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MENTALITY:**

**The Politics of
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Border Trade**



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In the late 1980s and early 1990s there was a steady improvement of relations between Russia (the Soviet Union and then the Russian Federation) and the People's Republic of China. On a state-to-state basis, measures were taken to normalise what had been frosty and at times even hostile relations. Trade between the two countries increased, especially at the local level. Border trade between Northeast China and the Russian Far East reached unheard of proportions. However, from 1993 onwards, the interests of the Russian state and the Russian Far East locality seemed to diverge. While Moscow continued to pursue its goal of a 'strategic partnership' with Beijing, the regions of the Russian Far East became more and more hostile towards the Chinese presence. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the social and historical origins of this hostility, as well as the attitudes of Russian Far Easterners to the centre. I will concentrate on the southern border regions of the area, with particular reference to the region of Primorskii krai.

1. Settler States and the Border Mentality

The Russian Far East was a 'settler state' which created an initially artificial Russian environment in the middle of Northeast Asia, the inhabitants of which (like the inhabitants of settler states elsewhere) looked to the metropolis for their inspiration, their example and their defence. Under both tsarist and Soviet authorities, Russians had been called upon to settle in the Far East as a means of populating, defending and exploiting a far flung corner of the empire.

Due to its contiguous connection with the rest of the Russian empire, it can be argued that the term 'settler state' is inappropriate for the Russian Far East. There is a temptation to compare it instead with the western frontier of the expanding United States. Indeed, such a comparison was made by a generation of Russian dissidents (the Decembrists, Herzen) and is contemporarily reflected in the work of Mark Bassin.¹ I would caution against it for two reasons. As Russian settlement moved eastwards, the forces with which it believed itself to be in conflict were the surrounding Asian populations, not primarily the indigenous inhabitants of the area into which it was expanding. Secondly, Siberia and the Far East were regarded as colonial possessions, entailing the consequent relationship between colony and metropolis.² This was not the relationship between the settled part of the United States and its frontier. As I hope to show in this paper, the development of the 'border mentality' in the Russian Far East gave rise to an attitude of both dependence on, and distrust of, the metropolis. Such an attitude is in no way comparable to that of the American west. I conclude that it is, therefore, more useful to compare the Russian Far East with the settler states of European imperialism. In the Australian case, which I refer to below, it is the relationship between the settlers and the surrounding Asians rather than that with the Aborigines which is the point of comparison.

The imperial state was mostly concerned with the area for military purposes, but even that needed a stable population. The difficulty of the location as well as the restrictions imposed by serfdom on peasant movement ensured that settlement remained sparse. The government attempted to alleviate this situation by forced settlement (especially of Cossacks) and by transporting convicted criminals to the area. However, incentives to peasant settlers (exemption from poll tax and military service) as well as the

lure of alluvial gold (first discovered in 1868) were a much greater motivational force. Between 1860 and 1900, one hundred thousand settlers moved from European Russia and Siberia over to the Amur and Ussuri colonies.

Japan's victory in the Russo/Japanese war spurred the Russian government's enthusiasm for populating Siberia and the Far East, and financial assistance to the settlers was increased. Between 1906 and 1914 'a flood' of immigrants arrived (759,000 in 1908 alone). The indigenous peoples of the Far East — Nanais, Udeghes and Nivkhs — were slowly pushed out.³

In the absence of a significant indigenous population, the Russian Far East, in true colonial style, had significant numbers of Chinese, Korean and Japanese inhabitants to function as 'the other' until their deportation in the 1930s. For it was not only Russians who eventually found settlement in the Far East an attractive option. Chinese settlers began entering the territory late in the nineteenth century, also in search of gold and of employment in the emerging Russian colonies. Their numbers steadily increased, until by the end of the century it was the Chinese (rather than the indigenous peoples) who constituted the largest non-Russian sector of the population. By 1902, the population of Vladivostok was over 39 per cent Asian, and the Far Eastern economy was coming to depend on Chinese labour. However, after 1910, government policy forbade the employment of Chinese workers on the Amur railway — or on any other state project. This made no sense economically — it was purely a matter of 'national security'.⁴ It reflected a racist attitude and increasing intolerance of the Chinese and Koreans on the part of the white settler population of the Russian Far East.

After its temporary abandonment by Moscow in the days of the Far Eastern Republic,⁵ the Russian Far East became a recognised bastion of Soviet power on the Pacific. This was an unusual period of tolerance for the Asian communities in the area. Both the Chinese and Korean populations were given a role in local government and encouraged to establish their own schools, newspapers, theatres and so on. The period ended, however, with the increase in Japanese military activity in Manchuria and in China generally. Amidst officially-endorsed hysteria about Japanese spies and saboteurs in the Asian communities, the Korean population was deported (mostly to Central Asia) in 1937, while some 63,000 Chinese vanished — possibly to labour camps in the north.⁶ It was once more urgent to populate the Far East with Russians. In fact, it was a strategic priority, symbolised by *Komsomol'skaya pravda's* front page in 1937: 'Girls! Come to the Far East!'.⁷

When considering this aspect of the Russian Far East, various other settler states come to mind (such as Northern Ireland), but none more so perhaps than Australia, given the nature of the settlement (white Europeans in Asia) and even its original purposes, both military and penal. Australia was seen as an important military outpost for British interests in the South Pacific, and ever since that time Australians have regarded themselves as the potential victims of hostile invasion: from the French (in the 1790s and 1800s, and again in the 1820s), the Russians (in the 1850s and 1860s), and from Japan after 1905. Once internal pacification had been achieved, Australia's 'frontier' was set somewhere in Asia and its defence was regarded by the settlers as the defence of Western civilisation.⁸ This was clearly manifested through the various military contingents sent by Australia to aid the British Empire — in the Sudan, against the Boers and the Boxers, and in the First World War.

Continuing the analogy, Robert Hughes has drawn our attention to the similarity between Australia as a penal colony and the Gulag in Siberia.⁹ And Australia was not without its own major population of Chinese, who came to trade, to prospect for gold and to work. The number of Chinese in the state of Victoria rose from 2000 in 1853 to 10,000 in 1855, and then to approximately 40,000 two years later. The Governor, Sir Charles Hotham, was moved to characterise this as a 'weekly invasion' and began talking of the need for 'self defence'.¹⁰ The frankly racist attitudes of the early Australian settlers to the Chinese were the equal of those expressed in the Russian Far East.

The nature of the settler state has at least two effects on the kind of society that it produces, both of which have proved useful in recent times to the leaders of the Russian Far East:

(a) The beleaguered garrison

One historian described the Protestant community in Northern Ireland as 'a beleaguered garrison loyal to the Crown and Empire, defending an Imperial interest in a hostile and rebellious land.'¹¹ The same kind of attitudes have been cultivated in the Russian Far East, at first as a bastion of imperial Russia and its civilisation, and then as an outpost of socialism. As the latter, it had to be firmly defended, locked up and enclosed against all sorts of enemies. Thus Marshal Blyukher to the 17th CPSU congress in 1934: 'Frontier under lock and key!' — words that were echoed by the fighter pilot who shot down KAL 007 in 1983.¹²

The enemies changed over the years, from Chinese bandits, to the Japanese army in Manchuria, to the United States across the

Pacific before returning to the Chinese — but their alleged aim was always the same — to destroy the Soviet/Russian way of life. The Far East was always, and remains, under some sort of perceived threat, and the defence of the Far East was and is the defence of Russia. The Governor of Primorskii krai, Yevgenii Nazdratenko, declared in 1994, 'We strengthened Russian statehood in the Far East by closing the border. I did a good job for our country.'¹³

(b) The settler mentality

Settler states try, as a means of cultural defence, to reproduce as closely as possible the customs, manners and society of the metropolis in their new environment. Hughes says of the early Australian settlement:

*All colonial standards ... were English. Until well into the 1820s, the word 'Australian' was a term of abuse, or at best of condescension; it carried an air of seediness on the rim of the Pacific.*¹⁴

However, because they are generally cut off from the changing mores of the home country, their reproduction of it tends to become static. The two are uncoupled, and the settler society begins to look old-fashioned compared to the metropolis.¹⁵ There then emerges the familiar colonial phenomenon of the settlers (in India say, or Northern Ireland) appearing more 'British' than the British. From here, it is but a short step to the settlers considering themselves as such and as more loyal to, and more representative of the 'national interest' than anyone in the metropolis. This is especially so if the imperial ambitions of the metropolis recede:

*... the dwindling of the imperialist aims in the metropolis does not imply a parallel decline in the colonialist ideology of the settlers. On the contrary: in areas faced with a combination of native inhabitants demanding power and a metropolis which has lost the imperial urge, the settler mentality is likely to come to the fore.*¹⁶

Has this been the case in the Russian Far East? Certainly, in terms of the society that was constructed in the 1930s, its 'Russianness' was continually emphasised and its nature as an outpost reiterated by frontier vigilance campaigns, the cult around the Border Guards (Border Guard day on 28 May, the 'Young Friends of the Border Guards' organisation, and so on) and slogans such as 'The frontier runs through people's hearts'. Its political loyalty was possibly greater than that of European Russia — in 1939, the Far East had the highest percentage of CPSU members in the population of any Soviet region — probably as a result of the danger looming from Japan.¹⁷

As far as being uncoupled from the metropolis is concerned, it is worth noting that serfdom did not follow Russian settlement across the Urals. During the Soviet period the Far East (at least until the 1930s) often seemed to be 'one campaign behind' Moscow (the NEP lasted longer, the First Five-Year Plan started later) and therefore — given the dramatic nature of these campaigns — defending a form of society which Moscow had already abandoned. This disjuncture was of course tightened up in the period of high Stalinism. Today, while European Russia charges forward to embrace the west and all that it offers, conversations in the Far East reveal a desire to emphasise their attachment to Russian society when discussing the Northeast Asian region — while at the same time emphasising their unique Far Eastern situation when

discussing internal Russian questions.¹⁸ The leaders of the region clearly portray themselves as having taken up the mantle of the Russian national interest cast aside by Moscow.

(2) The Market Undermines the Border

By 1987, the value of border trade between northeastern China and the Russian Far East, despite considerable obstacles, had reached US\$350 million.¹⁹ China had adopted new immigration and emigration laws in 1986 which allowed exit for 'employment' and 'tour',²⁰ thus allowing Northeastern Chinese traders to enter the Russian Far East in pursuit of trade. In 1988, the two countries reached an agreement to liberalise border trade procedures.

The process was neither halted nor slowed by the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. In fact, the fragmentation of the centralised economy encouraged regions — especially ones as far flung as the Russian Far East — to look about them for supplies which could no longer be relied upon from the centre. Between 1990 and 1992 Russia/China border trade expanded dramatically. With it came visaless frontier crossings, direct ties between Russian and Chinese enterprises, and, necessarily, the decentralisation of 'trade policy' (if such there was) to the local region itself. On their side, the Chinese allowed companies which had previously been restricted to US\$500,000 in exports and the release of fifty workers to joint ventures in Russia to expand to US\$1 million and one hundred workers.²¹ Trade between Russia and China hit \$8 billion in 1993 — and again, 80 per cent of it was conducted across the border (*Financial Times* 28/1/94). Anderson notes:

*Commentators began to speculate that regional trade was set to overtake government-to-government contacts as the driving force of closer bilateral ties.*²²

Between 1993 and 1997 the Russian Far East led the regions in Russia in terms of the decline in industrial and agricultural production. By 1998, 60 per cent of the region's enterprises were operating at a loss. At the same time, the share of China, the Koreans, Taiwan and Japan in the sale of products produced in the Far East grew dramatically.²³

Border trade encouraged the movement not only of goods, but of people; 'burgeoning border trade between China and Russia [was] naturally accompanied by increasing flows of petty traders, businessmen, entertainers and so on across the border.'²⁴ Russians flocked into the open Chinese cities,²⁵ and by late 1992 it was estimated by the Russian Foreign Ministry that there were 20-25,000 Chinese workers in the Russian Far East.²⁶ At the same time from 1990 onwards, the northern region, Siberia and the Far East began to lose population. Between 1990 and 1994, approximately one million left these regions for central Russia.²⁷

In other words, between 1989 and 1993 spontaneous economic forces moved towards each other from Russia and China, at first despite their national state authorities and only later with their encouragement. Border trade with China helped to fill an economic hole in the Russian Far East, opened up by the demise of the Soviet Union and widened by Russia's economic disintegration.

It has been suggested that the explosion of border trade between 1991 and 1993 'was caused by the unnatural economic imbalance resulting from the collapse of production and supply in

Russia...'.²⁸ I would argue that in fact it was a manifestation of 'natural' economic forces rushing in to fill a vacuum left by the collapse of what was already an 'unnatural' arrangement — the reliance of the Russian Far East for supplies and markets on the far-flung regions of the Soviet empire (and now the Russian Federation), and most particularly on the whim of Moscow. The goods supplied by Chinese traders may well have been of 'inferior quality',²⁹ but at this stage, the Russian Far East had little alternative — either in terms of supply or cost. It should be remembered that by 1992, while trade with everywhere else was falling, trade with China (and especially that part of it carried on across the Far Eastern border) was on the rise. As Rozman pointed out: 'The Chinese were closest, arrived first, offered the cheapest goods, bought items of marginal quality, and did not require hard currency.'³⁰

China was still the largest investor in the Russian Far East in 1993, despite the wishful preference of local officials for the US, Japan and South Korea as investment partners in a poll taken in that year.³¹ Furthermore, China was far more important to the development of the region than any of these places. It was the nearest and most receptive market to Russian Far Eastern goods.³² Its importance as a supplier to the region was grudgingly acknowledged even by Governor Nazdratenko when he stated in 1994 that Primorskii krai would investigate buying coal from China — and went on to point out (helpfully) that Chinese food, clothes and footwear were cheaper than that brought from western Russia.³³

Northeast China and the Russian Far East moved towards each other as a matter of economic necessity — not as a result of conspiratorial opportunism in the former case, and inconvenient

slumming in the latter. In the last analysis, if there is to be any integration of the Russian Far East into Northeast Asia, then China is going to have to be the place in which it starts.

(3) States Undermine the Border

But market forces were not the only phenomena that weakened the fortifications of the Far Eastern garrison. The Russian and Chinese states were not far behind them in undermining the border. Moves to improve relations with the PRC had been initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev as part of Soviet attempts to cut military spending and to increase its role in the Northeast Asian region. According to Gorbachev, under this scheme, the Russian Far East would cease to be an 'outpost' and become, instead, a 'window'.³⁴

The Chinese State Council (in line with Deng Xiaoping's injunction to speed up progress towards a market economy in January 1992) approved the designation of Manzhouli, Heihe, Hunchun and Suifenhe as open border cities in March.³⁵

Meanwhile, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was talking up the prospect of a new economic region comprising the Russian Far East, part of Siberia, Northeast China, Mongolia, the Koreas and parts of Japan.³⁶ Not surprisingly, Russia seemed sympathetic to the Tumangan project — a UNDP-initiated scheme to set up a free trade zone on the joint borders of Russia, China and North Korea — although the report in *Izvestiya* does concede that the Primorskii Krai authorities were 'often hesitant' about the idea).³⁷ According to Vice-Premier Shokhin on a visit to the PRC:

*A 'great leap' has taken place in Russian and Chinese economic relations. Trade, especially border trade, is growing so rapidly that by the end of the year it should reach the \$5 billion mark*³⁸

Qian Qichen, the Chinese Foreign Minister was rather more modest, with an estimate of \$4.5 billion. But whatever the exact figure, the fact was that some 80 per cent of this trade was border trade.³⁹

At the end of 1992, Boris Yeltsin visited China and signed an agreement with the PRC government providing for trade and economic co-operation, state credit for deliveries of Chinese goods to Russia, reduction of troops along the border and visaless travel across it.⁴⁰ By mid-1993 there were 13 river ports, 3 airports and 4 road bridges from the Russian Far East into Heilongjiang province alone.⁴¹ It was estimated that in that year 2.5 million crossed the frontier in one direction or another.⁴²

The successful attempts by Moscow to improve relations with the PRC were a matter of (metropolitan) state interests, combined with the fact that the Russian military-industrial complex and the energy sector constituted powerful proponents of closer ties with China. In April 1996, Yeltsin and the Chinese President, Jiang Zemin, declared that Russia and China were in a 'strategic partnership for the twenty-first century' which would pursue increased trade, security arrangements, foreign policy co-ordination and a commitment to a multi-polar world order.⁴³

Historians have noted, however, that settler states, imbued with the frontier ethos, are wary of, and often hostile towards, friendlier relations between their metropolis and surrounding states.

Those relations might undermine their border defences or endanger their frontier status. The frontier ethos did not mean that the inhabitants of settler states had unlimited faith in the rulers of the metropolis. McQueen points out in the Australian case:

*Australia's primary concern before 1904 was that Britain should protect her from predatory European powers; and after 1904 that it should protect her from Japan. Most anti-British and anti-imperial feelings arose because Australia was not always treated as if she were Britain's only responsibility.*⁴⁴

In the overall interests of the Empire, Britain signed a commercial treaty (1894) with Japan, followed by a strategic alliance (1902). This was exceedingly worrisome for Australia's settlers, most of whom regarded Japan as part of a more general threat from Asia. Trust in Britain's protective arms therefore wavered — and was shaken still further when the British government refused to endorse blatant discrimination by Australia against Asian immigration, on the grounds that it would offend Britain's Japanese allies. New Zealanders felt the same way, as the *Wellington Evening Post* explained:

*If she had no white colonies in the Pacific, Britain's alliance with Japan might be an admirable thing from every point of view; but she cannot expect it to be so regarded by free colonists who see their country exposed to the risk of being turned from white to yellow by her entanglement with an Oriental power.*⁴⁵

Similarly in the Russian Far East, as Russian and Chinese states and markets have moved closer together, the settlers have

reacted with a continuing emphasis on the defence of Russia and Russian society, combined with an increasing hostility towards and distrust of its rulers.

Opinion makers in the Russian Far East expressed misgivings about closer economic relationships with China from quite an early stage. Thus voices were raised against the Tumangan project.⁴⁶ The head of the Nakhodka FEZ administration declared that 'the implementation of Project Tumangan would turn the Far East into a raw materials appendage to foreign companies'.⁴⁷

Claims were made of uncontrollable numbers of foreign workers flooding into Vladivostok; in response, a city official suggested the resumption of travel by visa.⁴⁸ Increasing numbers of stories appeared in the Far Eastern press at first describing and then denouncing shoddy Chinese goods and poisonous foods and beverages. Crime, it was alleged, was rising sharply along the border, especially at Pogranichny (the main crossing point between China and Primorskii krai), where Russian and Chinese criminal gangs were fighting for control.⁴⁹ The Primorskii krai authorities banned Chinese citizens owning or leasing property and imposed a daily residence tax on them.⁵⁰

Local demands for the 'preservation' of their region against a Chinese 'invasion' became more and more strident. And they had their sympathisers in Moscow; a special commission which was convened by the Federal Government to combat the alleged problem of 'emerging Chinatowns' in the Far East claimed that there were 150,000 Chinese resident in Primorskii krai alone.⁵¹ The Institute of Economic Forecasting of the Russian Academy of Sciences issued a report on Primorskii krai which concluded that the increase in the numbers of Chinese (which they estimated at

200,000) was a 'potential threat to Russia' in strategic and economic terms.⁵²

Generally speaking however, the Russian state has shown little concern for the frontier fears of its far-flung citizens in Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and elsewhere in the region. Questions of 'excessive' border trade, problems of immigration and border disputes were simply not on Moscow's agenda as it pursued Beijing. As far as the Russian government was concerned, the only potential problems with the relationship concerned human rights (Tiananmen Square, Tibet) and the question of Taiwan.⁵³ The Russian state did not allow the 'borderlessness' of 1991-3, nor the tightening of border restrictions and subsequent decline in trade (see below) to alter its aim of partnership with China. In fact, when a slump in border trade occurred, officials from Moscow went to Beijing 'to reassure the Chinese that immigration and border-trade tensions would not undermine wider progress in bilateral relations.'⁵⁴

(4) The Anti-Chinese Campaign

Distrust of Moscow, and a renewed emphasis on the beleaguered nature of the Far Eastern garrison, has resulted in a mood of hostility directed against Chinese traders and settlers, skilfully manipulated by the regional administrations (especially that of Primorskii krai). In September 1993, krai authorities restricted visa-free entry and in the following year Russia rescinded the policy altogether.⁵⁵ Border trade was generally made more difficult. From December 1993, every company that employed foreign workers had to obtain permission from the Federal Migration Service, and permission was granted for a maximum of one year.⁵⁶ There was a sharp and steep decline in border crossings and border trade. Trade

fell by 78 per cent in Primorskii krai from its 1993 level; in the Amur oblast it fell by 81 per cent, on the Heilongjiang side it declined by 45 per cent. Overall, whereas trade had reached nearly US\$8 billion in 1993, it dropped to just over US\$5 billion in 1994.⁵⁷

This caused hardship on both sides of the border. In the Russian Far East, the gap once filled by Chinese products widened once again, thus causing the Far Eastern regions to turn to Moscow for aid, which was not immediately forthcoming. The provinces of Northeastern China suffered badly from the downturn in trade and three years later were still trying to recover from its effects.⁵⁸

But the anti-Chinese campaign continued. A stream of statements on the dangers of Chinese infiltration came (and has continued to come) from regional governors and administrators, Border Security officials and the military.⁵⁹ Some Russian businessmen also feared the Chinese, such as Andrei Maksimov of the East-Consult Company (based in Moscow):

*The practically uncontrolled infiltration of Chinese citizens into the Russian Far East is becoming an increasingly serious problem in relations between the two states ... The Chinese factor has become a factor of business and, most likely, will grow into a factor of political influence, for which the regions are not prepared yet.*⁶⁰

Such claims were backed — when they did not originate from — a Russian press largely sympathetic to the anti-Chinese hue and cry. Vladimir Portyakov maintains that in 1993 the Russian press repeatedly drew attention to illegal Chinese immigration, suggesting that there were two million Chinese in Russia — and anything up to a million in the Far East. Press stories also accused the Chinese of a

plot to buy up Russian real estate and privatisation vouchers, and of promoting Chinese criminal activities.⁶¹ Such press (and other) stories have continued to appear to this day.⁶²

However, facts reveal that the well-orchestrated fear of a tidal wave of Chinese immigrants is a rather hollow threat.

The presence of Asian workers in the region is hardly new. The Soviet government concluded an agreement with North Korea for the employment of some 15,000 guest workers to cut timber in 1967. During the 1980s, the region's need for foreign labour increased and so Chinese and Vietnamese workers were added to the list. In 1992 regional authorities were given the right to determine the numbers of Chinese workers allowed across the frontier.⁶³

Undoubtedly, the number of Chinese citizens in the Russian Far East has increased quite rapidly since 1991. Yet despite the accusations (some of which at least were officially inspired, of which more below), the increase was not part of a Chinese plot to take over (or take back) portions of Russian Far Eastern territory. Much of it resulted from the build-up of migratory pressures on both sides of the border, which were allowed expression by the Chinese reforms and the Soviet collapse.

On the Russian side, the sparse population of the Russian Far East had meant that during the Soviet period special incentives had had to be offered to entice labour from the rest of the Soviet Union to go there. Once these incentives were no longer available, supplies of labour dwindled, and a labour shortage ensued. To make matters worse, the number of people leaving the area began to

exceed the number moving in.⁶⁴ From 1991 there was negative population growth in all of the regions of the Russian Far East.⁶⁵

In Northeastern China meanwhile, the reforms (especially decollectivisation in the countryside) had created a situation in which a significant proportion of the population was underemployed. It was estimated, for example, that the province of Jilin required 5 million workers for agriculture in 1995, when 7 million were available. There was, in other words, a huge supply of surplus labour in the Chinese provinces.⁶⁶

Once again, economic forces, if left to themselves, would demand that surplus labour would move to areas of labour shortage — Chinese workers would move away from the unemployment of Northeast China and towards employment in the Russian Far East. And they were left to themselves during the period of 'borderlessness'. The fact that significant numbers of Chinese workers moved into petty trade was also a response to economic needs. The progressive tightening of border controls did not stop the movement. It simply made it more difficult to conduct through purely official channels.

The Association of Siberian and Far East Territories claimed in 1993 that there were nearly one million Chinese living legally and illegally in the Russian Far East.⁶⁷ The Chinese authorities however, put the figure at 30,000. The presidential adviser on Chinese immigration stated that claims of millions of illegal immigrants into the Far East were wrong; such numbers would be 'highly noticeable', he said. He stated that between 1992 and 1993 there were 50-80,000 Chinese citizens in the region (whether legally or illegally was unclear), and just under 200,000 in 1997.⁶⁸

In the early summer of 1994, the Russian Border Guard commenced 'Operation Foreigner', a concerted drive against illegal immigrants and visa over-stayers. Had the accusations of increasingly large numbers of Chinese citizens 'taking over' the region had any substance, then this campaign would have been expected to throw them into sharp relief. Yet its results were unimpressive, to say the least.⁶⁹ In the period up to September 1995, it managed to round up just over six thousand illegals, not all of them Chinese. Its most successful moment was the capture of precisely twenty two illegals trying to enter Primorskii krai in November 1996.⁷⁰ In 1997, 4016 Chinese were deported from Primorskii krai for illegal entry of overstay. Two years later the number had dropped to 3430.⁷¹ A Moscow researcher for the Carnegie Institute, Galina Vitkovskaya, reported in 1999 that there were less than a million Chinese in Russia as a whole. The estimates of both central bodies and local administrations were wrong because they double counted Chinese shuttle traders, who enter and re-enter repeatedly (that is, they were counted as a new individual each time they entered). Claims of an 'invasion', she said, were 'either a myth, pure and simple. or misinformation'.⁷²

(5) Nature of the Regional Administration

Border trade contributed (at least in part) to the economic well-being of the Russian Far East. Fears of a Chinese take-over appear to have been groundless. Why then did the local authorities step in to disable border trade as much as possible and encourage a campaign of hysteria against the citizens of what should properly be the Russian Far East's major trading partner? Especially when in doing so their actions diverged so dramatically from those of the Kremlin with regard to China?

Let us consider for a moment the nature of the local administrations in the Far East. The phenomenon of 'nomenklatura privatisation' — in which elements of the Soviet elite have taken over former state industries and now occupy positions of power (usually as a group) in post-Soviet societies — is a well-known one, particularly in the regions.⁷³

Indeed, the governors of the regions have proved to be a particularly powerful group in this regard. Once elected, it has been almost impossible for Moscow to exercise any control over either them or their activities in their personal fiefdoms. Their power was strengthened by former President Yeltsin's decision to have them constitute the bulk of the Russian parliament's upper house, and while he tried to bring them back into line in 1998, he failed. The financial collapse of August that year further extended the Governors' authority — the Centre's crisis was their opportunity, and they used it to advance their (and their cronies') control of the regional economies. In the run up to the December 1999 Duma elections, it appeared likely that regional powers and their representatives would control the composition of the next Federal government. The Kremlin, however, fought back (manifested in the creation of the 'Unity' bloc and the rise and rise of Vladimir Putin).⁷⁴ The success of Putin's current attempts to rein in the regional governors remains an open question.

The Russian Far East was not immune to the advance of the former nomenklatura, and Primorskii krai provided an almost classic case. There, industrial managers got together with much of the former elite to form the Primorskii Association of Commodity Producers (PAKT):

*... included were the directors of almost all of the major state enterprises in every sector of the economy, key officials ... the editor-in-chief of Primorskii's leading newspaper, etc.*⁷⁵

PAKT loaned money to its members and pressured the local administration to ensure that they kept control of the privatisation process. In time however, that pressure was hardly necessary, since the newly appointed Governor Yevgenii Nazdratenko was the former director of the Dal'negorsk state mining company, and a friend and colleague of the PAKT members. It seemed plausible to suggest that in Primorskii krai the nomenklatura had made the transition: from holders of power in one system to holders of power (and property) in another. And Primorskii krai was not alone. Nazdratenko had his equivalents in Yevgenii Krasnoyarov in Sakhalin, Vladimir Polevanov in Amurskaya oblast and Viktor Ishaev in Khabarovsk.

Yet the nomenklatura did not transform themselves into particularly good capitalists. One reason for this was the obsolescence (in terms of world market standards) of much of the industry that they inherited. Even in the military-industrial complex (which was of particular interest to the Russian Far East), '... [the enterprises] do not have *unique* technology. They have very *ordinary* technology ... it is impossible for them to use their technology and equipment to produce new products and new markets'.⁷⁶ Nomenklatura privatisation therefore, was generally not an attempt by the former elite to transform themselves into a new bourgeoisie. It was a matter of survival. At times that survival has entailed forms of behaviour which were antithetical to the construction of market capitalism. A refusal to restructure industrial enterprises and asset stripping are two of the more common of

these.⁷⁷ But for the purposes of this paper, the most important feature of the local elite's behaviour has been the attempt to preserve old structures, both political and economic.

In terms of political structures, the local elites have found themselves more isolated from Moscow than ever before. The defence of the region's 'sovereignty' has therefore become a much more important concern for the local authorities. The 'borderlessness' of 1991-93 could be (and was) portrayed as a threat to that sovereignty. The assertion of control over their borders by the regional governments was a display for the benefit of the local population (and for the Centre) that they had no intention of relinquishing any rights over their geographical patch. As Kirkow put it:

With such actions Primorskii krai authorities are trying to switch from the traditional role of a military spearhead to that of a defender of Russian national interests in the periphery, while more and more setting the political agenda by themselves and becoming independent of Moscow's supervision.⁷⁸

Just as important was the fact that if it had been allowed to continue, the Russian Far East would have become economically enmeshed with Northeastern China, and this would also have spelt a diminution of the power of the local elites. Won Bae Kim comments: 'Russian hesitance to adopt the open-border model derives from lack of confidence in its role in the coming international division of labor.'⁷⁹

A close economic relationship with China (as market and trader) and one of raw materials supplier to Northeast Asia did not

fit the local elite's model of state power — despite the fact that the economic development of the Russian Far East might lie along this path.

The most important economic structure preserved by the former elites has been a continuing reliance on subsidies from Moscow. Given the difficulties of transforming most of Soviet industry and agriculture into profit-making concerns, this has ever been the preoccupation of most of the 'nomenklatura capitalists':

*They don't want to be responsible competing capitalists independent of state support. They want to be what they are — irresponsible 'socialist capitalists' sponging off the state.*⁸⁰

From the Russian Far East the demand for subsidies has been continuous since 1991. Primorskii krai was still, in 1999, the third largest recipient of subsidies from Moscow.⁸¹

It has been argued that it was the collapse in border trade with China that produced an economic crisis which necessitated an appeal to Moscow for subsidies.⁸² I would argue on the contrary, that it was the local elite's need for subsidies that led to the *creation* of a crisis — the campaign against the Chinese and the crack-down on border trade.

The dilemma for the Far Eastern rulers (led by Nazdratenko) was this: given Moscow's steady disenchantment with the regional authorities (manifested, for example, in Nazdratenko's spectacular falling-out with Yeltsin) and attempts at economic austerity, how could a steady flow of subsidies be kept up?

(6) The Anti-Border Campaign

The Far Eastern rulers had to make an appeal not only to Moscow but also to their own populations (for their top representatives were now popularly elected) — and the appeal to the former would draw added strength from widespread support amongst the latter. They were able to do both on the basis of the frontier ethos that had existed in the Russian Far East since the 1930s.

They would do so by appearing to hold high the national interest which they portrayed as having been cast aside by Moscow. Given the border mentality, their campaign reached receptive ears. Having 'defended Russia' by scuttling border trade, their next target was the new border demarcation with the PRC.

In 1991, Russia and China had reached broad agreement on the new demarcation of their common border, with the exception of three islands in the Far East — two (Bolshoy Ussuriisk and Tarabarov) near Khabarovsk and one (Bolshoy) near Mongolia. When, during the drawn-out negotiations about the islands, it seemed that they would revert to China,⁸³ the authorities in Primorskii krai and Khabarovsk unleashed a torrent of denunciation against giving an inch to the Chinese. Nazdratenko encouraged the regional and federal Dumas to intervene.⁸⁴ Governor Ishaev of Khabarovsk wrote to the prime minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, demanding denunciation of the 1991 border agreement; 'There must be no surrender of Russian Far Eastern territories to other states', he said, 'Russia must not give up its lands to anyone.'⁸⁵ He also accused the Chinese of having a secret policy of expansion in the Russian Far East.⁸⁶ Support in the campaign was forthcoming from the authorities in the Jewish Autonomous oblast. The chairman

of its legislative assembly, Stanislas Vavilov accused China of using underground explosions to alter the flow of the Amur river and thus push the border line (which was meant to run along the main shipping channel) closer to the Russian bank.⁸⁷

Nazdratenko continued the campaign into late 1996⁸⁸ — to the extent that Yeltsin was moved to demand that any further statement on the subject from Nazdratenko should be cleared first with the Russian Foreign Ministry.⁸⁹ On his visit to China in November 1997, Yeltsin was accompanied by the governors of the four Russian regions adjacent to China — but Nazdratenko found himself excluded from the official talks with the Chinese.

The campaign against border demarcation was not the only way that the regional authorities sought to keep the border mentality alive and kicking. Nazdratenko had talked of deploying Cossack hosts along the border in 1993. By 1997, the Ussuri host had been deployed in the Primorskii krai, Kamchatka, Sakhalin and Magadan regions, pledged 'not to give away a single inch of land'. The Primorskii krai Duma voted in July 1998 to build a string of sixty Cossack villages along the border in order to defend it. The Duma hoped that federal authorities would pay seventy percent of the costs, which would include housing subsidies for the Cossack families. One of the Cossacks already there noted: 'Americans know very well about the Texas Rangers. It's the same idea: to settle and protect the borders with specially prepared people.'⁹⁰

In addition, the regional authorities took some trouble to observe the sixtieth anniversary of the fighting at Lake Khasan, where Soviet and Japanese forces met in a preliminary clash in July/August 1938. Wreaths were laid at the Border Guard

monument in Vladivostok — which features statues of Tsarist, Soviet and Russian Border Guards.⁹¹

The campaign of the Far Eastern authorities on the border represented the mobilisation of the settler state in action — dependent on the metropolis for its survival as a distinct entity, yet clad in its own understanding of ‘Russian’ national interest and hostile to the Centre’s evident untrustworthiness on this subject. But this was a means to an end for the authorities. Their main aim was to ensure the continued support of Moscow for the preservation of their own power. In addition, the whole anti-Chinese campaign was also useful in diverting the local population’s attention from the region’s deepening economic difficulties.⁹²

Nevertheless, the ‘frontier campaign’ of the Far Easterners did not leave Moscow entirely unmoved. In the very week that Yeltsin and Jiang were expounding on their ‘strategic partnership’, the Russian interior ministry summoned the press to inform them that massive illegal Chinese immigration threatened national security. There were two million Chinese in the Russian Far East, it was claimed, two-thirds of whom were illegal immigrants, many of them involved in Chinese criminal gangs.⁹³ In general however, Moscow has not been panicked by frontier tales of Chinese take-overs. But in order to pursue its relations with Beijing, it has attempted to keep the Far East on side — especially its most important region, Primorskii krai. Gaye Christoffersen refers to ‘Moscow’s promises of preferential treatment to Primorye as a side payment to bring it into alignment with Moscow’s China policy.’⁹⁴

Moscow’s motive in the area is not the economic development of the Russian Far East, which increased local trade and economic interdependence with China could have helped to bring about. For

that reason, the ups and downs of border trade in the region were of very little interest to the Centre, except insofar as they affected its relations with Beijing. However, when the 'frontier campaign' threatened that relationship, the Centre moved to continue subsidies to the area despite its hostility to the local rulers. Which, I would argue, was precisely the reason for the campaign in the first place.

(7) Conclusion

I began this paper by referring to the divergence of interests between Moscow and the Russian Far East over relations with China. While Moscow pursues what it sees as the strategic (and in part economic) interests of the Russian state, the local elite interprets that pursuit as a threat to its own power and steps up, draped in that particular shade of the national colours which only a settler state can produce, to defend the *real* Russian interests (which it portrays as equivalent to its own) — against the Russian state. Nevertheless, Moscow has continued its pursuit of a strategic partnership with China. In February 1999, the Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji visited Moscow and signed no less than eleven agreements on co-operation. President Putin visited Beijing in July 2000, foreshadowing a Treaty between the two states to be signed half way through this year.⁹⁵ Under pressure from the centre, even the recalcitrant Nazdratenko was brought into line — at least verbally. When Li Peng (Chairman of the National People's Congress) visited Vladivostok in September last year, the Governor declared that the Russia/China partnership was 'historic' and 'correct', and fulsomely praised 'the exchanges between the Primorskii krai and China's Heilongjiang and Jilin provinces'.⁹⁶ Despite this late change of heart, Governor Nazdratenko was prevailed upon to resign in February this

year (he was appointed head of the Russian State Fisheries Committee instead). But whether the new centrally-controlled administration of the region is any more enlightened on this question seems doubtful. The presidential representative in the Far Eastern region, Konstantin Pulikovskiy, has questioned Russian economic integration into North East Asia. 'They should integrate into us', he concluded.⁹⁷

But what is revealed in a study of this question is not simply another conflict between the Centre and a regional elite. There is a third force at work here, and that is the force of market economics itself. It was that force that helped build up the migratory pressures along the border; that dissolved the border in the late Soviet and early Russian period; that encouraged the movements of population (both Chinese and Russian) after 1991.

It is that force that still exercises pressure along the border — now manifested in illegal immigrants. Of course, this gives added impetus to the anti-Chinese campaign. According to the Federal Border Guard service (which might be seen as having a vested interest in figures of this sort), between January 1999 and June 2000, 1.5 million Chinese entered Russia, of whom only 237,000 were legally registered. But the Federal Migration Service disagrees — 'We haven't noticed that we have a million Chinese citizens,' says the head of the Immigration Directorate. In fact he maintained that numbers of illegal immigrants had in fact fallen.⁹⁸ One way or another however, there continues to be a large number of Chinese traders in the Russian Far East.⁹⁹

More generally, market economics maintains the pressure on the Russian Far East to move economically away from European Russia and towards integration with Northeast Asia, beginning with China.

Trade between Russia and China has somewhat recovered despite the best efforts of Nazdratenko, Ishaev and their supporters. In 1998, Russia was number eight in China's top ten trade partners. In the first half of 1999, border trade had increased 45 per cent on the previous year. The vice governor of Heilongjiang declared the intention to make border trade the "pillar industry" of the province. Chinese beef, pork and mutton constituted up to 90 per cent of the supply to meat processing companies in Primorskii krai.¹⁰⁰ And judging by government statements and officially-endorsed press reports, the Chinese government remains both optimistic and conciliatory about its relationship with the Russian Far East.¹⁰¹ Chinese investments in Primorskii krai were over US\$7 million by the beginning of 2000. The Chinese authorities have opened a Free Trade Zone in the border city of Suifenhe. While they wait for the Russians to reciprocate, they are moving ahead with plans to construct an airport. They have expressed interest in investing in the Khabarovsk/Sakhalin pipeline.¹⁰² According to 'trade experts', they expect border trade to improve. However, the Chinese are careful to point out that 'the government still needs to adopt strict management on border traders to prevent them from getting out of control again.'¹⁰³

In addition, the region's labour shortage has ensured that hundreds of Chinese and Vietnamese workers are still employed on the farms, construction sites and light industrial plants of the area.¹⁰⁴ The number of Chinese workers in the region is increasing — some of them have even made it as far as Kamchatka.¹⁰⁵

And in a curious footnote to the undermining of borders by market forces, it was revealed by the Russian Federal Border Security last year that many of the border crossing along the

Chinese border are not run by the Russian state — they have been privatised. Increased border trade demanded more border crossings — and there were simply not the funds to finance new ones.¹⁰⁶

Friedrich Engels wrote in *Anti-Duhring* that:

*where ... the internal state power of a country becomes antagonistic to its economic development, as at a certain stage occurred with almost every political power in the past, the contest always ended with the downfall of the political power. Inexorably and without exception the economic development forces its way through...*¹⁰⁷

It might be plausible to argue that the local state will not be able to resist that force indefinitely. If it eventually succumbs, whether the national state will remain content with its strategic partnership with the Chinese while watching the Far East drift slowly out of its economic orbit remains to be seen.

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