

# The Lake Baikal Water Bottling Scandal Says a Lot About Russia-China Relations

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*Russian-Chinese relations are excellent and the two Great Powers have never been closer to one another in history, but that doesn't mean that their partnership is perfect and without its problems, as the Baikal water bottling scandal recently revealed.*

## A Sign Of Something Bigger?

Somewhat surprising news recently emerged from Russia after the [authorities ruled](#) that a Chinese-backed water bottling plant on the shores of Lake Baikal is illegal in response to an unprecedented social media awareness campaign that saw [roughly one million people](#) sign a petition against this project. Russian civil society is very different from the Western one, and it's almost unprecedented that so many people in the country felt strongly enough to publicly voice their opposition to this foreign initiative that they fear (whether rightly or wrongly) will result in devastating environmental consequences in return for little to nothing of tangible benefit at all for the local communities there. Curiously enough, even Russian Prime Minister Medvedev [publicly spoke](#) about this issue during a recent question and answer session that he was involved in with VKontakte users, remarking that his use of social networks made him well aware of the public's attitude towards this sooner than if he had relied on official channels.

## Russia's Underwhelming Progress On BRI

This interesting turn of events raises some questions about the true state of the Russian-Chinese Strategic Partnership since it's clear that it's far from perfect and not without its problems, despite the "politically correct" narrative that [Alt-Media](#) regularly propagates about it. To be clear, there are no grounds for exaggerating the impact of this isolated event and speculating whether or not this might be the "beginning of the end" like some agenda-driven commentators might be tempted to do, though there are also no more grounds for pretending like this partnership is any different from any other strategic one anywhere else across the world either. As with all partnerships, this one also has its shortcomings and limitations, and it's also sometimes affected by unforeseen circumstances such as possible corruption and the public's intensely negative reaction to the aforesaid, which is more palpable and easily manifested in democratic systems like Russia's than in non-democratic ones such as many of those in the "Global South".

There's no doubt that Russia's [21<sup>st</sup>-century grand strategy](#) envisions the country managing a Eurasian-wide "balancing" act greatly facilitated by its [irreplaceable geographic location](#) between Western Europe and East Asia astride the proposed Eurasian Land Bridge that might one day connect them both as one of China's chief [Belt & Road Initiative](#) (BRI) megaprojects, but Moscow has thus far dragged its heels in this respect and has yet to

make any tangible progress on this front. The “[Power of Siberia](#)” gas pipeline and [two bridges](#) across the Amur River are the only physical manifestations of Russia’s Silk Road future, being relatively small in comparison to the hefty investments that China has made in its neighboring [global pivot state of Pakistan](#) or even further afield in Africa. It’s therefore obvious that the state’s publicly proclaimed goal of embodying the geostrategic logic of Silk Road connectivity isn’t being implemented in practice, or at least not at the pace that the public would otherwise expect, prompting a much-needed explanation.

### **“What The US Really Wants From Russia”**

Like the author wrote in his piece last year about “[What The US Really Wants From Russia](#)”, Washington is doing all that it can to pressure Moscow into scaling back its Silk Road cooperation with Beijing in exchange for a so-called “New Détente”, knowing that it can never realistically expect to get Russia to reverse its strategic relations with China (let alone turn the two into enemies like it did during the Old Cold War [India is supposed to fulfill that role this time around vis-à-vis China]) but can try to slow down the pace of their partnership instead. Whether connected to this strategy or not, it’s interesting that the Russian Finance Ministry is [officially deliberating](#) whether to divert funds from the Moscow-Kazan High-Speed Railway project that’s supposed to form part of the Eurasian Land Bridge upon completion and transfer them to the Novatek LNG project instead, as this basically aligns with the aforementioned paradigm.

Aware of this larger strategic context, it’s now possible to make more informed observations about the significance of the Baikal water bottling scandal and the possible consequences that it could have for Russian-Chinese relations. There’s no denying that the perception (keyword) of Chinese corruption, environmental degradation, and “neo-colonialism” is a powerful catalyst for Russian civil society in the Siberia and the Far East, where fears of these purportedly interconnected “three evils” are pervasive. Whether based on truth, lies, a manipulation of reality, or a combination of those three, it needs to be accepted that China suffers from serious reputational problems in that part of Russia that neither state’s authorities have been successful in fixing, which is why so many people signed the petition, protested, and even raised this issue to the level of the Prime Minister’s attention. In response, his government responsibly took action to investigate the claims and suspend the project for the time being.

There are those who might be inclined to seeing a more nefarious hand behind the latest events given Medvedev’s pro-Western and liberal proclivities that many might think would automatically make him predisposed to anti-Chinese policies and therefore function as the US’ “useful (or willing) idiot” for “containing” China and ruining Russia’s Silk Road future, but that’s an entirely superficial reading of the situation in this instance because it overlooks the genuine opposition that the locals have to the water bottling project. It’s debatable whether their claims are legitimate or not, but denying the rapidity with which they were able to politically mobilize civil society in this far-flung but strategic borderland region would be the height of irresponsibility by the state. Furthermore, that interpretation over-exaggerates Medvedev’s influence and makes it seem like he’s directly defying President Putin, which isn’t the case at all. Rather, he seems to be Russia’s “bad cop” to China just like Putin is its “good cop”.

### **“Balancing” Between The “Good Cop” And “Bad Cop”**

It shouldn't be forgotten that Russia's "balancing" strategy is complex and multifaceted, with the Eurasian Great Power harnessing all means of state power to influence its partners in pursuit of promoting supercontinental harmony, so it's not amiss to suggest that Medvedev might have actually been encouraged by Putin to be the "bad cop" "laying down the law" in this respect while the President himself continues to be the "good cop" taking ties to the next level unabated. To be sure, even the "good cop" could do more to integrate Russia into the Silk Road, but considering how ultra-sensitive his people in the Siberian and Far East borderland regions are to all issues China-related (due to their fears of Chinese corruption, environmental degradation, and "neo-colonialism"), it makes sense in hindsight why he's taking his time and not prioritizing this, to say nothing of the possible "balancing" act that he might be flirting with in regards to a "New Détente" with the US as previously explained.

Another important point is that Russia is currently trying to implement Putin's "[Great Society](#)" socio-economic development program which prioritizes domestic infrastructure projects that would make the country more compatible with the Silk Road vision upon completion, so the case can be made that it's better for Russia to take its time and not rush head-first into BRI until after it has the in-country capability to handle much larger capacities of trade on its own terms instead of disproportionately relying on Chinese foreign investment like Beijing's many other partners do. This approach carries with it a touch of "[Trumpist](#)" protectionism but not enough to the point of derailing the Silk Road like the US hopes to do by weaponizing this strategy for use against China in other transit countries (most likely East African ones). It's also not unprecedented by Russia either, considering that it [recently decreed](#) that only Russian-flagged ships can transport natural resources across the Northern Sea Route unless specific exceptions are made.

## Concluding Thoughts

Returning back to the lead-in focus of this analysis, the Baikal water bottling scandal, it perfectly correlates with Russia's real approach towards China, though it nevertheless comes off as surprising because Alt-Media misportrayed the true state of bilateral Silk Road affairs between them. The two Great Powers have never been closer to one another in history and the overall state of their relations is excellent, but Russia's rhetoric of gloating about the West's decline and glorifying China's rise doesn't always match up to reality as proven by the Kremlin's reluctance to fully embrace BRI for domestic political reasons and out of strategic "balancing" calculations. These obstacles could be overcome if Russia and China guarantee tangible benefits to the local Siberian & Far East populations and succeed in more clearly articulating their shared Silk Road vision to one another, but groundbreaking progress probably won't be made until after the "Great Society's" completion at the end of Putin's presidency.

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**Andrew Korybko** is an American Moscow-based political analyst specializing in the relationship between the US strategy in Afro-Eurasia, China's One Belt One Road global vision of New Silk Road connectivity, and Hybrid Warfare. He is a frequent contributor to

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