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# Medvedev's eastern challenge

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There is hardly a commentator in the world who would fail to emphasize the symbolism of President Dmitry Medvedev's first foreign trip - to the East, to Kazakhstan and China, rather than to the West. But although symbolism can sometimes be effective in this case it is pointless. It would be best to go to the East and the West at the same time but that is impossible.

Moscow will never have to make a choice between Eastern and Western policies - they will always be intertwined. Territorially, Russia is three fourth an Asian country, but only 28% of its population live there.

For Russia, China is a neighbor with the longest border. It is also a symbol of unprecedented global change. Even the Chinese themselves cannot guess what role they will play in 10 or 20 years, to say nothing of the outside world.

Be that as it may, but many analysts do not see Medvedev's choice of his first foreign trip as a sign of favoritism towards the East, although Russia's Western policy has been somewhat static and boring. Nevertheless, Moscow should enhance its eastern policy, and make it more meaningful because this is where Russia and other countries will face the biggest opportunities, challenges, and problems.

What can be done about resources in Siberia and the Far East? On the eve of Medvedev's flight from Astana to Beijing, it was mentioned that Russia will supply China with 30 million metric tons of oil and 68 billion cubic meters of gas per year, if the sides reach agreement on the projects they have been discussing since the past decade. The fact that other Pacific countries will receive not less energy resources does not matter. The gist of the problem is how to use the situation for the all-round development of Siberia and the Far East. Those who receive our resources are investing into the mining industry and infrastructure, but how can we develop these regions into something bigger than raw material suppliers with China's help?

This is an old problem, which the Russian authorities have been trying to resolve for many years. There is a new one, too - Central Asia is a region where the interests of Russia, China, India, and many other countries converge (by and large, without contradicting each other). It is clear now that China's interests there are different from Russia's, but we do not interfere with each other. It is also possible that everyone's interests will become more ambitious, but this will take years.

Medvedev knows China. For two years he was in charge of a difficult job - organizing the Year of Russia in China and the Year of China in Russia. He had to make numerous trips and conduct many talks. In a way, he closed down the old era in bilateral relations. Now his task is to open a new one.

The old era began not with the great friendship of the 1950s and partially the 1960s, but in 1989, when Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping stopped the great enmity. Later on, the two countries painstakingly restored their trade: in the beginning of the decade it barely exceeded \$10 billion, whereas now it stands at \$48 billion, and China is Russia's third biggest trade partner. During the same time, the sides understood that their interests coincide all along the line - from the desire to enhance

stability and global influence to the need to resolve minor regional conflicts. The visit's key document would be a declaration on the international subject(?).

Medvedev's Years of Russia in China and of China in Russia have helped restore contacts between millions of people in both countries. These contacts rest on the decreasing Chinese community in Russia, and the growing Russian Diaspora in China. But with our trade close to \$50 billion, we have intensive business contacts, not to mention a growing interest in each other's culture. Let's part with illusions - we will never have monopoly in China again; we are just an interesting country which China quite likes, but at least we have occupied a befitting place in it, just like China has done in Russia.

But there are problems as well. For example, China does not buy Russian weapons as it used to. Maybe, the sides will only conduct R&D together. The structure of trade where machines and equipment have gone down to 1.3% does not suit Moscow. China objects to the quality. Chinese machines and equipment amount to 30% of Russia's imports from China. These problems are rooted in the economy rather than the quality of bilateral relations.

In general, these problems are making relations chilly. The stormy period is behind, and it seems that they will continue to develop for years to come. But that is impossible. It is difficult to understand what to do next - invest more in each other's economies, continue cooperation in space (we have programs to develop the Moon, Mars, and Phobos), make movies together, or translate more books? Shall we do all of that at the same time?

In any event, many new directions will suggest themselves, and strategists will see new horizons. All this will be done during Medvedev's presidency.

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