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Vladivostok Denies Plan to Lease Half of City to China

By Paul Goble

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Four days after reports began swirling in the Russian media that Vladivostok officials had decided to rent half of their city to China for 75 years in order to compensate for tough economic times and to secure enough money for the region's redevelopment, city officials there denied the existence of any such plans.

The Vladivostok administration said that "reports disseminated by certain mass media outlets about plans for the development of Vladivostok connected with the rental of the territory to foreign states are false" and are not being discussed as part of the city's strategic plan for the period up to 2020.

The officials said they regretted that "the mass media and certain representatives of the scientific community and deputy corps took part in a sharp discussion of provocative rumors without even attempting to obtain official confirmation as to whether such a project exists in reality or is some kind of clever invention."

Last week, the "Yezhednevnyye novosti Vladivostoka" site reported that specialists at the Leontyev Center had proposed dividing the city into two parts and renting one of them to China for 75 years, setting up a Chinese administration there subordinate to Chinese authorities in Harbin.

The report carried the purported text of the Leontyev Center's presentation of this idea. That attracted the notice of Moscow-based news agencies as well numerous officials and bloggers, and for the intervening period, continuing even today, this apparent non-story has been at the center of intense discussion.

Almost all participants have been sharply negative, although the reasons they have given vary widely, with some arguing that no local government body has the right to make such an agreement and others writing in apocalyptic terms about this action leading to the end of Russia.

And while most appear to have dismissed the idea of such an arrangement out of hand, some nonetheless wrote that the economic problems facing the Far East are so dire and Moscow's ability to help so limited that they could understand why Vladivostok leaders might have been tempted to consider such an option if Beijing could supply enough cash.

Although the city's statement does not acknowledge this possibility, the likelihood is that Vladivostok was considering the kind of arrangements that some other Russian cities &mdash including St. Petersburg &mdash have entered into for the support of ethnic Chinese communities on their territories, rather than the more expansive rental transfer that sparked this media circus.

Nevertheless, the initial report and the way it was received serve to call attention to the extraordinary sensitivity among Russians of anything having to do with China in particular or the loss of sovereignty over any part of what most Russians view as their territory from time immemorial.

Among the items in this discussion were three meriting notice: First, one Russian expert said that China plans to eat up the Russian Far East "bit by bit" and is preparing for that with a massive campaign in Chinese schools showing that region as being historically part of China rather than Russia.

Second, there were intense discussions about the way in which China is already misusing the water of rivers on the border, something leading to "an ecological catastrophe" in Russia. And third, one article said that given Moscow's degraded military, China could seize this region any day.

This media frenzy is a reminder both of the dangers in accepting what might appear to be plausible reporting from Russia without careful checking and of the ways in which discussions of such reporting in the country's media and blogosphere can nonetheless provide insights into Russian thinking.

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