



CHINESE VLADIVOSTOK

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26th April 2024



Vladivostok is one of China's preferred ports. It is a six hour car drive from the city of Harbin, capital of Heilongjiang Province, which has recently received an exceptional boost and promotion. It is now a special economic zone, named "China (Heilongjiang) Pilot Free Trade Zone." Harbin is a city on the Trans-Siberian train route. Its only nearby port is Vladivostok. It is in Russia, but not according to many Chinese bloggers who claim it should be given back to China.

China officially reverted to its original Chinese name on February 23rd, 2023. It had used the form 符拉迪沃斯托克 (Fúlādīwòsītōkè) which is simply a transliteration of the Russian Vladivostok (ruler of the East). On official maps the name is now 海參崴 (Hǎishēnwǎi). This



was the name of the city before it became part of Russia. From a Chinese point of view, it is Chinese territory which should return to China. Hong Kong became British in 1841, Macau had been Portuguese since 1557. Both have returned to China. So why not Vladivostok and its region? It has been Russian since 1860. The area is called Primorsky Krai in Russian (“the seashore region”). The area used to be known as Northern Manchuria.

China is not fantasizing about a remote historical revanchism. If Vladivostok were a Chinese port, it would be directly connected to the city of Harbin. The strategic importance of the port is clear. India has its own consulate there. This reveals the great importance of the port and the sea route from there to Chennai (capital of the Tamil Nadu state in India).

Japan would benefit from a Chinese Vladivostok, since it is one of the closest ports to Japan itself and specifically Hokkaido Island. Japan has had an agreement with Heilongjiang province since 1980. Given that Russia and China have effectively reduced the customs checks on the border in the province of Heilongjiang (capital Harbin), Japanese products would enter China and be transported along the Trans-Siberian to Poland and from there to the rest of Europe. More importantly for Japan it would provide a close and direct access to the Chinese market.

Vladivostok is an underpopulated city (600,000 inhabitants) in a desolate province (population almost 2 million) surrounded by countries with immense populations. The fiftieth largest city in China has more than 2.5 million inhabitants (Luoyang census, 2020). If Vladivostok became the Chinese port of Heilongjiang province, it would be serving the city of Harbin whose population is over 10 million.

The Ukraine war has backfired for Russia. The ramped up military industry of Russia has alarmed China. It has grown too fast especially since it is China that is providing necessary raw materials and yet its own military is not growing at a similar pace. China has global maritime ambitions and one of its main rivals is the Pacific Sea Fleet of the Russian Federation based in Vladivostok.

If Russia loses the war in Ukraine, China might seize Northern Manchuria and make Vladivostok, or rather Hāishēnwǎi, one of the most important commercial ports in the Pacific.