

## Russia's Far East – Russian Or Eastern?

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### Introduction

It is more than geography which makes Russia's Far East the extreme end of empire. Conquered through a rolling and largely involuntary process of piecemeal expansion and colonisation, maintained as a military staging post as much as anything else, it could be said to have less an identity of its own as no identity at all. To be sure, there was a short-lived 'Far Eastern Republic' between 1918 and 1921, before it was reincorporated into the new Soviet Union. With most of its indigenous peoples scattered, outnumbered and politically marginalised, on the surface it is dominated by Russians and their attitudes and values – new, onion-domed Russian Orthodox churches are being built in Vladivostok and *Moskovskie novosti* ('Moscow News') is sold in Khabarovsk. But this need not mean particular fondness for or loyalty to a centre half a globe away. The *Vladivostok News* is dominated by local events, and local Governor Nazdratenko has survived open challenges from Moscow. When Boris Yeltsin's tanks shelled parliament into submission in October 1993, in the process flouting the constitution, the Governor of Sakhalin airily dismissed it as just "a struggle between clans" a long way away.

The region's component economies are having to develop their interconnections or, more to the point, acquire new partners in Japan, China and South Korea. A powerful local business and political elite is finding itself able to assert its effective autonomy. Regional military commanders are either despairing of receiving proper support from Moscow or

becoming tempted to link their fortunes with that elite. The net result is, perhaps, that an invisible proto-frontier is beginning to emerge between the Far East and the rest of the Russian Federation, one of the fault lines along which the empire of the tsars may finally break apart.

### The Significance of the Far East to Russia

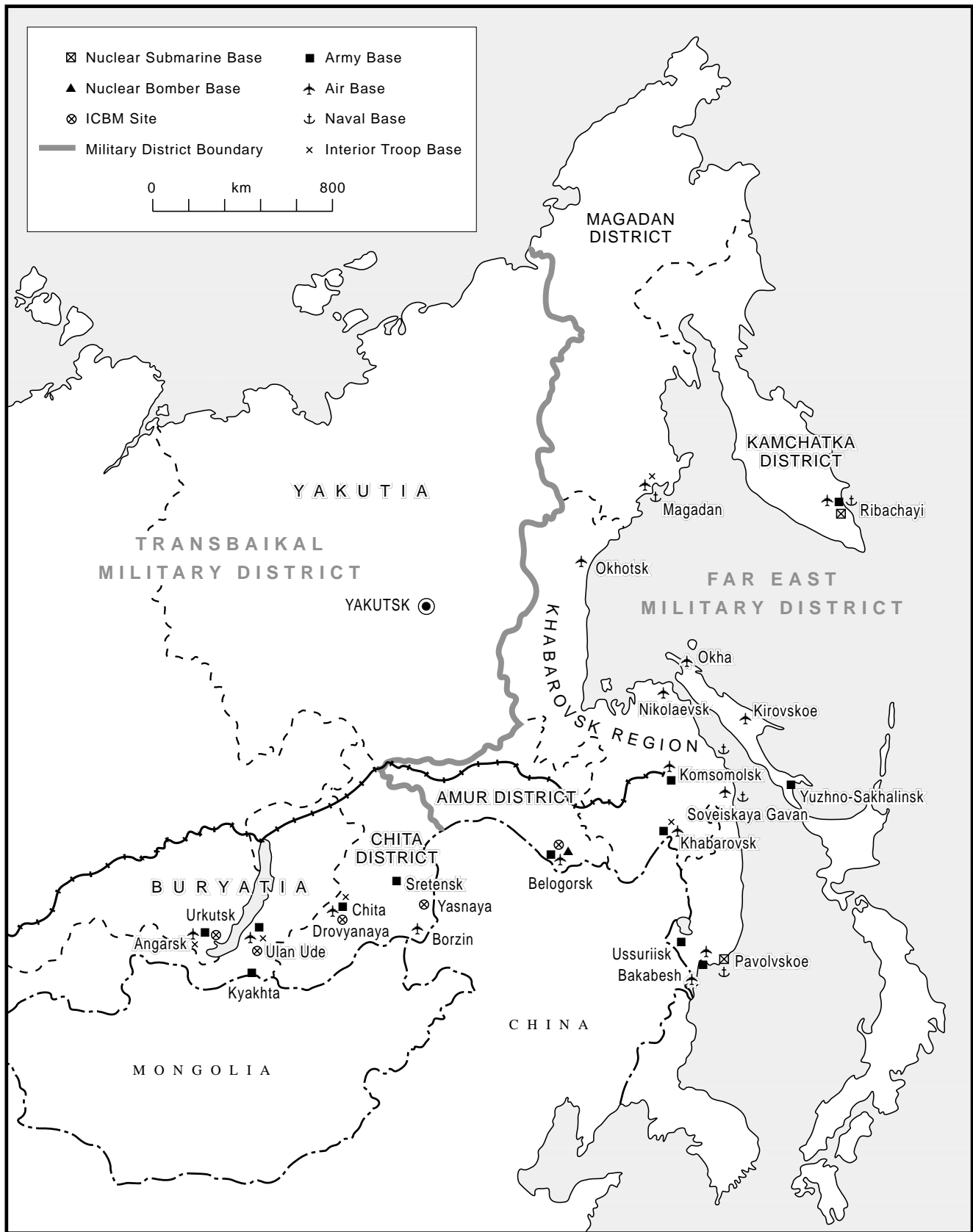
Any *de facto* or *de jure* secession is unlikely to be acceptable to Moscow. The region is, after all, of importance for a variety of reasons:

- *Political.* Moscow's authority over the Far East is of tremendous symbolic significance, especially in the wake of the Chechen fiasco. That central authority can span Eurasia is perceived as proof positive of its essential strength and the unity of the Federation. The irony is that, as is discussed below, Moscow has in effect been forced to purchase the *appearance* of this authority at the cost of surrendering much *practical* control over the Far East.
- *Economic.* While much of the Russian Far East is under-developed or economically moribund, it also contains lucrative and important strategic resources. Overall, it accounts for only 4.5% of national GDP, but fully 15% of national mining output. Magadan is Russia's second largest gold-producing region, while the huge, sparsely-populated region of Yakutia – which now calls itself the Republic of Sakha – produces 95% of the country's diamonds. In 1992, it unilaterally took control of the industry, but continues to provide substantial income to the central budget.

**Table 1: The Regions of Russia's Far East**

	<i>Area (sq.km)</i>	<i>Population</i>
Amur	363,700	1,040,800
Buryatia	351,300	1,052,800
Chita	431,500	1,299,000
Jewish Autonomous Region	36,000	211,900
Kamchatka	472,300	423,600
Khabarovsk	824,600	1,588,100
Maritime ( <i>Primorskii</i> )	165,900	2,273,100
Sakhalin	87,100	673,100
Yakutia (Sakha)	3,103,000	1,053,800

Figure 1: The Strategic Importance of the Far East



- *Geopolitical.* Good relations with China are central to Russia's short- and medium-term foreign policy strategy (Galeotti, 1997). China, after all, represents a huge potential market (and, although Moscow is loathe to admit it, investor), especially for military hardware. Both Moscow and Beijing have pledged themselves to triple the volume of their mutual trade by the year 2000, to the decidedly over-ambitious target of US\$20 billion. The Russians also hope to use it as a counter-weight to an expanding NATO and US global preponderance. Japan and South Korea are also regarded as useful sources of investment and potentially lucrative arms export markets. In 1997, South Korea purchased T-80U tanks and BMP-3 combat vehicles, and began assessing aircraft and air-defence systems. Japanese pilots have also begun training on Su-27 fighters, but this is unlikely – whatever the Russians hope – to lead to a major order. Furthermore, even if many of their forces based in the region have decayed below operational capabilities, Figure 1 and Table 2 (see over) show the extent of Russia's military infrastructure in the Far East.

### Moscow vs. Vladivostok

The first conflict is an overtly political one, between Moscow and local Far Eastern authorities, best exemplified by Vladivostok. The elected Governor of the Maritime Region, Evgenyi Nazdratenko, is a classic example of the modern Russian regional strongman. Since his re-election in December 1995, he has become an increasingly painful thorn in Moscow's side, championing local interests over those of the centre and, according to his critics, presiding over a growing empire of legal and criminal business (*Economist*, 1997).

In particular, he has made two issues central to his guerrilla war against Moscow: unpaid wages and territorial concessions. By championing the rights of those workers with wage arrears and blaming the centre (even if in fact the fault often lies with local companies or even Nazdratenko's own administration), he has won himself a degree of popular legitimacy. He has also sought to play the nationalist card, by denouncing suggested boundary changes. The area in contention with China is only some 15km<sup>2</sup> in size (and was formally signed over to Beijing in May 1991), but it and the Kuril Islands (Zinberg, 1997-98) have become powerful symbols both of Russian nationalism and what Nazdratenko claims to be Moscow's willingness to sacrifice the

interests of the Far East to win favour with China and Japan.

In June 1997, Vladivostok declared a state of emergency as power supplies were cut to six hours a day. Moscow sacked its existing Presidential Representative to the Maritime Region and appointed the local chief of the Federal Security Service (FSB – 'internal' successor to the KGB), Viktor Kondratov. Regarded as a tough trouble-shooter, he was instructed to assume most of Nazdratenko's powers. The confrontation was unprecedented and the constitution was unclear on where final power lay. Ultimately, Nazdratenko was forced to make some concessions, but in practice he has proved able to survive even a direct confrontation with the centre. His ultimate weapon is, after all, that having established a local elite beholden to him, as well as a degree of genuine personal support, he can threaten to hold snap elections on a question of confidence and expect to win. More broadly, the 1995 parliamentary and 1996 presidential elections showed heavy support for anti-government parties and candidates in the Far East, from the Communists to Vladimir Zhirinovskii's neo-nazi Liberal Democrats. Rather than an expression of actual belief, these votes should best be seen as reflecting impatience and disillusion with the Yeltsin regime and a desire to register a strong protest.

Yet behind the headline issue of the confrontation between Moscow and local governments, there is also much evidence of infra-institutional disputes between region and centre. This is most visible within the Far East's extensive military establishment, which has acquired an unenviable reputation for criminality and indiscipline. Pacific Fleet military prosecutor Major General Suchkov has admitted that crime within his region has reached "*unprecedented proportions.*"<sup>1</sup>

The toll of officers accused or convicted on charges of embezzlement reads like a Pacific Fleet and Far Eastern Military District roll of honour, including Fleet commander Admiral Khmel'nov (Galeotti, 1998). Very few of these cases ever reach the military courts, though, much less ever lead to a conviction. This has led to a widespread and probably accurate belief in the existence of a powerful *krugovaya poruka*, or "*circle of mutual protection*", linking key local police, military and political figures. With too few funds trickling from Moscow, commanders are already having to come to terms with local authorities to meet the practical

**Table 2: Russian Military Deployments in the Far East**

<b>Strategic Forces</b>		
Svobodnyi	ICBM base	mothballed
Yasnaya	ICBM base	mothballed
Drovyanaya	ICBM base	SS-25
Irkutsk	ICBM base	SS-25
Ukrainka	Air base	Tu-95 'Bear' bombers
Ribachyi	Nuclear submarine base	
Pavlovskoe	Nuclear submarine base	
<b>Conventional Forces</b>		
<i>Far East Military District (DVVO)</i>		
Khabarovsk	DVVO HQ	
Khabarovsk	194th Motor Rifle Division	
Sebuchar	Tank Division	May be close to 'skeleton' status
Pogranichnyi	Tank Division	
Kurile Islands	3rd Motor Rifle Division	
Barabesh	17th Guards Motor Rifle Division	
Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka	22nd Motor Rifle Division	
Kamen-Rybolov	29th Motor Rifle Division	May be close to 'skeleton' status
Belogorsk	31st Motor Rifle Division	
Komsomolsk-na-Amure	73rd Motor Rifle Division	
Leonipovo-Sakhalinsk	79th Motor Rifle Division	May be close to 'skeleton' status
Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk	342nd Motor Rifle Division	
Other locations	Divisions kept at skeleton status	
Ussuriisk	83rd Independent Assault-Landing Brigade	
Ussuriisk	14th <i>Spetsnaz</i> Brigade	Special forces unit
<i>Transbaikal Military District (ZVO)</i>		
Chita	ZVO HQ	
Chita	49th Tank Division	
Kyakhta	6th Tank Division	
Sretensk	34th Motor Rifle Division	
Other locations	Divisions kept at skeleton status	
Ulan Ude	11th Independent Assault-Landing Brigade	
Kyakhta	24th <i>Spetsnaz</i> Brigade	Special forces unit
<i>Air and Air Defence Bases</i>		
Barabesh, Blagoveshchensk, Borzin, Chita, Irkutsk, Khabarovsk, Kirovskoe, Komsomolsk-na-Amure, Magadan, Nikolaevsk, Okha, Okhotsk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka, Sovetskaya, Ulan Ude, Vladivostok		
<i>Pacific Fleet</i>		
Vladivostok	Pacific Fleet HQ	
Komsomolsk-na-Amure	Naval base	
Magadan	Naval base	
Petropavlovsk-Kamchatka	Naval base; Naval Aviation base	
Sovetskaya Gavan	Naval base; Naval Aviation base	
Vladivostok	55th Naval Infantry Division	Detachments also at Slavyanka and on the Kuril Islands

Table 2: continued

<i>Transbaikal Border Troops District (ZOPO)</i>		
Chita	ZOPO HQ	Static border posts, also one Motor-Manoeuvre Group and airmobile Rapid Response Unit
<i>Eastern Internal Troop District (VOVV)</i>		
Angarsk	Operational Designation Regiment	
Ulan Ude	Operational Designation Regiment	
Chita	Special Police Regiment	
Chita	Special Motorised Police Battalion	patrol force
Khabarovsk	Special Motorised Police Battalion	patrol force
Magadan	Special Motorised Police Battalion	patrol force
Vladivostok	Special Motorised Police Battalion	patrol force

needs of their units, often providing services (from patrols in the streets to vehicle repair) in return for food, heating and facilities. As they also become linked into regional elites by compromising chains of self-interest, Moscow, represented by its penny-pinching Defence Ministry and interfering investigators, increasingly becomes seen as the enemy, not the capital.

### **Mafiya: regional or national?**

The Russian underworld is marked by a striking degree of cultural homogeneity, with criminals and gangs across the country sharing a similar code of behaviour and even *fenya*, a common argot, or slang. This does not, however, mean that Russian organised crime is especially organised, especially in the so-called 'Wild East'.

Here the *vor v zakone* (literally, "thief-within-code", a traditional underworld godfather) Evgenyi Petrovich Vasin (known as *Dzhem* – "Jam") exerts a degree of regional hegemony from his base in Vladivostok. He is the arbiter and first-among-equals, though, rather than boss. The region's underworld is characterised by a patchwork of gangs based around territories, ethnic communities or specialisms, ranging from rural bandits to sophisticated bank fraudsters. The region has been riven by periodic turf wars, in 1994-95, 1995-96 and again in 1997.

Vladivostok and Maritime Territory have become the focus for Far Eastern crime, not least thanks to their links with China and other Asian centres. Chinese merchants travel to the city every weekend, regardless of notional border controls, to sell stolen and counterfeit goods, many to entrepreneurs who will then trade them across Russia. This trade route also supports a thriving trade in drugs and weapons

into China and illegal immigrants into Russia. Ethnic Russian gangs fought over this lucrative trade in 1994-95, while also defending their position against Chinese gangs.

The city of Khabarovsk similarly combines a thriving domestic crime scene with a role as a crossroads and meeting place between criminal groups in China, the Russian Far East, Siberia and European Russia. At least three major *strelki* ("little arrows" – criminal summits) were held there in 1993-95, with a possible two or three more in 1996-97. Even the Ussuri Cossack Host, based in the region, has cultivated close links with criminal elements within the wider Cossack diaspora, including involvement with the *Edinstvo* ("Unity") commercial agency. This is widely characterised as a front for regional organised crime, perhaps even *Dzhem*'s own syndicate.<sup>2</sup>

Blagoveshchensk has a similar, if less important function. Further east, the island of Sakhalin (where mafiya groups have been cooperating with Japanese *Yakuza* counterparts) and the peninsula of Kamchatka have become important as smuggling waystations. As a result, local gangs have begun to resent the previously unchallenged position of groups based in Magadan and Vladivostok (Oxford Analytica, 1995).

The wider importance of this criminalisation – in itself hardly unique to the Far East of Russia – is that it further contributes to the attenuation of links with Moscow and, indeed, the assertion of a distinctively 'Eastern' (*Vostochnyi*) identity. Many of these groups have working relations with *Yakuza* or Triad counterparts, and even when locked in contention with them, accept that they will have to find some form of *modus vivendi* with them. By contrast, incursions by gangs based in European

Russian (widely known as 'Varangians') are resisted bitterly. When, for example, one such organisation tried in 1996 to acquire control of a haulage firm servicing the eastern stations on the Trans-Siberian Railway, this caused feuding gangs in Khabarovsk to call a truce and combine their forces to resist the outsiders. Similarly, the role played by *Dzhem* as power broker and 'elder statesman' extends to a capacity as regional ambassador, able to deal with other *vory* in Moscow, the Urals and St. Petersburg in the name of the Far Eastern underworld.

### Criminal Colonisation

It is ironic that penetration by Asian crime syndicates causes discomfort, but not the fury directed towards the 'Varangians'. A 'China connection' has been dominant, originally largely on the back of an increasing flow of Chinese shuttle traders and illegal migrants. Facing discrimination and the threat of deportation, many of these economic migrants choose or are forced to work for ethnic Chinese gangs, the more organised of which are simply branches of Chinese-based Triads. To a large extent, these gangs originally preyed upon the Chinese community and were thus left alone by the Russian authorities. In towns with especially large Chinese populations, such as Pogradichnyi, these gangs effectively became the local authorities.<sup>3</sup>

In 1994, though, they appeared both to reach a 'critical mass' in terms of strength and organisation, and also to have exhausted the opportunities within their own communities. They began to prey more aggressively on outside targets, notably Russo-Chinese joint ventures. At the end of 1994, the deputy director of one was killed in Nakhodka, in 1995 the Khabarovsk offices of another were gutted by grenade launchers and in 1996, Triad members tried to kidnap three businesspeople in Vladivostok. This widening of horizons was also encouraged by developments further afield. As ethnic Chinese gangs in the Russian Far East began looking for alliances with the Triads, the reimposition of Chinese control over Hong Kong provided a great boost to the fortunes of the 'Big Circle' Triad (Myers, 1995).

This has already established itself as one of the most entrepreneurial and aggressive gangs, and eagerly accepted the challenge of developing new networks in Russia. In return for the security and resources provided by the established Triads, the ethnic Chinese gangs in Russia offer them new markets and opportunities for money-laundering, drugs

trafficking and the production of counterfeit goods in underground workshops.

Penetration by the Japanese *Yakuza*, by contrast, has been rather more limited and subtle. While heavily involved in the smuggling trade between Russia and Japan, they have otherwise confined themselves to investing in useful ventures in the Maritime Region, Magadan and Sakhalin. A development likely to become increasingly important is the provision of 'criminal services' to the *Yakuza* by Russian gangs, ranging from counterfeit branded goods produced in underground factories in the Far East through to money laundering. Each such transaction, in its own way, helps define the *Vostochnyi* underworld as an essentially Asian rather than Russian phenomenon.

### The 'Yellowing' of the Far East

In the 1970s, Soviet officials used to talk pejoratively and chauvinistically of the 'yellowing' of the USSR, meaning the demographic shift away from the 'white' Slav peoples towards the Central Asians. This regrettable term has in recent years been revived to refer to the increasing weight of Japanese, Korean and above all Chinese economic, political and criminal influence in the Far East.

It is also given concrete form by migration (usually illegal) into the region, what Petr Shirshov, Chair of the Federation Council's Committee for Security and Defence, characterised as a "*silent colonisation of the Russian Far East.*"<sup>4</sup> Ethnic Chinese represent at most 4% of the region's population, but they are concentrated in the cities of Vladivostok, Khabarovsk and Blagoveshchensk as well as townships such as Pogradichnyi (where Chinese are believed to outnumber the Russian community). They are also supplemented by a huge floating population of shuttle traders. There is also a substantial Korean population of 35,000 in Sakhalin (5% of the total population) – a community which unofficial reports claim could number 50,000.

Inevitably, the key issue is economic. The region is becoming increasingly geared to Far Eastern markets and economies. Amur has developed a thriving trading relationship with the Chinese city of Heihe, for example, trading raw materials (largely iron ore, timber and non-ferrous metals) for manufactured goods. Japan accounts for more than half the Maritime Region's exports and a quarter of its imports. This is not just a trade issue, though. Kamchatka owes its place in the top ten Russian

Figure 2: Crime and the Far East



regions for attracting foreign investments thanks to capital from Japan and South Korea, while Vladivostok is home to hundreds of joint ventures with Japanese, Chinese and South Korean firms.

The net result has not only been to provide much-needed economic support to the Russian Far East. It has also complicated regional relationships with Moscow, as the maintenance and expansion of these links with Asian economies becomes a key local issue. This should not be taken too far, though. Most, if not all of the regions of the Far East still depend more on Moscow than Asian trade and investment. Some 70% of Buryatia's budget comes from federal funds, for example.

Similarly, Nazdratenko has tried to balance an awareness of the economic advantages of co-operation with neighbouring economies with a populist and bombastic Russian nationalism. He has accused China and Japan of everything from "hidden imperialism" to stealing quotas due Russia's fishing fleets (*Vladivostok News*, 17 April 1998). Yet in the longer term, the centre of gravity is shifting steadily eastwards, and an unpublished federal survey of the Maritime Region and Khabarovsk found 68% of respondents agreeing that, "by the time [their] children are grown-up, events in Beijing and Tokyo will be more important to them than those in Moscow."

### Prospects

Thanks in large part to Nazdratenko's tough line, the 1995 Charter between Moscow and the Maritime Region explicitly grants it a rather ambiguous "certain degree of independence." The Far Easterners in general are using their autonomy to the fullest, even if it is in their interests not always to make a public display of this.

The 1995 Treaty between Sakha (Yakutia) and Moscow, for example, largely legitimised the former's unilateral decision to assume control of the diamond industry, and both sides quietly agreed to pretend this was a joint decision. On one level, this can simply be regarded as the practical politics necessary to hold such a fragmentary state together. But – and this is still an open question – this may also prove to be the political equivalent of tectonic drift, as European Russia and Asian Russia increasingly come to terms with the fact that a common language and culture no more force them to remain part of the same unitary state as it did the peoples of Britain and the United States.

The final divorce may not be imminent and may well prove as difficult, as Moscow's track record on decolonisation is decidedly poor. But the more the politics of the centre appears secondary to the internal processes taking place within the Far East and the wider Asia-Pacific region, the more it looks historically inevitable.

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### Notes

- 1 *ITAR-TASS*, 3 July 1997, in *BBC SWB*, 4 July 1997.
- 2 *ITAR-TASS*, 18 August 1994, in *BBC SWB*, 23 August 1994.
- 3 *RIA News Agency*, 9 October 1993, in *BBC SWB* 12 October 1993.
- 4 *ITAR-TASS*, 21 February 1996.

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