



FPRI The Russian Far East and the Future of Asian Security

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Abstract: While the U.S. Russia relationship remains strained over the Ukraine, the authors argue that Russia's Far East could be one of the building blocks of a revitalized U.S.-Russia relationship—one based on common security concerns and a shared Pacific space. Coping with China's rise is an important basis for renewed cooperation. Engaging the region could not only benefit the relationship as a whole but also contribute to security and stability in the Asia-Pacific, a vital U.S. national interest. The article concludes with recommendations for improving the U.S.-Russian relationship.

Russia's Far East (RFE), like much of eastern Asia, is at risk of becoming a *de-facto* appendage of a powerful and assertive Chinese state. Russia's deteriorating relations with the West, and a host of associated economic problems, have accelerated the RFE's drift to China's economic periphery, increasing the likelihood that the People's Republic of China (PRC) will shape the region's development trajectory to its advantage. While Russia now perceives China as its economic lifeline, China considers Russia's eastern territories as a proximate overland source for a range of vital commodities—considerations important to Beijing as its rivalry with the United States intensifies. A strong and controlling Chinese presence in the RFE, including preferential access to the region's resource base and perhaps a measure of political control, could increase greatly China's geopolitical weight compared to its neighbors, enhancing its prospects for regional hegemony in east and northeast Asia.

Such considerations have not been uppermost in recent U.S. policy toward Russia, which seems fixated on the Ukraine crisis, and on somehow inducing, mainly through a series of sanctions, Russia's withdrawal from eastern Ukraine. Unfortunately, events in Ukraine and the West's associated economic disengagement from Russia have broad international consequences. One of these is

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to enhance China's overall strategic position in Asia relative to that of the United States and its allies. This trend of events is not irreversible, but Washington must begin to fashion strategies to contain or manage China's rise. A vital aspect of this strategy is to reengage with Pacific Russia, to contribute to its stability and prosperity, and to ensure that no outside power gains direct or indirect control of its key assets and strategic space.¹



(Map courtesy of U.S. State Department)

Moscow and the Far East: The Failure of a Dream

The Russian Far East is one of Russia's most valuable territories, and among its most vulnerable. This huge area of northeastern Eurasia, stretching from east of Lake Baikal to the Pacific Ocean, contains all kinds of natural treasures—oil and natural gas, iron ore and copper, diamonds and gold, pristine fresh water, timber, and fish stocks.² It also gives Russia direct access to the Asia-Pacific region—making it a truly transcontinental nation, the only other such country is the United States. At the same time, being remote from and having tenuous transportation links to the country's core, suffering from demographic distress, serious underdevelopment, and backward infrastructure, the RFE is a source of constant concern for Russia, which has a weak economic presence in Asia. Ever since Russia acquired these territories, there have been recurring worries that these

¹ On determinants of a balancing coalition, see John Mearsheimer, "Can China Rise Peacefully?" *The National Interest*, Oct. 25, 2014, pp. 11–28, www.nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully.

² Lake Baikal alone has 20 percent of the world's unfrozen surface freshwater. In particular, the semi-closed Sea of Okhotsk is one of the most biologically productive areas of the world ocean. Ultimately, the RFE's marine biological resources, rather than hydrocarbons, may be its most important natural assets.

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