TATARSTAN CAPITALIZES ON CHINA'S EXPANDING ROLE IN MIDDLE VOLGA

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[For some time now, TTP has been telling you about the independence movements in Russia's Tatarstan and Bashkortostan, with Moslem Tatars and Bashkirs fighting in Ukraine against Russia, knowing Ukraine's freedom will lead to theirs and start the breakup of Russia. With that, they know they can prosper for they have lot of oil, easily extractable with no permafrost like in Siberia.

And TTP has been telling you for years about the long-range designs Chicom China has on eastern Siberia. Now, our friend Paul Goble tells us the latest: China's campaign to separate the Middle Volga from Russia.]

*Kazan, Tatarstan.*Russians have become increasingly concerned with the expansion of Chinese influence in the Russian Far East, along the Northern Sea Route, and in some of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia and the South Caucasus.

Now, the Kremlin is confronted with a potentially more disturbing development: the rise of China as a major player not just along Russia's periphery but near its core. Beijing has been increasing its investments and influence in Tatarstan and the Middle Volga.

This trend has assumed particular prominence in the past month as Chinese firms have moved to replace Western firms leaving these regions due to sanctions against Russia for its war in Ukraine. Increased Chinese activity is already giving Tatarstan and the adjoining regions and republics new sources of leverage over Moscow.

The Vladimir Putin regime has attempted to present these developments as simply evidence of strengthening Russian-Chinese ties. Nevertheless, the situation is sparking questions about Beijing's intentions and the future of the Kremlin's influence.

Trade between China and Tatarstan has been steadily growing. In 2023, it will likely exceed $2 billion. This only represents a fraction of Russian-Chinese trade, which reached $134 billion in the first seven months of 2023 alone (RBC, September 8). According to Russian commentator Ruslan Gorevoy, these figures do not accurately reflect the growing role of China in Tatarstan for three primary reasons (Versia.ru, September 18).

First, Russian exports mostly raw materials to China, while Chinese production in Tatarstan centers on finished goods. This effectively places industries into Chinese hands that many Russians think should be Moscow's alone.

Second, Chinese investment in existing and new firms in Tatarstan and the neighboring republics and regions is exploding far more rapidly than current trade figures suggest. Beijing officials are already talking about "billions" of rubles going to Tatarstan in the "first phase" alone, signaling that China's role will only grow.

Third, Kazan has given China special customs and tax free zones that will allow Beijing to use Tatarstan rather than Moscow as the major entry point for exports from China. Why Moscow has agreed to such arrangement, Gorevoy says, is far from clear.

The economic conference between Russian and Chinese regions that took place in Kazan two weeks ago was emblematic of China's rise in Tatarstan. It also underscored Tatarstan taking steps to actively capitalize on Beijing's increased influence to build its own political base.

Officials and businesspeople from across Russia and China attended. However, *the event was not organized by Moscow and Beijing directly but rather jointly by the Chinese consulate general in Kazan and the Tatarstan Agency for International Development*.

The title of the conference—*Rostki*in Russian, or "Shoots"—sent a powerful message on that point. The meeting's official logo showed a Russian and a Chinese flag holding up what some have characterized as "a cauldron," from which sprouts of new growth were shooting out. Moscow commentators expanded *Rostki*to mean "Russian and Chinese."

But Kazan writers stressed that the "t" between them stood for Tatarstan, which was thus the cauldron and big winner of recent developments (Kazan.aif.ru, September 4; Business-magazine.online, September 18).

During the conference, Tatarstan Rais ("Head") Rustam Minnikhanov stressed the central role of Tatarstan in Russian-Chinese trade. He also announced that he would be making another visit to China in November 2023 and that Chinese President Xi Jinping would be coming to Kazan next year as part of a BRICS session (Business-gazeta.ru, September 8 [1], [2]).

Minnikhanov visited Beijing earlier this year in May 2023. Other officials announced agreements on the construction of new production plants in Tatarstan and the Middle Volga region. They also celebrated the expansion of ties between Beijing and Kazan on various cultural, educational and developmental matters (Tatcenter.ru

, September 7; Chelny-izvest.ru, September 17; Rt-online.ru, September 21).

Both Moscow and Kazan see themselves as capable of coming out on top in this situation. Moscow believes it can due to its overwhelming power and control, while Kazan believes it can use the relationship with China to achieve its aspirations to be "a state within a state" (NTV.ru, September 8; Realnoevremya.ru, September 11).

In the short term, the Kremlin certainly has a better chance. But as Gorevoy points out, Kazan's characterization of its role as supporting Moscow's desire for expanded trade with China may boomerang unless the Russian central government remains properly informed of what is actually taking place in Tatarstan (Versia.ru, September 18).

Unless Moscow takes steps now, it may find itself on the losing side, especially if Tatarstan is able to encourage Chinese investment in other non-Russian republics, as it has done in the past. This, in turn, would help Tatarstan recover its status as the leader of the non-Russian regions against Moscow (Versia.ru, August 2, 2019).

In addition to whatever countermeasures Moscow takes, Gorevoy's article is likely to be a wake-up call for many, especially in the Russian security services. These bodies are becoming increasingly worried about the ways in which foreign involvement with non-Russians within Russia works against Moscow.

Furthermore, the Tatarstan government itself may soon face resistance to China's activities from its own population. Across the post-Soviet space, many Muslims are outraged by what Beijing is doing to the Islamic peoples of Xinjiang and by the fact that it assumes to have the right to do the same in other countries, including Russia.

At times, their attitudes have served as a constraint on what their respective national government might do in response (Ia-centr.ru, November 11, 2020; Window on Eurasia, August 28).

Such concerns exist in Tatarstan, even if they are certainly not strong as in Central Asia. In 2020, Tatars took to the streets to protest the construction of a section of the planned Moscow-Beijing superhighway. At the time, Moscow dismissed the demonstrations as examples of "not in my backyard" actions (Window on Eurasia, August 28, 2020).

They were, however, almost certainly more than that. The protests gave the indication that, if Kazan allows Chinese development projects to expand beyond a certain point, it may find its own people contemplating what they could do to block such moves. And this reality could come to pass as China continues to expand its activities in Tatarstan.

Paul Goble is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Serving in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and the Voice of America, he has been decorated by the governments of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for his work in promoting Baltic independence and the withdrawal of Russian forces from those formerly occupied lands.