

Island handover provides catalyst for Russia-China trade

By [Global Research](#)

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Russia and China have begun talks on a joint trade area for the border zone in the Far East. It follows a demarcation treaty, with Moscow handing back several islands after half a century of territorial disputes. Despite protests from the public, the move has helped mutual relations.

A 400 year-old border dispute between Russia and its Eastern neighbour has ended with a 340 square kilometer piece of land being officially placed under the Chinese flag.

The half-Russian, half-Chinese island is a hundred kilometers from the city of Khabarovsk. It has two names: the Russian half is called Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island, the Chinese half is now known as “the Island of the Black Bear”.

However, there are no bears to be seen. There’s not a lot of anything to see. What used to be a granary in Russia’s Far East, providing neighboring areas with bread, milk and meat, now appears absolutely desolate, with abandoned farms and neglected fields stretching for kilometers.

Official sources say about 500 people live here. The island used to be part of an intensively fortified border area, but the military men left as soon as the deal with China was signed four years ago.

Territorial arguments between the two countries date back to periods of expansion by both Tsarist Russia and Imperial China.

In the early 20th century the socialist neighbours ignored the issue, but when Russian-Chinese relations hit rock bottom in the 1960s, Beijing insisted on reviewing previous treaties.

In 1964, negotiations failed due to political changes in the USSR. Bloody clashes between Soviet and Chinese border guards near Damansky Island claimed dozens of lives on both sides. Not until 1991 did Mikhail Gorbachev and the Chinese President Jiang Zemin agree on the border.

In 2004, the negotiations were finally over with part of the territory officially handed over to China.

Khabarovsk residents are unanimous in their protests against the move.

"There are so many Chinese people here. There'll be even more now that the islands belong to them," one of the locals says.

Analysts say it would not be fair to say Russia has sacrificed its disputed land. They say the move was a well-considered gambit which would give Moscow much more than it took.

Viktor Pavlyatenko from the Institute of Far East studies says both sides won.

"They set the level of mutual credibility between the countries at very high. They also guaranteed each other a safe border, which will allow both of them to strengthen their strategic partnership," he said.

The benefits appeared just days after the islands' future had been resolved. A long-awaited deal to build an oil pipeline from Siberia to China was signed at the end of October. The pipeline will have a capacity of 15 million tonnes of oil per year.

A landmark agreement is mutually beneficial for both energy-hungry China and the world's second largest oil producer.

With the history of the dispute fading away the future of this small piece of land appears to be bleak. However, the island's impact on the two biggest countries in the world has been immense.

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