EXTERNAL THREAT AS A DRIVING FORCE FOR EXPLORING AND DEVELOPING THE RUSSIAN PACIFIC REGION

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Ever since the mid-19th century, Russia’s policies in the Pacific have focused on two interconnected tasks: gaining and maintaining the status of a Pacific power and protecting the country’s eastern territories. There were no continuous external threats of losing these territories, and Petersburg’s/Moscow’s interests in the region were limited to extracting its natural resources, as well as creating a buffer zone and a foothold for further eastward expansion. Thus, the efforts to explore and protect the region were intermittent and did not transform into a sustained development strategy. The Kremlin’s current drive to the east, for the first time in Russian history, has strong economic underpinnings and serves to reinforce Russia’s position in the Asia-Pacific region by expanding its economic presence there.

Key Themes

- The Russian state’s policies vis-à-vis the country’s Far East have predominantly been driven by non-economic considerations due to the region’s remoteness, climate, geopolitical conditions, and sporadic threats to regional security. The government became actively involved in the region when foreign powers increased their activity in close proximity to Russia’s borders, which was perceived as a threat to the country’s territorial integrity.
- Russia’s position in the Far East was mainly reinforced through Russian settlements there, fortifications along the Chinese border, and the creation of military-oriented transportation infrastructure, as well as military and export-driven mining enterprises.
- Today the Far East is treated by the Russian government as a transit corridor, a raw material base, and a geographic foothold for the drive into the Asia-Pacific region. However, in keeping with tradition, the Kremlin invokes threats to regional security to convince the public of the need to redistribute some resources toward the eastern part of the country. At the same time, there is a danger that the end of the “threat from the East” will result in the end of yet another escalation of the government’s eastern policy.

Recommendations

Russia’s presence in the Asia-Pacific requires a strategy that is consistent with regional realities and the country’s potential. A long-term development strategy for the country’s eastern territories must also be formulated. It should adequately address the relevant internal and external challenges rather than focus on repelling external threats.

The Far East can become a viable platform for Russia’s economic integration into the Asia-Pacific only if Moscow starts treating the region as an equal part of the Eurasian political and economic space.