

The First Portsmouth Peace Treaty Forum

NICHOLAS II AND THE RUSSO-JAPANESE WAR

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It's a privilege to give a talk in this audience, in the wonderful city of Portsmouth, where the peace treaty between Russia and Japan was signed in 1905. Perhaps there is some magic in the scenery of the place, and probably some day Portsmouth could reconcile even Russia and Ukraine.

Russia has become an Asian power very long ago; approximately starting from the sixteenth century, when Russian expansion, or extension, or just the projection of Russian might in Eurasia, had stepped over the Ural Mountains, and entered the Asian part of Siberia. However, the Russian advance towards the Pacific was a very slow one. It was more like crawling than walking. Only in the middle of the nineteenth century, Vladivostok, the capital of the Russian Far East, was founded. Only by the end of the nineteenth century, Alexander III and Sergei Witte, who at that point was the Minister of Finance and who in 1905 signed the Portsmouth Treaty for the Russian side, had started organizing the Russian drive to the East, so to say implementing the Russian Pacific dream.

The Russian Pacific dream, by the end of the nineteenth century, was extraordinarily powerful. It was the habit of the Russian royal house to send the future emperor, the heir to the throne, on a voyage abroad after he had finished his studies in St. Petersburg. The future emperor, Nicholas II, was the first heir to the throne, the first Russian tsarevich, to go to the Far East. That manifested the extreme interest of the Russian elite in the area. But at the same time, another young person, the great writer Anton Chekhov, also went to the Russian Pacific. And both of them had made a circle around Eurasia, by sea and by land. So by the 1890s, Russia was really fascinated by the area. However, Russia had one enormous problem with its Far Eastern provinces and with its extension in the area in general. The Russians were always willing to master space, but at the same time, they were willing to yield to time. They were conquering enormous spaces of continental Eurasia, but they were unable to develop those spaces. The Russians have mastered space, but they have not mastered time. That's why the Russian Far Eastern areas have remained extremely underdeveloped.

In the Soviet era, the Russian Soviet Far East remained a captive of space. It was too far away from central Russia, in all senses, cultural, economic, even political. At the same time, it was not self-sufficient; it was highly dependent upon central Russia, with supplies coming from the European part of the USSR to the Far East. It was a very weird practice, involving self-serving mechanisms of bureaucracy: sometimes fish found in the stores of Vladivostok, on the Pacific coast, was imported from the Baltic. At the same time, the authority in the Soviet Far East was completely monopolized by the military. The Soviets' Far Eastern provinces were, so to say, granted to the military to rule for eternity. That led to some not so funny accidents at the military storages and bases. The military were abusing both the rights of the local people, and the very principle of development of the Far East. Instead of a Russian California or Alaska, it became just a huge Russian military base. And it was happening in a very dynamic international economic environment. In the early 80s, Japan was already a recognized economic superpower. South Korea, together with Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, partially Thailand, were becoming the new centers of economic might in the area. China had made an economic breakthrough as well. The Russian-rather racist-image of the Chinese went back to the years of cultural revolution; the millions of people obeying Chairman Mao, and capable only of killing sparrows. And suddenly the Soviets

discovered an exuberant and swiftly developing China. That was a lesson to the Russian racism, and it was also a challenge to the Russian pattern of developing its Far Eastern areas.

So, by the 80s, the Soviets faced an ironic situation in the Far East: enormous resources and underdevelopment. Several attempts were made to change this unfortunate stalemate. When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, at first he was very active in trying, as he put it, "to face the Pacific." In the summer of 1986, he made a "milestone" speech in Vladivostok. Notwithstanding the pains in which the speech was prepared, and how much significance the Moscow elite assigned to it at the time, and how many initiatives Gorbachev declared, absolutely nothing happened. For instance, he promised to open Vladivostok, the city closed not only to the foreigners, but also to the Soviets. But nothing was done. The general staff still had full authority to decide whether a foreigner would visit the place or not.

At the same time, the development of the Russian Far East had its own "domestic" logic. Disappointed in Moscow as a center of power and decision-making, the area decided to develop its own network in the Pacific. And then, a sad phenomenon, which I would describe as the "Hong Kong mirage", appeared in the Far East. Somehow the Far Easterners started to believe that as soon as the magic wand of the foreign capital touches the coast of the Russian Far East, everything will be changed, probably even the pine apple trees will appear there. They had only one good reason for being so much involved in wishful thinking: resources. But they were mistaken in several important respects. First, they had the completely wrong perception of the nature of China's success, especially the success of China's free economic zones. Chinese free economic zones were first of all supported by the overseas Chinese, by the so-called "huagiao, while there was no Russian diaspora overseas to support generously any free economic zone in Russia. Then, of course, there were some unreasonable optimistic declarations of foreign businessmen, coming to the Far East and promising to turn it into Hong Kong overnight. And then there was a misleading euphoria of a Russian nation, which was awakening from totalitarianism. Finally, the Far Easterners have not taken into account the Soviet bureaucracy, a social stratum which cannot be appeased, on rational terms, and which builds its functioning upon mere extortion.

In total despair, the Soviet Far Easterners came out with the idea of a Far Eastern Republic, of secession from the Soviet Union. The idea of independence still exists in the Far East, and probably it is more powerful than it used to be. However, it is not a very realistic concept. There are numerous problems, first of all, how to define the borders of that independent Far Eastern Republic. Would it be just the Vladivostok area? What about Khabarovsk, Sakhalin, Kamchatka, Magadan, Eastern Siberia? And all those areas are competing with each other for foreign capital and investments. The Russian Far East has entered the post Soviet era having changed, but not having changed much. The military are still there, and more or less, they are still intact.

The good thing, and at the same time the bad thing, is that the Russian Far East, and Russia in general, is decentralized to the point of anarchy. It's good, because Moscow cannot impose anything upon the provinces, but it is bad because it is impossible to conduct economic reform in the situation of chaos. For instance, let us take the issue of free economic zones. Only in the Maritime province (Primorye), the capital of which is Vladivostok, there are three competing projects, where to build the free economic zone (or the "special" economic zone). One of the projects insists on Vladivostok, another on the port of Hakhodka, and the third on the area of Tumangan, where the borders of China, Russia and North Korea meet. Conflicting interests of several business groups are clashing. The international connection of the area with the outside world is very chaotic, again. Good news is that this connection is organized around

mostly local, private enterprises. Bad news is that usually it does not involve production. One of the most profitable businesses in the Far East is to import second-hand Japanese cars (bought in Niigata, or some other port in Japan, for 100 or 200 US dollars, and then sold in Russia for considerable sums of money). Business interaction has given birth to a very important phenomenon. The business interaction in the Far East has introduced, or rather reintroduced, the perception of the Chinese threat.

China, unlike developed nations of the area, is very much interested in expanding its economic relations with the Russian Far East. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, have lost most of their enthusiasm, as soon as they faced bureaucracy in the Far East, the lack of infrastructure, the lack of labor resources. But the Chinese were persistent, and the Russo-Chinese economic network is rather important these days. But Russian Far Easterners seem to be afraid of economic dominance by China. They are afraid that the Russian Far East will become just a "semi-colony" of the Chinese capital. And on the other hand, they are afraid of demographic dominance by the Chinese. According to the Russian Ministry of Interior, every day two hundred and fifty thousand Chinese cross the border in the Russian Far East. The Russian population in the area, which is very small, feels threatened.

The attitude of the Russian Far East towards the northern territories problem, the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan, is always there. Of course, the issue has been exploited by the Far Eastern political leaders, first of all, to enhance their own status as independent, wise, patriotic figures. And second, to get a share of the economic pie, which they hope to receive from Japan when Russia finally returns the disputed territories. The role of the political fuss in the Far East about the northern territories should not be exaggerated, but it is already interfering into the policy-making in Russia.

Russia these days is detached from the North Pacific, and from the Pacific in general. The attempt by Gorbachev to make the country face the region has failed. Today Russia has no clear-cut policy in the area. There are two conflicting perceptions of China. The first one is based upon the presumption that China is the natural geopolitical ally of Russia in Eurasia. Why? Because both Russia and China are threatened, or feel threatened, or will be threatened probably in the future, by Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia, which borders both with Russia and with China. And so there's the space for geopolitical cooperation, coordination, and probably even alliance between Russia and China. The Chinese are very much afraid of the events in post-Soviet Central Asia, because the post-Soviet Central Asia has become a bridge between the Chinese Moslem areas and the Moslem mainland. That was the territory through which the Silk Route used to pass. Now it could be called the Kalashnikov Machine Gun Route, because weapons are reaching Chinese Moslem areas through post-Soviet Central Asia. But there is another point of view, saying that nationalism is emerging in China, that territorial claims towards Russia have not been forgotten, that China is increasing its military budget (which is true) and is seeking new military capabilities, for instance building a blue water navy. Then there is also the problem of Mongolia, because Mongolia borders upon the Inner Mongolia, which is a part of China. (There are some indications that Beijing doesn't believe the Mongolia issue to be solved once and forever.) In the framework of this point of view, China is accused of a crawling expansion in the Russian Far East, and a conflict of some sort could develop in the future.

Then there are objectively different approaches of Moscow and Beijing to the situation on the Korean peninsula. Moscow would like to see a unified Korea, as a single state, while Beijing apparently would prefer to see two states on the peninsula. So there are two concepts in Russia: one of them regarding China as an ally, or as a potential ally, and another as a potential opponent or even adversary. The

Russian military do not support openly either of these concepts. Their only interest seems to be to sell as many weapons to China as possible, because it is the issue of getting hard currency (and if it were possible to sell weapons to the devil, they would do it). The interaction with China in the military sphere is a very pragmatic (and not a geopolitical) thing, and more than that, it is a matter of economic survival for the Russian military-industrial complex. The Russian military have got sort of an independence from the government, which is very dangerous in all possible spheres, and in the sphere of arms sales as well; probably no nation of the North Pacific would like to see China strengthened by advanced Russian military technology.

Russia as a nation seems to be in a stalemate, as far as its relations with Japan are concerned. The major obstacle for the normalization of relations between Japan and Russia is the northern territories issue. The only time when it was by all means possible to return the northern territories to Japan (for free, or for some ransom) was under Gorbachev, and in the first year of Yeltsin's administration. But both Gorbachev and Yeltsin have missed the chance to eliminate this obstacle, and since 1992 it is unrealistic to believe that any Russian leader in his sound mind will start serious negotiations with Japan on the issue. In the parliamentary elections of December 1993, 25% voted for fascists. How can a leader of such a country, even a liberal enlightened leader, (which Yeltsin is not) in such a situation, return territories to Japan? Extreme nationalists insist that Russia should get some territory from Ukraine, from Central Asia, and so forth, and now it is totally unrealistic to talk about giving some territory. Thanks to a Communist President Gorbachev and a post-Communist President Yeltsin, Russia has missed its chance to improve relations with Japan. Perhaps, current stagnation will last for quite a few years, until the domestic situation in Russia stabilizes.

The situation on the Korean peninsula is of a delicate nature for Russia. Recently, Russia has been not in a hurry to support the U.S. efforts to impose sanctions upon the North Korean regime. The Russian government has proposed an international conference instead. The Russian position here is complicated by classical geopolitical notions. First of all, Russia has lost all its leverage that it has enjoyed in North Korea, while China has not. China wants to see North Korea and South Korea as two competing states in the area, due to pure geopolitical considerations. A unified Korea would mean sort of a challenge to China in the Yellow Sea area. While for Russia a reunified Korea would be a natural geopolitical partner in the region. So the Russian and the Chinese approaches are rather opposite. But there is one dimension of the problem, which unites the approaches of Beijing and Moscow towards the situation in Korea. When we are speaking about sanctions against North Korea, we are approaching a very dangerous borderline between sanctions and military involvement. Some American analysts are already speaking about probable and necessary American military interference in the area. Obviously, those analysts are speaking from their North American perspective. North America is separated from the Korean peninsula by the immense Pacific Ocean. While for Russia and for China, North Korea is a neighbor. So if you have any military conflict on the Korean peninsula, and God forbid, if some nuclear accident happens-either involving a North Korean nuclear reactor, or a nuclear bomb North Korea allegedly has-the Russian areas of the Far East and the Chinese areas of Manchuria (as well as the whole of Japan) will be the first to suffer. We must also bear in mind that the North Korean regime has almost nothing to lose. That is why Russia is very cautious in the issue of North Korea.

Even if to take into consideration only the North Korea problem, it is obvious that Russian foreign policy in the North Pacific should be an extremely active one. We, however, witness limp, passive, and pathetically chaotic policy in the area. It's not because Russia as a nation is disinterested in the North

Pacific; it is because decision-making in Russia has been monopolized by a bunch of people without any strategic vision. Inevitably Russia as a nation will have to pay for that dearly. Be it the economic underdevelopment of the Russian Far East, be it the secessionist movement in the Russian Far East, be it the global security of the Pacific area, the results of the incompetent policy of the Russian Foreign Ministry and Russian government in general look dreadful. But still, the beam of hope is always there, if tolerance and patience are provided for. Russia and Japan will, sooner or later, negotiate the second peace treaty, and I hope that the City of Portsmouth would be as welcoming and as hospitable to the future Japanese Russian negotiations as it was in 1905, and the next treaty mending detachment and hostility between the two nations will also bear the name of Portsmouth.