

Russia and China- the inevitable end of the “*strategic partnership*”?

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In a report presented by CIA in 2019 the possible even closer cooperation between Russia and China is presented as the most challenging development for the US interests. China and Russia are seen as countries which have many common interests and a similar approach to the main problems of global policy. Both countries have very similar non democratic political systems, their economies are compatible and both countries are ready to challenge the US position in the world.

These commonalities could form a good basis for a close cooperation between both countries as we see to-day and could be a good basis for maintaining and even developing this cooperation in future. However, there are very serious problems which may not in a very distant future weaken and even ruin this rosy situation.

The potential of the future Russo-Chinese conflict rests in geography and history. In XVII century Russia was in a process of absorbing new territories in Siberia and finally had to regulate its acquisitions with China. The treaty which was signed in Nerchinsk in 1686 established the Russo- Chinese border on river Amur. But, two centuries later, Russia extracted from China almost 1,5 million sq kilometers of new territories which now constitute the Russian Far East region. The treaties which Chinese were forced to sign which established the border on Ussuri river were later declared as „unfair and unequal” and Mao Tse Tung openly raised the issue of these lost territories blaming Russia for ruthlessly exploiting in the past a weakness of China.

Year 1969 was marked by a series of border clashes between Russians and Chinese on islands on Ussuri river. Russians successfully repelt the Chinese attempt to gain control of Dmansky island. In the fights about 60 Russian and 800 Chinese soldiers were killed and the defence of the island became a part of Russian national mythology.

However, beginning from 1980's under the rule of Deng Xiaoping, China embarked on a process of gradual replacing the communist totalitarian utopia by an autocracy with a strong

emphasis on economic growth and market mechanisms. Russia, with its tremendous raw material resources across the border became an indispensable partner for China. Therefore the problem of „unequal treaties” had to be put into a deep freeze.

That does not mean that the issue has been finally buried and forgotten

The maps available in China and often used in schools still present these territories as „temporarily abandoned”. China is practicing a creeping annexation of territories along Ussuti river. By a skillful alteration of the main current of this river China begun to control a host of river islands which resulted in the acquisition of almost 1500 sq kilometers of previously Russian territory. The Damansky island, a place of fierce fighting in 1969 is now in China and on the island there is a small museum dedicated to the fighting. Every year Chinese border guard conscripts begin their service by taking an oath there.

It seems, that the long period when the main directive of Chinese policy was „keep a low profile, hide its capabilities and bide its time” is gradually replaced by a concept of China Dream, which according to Xi Jinping means „ a great rejuvenation of the nation”. With the concept of communism becoming sterile and lacking any power of inspiration, the nationalism is naturally coming to the fore. If, sometime in future China will have internal problems, for example resulting from a mismatch between the growing aspirations and economic growth, an issue of lost territories and the need to secure and control the Siberian resources can easily be brought to the political agenda. The museum exhibitions arranged under the slogan „Do not forget the humiliations of the Nation and revive the national spirit” which already exists in China can be a source of an inspiration.

Russia is fully aware of the seriousness of its Far East problem. The memories of the loss of Alaska and northern California are coming back. The danger that the Far East could become economically a part of China is lingering on. There are very good reason for these worries. The economy of the region was dominated by heavy and defence industries which collapsed after the fall of Soviet Union. What remains is the excavation of raw materials, predominantly oil and gas and exploitation of timber, making the region a raw material supplier to China.

The spectre of China looming over the Russian Far East has been somehow dispersed by policy of later Chinese leadership. Officially China is very seriously trying not to alarm Russians and to avoid anything which would affect Russians national pride. Nevertheless the

dilemma Russians have to face is still there: how to develop the Russian Far East without endangering its status. The region needs the investments not only in the oil and gas sectors and needs personnel to work there. The problem is, that Russia with its hostile to the West policy could hardly expect to attract investors from the West or Japan or South Korea. That makes China by far a dominant potential investor. On top of it, the population in the region is diminishing not only because of a negative birth rate but by massive emigration to central Russia (between 1990 and 2010 every fifth resident left the region, most of them- young people). Therefore, the labor force for potential investments could come mainly from China, where just across the border lives 10 times more Chinese than Russians. In other words, that means a swift sinization of the region which opens the way for a repetition of the Alaska scenario. Zbigniew Brzezinski wrote quite rightly that „ Siberian natural resources are immense, but without western support Russia can not be sure to retain a control over the region.”

There is however a possibility, that China may opt for a much harsher and swift solution with the use of force. This scenario is clearly in the minds of Russian military who are worried about the lack of military balance in the Russian Far East. It is true, that the Eastern Strategic Command has as many as 4 army size headquarters (in comparison with only two in the Western Command), but that is not underpinned by sufficient number of active troops and must rely on a mobilization of reservists and on the transfer of combat ready units from other areas. Such massive redeployment (often practiced during military exercises) is not easy, because there are only two railway lines of not very great capacity between central Russia and the Russian Far East. On top of that, China is rather reluctant on developing any confidence building measures and mechanisms of military transparency in the region. Military exercises in 2006 and 2009 were seen in Moscow as an indication of readiness of Chinese forces to launch a large scale offensive against Russia.

Not only military are worried about China. A well known Russian political analyst Dmitri Trenin wrote already in 2000 „The widespread fear of yellow peril is the complete opposite of official complacency and self satisfaction. (...). what is new is that what seemed a remote prospect decades ago is now perceived to be rapidly becoming reality”. Nikita Michalkov, a Russian nationalist and staunch supporter of President Putin presented not long time ago in internet a political fiction film under a very telling title „China takes over Russia”. According to this film, China crushes Russian forces in a matter of weeks. Russia's appeals to the

European Union and NATO for help are unsuccessful and as a result, Russia is forced to sign a new treaty establishing the border with China as it was in the middle of XVII century, what means, that the whole Russian Far East goes to China. Eastern Siberia is interminably rented to China and Western Siberia becomes a kind of Chinese-Russian condominium. It is worth to notice, that the film was seen in Russia by more then 3 million viewers.

Having a rummage in Russian internet one can find a comparison of the present Russo-Chinese relations to the period of 1939-1941 when Soviet Union was an ally of Hitler's Germany. It looked at that time that both countries had many common interests, Soviet Union has been providing Germany with all sorts of raw materials, oil grain etc, Germany even presented Soviet Union, a brand new heavy cruiser: Lutzow, against the needs of the German Kriegsmarine. What was the end of this alliance everybody knows...