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Fears of Chinese Expansion Mar Budding Alliance With Russia

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The image of Russia's increasingly friendly relations with China took something of a battering this week when a regional governor's stated intention to rent out swathes of land to a Chinese investment company was met at home by a storm of indignation.

After the governor of the Zabaikalsky region in Russia's Far East said last week that he was considering leasing a Chinese company 150,000 hectares of Russian land for agricultural purposes for 49 years, State Duma deputies and members of the public reacted with dismay and suspicion, saying Russia could end up losing its territory to China.

Despite assertions made by President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping during the latter's visit to Moscow in May that Russia-China relations are "at their highest level ever," it suddenly became starkly evident that some members of the Russian elite — as

well as the public at large — still see their rapidly flourishing eastern neighbor as a threat.

Members of the All-Russia People's Front, a political movement led by Putin, said Monday that the local government should hold public debates on the issue in the region before signing any contracts with the Chinese.

Konstantin Solodkov, a resident of Novosibirsk, launched a petition on the Change.org website, calling on Putin to nix the deal. By the time of publication, more than 3,200 people had signed it.

The reported rental cost of the land to be paid by the Chinese company — 250 rubles ($4.50) per hectare per year — fueled the flames of discontent and was condemned as a virtual giveaway.

Led by Igor Lebedev, deputies from the nationalist LDPR party in the State Duma said they were preparing to send an appeal to Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, asking him to revoke the decision, and calling it a "question of geopolitics."

The LDPR "wants to resolve this important geopolitical question. ... Otherwise in 20 years' time the governor of the Zabaikalsky region will be Chinese," Lebedev told the Kommersant newspaper on Monday.

Russian Benefits

Konstantin Ilkovsky, the governor who sparked the panic, was swift to assuage fears, saying that at this stage, only a memorandum of understanding has been signed and that even if the Chinese company gets the land, the number of Chinese workers there will be limited to 50 percent.

"I want to underline that this will be a Russian enterprise, though with Chinese investments," Ilkovsky said in an interview with the local Zabaikalskoye Vremya TV news program on Monday.

The Kremlin's reaction was neutral, with Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying that "if a request is received [from the State Duma for the government to look into the issue], then the relevant government bodies will give their opinion," Interfax reported Monday.

If the deal is signed, the Chinese company will get less than 1 percent of the territory of the vast Zabaikalsky region, which is geographically closer to Beijing than to Moscow. According to China specialists, there are countless other examples of Chinese investment in agriculture in the Russian Far East.

More than 75 percent of agricultural land in the Jewish autonomous region — also close to China — is controlled by the Chinese, according to Alexander Gabuyev, a China expert at the Carnegie Moscow Center think thank.

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If it goes ahead, the land lease agreement would boost a recent package of 32 deals signed

by Putin and Xi in Moscow during the latter's recent visit that prompted many pundits to declare the bilateral relationship an alliance.

Historical Grudges

Nevertheless, the outrage sparked by the idea of handing over land for 49 years to the Chinese reflects a long-standing fear in Russia of Chinese expansion.

According to Dmitry Trenin, head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, the incident demonstrates that the Russia-China detente cannot be "absolutized."

"I think what is happening is a complicated process of Russia's rapprochement with a bigger and more dynamic country, which creates certain problems," said Trenin in a phone interview.

"After [condemnation of Russia's actions in] Ukraine, Russia has very limited choices of potential allies and is forced to come closer to China, while these fears [of China's expansion into Russia] limit this process," he said.

Experts have pointed out that the Soviet Union and China had a very close relationship after the 1949 Chinese Communist revolution. But a Sino-Soviet split followed in the 1960s with Mao Zedong claiming that China had lost a number of its historic territories in a series of unequal treaties signed with Russia in the 19th century.

The Soviets fought a seven-month border conflict with China in 1969, but in a border demarcation agreement signed in 2004, Russia ceded several territories, including the whole of Tarabarov Island on the Amur River near the Russian city of Khabarovsk.

The memory of these territory disputes lingers, according to Alexander Lomanov, a senior researcher at the Institute of the Far East of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

"If you open a Chinese textbook, you will read that Russia illegally acquired large swathes of Chinese territories, which means that the border issue is not solved," said Lomanov in a phone interview.

"On the other hand, when the Chinese hear that Russians are concerned about this [the land deal], they begin to think that Russians are not rational: They [Russians] are being offered money, yet they act according to their emotions," he said.

The reasons for fear are not solely rooted in emotion, however. According to Igor Denisov, senior China researcher at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the problem with Chinese investment in Russia is not simply that it awakens historic phobias among the public, but because Russia still lacks the institutions that would make these investments better regulated by the state.

"I don't see that China wants to impose anything on Russia; the problem is simply that these investments are not limited by the relevant institutions," he said in a phone interview.

"What both China and Russia have to do is to create a civilized framework for cooperation," he said.

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