
**CHINA:
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**“A GIANT TREE” FOR NORTHEAST CHINA:
RUSSIA IN MODERN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES
OF THE CHINESE REGION**

Viktor L. LARIN,

ORCID 0000-0002-2825-8391, larin.vic@gmail.com

*Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far East, Far-Eastern Branch,
Russian Academy of Sciences, 89, Pushkinskaya Str., Vladivostok, 690950, Russian Federation.*

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Abstract. The article is based on official Chinese materials and devoted to the northern vector of the modern China openness policy, which is implemented through the foreign economic activity of its northeastern territories – the provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region. The author analyses the officially announced strategic guidelines and development priorities of these territories, and the tools used for their implementation. Special attention is paid to free economic zones. The article studies their tasks and activities in these provinces, the construction the “openness infrastructure” to the North and along the borders, as well as some results of their foreign economic activity in the post-COVID period. A conclusion is made that the Communist party and government of China have not removed from their agenda the goal of “achieving new breakthroughs in the comprehensive revival of the region”, and one of the tools for this is to advance the level of its openness. Beijing continues to promote the concepts of the construction of “northern corridor” to enter the Eurasian space, as well as the attracting the natural resources, transport, logistics and intellectual potential of the Pacific Russia not only to support the revival of the North-East of China but to give the convenient root for Chinese goods from the industrial East to Eurasian markets.

Keywords: Northeast China, Russia, development strategies, external relations.

About author:

Viktor L. LARIN, Dr. Sci. (History), Academician of RAS, Principal Researcher, Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Peoples of the Far East, Far-Eastern Branch, Russian Academy of Sciences.

**“БОЛЬШОЕ ДЕРЕВО” ДЛЯ СЕВЕРО-ВОСТОЧНОГО КИТАЯ:
РОССИЯ В СОВРЕМЕННЫХ СТРАТЕГИЯХ
РАЗВИТИЯ КИТАЙСКОГО РЕГИОНА**

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ЛАРИН Виктор Лаврентьевич, доктор исторических наук, академик РАН,

ORCID 0000-0002-2825-8391, larin.vic@gmail.com

*Институт истории, археологии и этнографии народов Дальнего Востока ДВО РАН,
РФ, 690950 Владивосток, ул. Пушкинская, 89.*

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Аннотация. Статья основана на официальных китайских материалах и посвящена северному вектору политики открытости современного Китая, которая реализуется через внешнеэкономическую деятельность его северо-восточных территорий – провинций Хэйлунцзян, Цзилинь, Ляонин и автономного района Внутренняя Монголия. Автор анализирует официально озвученные стратегические установки и приоритеты развития, инструменты, используемые для их реализации, – специальные экономические зоны, инфраструктурные и логистические проекты, а также некоторые результаты внешнеэкономической деятельности этих территорий в постковидный период. Делается вывод о сохранении и определенной модернизации концепции “северного коридора”, создаваемого Пекином для выхода на евразийское пространство, а также идеи “возрождения” Северо-Востока, в том числе за счет привлечения ресурсного, транспортно-логистического и интеллектуального потенциала Востока России.

Ключевые слова: Северо-Восток КНР, Россия, стратегии развития, внешние связи.

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INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2024, a publication appeared on the platform of *ZhiguTrend* (智谷趋势), an influential financial media organisation in China, with a remarkable and indisputable title: “Take-off! After 20 years of silence, Northeast China is reviving.” The article was reprinted under various titles, one of which directly linked this revival to the influence of Russia [1]. That emotional and optimistic essay used a well-known Chinese idiom about “The Giant Tree,” which is a good place to lean against and enjoy the coolness of its shade¹. According to the author of the article, “a Giant Tree” for Northeast China (NEC) is, as before, Russia.

Four Chinese territories close to Russia and historically linked to it, the provinces of Heilongjiang, Jilin, Liaoning, and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (IMAR), are not the most economically developed, populated, or favourable for living and economic activity in the country. They account for 8% of the country’s population (119 million people in 2024), 6.1% of GDP (just under 9 trillion yuan), and 3.5% (1.5 trillion yuan) of China’s foreign trade. However, in building relations between China and Russia, the Northeast² has always been and continues to be of exceptional importance, not only because of the fairly long (4,210 km) border and the historical and modern mutual dependence of the Russian and Chinese border territories on each other’s interests and activities, but also because the Northeast currently accounts for one-fifth of China’s trade with Russia.

¹ The idiom 背靠大树好乘凉 is taken from the first act of the play *Marrying the Maid* by an anonymous author from the Yuan dynasty (1279–1368). The original text reads: “If you eat his family’s food every day, you will feel how pleasant it is to enjoy the shade of this big tree”. This sentence means that in everyday life, if you can rely on the support of others, you can enjoy comfort, like under a big shady tree.

² Traditionally, the provinces of Inner Mongolia, Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning are considered to be a part of Northeast China, but in the context of this study, the inclusion of Inner Mongolia in the region is entirely justified.

The lag in modernisation and economic development in the northeast of the PRC is one of the most acute problems and is a serious subject of concern for the country’s leadership. To overcome this lag, special decisions and programmes were adopted at the highest level; local governments acted in a similar manner, and all of the adopted documents accorded an important role to the development of relations with the northern neighbour [2, 3, 4].

In the third decade, the internal and external conditions for the development of these territories, as well as China as a whole, have undergone significant changes. The main external factors included changes in the global market, the rupture of many economic ties caused by the isolationism during the pandemic, the deterioration of economic relations between the USA and China, and Western sanctions against Russia. Domestic factors included changes in the demographic situation and a slowdown in the pace, as well as the irregularity, of economic development in the country as a whole and in the Northeast in particular.

The 2020 PRC census revealed serious demographic problems in the Northeast. The share of children under the age of 15 was lower (10 to 14% in different NEC provinces, compared to 18% in China as a whole), while the proportion of pensioners was higher than the Chinese average (20 to 26%, compared to 18.7%). The trends of the last five years have become even more alarming. During that period, the population of the four territories declined by a total of 6.1 million people (4.8%), while the number of pensioners (people over 60) increased by 5.5 million, to 32.5 million (over 27% of the population) [source 1].

The Chinese government’s tough measures to combat the *COVID-19* epidemic and the de facto closure of inter-state borders have led to extremely uneven economic development. The GDP growth rates in these provinces ranged from –1.9% in Jilin in 2022 to +7.4% in IMAR in 2023 (see the figure). This irregularity, along with the overall decline in economic growth rates, which is also characteris-

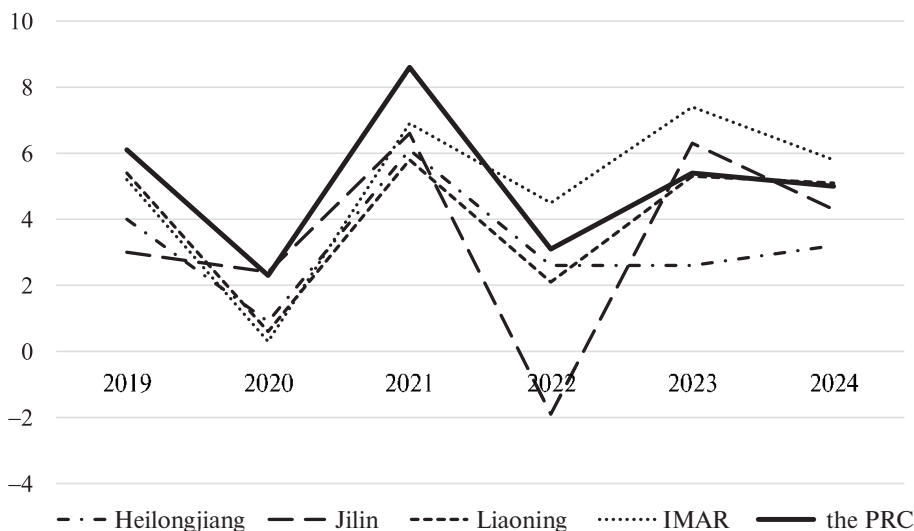


Figure. GDP growth dynamics in the PRC and the Northeast territories, 2019–2024, % compared to the previous year

Compiled from: [source 3].

tic of the country’s most prosperous provinces, has given rise to a phenomenon in the public consciousness known as “weakened expectations”³, which is a subject of concern for the authorities, who have made it a priority to address. Hu Yuting, Governor of Jilin, defined the main problems faced by the province in 2025 as follows: “insufficient consumer demand, weakened expectations, debt repayment, flood prevention, and disaster relief” (需求不足、预期转弱、化债除险、防汛救灾) [source 2].

In search of sources of funding and incentives to solve the existing problems, local authorities naturally turn to both internal and external resources. If we disregard the typical nationwide top-down directives on continuing reform policies, scientific and technological innovations, security, environmental protection, “green” development, improving people’s standard of living, etc., and instead consider the specific “moment” and the particularities of the Northeastern territories, then the main issues, as listed below, constitute the agenda.

1. Stimulating domestic demand, primarily through the development of the service sector, domestic and foreign tourism, and increasing the effectiveness of innovation.

³ The “weakened expectations” are interpreted as a decline in businesses’ and households’ confidence in the economic development prospects of the country and territories, which leads to a decline in business investment and faded consumer intentions.

2. Participating in ensuring the country’s food security and food sovereignty.

3. Expanding the policy of openness, intensifying foreign economic relations, increasing the inflow of foreign investment, and developing international cooperation. This direction is determined by the actual geography of the region, its borderland location, and proximity to countries with sufficiently broad markets (Russia, Japan, and South Korea) and rich resources (Russia and Mongolia).

The strategic line of development for these territories, including the external vector of their interaction, is set by special directives of the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the Government of the PRC [sources 4, 5, 6], as well as by the five-year development plans for the provinces for 2021–2035 [sources 7, 8, 9], though it is constantly refined and adjusted. The policies of each of the four Northeastern territories have both common and specific features, determined by their geographic location, economic structure, and level of development, human resources, and many other factors.

STRATEGIC GOALS AND PRIORITIES

From the perspective of Heilongjiang provincial leaders, the three national strategies

are “intertwined and overlapping”, they are: the comprehensive revitalisation of the Northeast, regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, and trade and economic cooperation with Russia [source 10]. Among the most important objectives that the Heilongjiang government sets for itself are the following invariable and consistent goals: “expanding openness” through participation in the construction of the Belt and Road and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, stabilising foreign trade and foreign investment, and accelerating the organisation of the provincial “openness to the North” platform [source 11]. This view is largely shared by neighbouring provinces, though they pursue it in their own way.

Strengthening the province’s role as an intermediary in trade with Russia has always been its strategic course. Technically, all the conditions are in place for this: 19 border checkpoints, of which 15 were operational in 2024 [source 12]; well-established connections and adequate logistics; and experienced Russian-speaking personnel. However, in 2024, Heilongjiang accounted for only 4.5% of Chinese exports to Russia and 21.4% of imports in the total volume of Russian-Chinese trade. It is worth noting that this was achieved primarily due to the passage of oil and gas pipelines from Russia through provincial customs posts.

Nevertheless, the authorities of Heilongjiang are not changing their strategy in the middle of the third decade of this century. They remain firmly committed to “improving the quality and efficiency of trade with Russia,” “buying goods throughout Russia and selling them throughout China, as well as buying throughout China and selling throughout Russia,” increasing exports of high-tech products and goods with high added value to the Russian Federation, expanding imports of Russian oil, gas, and grain, and stimulating the development of cross-border e-commerce based on their “key borderline cities” [source 11].

The goal of transforming Heilongjiang into “an important gateway for China’s window to the North and a central hub for regional cooperation with Russia and Northeast Asia,” and, through this, “participation in economic globalisation and regional economic integration,” is set out as one of the main objectives in the Comprehensive Development Plan for the Province’s Transport Network for 2021–2035

[source 13], approved by the Party Committee and the Heilongjiang government on 27 January 2022.

Jilin Province is also designated in the PRC’s spatial development strategy as “an important region for the country’s entry into Northeast Asia” [source 6]. In line with this status, the province has set itself the tasks of “deepening international cooperation in the industrial sector” and “creating a market-oriented legal international business environment,” thus becoming “an important window for the development of the Belt and Road in the North” [source 14]. At the same time, the province positions itself as the “centre of Northeast Asia” and develops programmes based on this geographical identity.

Beijing has set similar objectives for the two other Northeastern territories. Inner Mongolia is required to “fit into the domestic and international dual circulation” and to “promote the high-quality construction of an important springboard for entering the North” [source 4]. The best economically developed province in the Northeast, Liaoning, is to become “an important hub in the eastern part of the Eurasian continental bridge” [source 15].

Thus, all four territories are called upon to perform a national-level function: to ensure the development of the northern vector of the Belt and Road, to participate in the construction of the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, and to promote a more effective and productive openness of China in the northeastern direction (along the Russia-Europe route with access to the Northern Sea Route). They are also expected to make better use of their geographic proximity to Russia, Mongolia, Japan, and South Korea to further their own development.

The specific goals and objectives remain the same: expanding external demand for Chinese products, importing and processing raw materials on their territory, attracting foreign capital, and gaining access to intellectual resources and high technologies. The tools for achieving these goals are being continuously improved and expanded.

TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

Beijing is developing the “Northern Openness Corridor” quite thoroughly, ensuring its political

legalisation (which includes the mandatory mention of the importance of cross-border cooperation in annual Russian-Chinese statements and communiqués; the activities of intergovernmental commissions; and the signing of agreements and treaties at both the government level and between the border territories of the PRC and the Russian Federation); securing the necessary regulatory and legal framework (through numerous decisions, resolutions, and directives at the level of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the PRC government, and provincial authorities); and providing ideological (official propaganda, exhibitions, fairs, festivals) and academic (scientific forums, symposia, domestic and international round-table discussions) substantiation, along with generating positive public opinion in China and abroad, especially among decision-makers.

However, the main instruments are intended to stimulate business activity, establish relations between entrepreneurs, and attract investment, new technologies, and skilled personnel. In China, these tools have taken the form of special trade and economic areas (free trade zones, bonded areas, e-commerce areas, etc.) with favourable customs and tax regimes for foreign trade, export production, and the processing of imported raw materials, and the Northeast is no exception.

The province of Liaoning was a pioneer in creating special zones in the Northeast. On 15 March 2017, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China decided to establish a pilot free trade area (FTA) in this province, covering a territory of 120 km² and including the port cities of Dalian, Yingkou, and the Shenyang metropolitan area [source 15]. This aimed to “accelerate the province’s integration into the construction of the Belt and Road and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor,” and to strengthen cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road and in Northeast Asia (primarily Japan, South Korea, and North Korea), not only in the economic sphere but also “in the spheres of culture, education, sports, healthcare, and entertainment,” and to “participate in international competition on a broader scale and in broader areas.”

On 2 August 2019, the Chinese government issued an order to establish pilot free trade areas in the provinces of Heilongjiang, Shandong, Ji-

angsu, Guangxi, Hebei, and Yunnan [source 16]. The Heilongjiang FTA was intended to promote the “comprehensive revitalisation of Northeast China,” create an important window for opening up to the North, and serve as a “central hub for regional cooperation with Russia and Northeast Asia.”

The zone included three regions: the central area (Harbin) and two border areas (Suifenhe and Heihe). The Russian cooperation dimension was clearly outlined for each, with a number of ambitious goals. However, the *COVID-19* pandemic and subsequent changes in China’s financial and economic situation introduced adjustments to the programme. As a result, the *Regulations on the Pilot Free Trade Area in China (Heilongjiang)*, adopted by the Heilongjiang Provincial People’s Government on 24 April 2024 [source 17], set more modest goals. The zone is now expected to align with the construction of the Belt and Road and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, and to serve as a platform for the development of economic cooperation in Northeast Asia, with a narrower set of functions assigned to each of its parts.

According to the *Regulations*, Harbin should focus on the development of “new strategic industries” such as next-generation information technologies, new materials, high-tech equipment, biomedicine, modern services, finance, cultural tourism, and the “cold region economy, giving due consideration to ice and snow specifics.” The objective is to create a platform and national logistics centre for comprehensive cooperation with Russia and Northeast Asia, to provide access to Europe and Asia, and to serve as a “growth pole for the comprehensive revitalisation of Northeast China” [source 17].

The Heihe area is tasked with the comprehensive processing and utilisation of cross-border energy resources; the production of environmentally friendly food products; trade, logistics, tourism, healthcare, and cross-border finance; the development of cross-border industrial clusters and model cooperation areas; and the creation of a logistics hub and a Sino-Russian cooperation base.

Heihe is positioned in various province-level documents as a ready “window of China to

the North” because it has the necessary transport infrastructure (highways, bridges to Russia across the Amur River), China-Russia pipelines, and cross-border electric power lines. Therefore, it is intended not only to develop active transborder trade, including electronic trade, but also to become a centre for the advanced processing of Russian mineral raw materials; to serve as a tourist, cultural, and financial centre of the Russian-Chinese border area [source 18]; and as an “international logistics, cultural and tourist centre, and an ecologically comfortable border town facing the Russian Far East and Northeast Asia” [source 19].

The Suifenhe area is required to specialise in wood and grain processing, the development of clean energy, services, trade, finance, and modern logistics. It should be “oriented towards international land and sea corridors” and create “an important platform for strategic cooperation between China and Russia and open cooperation in Northeast Asia” [source 17].

According to the Chinese authorities, the creation of the “Heilongjiang Pilot Free Trade Area” is justified. In 2024, it accounted for 20.8% of the province’s foreign trade turnover and 18.5% of the attracted foreign capital. During the year, a total of 8,367 new enterprises were established, with more than 30,000 enterprises created within just five years of the enclave’s existence [source 20].

A less important and, so far, more prestigious than economically significant provincial-level project is the development of the Chinese part of Bolshoy Ussuriysky Island (Heixiazi), involving the creation of an “exemplary zone of Chinese-Russian international cooperation” with comprehensive infrastructure and a top-level tourist cluster (5A). These plans are particularly relevant for Fuyuan County, which intends “to make efforts for the Russian side to meet its obligations” and to eliminate “the biggest obstacle hindering the development of Fuyuan, namely the six-month downtime of the port” [source 21].

The Changjitu Pilot Development and Openness Zone and the Hunchun Marine Economy Development Demonstration Zone in Jilin Province have been operating as platforms for expanding “external openness” over the past 10 years

[source 2]. The need to promote further development and openness of the Changjitu pilot zone, and its active participation in regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, is mentioned in the “*Master Plan for Land Use and Development of Changchun City for 2021–2035*”, adopted by the State Council of the PRC on 2 January 2025 [source 22].

Russia is presented in this and other plans of Jilin Province through the prism of two objectives.

The first and foremost of these is the creation of an international transport corridor between China and Russia (“Primorye-2”), representing a railway from Hunchun to Makhhalino Station and further to the ports of the Primorsky Territory of the Russian Federation, primarily Zarubino and Slavyanka. This route is necessary for local producers to access sea routes [source 23].

The second objective is to develop the city of Hunchun as a maritime economic zone based on the import of biological resources from Russia, particularly the processing of aquatic products, deep-sea fishing, the production of marine equipment and related materials, and the development of marine biomedicine [source 7].

In February 2025, the Jilin provincial government issued a directive on the necessary actions to improve the policy of openness, considering it a necessary and effective tool for the further development of the territory [source 14]. The document envisages the modernisation of the existing Changjitu and Hunchun areas, as well as the establishment of the “Yangzi-Changbaishan Pilot Zone to be opened for key development,” along with the creation of “national and provincial border cooperation areas” aimed at building a “new platform for openness to the outside world.”

The IMAR officially applied for the creation of a free trade zone only on 9 November 2023. The impetus came from the recommendations of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on the “quality development of Inner Mongolia,” which included a proposal to build several industrial parks along the border, particularly in Manzhouli and Erenhot, with a view to “creating a new border-openness platform” [source 4]. The main idea is to create a corridor connecting the Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei triangle with Russia, Mongolia, and Europe via the Manzhouli and

Erenhot border checkpoints. The pilot zone is designed to deepen cooperation with Mongolia and Russia in the fields of agriculture, animal husbandry, energy, mineral extraction, infrastructure, and environmental protection. Through this mechanism, the authorities of the autonomous region aim not only to participate in the construction of the Belt and Road and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, but also to “deepen and expand cooperation with Northeast Asia, Central Asia, Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand, as well as countries with developing economies” [source 24].

The development of e-commerce, which has become increasingly prevalent in Russian-Chinese economic relations, has become a symbol of the last decade. In April 2020, the State Council of the People’s Republic of China approved the first list of 46 cities and regions in the country where “comprehensive cross-border e-commerce pilot areas” (跨境电子商务综合试验区) should be established. In the context of the raging pandemic, these structures were intended to “stabilise the basic foundations of foreign trade and foreign investment,” while provincial authorities were instructed to facilitate their construction and development in every possible way [source 25]. The pioneers of this type of international trade included Heihe (Heilongjiang Province), Yingkou (Liaoning Province), Jilin (Jilin Province), and Manzhouli (IMAR). Later, similar areas were added in Harbin, Suifenhe, and Tunjian, and by early 2024, Heilongjiang e-commerce companies had outlets and warehouses in 104 countries and regions around the world, including, of course, Russia [source 26].

The second most important tool for creating a “window to the North” is the construction of modern transport and logistics infrastructure.

The basic principles and directions for creating this infrastructure were formulated in Beijing. The “Main Provisions of the Plan for the Construction of a National Comprehensive Three-Dimensional Transport Network,” approved by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on 24 February 2021, aim at the development of international transport corridors, including Asia-Europe and China-

Mongolia-Russia, the construction of the Ice Silk Road across the Arctic Ocean, the development of transport in border areas, and the “creation of a transport hub open to Northeast Asia and the outside world.” The document calls for increased capacity of container trains, faster cargo transshipment at port sites, simplified customs clearance procedures, and more [source 27]. It is only natural that the provinces of the Northeast have taken up and adapted these guidelines in line with their capabilities and interests.

The 2021–2035 Comprehensive Development Plan for the Heilongjiang Provincial Transport Network sets a specific goal: by 2035, to form “a modern, high-quality, comprehensive three-dimensional transport network providing intra-country and inter-state transportation links... and essentially to form a central hub for regional cooperation with Russia and Northeast Asia” [source 13]. This structure is intended to ensure one-day delivery of goods and passengers within China, two-day delivery to neighbouring countries, and three-day delivery to major cities worldwide⁴. By 2025, all border crossings in Heilongjiang are to be connected by expressways, and key border crossings will be directly linked by trunk-line railways and motorways [source 13]. It is important that the motorways passing through Suifenhe and Heihe, “being smoothly interconnected within the motorway network of Jilin and Inner Mongolia,” should be “fully integrated into the Asian motorway network and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic cooperation corridor” [source 10].

Jilin Province also intends to build a similar “central hub for cooperation in Northeast Asia.” Its transport strategy focuses on “integration and openness.” Plans include the construction of a “multimodal, multi-route, convenient transport corridor” from Hunchun to Ulan-Ude, running along the Ulaanbaatar-Hunchun expressway via the Changjitu zone and the Primorye-2 inter-

⁴ The “global transport ring 1–2–3” formula as an attribute of the Great Transportation Power was formulated in the “Basic Provisions of the Plan for Building a Powerful Transportation Country” approved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China on 20 September 2019, and further replicated in a number of provincial-level transport strategies.

national transport corridor (the latter connects the province with several ports in Russia and North Korea), the Russian Far East, and the Rason Special Economic Zone. Its purpose is to connect the Bohai Gulf, the southeastern coast of China, Japan, South Korea, and Southeast Asia by sea, as well as to link Russia, Mongolia, North Korea, and Europe by land [source 28]. More specific projects were announced by the Jilin government in early 2025: river cruises on the Tumannaya River with access to the Sea of Japan, coastal tourism and cross-border tourist routes for driverless cars between China and Russia, and flights from Changchun to Vladivostok, Khabarovsk, Yekaterinburg, Irkutsk, and other destinations [source 14].

As for Inner Mongolia, it intends to take full advantage of its favourable geographical position, its direct connection with Russia and Mongolia. The Chinese government links the “high-quality development of Inner Mongolia” with, among other things, the creation of an “eastern passage” from the ports of Dalian and Qinhuangdao via the Manzhouli border checkpoint to Russia, Mongolia, and Europe [source 4]. The province itself aims to “integrate deeply into the construction of the Belt and Road and the China-Mongolia-Russia economic corridor, becoming an important foothold for China’s openness in the North” [source 29]. The strategic directions for the development of the autonomous region’s transport network include, firstly, the creation of a modern and unified transport network within the region itself and its connection to the national transport system; and secondly, ensuring the effective operation of this network as a “window to the North,” providing access to the markets of Russia and Eurasia. By 2035, the city of Hohhot is expected to serve as a hub connecting all border crossing points via expressways; it will also ensure their effective development and optimise customs clearance for multimodal transport, among other functions [source 9].

The province of Liaoning, which does not have direct access to the Eurasian mainland, has set similar objectives. The authors of its transport programme consider it necessary for the province to participate in “creating new areas of openness to the outside world and promoting the construction of the Northeast marine and land transport

corridor,” which will connect Japan, South Korea, Southeast Asia, and the southeastern coast of China with Mongolia, Russia, Central Asia, Europe, and other regions [source 8]. The key points of this system will include the “Dalian International Shipping Centre of Northeast Asia,” the “Yingkou Sea and Railway Transport Hub,” and the “Shenyang Cross-Border Railway Hub” [source 15]. Access routes to Russia, and further to Europe, will be organised through the border checkpoints of Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Inner Mongolia.

SOME RESULTS

In broad terms, during this difficult period for the country, the Northeast’s foreign economic relations developed positively. After a slight decline in 2020 caused by the government’s anti-pandemic measures, they began to revive steadily. From 2020 to 2024, the foreign trade volume in Heilongjiang Province grew by 103.2%, in IMAR by 98.8%, and in Jilin by 37.8%⁵.

The results of the intensified “open policy” are not uniform across these territories, as each province has a specific economic structure, unique potential, and interacts with different foreign trade partners with varying capacities and interests. Liaoning’s main economic counterparty is Japan; IMAR’s is Mongolia; Jilin’s is Germany; and Heilongjiang’s is Russia.

The total export volume of the four NEC territories in 2024 increased by 48%, from 418 billion to 618 billion yuan, nearly doubling in dollar terms, from \$ 107.5 billion to \$ 200 billion, despite a significant increase in oil and gas imports from Russia; at the same time, the foreign trade balance deficit decreased. This is largely due to the fact that the NEC provinces, like the Chinese economy as a whole, benefited from the economic war unleashed by the West against Russia. They took advantage of both the emergence of commodity niches in the Russian market, resulting from Western sanctions, which Chinese businesses actively rushed to fill, and the availability of cheaper Russian energy resources. From 2019 to 2024, exports from Liaoning Province to Russia doubled (from 7.9 billion to 15.7 billion yuan); Heilongjiang’s ex-

⁵ Hereinafter, all calculations are based on PRC customs statistics.

ports increased by 3.7 times (from 10.7 billion to 37.3 billion); those of Inner Mongolia grew by 7.6 times (from 2.7 billion to 20.4 billion); and Jilin's exports rose by 12 times (from 1.7 billion to 18.3 billion yuan). At the same time, in 2023, Jilin's exports to Russia peaked at 20.4 billion yuan.

Since 2020, Heilongjiang has also significantly increased its imports from Russia (by 2.3 times), bringing its volume to 197 billion yuan. Mainly due to this leap, the Northeast's trade with Russia increased by 90.6% over five years (from 175.3 billion to 334.1 billion yuan), and its share in the foreign trade of the Northeast grew from 15.2% to 22.9%. At the same time, the Northeast does not play a key role in the broader economic exchange between China and Russia. In 2024, only Heilongjiang, accounting for 4.5% of its own exports, was among the top ten Chinese provinces in terms of exports to Russia (7th place, \$5.24 billion). However, these territories played a more significant role in imports from Russia. Heilongjiang ranked 2nd (\$27.7 billion and 21.4% of China's imports from Russia); Liaoning ranked 9th (\$3.1 billion and 2.4%); and Inner Mongolia ranked 10th (\$2.1 billion and 1.6%) [source 30].

It is clear that Russia is fundamentally important for Heilongjiang (accounting for 75% of its foreign trade in 2024), relevant for Jilin and IMAR (each with one-sixth of foreign trade turnover), and of limited significance for Liaoning (5%).

The trade turnover between the NEC and the Russian Federation has increased significantly for the same reasons as the China-Russia trade in general. Exports from the Northeast to Russia have grown mainly due to electromechanical products and transport vehicles, with growth not only in volume but also in the price of these products. In 2024, mechanical and electrical products accounted for 46% of Heilongjiang's exports, with exports of passenger cars, automotive parts and components, and mobile phones increasing by 96.0%, 44.8%, and 183.5%, respectively [source 31].

Northeast imports from Russia are dominated by energy resources: crude oil, gas, coal, and ore concentrate. In Heilongjiang Province, mineral products accounted for 85% of imports from Russia in 2023, while wood and timber products accounted for another 7%. Marine products ac-

counted for 47% of Jilin Province's imports from Russia, and mineral raw materials accounted for 38% [source 32].

Measures taken by the Chinese government and local authorities to attract investment from Russia into the established FTAs have, in fact, failed. Chinese artificial intelligence refuses to reveal even approximate figures for Russian investment in the Northeast. Considering that the amount of Russian direct investment in China from 2020 to 2023 ranged from \$10 million to \$40 million per year, and that the cumulative volume amounted to \$1.15 billion at the end of 2023, according to official Chinese data [source 33, p. 36], it can be assumed that the Northeast received a negligible portion of this amount.

The flow of investment from the Northeast into neighbouring regions of Russia was slightly larger in volume, but still equally insignificant. The main investors were private enterprises from Heilongjiang, “as a rule, small in size, weak in terms of risk resilience, and lacking in sources of financing.” Chinese experts are therefore forced to conclude that Heilongjiang Province and the Russian Far East are characterised by “still few large strategic projects, insufficient volume of reciprocal investment, and low level of cooperation” [5, p. 14].

CONCLUSION

Thus, it is still premature to talk about the revival of the Northeast, as well as to draw any conclusions on the results of the current stage of the Chinese Northeast's policy of openness to the outside world. At the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, this region of China, which has slowed down in its development, is in search of new models and sources of economic growth. The following measures are considered fully workable and potentially effective: the build-up of the region's export potential in specially created zones (free and electronic trade areas, simplified customs clearance areas, innovative production areas, etc.); bringing manufactured products to new markets in Eurasia and worldwide through “openness corridors to the North”; and new transport and logistics schemes developed in Beijing and along the border with Russia.

The Chinese Communist Party and the Chinese government have not removed the objective of “achieving new breakthroughs in the comprehensive revival of the region” from their agenda. One of the tools for achieving this is “the accelerated formation of a comprehensive model of openness, which is supposed to connect the land and the sea, the country and foreign states, the east and the west” [source 34].

In this development strategy, the Northeast FTAs will continue to serve as an important tool of economic modernisation. In April 2025, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China published recommendations for the further reform of China’s free trade areas. These areas are viewed as “important outposts for implementing the dual circulation policy and a powerful engine for high-quality development,” capable of ensuring “free and convenient flows of trade, investment, capital, information, transport, and people.” FTAs promise to create new opportunities for innovation, manufacturing and finance, inter-

national scientific and technical cooperation, and support for “technologically advanced service enterprises” [source 35].

Among the measures intended to “further promote high-level open development,” envisaged by the government of Jilin Province in early 2025 and aimed at its “comprehensive revival” [source 14], are actions such as supporting enterprises seeking to enter the global market; expanding the use of the yuan for cross-border trade settlements and direct investment; creating platforms for scientific and technical cooperation; attracting highly skilled professionals from abroad and nurturing local talents; promoting domestic brands and products outside China; and much more. Experts from Heilongjiang also note the importance of “attracting talents” from Russia for the modernisation of the province [5, p. 16].

“Leaning against The Giant Tree”, its market, natural and human resources, feeling its power and getting imbued with its confidence, is indeed an important and entirely possible path for the Northeast to add a new page to its history.

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