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Intensive and illegal wood logging in Eastern Russia: How emerging representations on China hide Russian internal malfunctions

Abstract: Since the fall of the Soviet Union, relations between China and Russia have steadily improved, making China the first trading partner of Russia and one of its main military allies. Nevertheless, the growing contrast between the two states in terms of economic power and political influence seems to bring out new fears in Russia. In the press or in the social networks, voices are rising against the structure of bilateral trade, fearing that Russia will become a mere reserve of resources for its neighbor (Kolossoff 2018). The representation of a plunder of Russian natural resources by China has brought out an eco-nationalist discourse that now seems to dominate anti-Chinese narratives in Russia. Topics such as deforestation of the Siberian Taiga, pollution of farmland or of the Baikal Lake have become the main objects of local and national contestation towards economic cooperation with China (Kondratenko 2017). Based on the study of Russian-language media, academic sources and two field studies with interviews in the Russian Far East, our research leads us to believe that the theme of deforestation is the one that has the most significant impact on the national level nowadays. In this paper, we propose to present the main features of the discourse that accuses China of destroying the Russian forest by intensive or illegal logging. Then, we will try to demonstrate how this discourse conceals the fact that intensive and illegal harvesting actually appear as an internal problem in Russia, based on the illegal practices of landowners and shortcomings in state management (Smirnov 2013).

Introduction

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, relations between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation have steadily improved, allowing the final settlement of the border issue in 2004, making China the leading trading partner of Russia and one of its main military allies. This rapprochement has become all the more crucial for Russia as its economic and diplomatic relations with European and North American states have deteriorated sharply since 2014 and

the eruption of the Ukrainian conflict. This need has resulted in an increasingly positive perception of China in Russia.

Nevertheless, the growing contrast between a rapidly growing China that is asserting itself as one of the main actors in international relations and a diplomatically isolated Russia in economic stagnation seems to bring new fears. In the press or on social networks, voices are rising against the structure of Sino-Russian trade, fearing that Russia will become a mere reserve of resources for its neighbor and that “Chinese expansion” could be finally achieved through economic domination. This representation of a plunder of Russian natural resources by China has brought out a national-ecological discourse that now appears to dominate anti-Chinese feelings in Russia. Topics such as the deforestation of the Siberian Taiga, pollution of farmland or of Baikal Lake seem to have become the primary objects of a local and national concerns about economic cooperation with China.

Based on the study of Russian-language media, academic sources from Russia & abroad and two field studies with interviews in the Russian Far East, our research leads us to believe that the theme of deforestation is the one that has now the most significant impact on the national level.

In this paper we will try to show how emergent representations of China can go against the trends of Russian-Chinese relations and obscure internal problems within contemporary Russia. First, we propose to discuss recent shifts in Sino-Russian relations and its consequences on the image of China in Russia. Then, we will try to underline that the considerable improvements between the two countries have not erased the traditional negative representation of China and even brought new ones. Finally, we will focus on the subject of the intensive and illegal harvesting of the Russian forests, which appears to be one of the main features of an emerging eco-nationalist anti-Chinese discourse. After a brief analysis of this discourse, we will try to demonstrate how it conceals the fact that intensive and illegal harvesting actually appear as an

internal problem in Russia, based on the illegal practices of land leasers and shortcomings in state management.

I. Recent shifts in Sino-Russian relations and their consequences on the image of China in Russia

In 2018, bilateral trade between Russia and its premier trade partner, China, has crossed the symbolic mark of \$100 billion¹. Last September, the People's Liberation Army participated in "Vostok" military exercises on Russian soil, a demonstration of strength that has proven to be the largest military exercise since the fall of the USSR. The event took place right after the 4th Eastern Economic forum in Vladivostok, a yearly event aimed at stimulating North Asian investments in an economically depressed Eastern Russia, with Xi Jinping as guest of honor. In April 2019 the Russian president was the main guest of the Belt & Road Summit in China.

The "true" nature of Sino-Russian relations is often questioned by both academics and journalists, mainly from western countries, with formulas such as "Frenemies" (Kaczmarek 2015). Researchers and journalists try to underline a hidden and insurmountable geopolitical rivalry in their mutual areas of influence, despite the fact that the two North-Asian nuclear powers appear to have brought their political and economic relationship to the "best level in history", according to Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi².

In Russia, this rapprochement occurs with an almost exclusively positive official discourse towards China: "terms like 'partners' and 'friendship' dominate political narratives" (Billé 2018). As recent polls show, this discourse would have remarkable consequences on the population, greatly improving China's image in Russian public opinion: according to a poll conducted by the independent Levada center in June 2018, China is now considered "a close

¹ "Russian-Chinese trade grew by 27.1% in 2018" (Tovaroobarat Rossii i Kitaia v 2018 godu vyross na 27,1%), TASS news agency, 13/01/2019 (<https://tass.ru/ekonomika/5994096>)

² "Foreign Minister of China called relations with Russia the best in history", Vedomosti, 08/03/2017 (<https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2017/03/08/680350-mid-kitaya>)

friend or an ally of Russia” by 40% of the population, coming in second place right after Belarus (49%). As a comparison, only 24% of respondent answered the same thing in 2006. Another poll, conducted in 2017 by the state-controlled agency VTsIOM confirms such dynamics. Thus, as the Levada poll show, the true turning point in this evolution appears to be the 2013-2014 period, which saw public perception toward China doubling in approval, while at the same time dramatically declining with respect to leading Western countries such as Germany or the US. As one can assume, this rapid decline in perception toward Western states seems to be a direct consequence of the Ukrainian conflict and the economic sanctions introduced against Russia. On the other hand, the European conflict, in which China does not seem to be involved, does not at first justify the sudden evolution of its image in the eyes of the Russian population in the same period. Nevertheless, these two elements would also be directly related.

In recent years, many academic works have been dedicated to the study of the eastern strategy of the Russian state, an orientation that would become so important that it is often described as a “Turn to the East” (Fortescue 2015; Blakkisrud & Rowe 2018) or even a “Pivot to Asia” (Ma 2017; Bratersky 2018). The strategy’s aim would be to secure Russia's access to Asian markets, essentially for the export of energy resources (Itoh 2011) as well as to develop the Russian Far East (Titarenko 2014), a region undergoing a permanent economic and demographic crisis since the fall of the USSR (Radvanyi 2015).

However, apart from these economic objectives, the "turn to the east" of the Russian state would also be political. Like the attempt to set up a trilateral dialogue format including Russia, India and China (RIC), this policy may be seen as yet another attempt by Russia to counterbalance what it considers to be the hegemony of the Euro-Atlantic powers (Cabestan 2008), essentially via a rapprochement with China. For the Chinese researcher Ma Bo, this strategy would be mainly the consequence of a growing antagonism between Russia and the European powers. Therefore, he explains that the Ukrainian crisis of 2014 and the diplomatic isolation of Russia

that followed it is a turning point in the implementation of the strategy of "turning to the east" (see Ma 2017). Giving the example of the record natural gas deal of \$400 billion that was signed in 2014 between Russia and China he emphasizes: "Vladimir Putin chose this particular moment for signing a contract negotiated over the previous 10 years, precisely in connection with the new international situation".

Thus, the remarkable evolution of perception of China as well as of Western countries in Russian public opinion during the 2013-2014 period appear to be connected, both depending on the international relations context of the Ukrainian crisis of 2014.

II. An alliance of fact that does not seem to make old fears disappear, but bring new ones

In the period following the fall of the USSR, the memory of the Sino-Soviet break and the 1969 border conflict maintained a mostly negative perception of China among the Russian population. Thus, representations of a risk for territorial sovereignty or an invasion of migrants that are traditionally related to the concept of "Yellow peril" or "China threat" were still present in the 1990s and beginning of the 2000s (Larin 2006, Bourbeau 2002). According to our previous presentation, and the polls that were analyzed before, the fears of expansion traditionally associated with China in Russia should have logically weakened, at the same time that good opinions regarding the "partnership" or the "alliance" have improved.

However, another poll, conducted by Levada center in the same period, reveals the contrary: to the question "Should we limit the number of Chinese living in Russia?", 31% of the people answered "Yes", placing Chinese right after the Gypsies (32%), a number that more than doubled in one year. Even though these figures have to be put in the context of an increased xenophobia towards other nationalities as well, they are significant. How can there be such a strong contrast between official discourse that places China, as a state, among the main allies of Russia, and public opinion, which rejects the Chinese as a population?

This leads us to think that the "traditional" representations of a "silent invasion" of an underpopulated Russia by a constantly growing China would remain present. In his latest monograph devoted to the contemporary representations of China in the world, Franck Billé emphasizes this direction: "In Russia the ubiquitous trope of "Chinatown" sketches a geopolitical imagination of a weakened and disintegrating Russia gradually annexed through China's sheer demographic weight." (Billé 2018). Indeed, even at a slowed pace, Chinese demographic growth remains impressive from a Russian point of view. In 2017, the population grew by 8 million people (China statistical Yearbook 2018), the same population as the entire Russian Far Eastern District that borders China. A region that appears precisely to be the first objective of the hypothetical Chinese invasion put forward by the speech of "Chinese Peril" (Lukin 2011).

As our field study has revealed, representations of a "silent invasion" remain strong indeed, with rumors such as "the Chinese state is paying citizens willing to marry Russians and settle in Russia"(Interview in Vladivostok).

However, aside from these "traditional" territorial and demographical fears, the new configuration that is taking place in the context of a strategic and economic rapprochement between the two countries, eliciting a new range of negative representations that we could assimilate with the idea of an economic domination.

Indeed, the structure of trade between China and Russia, with mostly raw resources coming from Russia, has been a source of concern for more than a decade (Cabestan 2008). In view of recent developments, the fear of dependence is increasing and the fear of becoming a mere source of reserve is emerging: "Many are convinced that the heart of Beijing's current rapprochement with Moscow is the desire to control the resources of Siberia and the Far East in the future." (Gabuev 2014). One of the questions that arises then, is whether Russia can deepen its partnership with China without falling into a situation of dangerous political and economic dependence (Lukin 2018).

In public opinion, this representation of economic expansion is reflected mainly in the image of a looting of Russian natural resources by the Chinese. Recently, this fear found expression in the controversy surrounding the construction of a bottling plant near Baikal Lake, supposedly aimed to sell the lake's water to China. A petition launched to protest against the construction of this plant has already collected more than a million signatures. Another controversial issue is the leasing of agricultural land to Chinese companies, which would then destroy them through the use of pesticides. The question was even raised at the Russian Duma by the notoriously nationalist³ Liberal Democratic Party. Among those subjects that fuel the anti-Chinese discourse by associating ecologist arguments with a nationalist rhetoric, the most widely held seems to be that concerning the forest.

III. When ecology meets nationalist discourse: The question of intensive and illegal logging of the Russian "Taiga" forest

The "Taiga" is the boreal forest, mostly coniferous, which covers the majority of Russian territory. According to a monograph devoted to the symbols of "Russianness" (Hellberg Hirn 1998), the taiga would be, along with steppes, a key element of the collective narrative that constitutes Russian identity. Therefore, the risk of its looting by Chinese companies appears a logical and central topic in the nationalist discourse. Moreover, it is important to note that the presence of an ecological feature in Russian nationalism is not recent and would find its roots at the emergence of the movement, at the end of the Soviet era: "At the end of the 1970s, beginning of the 1980s, the national-patriotic movement existed in the form of a movement for the preservation of the environmental and cultural heritage of the country" (Haliy 1995).

³ "Liberal Democratic Party requires to assess the risks of leasing land in Transbaikalia to China" (LDPR trebuyet otsenit' riski sdachi v arendu zemli v Zabaykal'ye Kitayu), RIA News Agency, 22/06/2015 (<https://ria.ru/20150622/1080167496.html>)

In recent years, the anti-Chinese nationalist rhetoric about the threat to the Russian forest has mostly been expressed through nationalist media, such as the monthly journal "Zavtra", on social networks, or on video platforms like YouTube, where several videos on the subject exceed one million views.

As we have seen from the analysis of several videos, the reading of articles by Zavtra⁴ or the interviews conducted during field studies, the main features of this discourse seem to be the idea that China would raze the forests for its important domestic consumption, for infrastructure needs in the framework of the Belt and Road initiative and even sometimes to replace them with rice fields. Most of the time, the common thread of all these arguments is a strong criticism of Russian leaders, who would "sell Siberia to China". In that sense, this anti-Chinese rhetoric can also be seen as an indirect means of criticizing power for the nationalist opposition.

Given the extent of controversy around the issue of the forest, the state felt obliged to react via an appearance by Prime Minister D. Medvedev on public TV (Rossiya 1 - 06/12/2018) and by the state-owned press agency Ria Novosti⁵. Advocating that the current state of export will not put the sustainability of the forest in danger, and would, for example, be behind that of the United States, the official discourse puts forward a greater danger coming from the Russian population. For example, non-voluntary fires, would have cause, in 2017, a forest loss equivalent to 22 years of permanent export to China.

IV. How the nationalist anti-Chinese narrative hides Russian internal malfunctions

According to interviews conducted during our field study and independent reports established by environmental protection associations such as WWF, the problems related to the management of the Russian forest, the most important of which are the illegal logging of

⁴ Vladimir Vassiliev, "China cuts down Siberia" (Kitaï vyrubaiet Sibir), Zavtra, 20/06/2018 (http://zavtra.ru/blogs/kitaj_virubaet_sibir_)

⁵ "The Chinese cut it all." Who actually destroys the Russian forest? ("Kitaytsy spilili vse". Kto na samom dele unichtozhayet russkiy les), RIA news agency, 19/07/2018 (<https://ria.ru/20180719/1524911949.html>)

protected species or forest fires, would have their origin in the Russian legislation which replaced that of the USSR.

Indeed, when the Soviets came to power, a decree "on forests" was passed in May 1918, nationalizing the forest estate and leaving its management to the state. Following the collapse of the Union, the issue of forest management was debated until 1997, when the first Forestry Codex was established (law N°22F3-29/01/1997). This text has marked the transfer of forest management to the hand of private actors. While retaining ownership of the forest estate, the State no longer has the right to manage it and must lease it to private individuals, for leases up to 49 years.

This situation would be at the root of several problems. No longer benefiting directly from logging, the state would have disengaged and severely limited the resources devoted to surveillance. Indeed, the median salary of forestry inspectors in 2017 was estimated between 10,000 and 12,000 Rubles per month by the job aggregator trud.com, whereas the average income of the population was officially 31,422 for the same year (Rosstat statistical handbook 2018). Because of this situation, forestry inspectors, whose numbers have been greatly reduced with the new 2006 codex, would not see the point in carrying out their work with efficiency. During an interview we conducted, an environmental activist even declared that his association is sometimes giving money to the inspectors, just to buy enough fuel to cover the enormous distances they are expected to monitor.

The state disengagement would lead to unlawful behavior by leaseholders, who would be directly responsible for more than 90% of the illegal exploitation, undermining the idea of Chinese responsibility or poachers reselling to the Chinese. This would be done mostly under legal practices such as sanitary cut, which involves logging sick or burnt trees, or intermediate cut, which involves cutting some trees to allow the best specimens to grow better (Smirnov 2013). Lease holders have even been known to start forest fires themselves then using the

sanitary cut as a pretext to harvest unpermitted trees. Even if the majority of Eastern Russian's roundwood is indeed aimed for export to China, the problem appears to reside in the sellers' practices.

Conclusion

Although Sino-Russian relations now seem to be at a historic peak and many Russians see China as an ally, negative representations remain. Whether a legacy of Soviet propaganda or the consequence of declining Russian power vis-a-vis China, the fears of an economic or demographic expansion seem only to be accentuated as the difference widens between the two northern Asian giants. Among the many facets of anti-Chinese rhetoric in Russia, there is one that has shown particular resonance of late. The idea of a plunder of resources by China sees the emergence of an eco-nationalist discourse that revolves around topics such as the protection of highly symbolic elements like the Baikal Lake or the Taiga forest. Regarding the forest, the ongoing debate in the media and social networks has led us to try to identify how much China was really responsible for the damage. As our study tries to show, its implication appears to be minor compared to that of Russian actors.

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