far East. This declaration prompted some politicians to talk about “the geopolitical hold” on the Far East,⁴³ while political analysts were alluding to threats of economic and cultural exploitation of the territory by “other foreign legal entities.”⁴⁴ Internet publications continued to discuss China’s growing demographic and imminent military expansion. Meanwhile, the state was not concerned with reinforcing its borders and modernizing its Pacific defenses; instead, it sought to create an economic and

The Russian Pacific’s integration potential rather than the Center’s concerns about the state’s territorial integrity or the destiny of the region’s residents became the driving force for the Kremlin’s fundamental decisions on the development of its Far East Region.

infrastructural platform that would ensure the country's integration into the Asia-Pacific economic space.

In August 2007, the Russian government approved the new version of the program entitled “The Development of the Far East and Baikal Regions Until 2013.” A year later, the program was supplemented by an addendum entitled “The Development of Vladivostok as a Center for International Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.”⁴⁵ As Princeton University Professor Gilbert Rozman noted, “...one corner of the Russian Far East was poised to become a platform for economic resurgence to help make Russia's presence known.”⁴⁶ Unlike most of the programs of the past, this one received regular financing, which was actually increased, largely thanks to private sector investments.⁴⁷ In December 2009, the government approved “The Strategy of Socioeconomic Development of the Far East and the Baikal Regions Until 2025,” which sets out to “counteract the potential threat to national security in the Far East and Baikal.”⁴⁸

At the end of the 2000s, the experts wondered how long Russia's love affair with the East would last, especially considering the fact that then President Dmitri Medvedev was far more interested in the United States and Europe. However, it appears that the events at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century actually strengthened the Russian leadership's commitment to the continued “Pacific drive.” The protracted economic crisis in Europe, the sharp escalation of tensions between the countries of East Asia, the events on the Korean peninsula, and the American return to the Asia-Pacific all served to revive the talk of the threats to Russia in the Pacific that have to be addressed.

At the meeting of the State Council Presidium in November 2012, President Vladimir Putin again formulated the economic approach to guaranteeing the region's security, speaking of the need for its accelerated sustained development “so that these territories develop efficiently and become the key contributors to Russia's prosperity and power.”⁴⁹ Addressing the Federal Assembly on December 12, 2012, he repeated that Russia's 21st-century vector of development points to the east, and tapping into the enormous potential of Siberia and the Far East provides Russia with an opportunity to take its rightful place in the Asia-Pacific.⁵⁰

The Evolution of Threats: Perception, Identification, and Responses

From the moment the Far East entered the Russian Empire, it has clearly been the weakest link in the nation's defense system. Thus, the issue of its vulnerability, protection, and preservation has always hung over the Russian leadership's heads like the sword of Damocles. However, the leadership took on an active role only after it had concluded that a threat of losing the territories existed.

The threats of territorial losses served as the main excuse for the urgent intervention in the Far East in the middle and at the end of the 19th century, in the 1930s, and at the turn of the 1970s. The current phase is an exception, since the main threat now stems from Russia's nonparticipation in the Asia-Pacific economic and integration processes. But again, the wish to "keep up with other powers" that fueled Russia's policies in the late 19th century can still be discerned in the lofty discourse on integration.

It is worth noting that the central government did not actively react to the warnings of "the yellow threat" that were circulated in the early 20th century and at the turn of the 21st by the local politicians and the public in order to prod the capital to take some steps to contain "the Asian presence" in the region. Some migration policy projects did incorporate the idea of containing "the Chinese demographic threat" and encouraging the influx of Russians, but little was done beyond that.

The idea of Siberian and Far Eastern separatism, on the other hand, has long been a source of apprehension for the central government and amplified the power of the external threat factor. In the 1840s, St. Petersburg officials considered the danger of Siberian separatism to be quite real. It was feared that Russians might become disloyal to the crown under the influence of ethnic minorities and foreigners.⁵¹ The special identity claimed by the Far-Easterners clearly bothered the Kremlin during the Soviet era. The subject of separatism returned in the early 1990s and is still being discussed today. The politicians in Moscow earnestly talk of the territories' possible economic and then political drift toward Russia's Asian neighbors. They express concerns that "the accelerated development of the Far East – even in comparison with neighboring Siberia – can increase its already significant autonomy from the European part of Russia."⁵² The region's heavy economic dependence on China, Japan, and South Korea encourages reflections on this factor.

Identification of threats was accompanied by the creation of plans and projects to counteract them. The first ones appeared during the imperial era, when the settlement and development of the territories were treated as "a strategic operation."⁵³ In 1861, the government approved "The Rules of Settlement in the Amur and Primorye Regions for Russians and Foreigners," which declared the territories open to "landless peasants and the enterprising citizens of all social classes willing to resettle at their own expense."⁵⁴ But there were few takers, and in 1863 the authorities stopped supporting peasants who intended to settle in this remote region. In 1909, the Committee to Settle the Far East, headed by Prime Minister Peter Stolypin, was formed. However, the results here were less successful than in the case of Siberia.⁵⁵

The Soviet era programs that addressed the development of the Far East in 1930, 1967, and 1972 did not differ essentially from each other. Economists

The protracted economic crisis in Europe, the sharp escalation of tensions between the countries of East Asia, the events on the Korean peninsula, and the "American return to the Asia-Pacific" all served as weighty arguments to revive the talk of the threats to Russia's interests in the Pacific and to undertake steps to overcome these threats.

Soviet policies were always aimed not at the development of the Far East Region as such, but at strengthening its defense capabilities and the component of its economic and human potential that ensured this capability.

have concluded that “they had nothing to do with economic priorities” and were directed exclusively toward attaining military and political goals by purely command means.⁵⁶ Soviet policies were always aimed not at the development of the Far East Region as such, but at strengthening its defense capabilities and the component of its economic and human potential that ensured this capability, whether it be the fortified zones at the Sino-Soviet border, military industrial complex facilities, or a “demographic belt” along the border. It comes as no surprise then that the programs’ effective implementation was contingent upon the seriousness of the threats the country was facing.⁵⁷

The historical context allows us to evaluate the quality of today’s regional planning – specifically, “The Federal Targeted Program to Develop the Far East and Baikal Regions for 2008-2013.” In November 2012, only 28 percent of the targets had been met,⁵⁸ which raises questions about the seriousness of the Center’s commitment to the development of the region. In my opinion, two conclusions can be drawn from this. First, Moscow does not seriously think it might lose the Far East. Second, it is reorienting its approach in favor of the integration model of regional development. Thus, it envisions the Far East as a foothold for Russia’s integration into the Asia-Pacific. In this light, it seems logical that 99.1 percent of the costs of Vladivostok’s preparation for the APEC Summit had been covered by September 2012.⁵⁹

One must bear in mind another important factor that was relevant even when the country’s leadership expressed interest in the problems of the Far East: the capital’s bureaucracy, which for various reasons had no personal stake in the implementation of the “eastern projects” and tried to sabotage the decisions made at the top. Dr. Stephen Blank of the United States Army War College notes that “while Putin’s power is uncontested his bureaucrats either cannot implement his policies effectively or regularly subvert them – both long-standing features of Russian history.”⁶⁰ Looking back to historical records, we find that while Governor General Muraviev was battling for control of the Amur region, “few government departments in the capital looked favorably upon the real administration of East Siberia.” Prince Chernyshev, the War Minister in Nicolas I’s government, even suggested that the emperor form a committee to discuss the possible secession of Siberia.⁶¹

Among the various means of counteracting external threats was the military and defensive buildup that included border fortifications, army reinforcements, and the development of military industrial facilities. In addition, the military-oriented transportation infrastructure was developed and the region was populated by ethnic Russians. The intensity with which these steps were put into practice varied, apparently according to the seriousness of the threats faced and the capacity of the state’s coffers. The 1930s and 1970s saw the highest defensive buildup

on the Chinese border, while the defensive measures of the 1850s and 1890s were limited to locating Cossack communities and villages along the border.

The infrastructural detachment of the Far-Eastern territories from the metropolis was one of the main reasons for their vulnerability. Naturally, every escalation of tensions on Russia's eastern borders was followed by the Center's attempts to remedy this problem. The first attempt was the conquest of the Amur, and the second – the construction of the Great Trans-Siberian and the Chinese Eastern railways. Although both of these grandiose projects were billed as commercial ventures, they primarily had strategic importance for Russia. The Baikal-Amur Railway construction in the 1930s and 1970s played a similar role. But given that the cycles of the Center's involvement in the East were rather short-lived, the problem of the region's tenuous link to “the federal economic, information, and transportation networks”⁶² has still not been solved to this day and is still seen as a threat to Russia's national security.

Right from the start, the presence of a Slavic majority in the Far East was considered extremely important to regional security. Alexander II made the first steps in this direction in 1854, a few years before the official annexation of the Amur region, by sanctioning the Russian settlement of the left bank of the Amur River. In the spring and summer of 1855, a few Russian villages were established there. At the turn of the 20th century, a large number of Russians moved to the areas of the Chinese Eastern Railway and the cities of Port Arthur and Dalny. In the 1930s and 1970s, Russians settled en masse along the border with China. The current Russian leadership is trying to encourage the same behavior. In early 2006, the government included the southern areas of the Far East in its program that supports the return of Russian expatriates. In March 2006, Presidential Envoy in the Far East Kamil Iskhakov shocked the public by announcing plans to resettle 18 million people to the Far East.⁶³ He suggested that they be settled primarily along the border with China.⁶⁴

■ ■ ■

As our study indicates, two factors caused Russia to turn to the Pacific in the last 150 years. On the one hand, the authorities sought an active role in the region's political life and integration into its economic system; on the other hand, they feared losing the country's Pacific territories. Thus, external factors were critical in both cases. The desire “to keep up with other powers” fueled St. Petersburg's expansionist appetites in the second half of the 19th century, just as it is fueling Moscow's “integration motives” in the early 21st century. In turn, the threats the territories had faced numerous times from the 1850s to the 1970s prompted the government to enhance the region's defensibility and be more active in East Asia.

The Far East's strategic significance and its enormous expanses determined the essence and substance of Russia's policies in the region. Strategic, military, and political interests steered the Center toward the region's colonization, which

was accomplished through the policy of resettlement, the creation of transportation infrastructure, defensive buildups, and investment in predominantly military-oriented industrial production. These essentially colonial policies did not concern themselves with the lives and interests of the local population; instead, they sought to maintain and strengthen Russia's position in the Pacific, as well as ensure its security and territorial integrity. This is the model that was employed by both tsarist and Soviet governments and is still used by Russian leaders today. It treats the local population as a strategic resource that can be utilized to attain military, political, and economic goals. Herein lies the principal impediment to the effective development of the region: the interests of the state, directed at attaining geopolitical and strategic objectives, contradict the interests of the residents, whose main objective is to enjoy a more comfortable life.

It is certainly inappropriate to fully equate the state approaches and policies toward the Far East during such different and contradictory periods in Russian history. Every cycle in which the Center reached out to the East has its distinct features related to the level and nature of state development, its political system, and the political situation in the Pacific and the world at large. However, the general trend is clear: the imperial, the Soviet, and the current federal Centers have treated the Far East as a colony that has to serve the interests, development, and stability of the metropolis. This treatment entailed providing the colony with the bare minimum of financial support necessary for its survival. Only when critical situations resulting from external actions threatened to deprive the metropolis of these territories, did the central government provide an emergency response intended to strengthen the region militarily and develop it economically. As the threats disappeared, the Center's interest in the region immediately waned.

And that's where we are today. China's economic, political, and military rise in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has triggered yet another escalation of perceptions of threat to Russia's eastern territories, which have spread among Russian politicians, military officials, and rank and file citizens. Thus, Putin's warnings of a threat to the country's territorial integrity fell on fertile soil. One is tempted to conclude that they were not issued based on a realistic assessment of the situation. In all likelihood, the regime once again resorted to a traditional model of justifying major decisions through an appeal to external threat. Appealing to external threat is also a necessary mechanism in ensuring the "securitization" of Putin's foreign policy.⁶⁵ The needs converge.

As of today, the steps the Center has taken to change the negative developmental dynamics in the Pacific have not yielded any significant results. The region's population keeps declining. It is falling farther behind China, and its dependence on the outside world keeps growing. Besides, if history is any guide, the current

China's economic, political, and military rise in the late 20th and early 21st centuries has become the main trigger for yet another escalation of perceptions of threat to Russia's eastern territories, which have spread among Russian politicians, military officials, and rank and file citizens.

supply of aid from the Center should run out by 2015, unless the strategic partnership between Russia and China collapses due to someone's blunder, and Moscow will again have to scramble for enormous resources to fortify the Russian-Chinese border. But Russia is far more likely to content itself with being semi-recognized as an Asia-Pacific power and, having increased its energy shipments to the East, will return to its European affairs. Meanwhile, Pacific Russia will remain the country's strategic resource, continuing to play the part of Cinderella in Russia's domestic politics and to bear the brunt of colonial development. Until the next cycle comes... The Far East can become a viable platform for Russia's economic integration into the Asia-Pacific only if the Center completely alters its stance toward the region and starts treating it as an equal part of the Eurasian political and economic space.

Notes

- 1 Simonia Nodari immediately described it as “the new era” in Russia’s relations with the countries of Northeast Asia and “the beginning of serious, systematic and complex development ... of East Siberia and the Far East region in general.” Nodari Simonia, “Russia in the Asia–Pacific: The Beginning of a New Era?,” *Asia-Pacific Review* Vol. 13, № 1 (2006): P. 27.
- 2 Gilbert Rozman, *Northeast Asia’s Stunted Regionalism: Bilateral Distrust in the Shadow of Globalization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), PP. 328-329.
- 3 The speech of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov at the conference on “The Russian East and Integration in the Asian Pacific: Challenges and Opportunities,” Moscow, July 2, 2009, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/2fee282eb6df40e643256999005e6e8c/12618fed035301f8c32575e8003ebd1a?OpenDocument.
- 4 *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation* (2008), <http://www.kremlin.ru/text/docs/2008/07/204108.shtml#>.
- 5 黄登靴。中俄战略协作伙伴关系析论 (/ 东北亚论坛 [Huang Dengxue, Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership Analysis] 东北亚论坛, № 2 (2008): P. 38.
- 6 郭力。俄罗斯东北亚战略评析 [Go Li, The Analysis of Russian Strategy in Northeast Asia], 俄罗斯中亚东欧研究, № 3 (2006): P. 52; Hakamada Shigeki, “Resurgence of Major-power Ambitions and Changes in Russia’s Foreign Policy,” in *Russia’s Shift Toward Asia*, ed. Hiroshi Kimyra (Tokyo: The Sasakawa Peace Foundation, 2007), P. 11; “Blind-sided in Asia. Russia Does Not Exactly Soar in its Asian Backyard,” *Economist*, July 11, 2009, P. 55.
- 7 “Russia: ‘Eastern shift’ is More Rhetorical Than Real,” *Oxford Analytica*, March 25, 2010, P. 4.
- 8 Richard Sakwa, “‘New Cold War’ or Twenty Years’ Crisis? Russia and International Politics,” *International Affairs*, №2 (2008): P. 246.
- 9 Vladimir Putin, Opening remarks at the Security Council meeting, December 20, 2006, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2006/12/20/1910_type82912type82913_115717.shtml.
- 10 The Aigun (1858), Tianjin (1858), and Beijing (1860) treaties with China; the Shimoda Treaty (1855) with Japan.
- 11 A. Arbatov, “Natsional’naya ideya i natsional’naya bezopasnost’” [The National Idea and National Security], in *Vneshnyaya politika i bezopasnost’ sovremennoy Rossii. Khrestomatia* [The Foreign Policy and Security of Present-Day Russia. Anthology] Vol. 1, Book 1 (Moscow: 1999), P. 203.

- 12 Distances – enormous even by today’s standards – significantly contributed to delays in the transmission of information. The time difference between Moscow and Petropavlovsk-Kamchatski is eight hours, while the direct flight from Moscow to Vladivostok currently lasts nine hours.
- 13 Remnev pinpointed five peaks of the policy in the 19th and 20th centuries. Each of them lasted three to fifteen years. (A. Remnev, *Rossia Dal’nego Vostoka. Imperskaya geografia vlasti XIX-nachala XX v.* [Far East’s Russia. The Regime’s Imperial Geography in the 19th and Early 20th Centuries.] [Omsk University Press, 2004], P. 522). Savchenko tried to discover the fundamental factors determining the policy’s essence and character. (A. Savchenko, “Tsikly dal’nevostochnoy politiki Tsentra: k poisku porozhdayushikh faktorov” [The Cycles of the Center’s Far East Policies: Searching for the Origins], *Tamozhennaya politika Rossii na Dal’nem Vostoke* [Russia’s Customs Policy in the Far East], № 3 [2012]: PP. 22-28).
- 14 P. Minakir, “O kontseptsii dolgosrochnogo razvitiya ekonomiki makroregiona: Dal’niy Vostok” [On the Concept of Long-Term Macro-regional Economic Development: the Far East], *Prostranstvennaya ekonomika* [Spatial Economics], № 1 (2012): PP. 7-28.
- 15 Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, *The Siberian Curse. How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold* (Washington, D. C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2003), P. 8.
- 16 I. Barsukov, *Graf Nikolay Nikolayevich Muraviev-Amurskiy* [Count Nikolay Nikolayevich Muraviev of Amur], reprint of the 1891 edition (Khabarovsk: Amur Region Geographic Society, 1999), P. 205.
- 17 Ibid., P.192.
- 18 M. Sladkovsky, *Istoria torgovo-ekonomicheskikh otnosheniy narodov Rossii s Kitaem do 1917 g.* [Peoples of Russia and China: The History of Trade and Economic Relations up to 1917] (Moscow: Nauka, 1974), PP. 221-222.
- 19 In 1856, soon after the end of the war, a San Francisco merchant named Bernard Peyton traveled to Irkutsk to ask Governor-General Muraviev for an American monopoly on commerce on the Amur. Another Californian, Perry McDonough Collins, tried to persuade Muraviev to let Americans “manage Russo-Chinese trade, handle Russia’s Pacific shipping, construct a railroad from Lake Baikal to the Amur, and colonize the Amur valley.” (J.J. Stephan, *The Russian Far East. A History* [Stanford: Stanford California Press, 1994]), P. 82).
- 20 General Kuropatkin’s report on the advisability of the Russian occupation of North Manchuria. *Rusko-yaponskaya voyna 1904-1905 v dokumentakh vneshnepoliticheskogo vedomstva Rossii: fakty i kommentarii* [The Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905 in the Documents of Russia’s Foreign Ministry: Facts and Commentary] (Moscow: IDEL, 2006), P. 68.
- 21 The plan for constructing the railway was submitted by General Bogdanovich back in the 1860s, but since it was a purely commercial venture at the time, and there was no pressing economic need for it, the project did not resurface for another three decades. (I. Lutkoyanov, “Ne otstat’ ot derzhav...” [To Keep Up with the Other Powers...], in *Rossia na Dal’nem Vostoke v kontse XIX-nachale XX vv.* [Russia in the Far East in the Late 19th-early 20th centuries] [St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoria, 2008], P.68.
- 22 S. Witte, *Vospominania: Tsarstvovanie Nikolaya II* [Memoirs: the Rule of Tsar Nicholas II] (Berlin: Slovo, 1922) Vol. 2, P. 122.
- 23 *Dal’niy Vostok Rossii v period revolyutsiy 1917 goda i grazhdanskoj vojny* [The Far East During the 1917 Revolutions and the Civil War] (Vladivostok: Dalnauka, 2003), P. 62.

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- 28 I. Stalin, Otchetnyy doklad XVII sjezd partii o rabote TsK VKP(b) [Report at the XVII CPSU Congress] (Jan. 26-Feb. 10, 1934, stenographic record), http://www.hrono.ru/dokum/1934vkapb17/1_2_1.php.
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- 37 V. Larin, *Rossiysko-kitayskie otnosheniya v regional'nykh izmereniyakh (80-e gody XX-nachalo XXI v.)* [Russian-Chinese Relations in Regional Dimensions (1980s-early 2000s)] (Moscow: Vostok-Zapad, 2005), PP. 320-331.
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- 42 D. Trenin, "Russia's Asia Policy under Vladimir Putin, 2000-2005," in *Russian Strategic Thought Toward Asia*, ed. G. Rozman, K. Togo, and J.P. Ferguson (N.Y.: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2006), PP. 127-129.
- 43 *Dal'nevostochnyy region v sotsial'no-politicheskom prostranstve Rossii: problemy i puti ikh reshenia. Sbornik materialov* [The Far East in Russia's Socio-political Space: Problems and Solutions. Collection of materials] (Moscow: Federation Council, 2008), P. 23.
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- 47 By the summer 2012, the cost of the Vladivostok program had increased 4.6 times to 679.3 billion rubles, with its federal component comprising 32.3 percent (219.3 billion rubles), <http://www.ach.gov.ru/ru/news/archive/04072012/>.
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- 49 The State Council Presidium meeting, November 29, 2012, <http://www.kremlin.ru/news/16990>.
- 50 The President's Address to the Federal Assembly, December 12, 2012, <http://kremlin.ru/transcripts/17118>.
- 51 V. Turaev, "Dal'niy Vostok Rossii v otsenke sovremennikov (konets XIX-nachalo XX v.)" [Russia's Far East Through the Eyes of Contemporaries (late 19th-early 20th centuries)], in *Rossia na Tikhom okeane: rol' lichnosti v stanovlenii Rossiyskoy gosudarstvennosti i problemy bezopasnosti* [Russia in the Pacific: The Role of Personality in the Establishment of Russian Statehood and Security Issues], Sixth Krushanov Readings, 2009 (Vladivostok: Dalnauka, 2011), PP. 32-33.
- 52 http://www.vneshmarket.ru/content/document_r_FBB6ABB6-51C9-4ACB-8D76-ED3E6EE01C18.html.
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- Tikhookeanskogo regiona. 1856-1925 gg.: Dokumenty i materialy* [For Benefit and Prosperity: The History of Economic Ties Between the Russian Far East and the Pacific States. 1856–1925. Documents and Materials] (Vladivostok: Dalnauka, 2012), P. 517.
- 54 *Istoria Dal'nego Vostoka SSSR v epokhu feodalizma i kapitalizma (XVII v.-fevral' 1917 g.)* [The History of the Russian Far East in the Eras of Feudalism and Capitalism (17th century – February 1917)] (Moscow: Nauka, 1991), P. 231.
- 55 In the period from 1906 to 1914, the population of the Far East rose from 482,000 to 968,000 (a two-fold increase), while the natural population growth had been 175,000. (V. Kabuzan, “Dal'nevostochnyy kray v XVII-nachale XX vv. [1640-1917]” [The Far East in 1640-1917] a historical-demographic essay [Moscow: Nauka, 1985], PP. 152-153). Over the same period of time, however, 2.2 million people moved to Siberia, and 2 million of them settled there permanently. (*Population Migration in Asiatic Russia*, PP. 21-23). The population of neighboring Manchuria was 18 million people in 1910 and subsequently had an annual average growth of 382,000. (*Istoria Severo-Vostochnogo Kitaya XVII-XX vv.*, Kn. 1, *Man'chzhuria v epokhu feodalizma [XVII-nachalo XX vv.]* [The History of Northeast China in the 17th-20th centuries, Book 1, Manchuria in the Era of Feudalism (17th-early 20th centuries)] [Vladivostok: Dal'nevostoch. publishing house, 1987] PP. 269-270).
- 56 P. Minakir and O. Prokopalo, *Regional'naya ekonomicheskaya dinamika. Dal'niy Vostok* [Regional Economic Dynamics. The Far East] (Khabarovsk: DVO RAN, 2010), P. 75.
- 57 The extent to which investment targets were met were 130 percent for the 1930 program, 80 percent for 1967, and 65 percent for 1972. In contrast, subsequently, in the absence of security threat rhetoric, the programs for developing the Far East (the State Targeted Program for 1986-2000 and the Presidential Program for 1996-2005) were implemented to a level of only 30 percent and 10 percent respectively. (Khabarovsk Governor V. Ishaev's report to President Putin in Vladivostok entitled *O sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoy razvitiy Dal'nego Vostoka i Zabaykal'ya* [On the Socioeconomic Development of the Far East and the Baikal Region], <http://gov.khabkrai.ru/Invest2.nsf/NewsRus/68c369e753d4c89aca256c22002c1cbb>).
- 58 The State Council Presidium meeting, November 29, 2012.
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- 64 K. Iskhakov, “Nuzhno sdelat' Dal'niy Vostok privlekatel'nym” [We Have to Make the Far East Attractive], <http://www.dfo.ru/info/interview/10.htm>.
- 65 Bobo Lo, “The Securitization of Russian Foreign Policy Under Putin,” in *Russia Between East and West. Russian Foreign Policy on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. G. Gorodetsky (London, Portland: Frank Cass, 2003), PP. 12-27. The term “securitization,” as understood by the Australian diplomat and researcher Bobo Lo, refers to the primacy of political military priorities over economic ones.

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