

# Chapter 1: Border Demarcation Negotiated: 1991-1997



Jiang Zemin and Chinese and Russian foreign policy leaders  
(MGIMO: Sept., 3, 1994)

# 1 Booming Border

## Reconciliation

Mikhail Gorbachev, Secretary General of the CPSU, made his famous speech in Vladivostok, 300 kilometers south of Damanskii Island, in 1986: International affairs surrounding the Soviet Union should be changed to successfully achieve Perestroika; the main task in Asia was to improve relations with China. Then he appealed to Beijing to reopen border negotiations, basically frozen since the Sino-Russian military clashes of the late 1960s. In February 1987, negotiations for demarcation of the PRC-USSR border — some 4,300 kilometers of an eastern border and over 3,200 kilometers of a western border — were resumed on a deputy foreign ministry level that had been suspended since 1964. In mid-1989, when Gorbachev visited Beijing, students demonstrating on Tiananmen Square to demand democracy for China, gave him a warm welcome. During this visit, he shook hands with Deng Xiaoping for the reconciliation of the Soviet Union and China. Border negotiations were subsequently hastened.

The message of reconciliation reached the border area where the remains of the military tensions of the 1960s had lingered. Border trade was resumed in 1983, but heavy traffic on the Amur River between Heihe and Blagoveshchensk was resumed on a one-day trip basis in the winter of 1988: The total in and out flux of people in this border was 2,352 (of which 1,602 were Chinese) and the total volume of cargo was 6,510 tons (of which 4,266 tons were Chinese). These figures significantly increased in 1989: 30,789 people (of which 17,307 were Chinese) and 77,883 tons (of which 49,846 tons were Chinese) (Heihe diquzhi: 448).

On May 16, 1991, when Jiang Zemin, General Secretary of the CPC visited Moscow, after having been recently promoted after the repression of the Tiananmen Movement, Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen and his counterpart Aleksandr Bessmertnykh signed an agreement covering the eastern border between the PRC and the USSR. The agreement covers a 4,300 kilometer border, with the exception of a few disputed lands from the Sino-Russian-Korean triangular border point on the Tumen River to the Sino-Russian-Mon-

golian triangular border on the grasslands, and consists of ten articles that had not been published at the time. That summer an aborted coup d'etat occurred in Moscow, and the Soviet Union collapsed the following December.

### **Shock Waves from China**

1992 was an important year both for Russia and China. Newly-born Russia rushed for its "regime transition" and adopted new economic policies, particularly "border openness" and "liberalization" for introducing a market economy into its own country. As a symbolic gesture of openness, Vladivostok, a military port that had been closed to foreigners for a long time, was given open city status in 1992. The Chinese leadership, while astonished by the sudden decline of the father state of socialism, considered the breakup of the Soviet Union not only a crisis for the regime but a golden business opportunity for Chinese entrepreneurs. In the winter of 1992, Deng Xiaoping declared in his now famous "Southern Speech" the importance of emphasizing economic improvements over other socialist values. Then, cities in the northern front facing the Russian Far East, Heihe and Suifenhe in Heilongjiang, Manzhouli in Inner Mongolia and Hunchun in Jilin were declared an open gate for "reform and openness" by the central government. These local governments also tried to develop their own local economies to redirect goods from South China for export to Russia.

Quite accidentally, both Russia and China adopted their policies of "openness" at the same time, which boosted the trade volume between the two. The trade volume of Heilongjiang Province with Russia rose to \$1.74 billion in 1992 and \$1.89 billion in 1993 from \$85 million in 1991 (see Chapter 5). The total in and out flux of people and the volume of cargo in Heihe increased to 142,112 (of which 61,852 were Chinese) and 129,100 tons (of which 44,976 tons were Chinese) respectively in 1992 from 79,792 (of which 36,488 were Chinese) and 109,007 tons (of which 37,904 tons were Chinese) in 1991 (Heihe diquzhi: 448). A notable increase in the number of people moving across the border points between Russia and China is clearly discernable. Once Russia and China had started allowing their citizens to visit free of charge in 1988, many citizens on both sides yearned for the

opportunity to do business on the other side of the border on a non-visa basis. Of course, at the time this was implemented, the entry of Chinese citizens into Russia, and vice versa, was strictly controlled by both countries' socialist regimes. However, 1992 proved to be a difficult year for the Russian communist in the Far East.

From 1992 onward, many Chinese "businesspersons" started to use the non-visa basis to earn money in the Russian Far East and Siberia. This had a drastic impact on the Russian people. It is well-known that the two countries have a striking demographic gap of about seven million people in the Russian Far East compared to more than a hundred million people in the North East of China. In addition, while many Russians are said to be leaving the Russian Far East, where living conditions are worsening day by day since the breakup of the country's previous economic system, the vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union was filled by the infiltration of Chinese goods and people.

Chinese business people and goods dominating the Russian Far East are a historic symbol of the return of a "Chinese presence," which creates trivial but daily conflicts arising from the deep cultural gap that exists between the two. For example, Chinese customs started to spread in Russian territories, e.g. jostling instead of waiting in line, spitting phlegm in public, and failing to observe traffic regulations. This was a great shock to Russians accustomed to, more or less, a westernized standard of mores. Russia's Far Eastern territory suddenly was obliged to face a completely different "world order," which could possibly threaten its own values. In fact, Chinese business people sat on the main part of a city bazaar and realized big profits from shuttled goods made in China, beating their Russian counterparts. Many ordinary Russian customers who had little experience and were ill-equipped in haggling became mere fodder to Chinese businesses in the early 1990s. This was the background of the rapid development of trade and people shuttling between their corresponding borders between 1992 and 1993. The statistics appear to suggest economic "complementarity" between Russia and China, but a massive negative reaction to the Chinese inclusion in Russia's Far East market was a cause of great concern during this time.

### **A Mystery Figure**

In January 1994, the central government of Russia, following the requests made by local governments in the Russian Far East, introduced a new visa regime for Chinese travelers to tighten control of Chinese migration. Russian locals as well as central newspapers began to campaign against a perceived "Chinese threat," citing an unsubstantiated figure of Chinese "immigrants" — more than a hundred thousand illegal Chinese immigrants living in the Russian Far East (Anderson 1997: 28).

Russia's customs statistics show a number of inconsistencies, as mentioned previously (page 10), when compared to those compiled by the Chinese. The sum of movement at Blagoveshchensk was 9,426 (Russian 3,193) in 1988, 51,209 (Russian 23,504) in 1989, 141,474 (Russian 67,462) in 1990, 283,885 (Russian 142,621) in 1991, 618,006 (Russian 330,791) in 1992 and 771,008 (Russian 397,075) in 1993 (Zhang Zonghai 2000: 157). These figures do not correspond with their Chinese counterparts, though most of the passengers entered into Blagoveshchensk from there.



Chinese "shuttle traders" rushing for the river customs  
(Blagoveshchensk: Sept., 1997)

In April 1994, the authorities of Khabarovsk Krai proclaimed to a parliamentary delegation from Moscow that the city was in disorder because of Chinese infiltration: Forty-five percent of foreign trade, two-thirds of the import volume in 1993 and half of Russia's joint ventures were with China. Chinese business practices are astute, however. China's share of joint investments is only ten percent of all the foreign investments and it concentrates on trade and broker works and has no interest in developing the local economy. On the other hand, Chinese businesses made a hundred percent commitment to acquire more property. They acted as though they were in their own country using legal irregularities in foreign transactions (a Deputy Governor).

Here is the Chinese "calm expansion." Chinese businesses cautiously got Russian companies to fail by implementing their own deals with China, and tried to receive compensation through default. This caused a sudden release of Russian rubles all at once to disrupt the local economy. They also purchased military technology acting as representatives of the Chinese government (Khabarovsk Chief of Intelligence) (Priamurskie vedomosti Apr. 23, 1994).

## **2 The 1991 Agreement on the Sino-Russian Eastern Border**

### **A Political Leak**

In the summer of 1993, when a clamor over Chinese "immigrants" arose, a partial text of the 1991 agreement on the Sino-Russian (then USSR) eastern border was suddenly published and criticized in some newspapers. It was a strange move since Russia's Supreme Soviet had ratified this agreement with a majority in February 1992. Except for a few disputed points, the 1991 agreement that had finalized the Sino-Russian 4,200 kilometer border was regarded as a victory for Russian diplomacy that had halted further demands by China for its historic and potential territorial claim over one and half million square kilometers of territory. Nobody except professional geographers noticed what territories would be transferred to China in accordance with the 1991 agreement because the attached map to the agreement was not published, although Article 2 defined the details of the division of local territories. Publication of the agree-

ment may have been a political leak aimed at fermenting criticism of the territorial deal between Moscow and Beijing. Here is an abstract of the agreement (Demarkatsiia 1997: 14-21):

Article 1: The signatory states resolve justifiably and rationally the historic border problems and set the border.

Article 2: Omit (it identifies border points from One to Thirty-three, except from Seven to Eight and from Ten to Eleven).

Article 3: The signatory states, according to Article 1, will continue to negotiate to resolve the problem of the two border sections: from Seven to Eight and from Ten to Eleven.

Article 5: The border runs through the center of the main channel in a navigable river and runs through the center of any river or center of its main course in a non-navigable river. The exact position of the main channel, the position of the center of the main channel, the center of a river, center of its main course, and the possessions of islands on the river, will be concretely decided during border demarcation work between Russia and China.

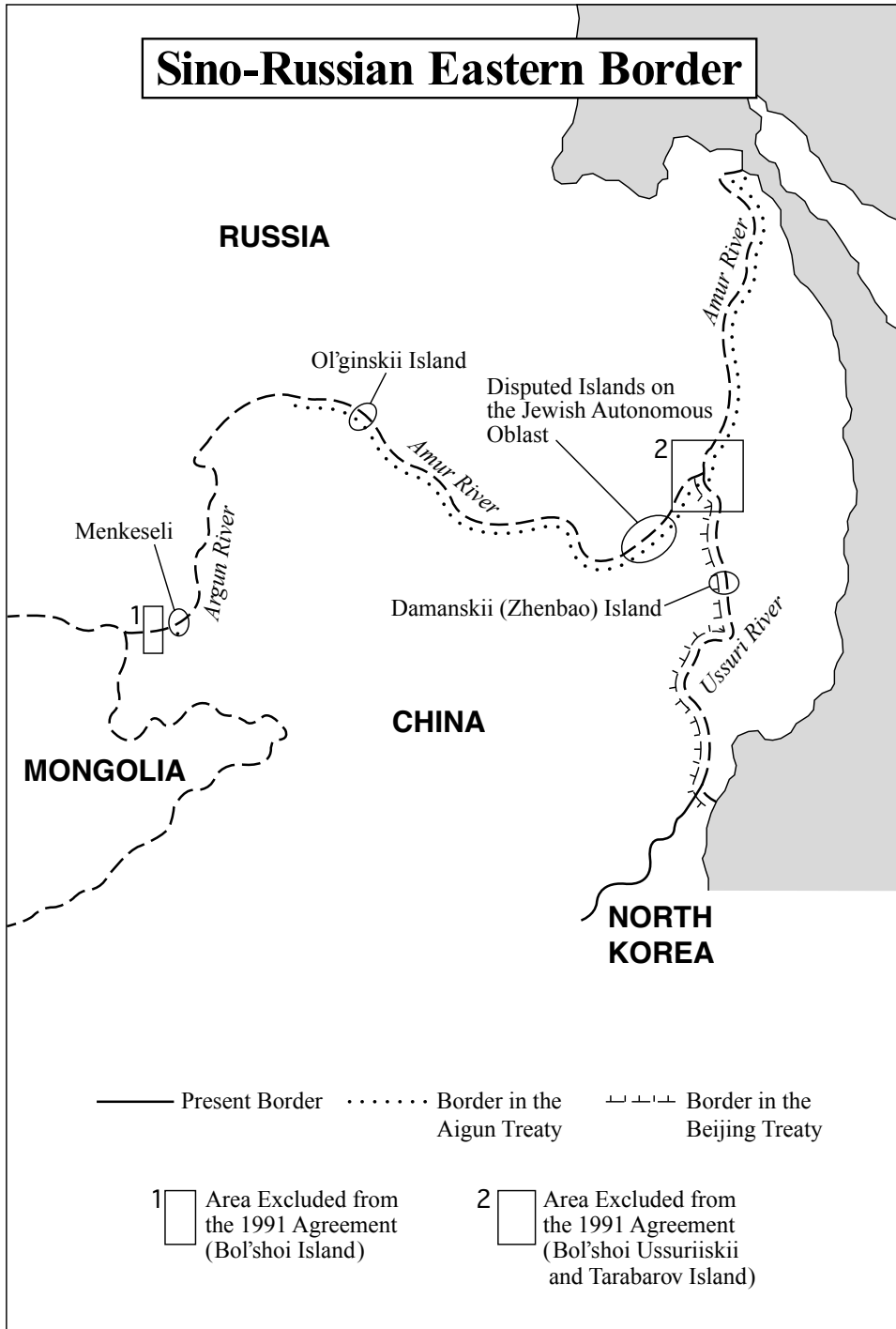
Article 8: The signatory states agree that various types of ships, including military ships, can navigate the Ussurii River into the Amur River near Khabarovsk City without any disturbance and vice versa. A concerned organ of the signatory states will elaborate the rules for navigation.

Article 9: The Soviet Union agrees that Chinese ships (under the PRC flag) can navigate the Tumen River below the border point Thirty-three of Article 2 to the sea and vice versa. Concrete problems, related to navigation, will be regulated by agreement between interested parties.

(an abridged translation from the Russian text)

The main point of concern in Russia was what Russian territory would be transferred to China once the agreement was put into effect.

# Sino-Russian Eastern Border





## **River Border**

First, Article 3 omits two places to be resolved in the agreement. One basic principle of international law, which was adopted as Article 5 in the agreement, is *Thalweg*, which defines river borders on the basis of the main channel of navigable rivers. The three points mentioned above between Eight and Ten in Article 2 cover the entire border in the Argun and Amur Rivers according to the spirit of Article 5. It is, however, disputable which water course, close to the Russian or Chinese riverside, is the main channel when there are many islands on the river. Curves and seasonal changes in the rivers' water flow caused a serious debate over defining the border. Both Russia and China had a stake in keeping the main channel distant from its own riverside. This is because each country could receive more islands than the other if it recognized a channel close to the opposite side of the border.

In the section from Seven to Eight, which is excluded in Article 2 and preserved for further negotiations pertaining to Article 3, is a 5,000 hectare island, Bol'shoi, on the Argun River, close to Manzhouli and Zabaikal'sk, and listed from Ten to Eleven are the 32,000 hectare Bol'shoi Ussuriiskii Island and the 4,000 hectare Tarabarov Island on the Amur and Ussuri Rivers opposite Khabarovsk city. The Chinese name for Bol'shoi is Abagaitui, the origin being Mongolian. The two islands near Khabarovsk are referred to as Heixiazi (Heixiazi sometimes signifies only Bol'shoi Ussuriiskii, while Tarabarov is called Yinshe). The "three islands" problem has been subject to negotiations, but remains unresolved even now since the signing of the 1991 agreement.

According to the demarcation work of the 1991 agreement, Russian residents living close to the border were obliged to recognize *Thalweg*, which is outlined in Article 5. The agreement was never intended to mean an equal division of "blank" territory on the border river. It reconsiders the previous "unequal" realities that Imperial Russia "forced" upon China by the Aigun and Beijing Treaties of the late nineteenth century. In short, it tried to revise the de facto border line between islands that Russia and China had controlled before; therefore Russia was forced to face the serious fact that many of its hundreds of islands would be handed to China.

### **Three Points on the Land Border**

According to the 1991 agreement, the territory that would be transferred to China was not limited to islands on the river border. The land border is referred to in Article 2 by sections from points One to Seven and from points Thirteen to Thirty-three. With the exception of the Argun, the Amur, and the Ussuri, the sections of land and river borders tend to be short. Border points are usually set at intervals because the land border can be drawn in a straight line. It is difficult to discern where the land border will be drawn between China and Russia from Article 2 without a 1:200,000 scale map. If we were all professional geographers with detailed maps, we could identify the revisions. That is the territory transferred to China or Russia.

It is well-known that the territories revised in the 1991 agreement comprise of the three sections of the land border from Lake Khanka to the Tumen River in the Primor'e Krai: the 300 hectares near Lake Khanka, 900 hectares at Letter P — an old marker used during the previous demarcation work (see Chapter 2) — in the Ussuriisk Region and a 300 hectare area in Khasan Region. In the latter two, Russia gave the whole area to China, while the former was said to be an exchange of land: Russia would get 90 hectares from China and China would get 200 from Russia (these figures were published in a Russian source). These three sections became famous for the anti-1991 agreement campaign led by Primor'e Governor Evgenii Nazdratenko and his aides in Primor'e Krai at the beginning of 1995.

### **3 A Territorial Campaign**

#### **"Not One Acre of Our Land Will Ever Be Handed to China"**

A campaign by Nazdratenko through local newspapers, in Vladivostok and elsewhere, brought the territorial issue to its most politicized point in the Primor'e. On February 13, 1995, just one day after Nazdratenko appealed to the central government to annul the 1991 agreement by an Upper House resolution, sensational news appeared on the front page of the "Tokyo Shimbun," a Japanese daily newspaper, reporting that the Chinese army had mobilized near the Russian border, and a force of half a million strong staged the first

large-scale maneuvers in ten years. Its correspondent, Andrei Polutov, a Japanese interpreter for the Pacific Fleet, explained that these military maneuvers were taken by the Chinese in response to Nazdratenko's campaign under the slogan "no territory will be given to China" (Tokyo Shimbun Feb. 16, 1995). On February 22, the Chinese Foreign Ministry commented that the Primor'e parliament's renunciation of the 1991 agreement was "irresponsible" (Krasnoe znamia Feb. 28, 1995). A few days later, news of an army of half a million mobilized for maneuvers in China was confirmed as disinformation; the actual number of the forces was 40,000 (Tokyo Shimbun Feb. 25, 1995). This sensational episode reflected the negative atmosphere regarding China in the Primor'e. When Nazdratenko declined to join the delegation to China at the end of February, he was criticized by Deputy Foreign Minister Aleksandr Panov. The endangerment of the 1991 agreement and the growing lawlessness regarding border security (e.g. a possible return to the 1960s when military clashes occasionally occurred) alarmed Panov (Krasnoe znamia Mar. 2, 1995).

### **Spring of 1996**

At the beginning of 1996, Nazdratenko escalated his campaign against the 1991 agreement. He stirred up the local mass media, rallied local support, and tried to pressure the Foreign Ministry to reconsider the 1991 agreement by receiving majority help through the Upper House in the central legislature. On the other hand, the slow pace of the ongoing demarcation work mandated in the 1991 agreement irritated President Boris Yel'tsin and the Foreign Ministry who were preparing for their up-coming visit to China. According to Russia's domestic law, the agreement would become invalid if the demarcations were not finalized by 1997, five years following its ratification. This meant that 1997 was the deadline and Russia had only one year remaining to complete the work (Interfax Aug. 8, 1997). The central government persuaded the Primor'e to speed up the demarcation work. In April of that same year, Panov claimed that the Primor'e had retracted its complaints over the disputed territory near Lake Khanka (Interfax Apr. 18, 1996); the problems in this area seemed to have been resolved between the central government and the Primor'e.

On April 5, Maj. Gen. Valerii Rozov, then a member of the demarcation committee, suddenly resigned his post to criticize the "transfer of Russian territory to China." He stressed that the lands in Khasan Region were of special importance, because they were located at the junction of three countries and gave Russia access to the Tumen River. Furthermore, the transfer of these lands to China would strip Russia of a strategic border zone, which would be especially important in light of the U.N. Tumen project. He argued that there was still a chance of making a "sensible" decision on the finalization of the Russia-China border and the Russian president's visit to China might encourage moves in the right direction. The Russian Foreign Ministry commented that this was his personal view, while President Yel'tsin signed a decree accelerating the border demarcation work (Interfax Apr. 5, 1996).

On April 10, Nazdratenko met with President Yel'tsin and Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov to discuss the problem of border demarcation. On April 11, both had taken opposing viewpoints; Nazdratenko announced a halt to the demarcation work while Yel'tsin expressed his anger about Nazdratenko's remarks and confirmed his decision to accelerate the demarcation work. Then, news was reported that Cossacks of the Ussuriisk Region had united and formed a patrol group to stop the demarcation work (Vladivostok Apr. 13, 1996).

### **The Disputed Islands in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast**

The central government reemphasized the significance of the presidential decree on border demarcation. A high-ranking officer from the Foreign Ministry maintained that it was necessary in order for a relationship based on trust and friendship between Russia and China to develop. The Deputy Head of the Federal Border Guard reiterated the importance of finishing demarcation work by 1997 (Interfax Apr. 15, 1996). The aim of the decree was to push the demarcation work of other border areas that had been delayed as well as the Primor'e (Tikhookeanskaia zvezda Jul. 16, 1997). Yel'tsin tried to accelerate the work concerning the islands on the Amur River in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast. There were some ten thousand hectares of islands, Popov, Savel'ev, Sazanii, Sukhoi, Na-stvorakh, Evrasikha, Lugovskoi, and Nizhnepetrovskie between Tarabarov and the city of

Leninskoe along the Amur River (Priamurskie vedomosti Apr. 3, 1996). On April 13, Aleksandr Manilov, Deputy Director of the Federal Border Guard, gave a press briefing that all of the 4,700 hectares of islands, including Evrasikha, Lugovskoi, Nizhnepetrovskie, Popov, and Savel'ev — 3,800 hectares in all — would be transferred to China, while 11,400 hectares of islands, including three on the Amur River and others, would remain in Russian hands (Utro Rossii Apr. 17, 1996). Aleksandr Gol'bakh, Chief Commander of the Far East Border Guard, reported that Sazanii, Sukhoi, Na-stvo-rakh — 2,500 hectares in all — were confirmed as Russian territory (Priamurskie vedomosti Apr. 23, 1996). This was a reconfirmation of the 1991 agreement (Vereshchagin 1999: 232-233).

On April 17, Khabarovsk Governor, Viktor Ishaev, expressed concern over the islands' fate and demarcation work next to Tarabarov and Bol'shoi Ussuriiskii, while not renouncing the 1991 agreement (Interfax Apr. 15, 1996). At the same time, the Far East and Trans-Baikal parliament assembly complained bitterly about the hand-over of forty islands and the Primor'e lands to China (Amurskaia pravda Apr. 18, 1996).

### **"Strategic Partnership"**

The Foreign Ministry was desperate to defuse the ripples that had spread over the Far East. On April 18, Panov, denying a rumor of a secret agreement allowing for the transfer of Russian territory to China, made clear that no such secret agreement had ever existed nor would it be discussed during demarcation negotiations in Yel'tsin's coming visit to Beijing. He proclaimed that demarcation work in Ussuriisk and Khasan Regions had not been conducted and an optimal solution was being sought. Panov refuted several of his opponents' criticisms of the demarcation. For example, the claim that China was getting an allegedly strategic advantage on the Tumen River, offering China access to the sea. He countered that the 17 kilometer river mouth beyond the border belonged to Russia, so China would not get access to the sea, and maintained that any alleged claim by China to build a port on its section would be groundless because the Tumen River was too shallow. He also confirmed that the agreement would be in full force only when the

demarcation was completed on all sections. "If we do not do that, we will have a legally unprotected border which is unacceptable," he stressed. He denied claims of a confrontation between the Foreign Ministry and the presidential administration over the border issue. "All the agencies involved in the demarcation process, including the Foreign and Defense Ministries and the Federal Border Service, hold a common view," he said. He described Beijing's official attitude as very reserved. However, according to him, there was talk in China that if the demarcation was not completed, Beijing might renew its claims to over one and half million square kilometers of Russian territory (Interfax Apr. 18, 1996).

At last, President Yel'tsin, expressing uneasiness over Nazdratenko's action on territorial problems, skipped his visit to Vladivostok, and decided to go to China via Khabarovsk. On the eve of his visit, he signed an agreement to divide administrative competence between the central government and Khabarovsk, and showed attentiveness to Ishaev in contrast to Nazdratenko. Then, though he criticized the delay of the demarcation work in Ussuriisk and Khasan Regions, he stated Russia's observance of the 1991 agreement, and demonstrated his determination to retain control over the disputed "three islands," while appealing to guarantee national interests to the people of Khabarovsk and all of Russia (Priamurskie vedomosti Apr. 26, 1996).

This suggests that Yel'tsin's strategy of divide and rule on the border demarcation issue in Khabarovsk and Primor'e was to be short-lived. He prevented a territorial quarrel from spreading across the Far East from the Primor'e. China did not react to Yel'tsin's firm pre-visit rhetoric on holding the "three islands." For the time being, China seemed to be satisfied with Russia's "honesty" in reconfirming the transfer of several islands of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast to China. President Yel'tsin, hoping to conceal deep-seated problems plaguing the Sino-Russian border negotiations, suddenly proposed a "strategic partnership" between Russia and China.

Moscow showed its goodwill in transferring these islands in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast to China instead of immediately resolving the Primor'e problem. It was here, on the way to China, that President Yel'tsin suddenly proposed the concept of a "strategic

partnership" between Russia and China. In this context, the concept of "partnership" was, at least then, fabricated to strengthen the persistently fragile border negotiations between Russia and China.<sup>4</sup>

Nazdratenko, accompanying Yel'tsin on his trip to China, never referred to the territorial issue and was said to have acted in a way more appropriate for a salesperson. The Chinese side admired and considered him a "friend to China." After his return to Russia, the newspaper in Vladivostok accused him of being overly opportunistic during negotiations with China. The paper criticized Khabarovsk's indifference to Vladivostok on the border issue (Vladivostok Apr. 25; May 6, 1996). And it was at this time Nazdratenko unveiled another thought.

## **4 A Last-minute Compromise**

### **Linked to River Border Challenges**

Dissatisfaction over territorial problems was widespread in the Far East despite Yel'tsin's endeavors. On June 11, the Jewish Autonomous Oblast parliament sent President Yel'tsin a letter expressing its disagreement over the decision to transfer its islands on the Amur River to China. In the second half of July, when maneuvers were being conducted on the river, the deputy commander of the Border Guard did not hide his dissatisfaction with Moscow's decision on the border demarcation. It was seen as a move to politicize the territorial issue for Amur Oblast (Amurskaia pravda, Jul. 26, 1996).

The anti-demarcation movement was founded in Khabarovsk Krai. In late November, when a plan for "joint use" of the disputed islands between Russia and China was proposed (details discussed later), Ishaev angrily complained that politicians in Moscow had seen the disputed territory only as a sandbar, changing from his cautious position to become a hard liner (Tikhookeanskaia zvezda Nov. 20, 1996).

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4 One correspondent considers Yel'tsin and Jiang's confirmation of the 1991 agreement to be very important for the Russo-Chinese partnership. The confidence building measure agreement for the border areas including Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and China, signed in Shanghai on April 26, 1996, should also be positioned in a context that would defuse mutual distrust between them (See, Krasnaia zvezda Apr. 26, 1996).

The position held by Gol'bakh, commander in chief of the Far East Border Guard, had become more acute: recently improved relations between Russia and China had been dependent on China's goodwill. China hoped to enhance its economic position in the Far East, and to gain access to Russia's natural resources to develop its northern territories. Despite many governmental agreements, China did not hide its interest in gradual migration of Chinese into Russian territory, and it secretly tried to change the river border closer to the Russian side. It seemed that China considered the agreements as only tactical, while it had a long term plan for acquiring territory at the expense of the Russian Far East. In Khabarovsk Krai, inconspicuous Chinese migration was increasing. Bol'shoi Ussuriiskii and Tarabarov had already been incorporated as Chinese islands on Chinese maps: the border had yet to be stabilized (Tikhookeanskaia zvezda Dec. 5, 1996).

During the Sino-Russian behind-the-scenes negotiations over the demarcation work, one difficult point of contention was the 17,500-hectare Menkeseli region, next to Bol'shoi on the Argun River in the Chita Oblast. According to the 1991 agreement, it should have been handed to China, but the Trans-Baikal Army and local residents, who had used this area for fishing, resisted the decision for security and economic reasons. This disturbed the demarcation work. Even in April 1996, the problem had not been settled, and the central government had tried to resolve it by guaranteeing local residents' "special use" of this region after its transition to China. The deal was finalized in late 1996. This "joint use" option card became a breakthrough during negotiations (Nezavisimaia gazeta Jan. 30, 1997).

### **Toward the Final Negotiation**

Nazdratenko successfully pressed the Foreign Ministry to revise the 1991 agreement by acquiring the support of Gen. Aleksandr Lebed, Premier Viktor Chernomyrdin, Security Counsel Secretary Ivan Rybkin and other important players. He proposed a compromise: the Primor'e would agree to transfer Letter P, a 900-hectare section of disputed territory, to China in return for China's acceptance of the status quo of the disputed territory in Khasan Region (belonging to



Russia) and an agreement not to exercise the rights to navigate Chinese ships down the Tumen River to the Sea of Japan (Vladivostok Dec. 5, 1996). The Upper House promised to establish a working group including all of the organs related to this issue to resolve the different positions between the Foreign Ministry and the Primor'e (Interfax Dec. 17, 1996).

In 1997, there was little hope of resolving the deadlock on the territorial problem. Despite an announcement of a Sino-Russian "strategic partnership," border negotiations had been frozen during 1996. At the beginning of 1997, the final year of Russia's legal deadline for finishing demarcation work, only 2,500 of the 4,200 kilometer border had been set (Nezavisimaia gazeta Jan. 31, 1997). Then, Foreign Minister Primakov proclaimed that a "crisis" in border negotiations would ensue unless the work was finished by the end of the year (Tikhookeanskaia zvezda Mar. 8, 1997).

A calm but assertive "reaction" to the central government was devised. The president of the parliament of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast requested rescaling work on the Amur River. Ishaev expressed his dissatisfaction over the non-confirmation of Bol'shoi Ussuriiski and Tarabarov as Russian territory, refusing to join a planned delegation to China the following June (Tikhookeanskaia zvezda Feb. 27, 1997). A local movement for a referendum on the question of the transfer of territory to China had arisen in the Jewish Autonomous Oblast and the Primor'e Krai (Interfax Mar. 27; Apr. 2; Apr. 9, 1997). According to Vladimir Lukin, Head of the International Committee of the Lower House, by April 1997 only 3000 kilometers of the border had been demarcated (Interfax Apr. 16, 1997).

May was the month when a new act was introduced. On May 20, it was stated that both central governments had agreed in principle to "joint use" of the demarcated islands (Tikhookeanskaia zvezda May 23, 1997). China had made the decision to permit Russian local citizens to use the islands transferred to China for a limited time after the demarcation had been completed. With this so-called "joint use" agreement, Menkeseli on the Argun River was officially transferred to China on the condition that a number of Russian residents living near Menkeseli would be permitted to enter (Kireev 1997: 15).

After that, demarcation work speeded up with "joint use" in the Far East. By the end of August, two islands remained unsettled on the Amur River in Amur Oblast. One of them, the island of Ol'ginskii, was handed over to China with "joint use" recognized by China. The work on the Amur River of the Jewish Autonomous Oblast was successful as five islands, including the island of Popov, were handed over to China as Gol'bakh envisioned the previous year. All the while, the local authorities tried to apply legal measures blocking any adjustment of the border without local consent and to put a stop to the demarcation work. The work done on the many islands along 200 kilometers of the Ussuri River south of Khabarovsk remained unfinished (Amurskaia pravda Jul. 4, 1997). In Khabarovsk, a rumor was being broadcast everyday that Bol'shoi Ussuriiskii and Tarabarov would be treated according to the "joint use" option of resolving the territorial deadlock and, particularly, the fate of the latter would be a cause of worry (Amurskaia pravda, Jul. 2, 1997). Despite the positive signs, there remained some difficult barriers to tackle in order to finish the demarcation work.



A Russian border surveillance ship on the Amur (Tarabarov Island)

### **A Compromise on Khasan**

An area in Khasan Region was still in dispute. According to the Deputy Governor of Primor'e, Vladimir Stegnii, the Foreign Ministry's approach to the Primor'e's position was revealed before the Upper House on May 13, where Grigorii Karasin, Deputy Foreign Minister, Evgenii Afanas'ev, Head of the First Division of the Asian Bureau of the Foreign Ministry, and Ambassador at Large Genrikh Kireev, Plenipotentiary of the Russian demarcation committee, were present. Stegnii stated that Russia did not necessarily have to transfer land in Khasan and Ussuriisk to China (Utro Rossii May 23, 1997). In June, the Upper House made clear its position supporting the Primor'e. The press service of the Primor'e administration issued a statement that the Upper House had agreed with the underlying correctness of the Primor'e position, asking the central government and the demarcation committee to negotiate a compromise and proposing a law making representatives of the Trans-Baikal and Far East regions part of the Russian delegation (Utro Rossii Jun. 7, 1997). Isolation of the Foreign Ministry, relying only on Yel'tsin's judgment, seemed inescapable.

In late June, Premier Viktor Chernomyrdin met and discussed bilateral issues with Jiang Zemin in Beijing and proposed a new border in the middle between the present line and the one set down in the 1991 agreement, and a plan for the fifty-fifty division of the Khasan disputed area (Interfax Jun. 27, 1997). When the Sino-Russian border demarcation committee met in Beijing from July 21 to August 4, Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman Valerii Nesterushkin gave a briefing in Moscow that stated the two sides had conducted talks over items on the agenda in a businesslike manner, on the basis of objective data. Positive results were achieved during the discussion of the materials by the demarcation groups. Most of the remaining charts for the Ussuri River were coordinated. The joint demarcation commission took place in a friendly, constructive atmosphere with the aim of completing the demarcation by the end of 1997 (Interfax Aug. 7, 1997). Furthermore, it was decided the Ussuriisk area would be handed over to China by the end of 1997.

Movement was seen in the negotiations on the Khasan area: Stegnii expressed his desire for the status quo in the disputed area in

Khasan and took note of a change in China from its previous stance, but immediately he retracted his statements (Interfax Aug. 7, 1997; Nezavisimaia gazeta Aug. 8, 1997). It seemed that Stegnii had defended the Primor'e proposal of keeping Khasan intact instead of giving Ussuriisk P to China. The Chinese side had only suggested a hint of a compromise on Khasan, however. The negotiations did not defuse the problem. On August 5, after finishing a meeting of the demarcation committee, Foreign Minister Primakov warned that finishing the demarcation work was the most important task for improving Sino-Russian relations and, if unfinished, the 1991 agreement itself would be in doubt. He appealed to the local bodies of the Russian Far East to withdraw their requests aimed only at individual interests (Interfax Aug. 5, 1997).

On September 2, the Chinese side, at a meeting of the border demarcation committee in Moscow, suddenly expressed the view that China would compromise with Russia and was willing to withdraw its request to transfer the Khasan area over to China. Just then, Liu Huaqing, Vice President of the military committee of China, suddenly accepted the Russian proposal: Khasan's 300 hectares would be divided fifty-fifty (Vladivostok Sept. 2, 1997). It was a decisive step and a win-win situation for both countries. On October 15, Karasin emphasized that Sino-Russian relations rode on these dynamics and both leaders would pay close attention to border demarcation issues in an up-coming visit by Yel'tsin to China in November. He added that a few disputed border points during demarcation work had complicated public opinion but a compromise was proceeding for a formula that could be acceptable to both Russia and China (Interfax Oct. 15, 1997). Karasin also stated that Yel'tsin had already indicated that he would accelerate the demarcation work by all the relevant local bodies and that the Finance Ministry had allotted 2.6 billion rubles for this work. Finally, he expressed his hope to sign agreements that would allow for "joint use" of various islands and other bilateral cooperative frameworks (Interfax Oct. 24, 1997).

### **1997 Declaration on the Finalization of Demarcation Work**

On November 6, the Russian Border Guard Headquarters issued a statement on the demarcation work of the eastern Sino-Russian border.



The Sino-Russian border with the flags of the two countries (Hunchun customs)

The Chinese Foreign Ministry, responding to Russia's statement, announced that the demarcation work would be finalized and both leaders would announce its completion during Yel'tsin's up-coming visit to Beijing. On the same day, Karasin, appreciating China's understanding of Russia's approach toward the demarcation work, argued that it was not a question of revising the 1991 border agreement but of enforcing it — specifying individual sections of the border. "We are approaching mutually acceptable, sensible solutions suiting both sides and — more importantly — which the Russian and Chinese public can agree upon," Karasin said (Interfax Nov. 6, 1997). Both sides rushed to complete the provisional demarcation work, and they barely finished three days before Yel'tsin's visit to Beijing in November, 1997 (Nezavisimaia gazeta Nov. 11, 1997).

On November 9, when Yel'tsin arrived at Beijing Airport on an official visit, he briefed correspondents that the finishing of demarcation work was a great victory, and his trip to Beijing was worthwhile. The following day, he met with Jiang Zemin, and signed a joint statement announcing the successful completion of Sino-Russian eastern border demarcation work and confirming their "strategic partnership for the twenty-first century" (Interfax Nov. 10, 1997).

The statement recognized the implementation of the 1991 agreement, therefore, the "three islands" remained in dispute and were left to future negotiations.

President Yel'tsin declared in Beijing that completion of the demarcation of the eastern Sino-Russian border was a great success and joyfully celebrated with President Jiang Zemin. However, many observers did not fully understand why both leaders felt so delighted, as most of the troubles concerning border negotiations had been concealed from those on the outside. Even the final settlement of the notoriously difficult Primor'e demarcation issue seemed unfamiliar. Due to strict control over relevant information, Nazdratenko declared its success, but the fate of Ussuriisk and Khasan remained unclear to others. Even now, few Primor'e people know that half of the 300 hectares in Khasan and all of the disputed 900 hectares in Ussuriisk have already been handed over to China.<sup>5</sup>

Many specialists did not know the facts and troubles surrounding the demarcation negotiations between Russia and China. They, therefore, exaggerated their explanation when they repeated the "strategic partnership" in November 1997 as a kind of protest against the U.S. in international affairs. A declaration of "strategic partnership" seems to have originated within a bilateral context, especially during the Sino-Russian border negotiations. The Sino-Russian relationship primarily depends on geopolitical and historic confrontations. Both countries, which were deeply swayed by sentiments of fear and distrust of the other, had to achieve mutual stability and security in a post-Cold War world full of uncertainty.

Why did China change its policy regarding the Sino-Russian border negotiations at the last minute? Dong Xiaoyang, Vice Director of the Institute of Russia, East Europe and Central Asia, explained that the Chinese decision to concede half of the Khasan territory

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5 While a diplomat publicly announced the last compromise concerning Khasan between Russia and China, the fate of the 900 hectares in Ussuriisk was not revealed until just after the demarcation in 1997 (Moiseev 1997: 5). Many Primor'e residents did not even know of the transfer of Damanskii Island to China until just after the 30th anniversary ceremony of the Sino-Russian military conflict there in 1999. Information control on border negotiations might have been a necessary condition for its success: a public display of "win-win" for all concerned parties.

was a result of deliberate and careful investigation of the long and acrimonious negotiations from the Gorbachev era, China's determined will to finish the demarcation during Yel'tsin's term of office, and its recognition of border stability and peace as the most important factors for its foreign policy (Interviews, Jul. 19, 1998).

The Chinese side fully understood the seriousness of policy coordination between the central and local governments in Russia concerning demarcation problems. If Russia had failed to finish the demarcation work, whose deadline was at the end of 1997 as imposed by its domestic law, no legal basis for the border demarcation would remain. This would certainly harm China's national interests. China needed to prevent a would-be conflict with Russia not only for its own security but also in order to continue its concentrated drive for economic development.

In addition, the enforcement of the 1991 agreement would rehabilitate China from the status of "colony" and younger-brother vis-à-vis Russia to an equal and normal partner for the first time in the twentieth century. We saw many Chinese specialists happily welcoming this agreement and its successful results. The last-minute Chinese concession on the disputed Khasan area, which was never meant to have a negative effect on China's incorporation of the (so-called) 600 islands on the rivers from Russia, was small in size but proved to be a landmark in Sino-Russian relations. The Chinese side seemed satisfied showing their "mature" stance toward their former "elder brother," Russia. Here was a Sino-Russian "strategic partnership" providing a useful and necessary formulation for making bilateral compromises during the latter stages of its border demarcation.<sup>6</sup>

The Sino-Russian border is not just a question of "hectares" and islands but a 4,300 kilometer line. It does not consist of just the short history of the 1990s but covers centuries. The following chapters will be an adventure for the reader, and will unveil more facets and interesting episodes relating to border issues and negotiations.

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6 In this meaning, I do not have reason to cast doubt on both Russian and Chinese diplomatic leaders' evaluation of "strategic partnership" as "dolgo-srochnost' perspektivy," especially in its bilateral context (see Karasin 1997: 25; Wang Shunchun 1998: 67).