THE NORTHEAST ASIAN REGIONAL CONTEXT FOR ENVIRONMENTALISM: ASSESSING ENVIRONMENTAL GOALS AGAINST OTHER PRIORITIES IN THE 1990S

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Environmental goals are linked to regionalism, but they are often a low priority for advocates of nationalism. Early in the 1990s idealists assumed that reallocations of money, newly active social movements, and a lively process of regionalism would boost environmentalism to one of the top priorities across Northeast Asia. Soon they found, as regionalism floundered, that countries did not have a strong commitment to the environment and some showed little concern. In a region where state-centered development and national dignity remain powerful concerns, environmental hopes rest on gradual acceptance as a secondary theme as part of balanced regionalism. After fading before great power competition in 1996-99, regionalism made a partial comeback in 2000. Hopes for environmental cooperation rest on new gains for regionalism, but strains in the summer of 2001 suggest that progress will be slow.
The 1990s was supposed to be the decade of environmentalism in Northeast Asia (NEA). Mikhail Gorbachev had opened the window on Soviet “ecological suicide” (ecocide) to win support through environmental glasnost among people aroused about saving their country from destruction (Feshback and Friendly Jr. 1992). After a decade of revelations about severe environmental damages, Chinese academic experts had gained a large following plus more support from the central government than others who raised civil society themes (Edmonds 1994). Japanese alarm about acid rain from China and about nuclear dumping in the Sea of Japan by Russia led to a new urgency for Japan to assume leadership (Lincoln 1993:109-59). Soon official development assistance (ODA) was made conditional on environmental progress, and funds were so targeted. South Koreans took advantage of their newfound democracy to highlight pollution cases at home and, as ties with China developed quickly, to discuss how the severe costs of acid rain could be reduced. In an upsurge of idealism many of the conferences of 1990 to 1993 proclaiming the arrival of NEA regionalism highlighted environmentalism as one of the priorities for cooperation (Takeshi 1990).

Optimists foresaw the following scenario: i) after the end of the cold war and the Sino-Soviet split, military budgets and tensions would fall, freeing money not only for economic growth and retooling but also for environmental projects; ii) after central controls were removed, a wave of democracy, decentralization, and freedom of speech would impart momentum to environmental movements; and iii) regional and global cooperation through NGOs as well as governments would give priority to environmental objectives since they are less controversial and more likely to show quick benefits than most other goals. Now that all countries at the national and local level embraced environmentalism as a worthy cause there was much talk of using environmentalism in strategies for regionalism. The heady voices predicting rapid progress in the early 1990s sounded as if they presented an irrefutable logic.

High hopes, however, soon gave way to stagnant negotiations and
unfunded initiatives as well as to outright contempt that put a brake on cooperation in the region as a whole. When countries put aside actual problems to accentuate the positive, they accepted secondary themes on the agenda as long as they built support for long-term objectives. When problems burst into the open and demanded prior solution, there was no longer much interest in themes such as environmentalism. To appreciate what happened, we need to assess environmental goals against other national and regional priorities. We must look at politics, nationalist rhetoric, and problems in bilateral and multilateral relations over the course of the decade. Lots of things went wrong in Northeast Asia; to grasp the fate of environmentalism we need to place it in a wider regional context. That context also offers new hope that environmental cooperation, building on some positive projects of the 1990s, could become a secondary effect of recent steps toward regionalism.

DEGREES OF ENVIRONMENTALISM AND PATHS TO REGIONALISM

In the 1990s countries large and small were reassessing their priorities. If each country started with a large wish list, circumstances soon made it clear that some goals take precedence over others. Domestic politics were engaged in sorting out the level of commitment to solving environmental problems as well as the path to regionalism most consistent with national identity and perceived national interests. In Northeast Asia growing nationalism reshaped debates on these matters.

At the outset we should distinguish three types of environmentalism. First, there is a response to an immediate crisis, often of a life-threatening nature. While this is the most intense type of environmental concern, it often does not linger long for those not locally affected. In Northeast Asia we find lots of sensational issues: sudden
discovery of acid rain from China, revelations of Russian dumping of nuclear waste in the sea, and large oil spills such as from the tanker Nakhodka off the coast of Japan. These issues came and went, leaving a residue of concern, but not building a foundation for sustained interest.

Second, there is a national movement in which the very direction of a country’s development is at stake. Examples were environmental dissent in the Soviet Union reaching a peak in 1986-87 and Japan’s claim in the early and mid-1990s to be an environmental great power. Such linkages between environmentalism and national identities can be very popular but also fickle as other emotional issues rise to the fore.

Third, we find a long-term perspective associated with an educated, middle class society that accepts the need to balance economic growth and environmental protection. Prosperous Japanese at a time of optimism about national growth but concerned about polluting neighbors gravitated toward the third approach to environmentalism. Other nations, however, responded on the basis of a much weaker commitment to the environment. Actually, some responses may have been calculated, assuming that by piquing Japanese interest funds would start flowing that could be diverted. Even in Japan, economic stagnation as well as preoccupation with other aims of regionalism and bilateralism eventually left sustained support for environmentalism in doubt. Supposedly, “post-modern societies” turn away from developmentalism to focus on their quality of life. In Northeast Asia, however, a mentality of relying on state-centered development and regaining national dignity through contentious foreign relations left little room for such thinking about giving priority to joint endeavors to make life easier. Some nations are too poor to shift their outlook; others are too worried about their relative standing.

If regionalism had realized its promise of increased momentum and trust, then environmental themes could have been included on the agenda. But conditions for regionalism are sorely lacking. That has left environmentalism as a topic for small numbers of idealists, who are often out of touch with the real concerns on the minds of their
audiences. By the mid-1990s it was clear that environmentalism is not a centerpiece of regionalism. Matters of traditional security and economic growth are primary. There may be other themes with more enduring emotional appeal as well, particularly in a region where many borders have been closed and nations are unaccustomed to working together.

To understand the diminished attention to environmentalism it is important to show how attitudes towards the environment changed in accord with a timetable of strategies towards regionalism. In turn, regionalism must be balanced against localism, nationalism, and globalization as sometimes overlapping and sometimes clashing priorities. Over the decade the tradeoffs among these reshaped the debate on environmentalism.

Looking back on the 1990s we can distinguish four paths to regionalism, each with its own implications for dealing with the environment. One is the squeezing of nationalism between globalization and localism, advancing to regionalism largely by bypassing the nation state. Although this leads to idealistic talk of environmentalism replacing nationalist priorities, it does not reflect the realities of centralized states with strong nationalist orientations in Northeast Asia. Two is regionalism focused on states replacing local areas as the main actors and searching for a balance among nationalism, localism, and globalization. This raises the importance of security interests, resulting in delays in addressing environmental issues. Three is a breakdown into jockeying over great power influence and coalitions. Under these circumstances, only urgent pollution cases are likely to arouse public attention although lip service may be paid to environmental themes in the course of negotiations aimed at other concerns. Four, when an atmosphere of balanced regionalism appears in which articulation of a vision for long-term cooperation becomes part of the exploration of how to proceed in stages, then environmental issues make a comeback. They can play a supplementary role as part of a comprehensive vision as countries establish the security, economic, and civilizational re-
quirements for regionalism. Yet, even when there is general agreement on the need for balanced regionalism, the forces pulling the region apart may still be in the ascendancy. We see all four of these paths during the course of the 1990s in Northeast Asia.

For success on the fourth path it is necessary to bridge the gap between the community of experts, aggrieved parties, and internationally-minded people who put the environment high on the agenda and the so-called realists who often treat it as an afterthought. This means calculating the circumstances and timing for bringing environmental goals to the fore. In Northeast Asia the interplay of idealism and realism can best be seen not in the linkage between globalization and localism but in the struggle over regionalism that somehow had to incorporate nationalism. In 2001 regionalism hangs between resurgent nationalism and emergent nationalism, leaving environmental cooperation waiting for a new balance of forces.

A CHRONOLOGY OF PRIORITIES IN NORTHEAST ASIA

In the early 1990s many advocates saw regionalism as the intersection between localism and globalization. They assumed that nationalism was a declining force. In its place a wave of decentralization sweeping across Northeast Asia would boost local areas, which would look outside for partners in other countries to check the power of the national capital. In this scenario regionalism means borderlessness as well as initiatives to solve new types of threats to security such as pollution (Ohmae 1995). One international conference after another proclaimed that virtually no tradeoffs were needed; everybody would gain by moving swiftly to solve all manner of problems, among them environmental ones (Kim 1992). By the end of 1993, however, all sides had soured on the cross-border ties that had emerged in the region, and domestic reactions against the effects of decentralization also were mounting (Rozman 1998a). Criminal gangs, shoddy goods, corrupt customs officers, and other problems
troubled the Sino-Russian border. Russians insisted on tight controls along the border (Rozman 2000). The Russo-Japanese border trade also fell under criminal groups, who monopolized the traffic in crabs and used cars to the disadvantage of Russian consumers (Rozman 2000). South Korean generosity in loans to the Russian Far East ended with large unpaid debts. North Korea failed to accept the requirements of either localism or globalization. In this climate of frustrated economic cooperation, continued geopolitical threats, and even perceived clashes of civilization (Rozman 1998b), environmental projects slipped to the bottom of the agenda. Although some that went forward had a positive effect, for instance slowing the extinction of rare species, and NGOs struggled valiantly to make a contribution, this theme was not sustaining attention.

At first in 1991-92 there was a surge of environmentalism in discussions on regionalism. Japanese led the way as advocates of both. They saw themselves as the leaders of globalization in Asia and largely considered regionalism as a means for proving their worth in international society. Japan would become a bridge between China and the U.S., showing that its less adversarial and more gradual approach to China could win that nation’s trust and achieve goals shared by the West. After settling the territorial dispute, Japan would also take responsibility for integrating Russia’s Far East and much of Siberia simultaneously into the global and regional communities. Environmentalism ranked along side democratization and market reform as a target of transformation. Others in Japan called for local exchanges around the Sea of Japan rim as the path to regionalism (Kamibonkai koryoken 1992). If they were supportive of solving specific problems of pollution, their primary interest was to invigorate local economic development. Many from the old left suspicious of the U.S. favored regionalism with a local touch and less globalization (Hidetoshi 1992). They too idealized environmentalism as a way to bypass nationalism. Each set of advocates assumed that Japan would pay the bulk of the costs for environmental improvements and controls, winning goodwill
and demonstrating its leadership. Indeed, Japanese took the lead in studies to “increase the awareness of accomplishing environmental friendly and sustainable development” (Sheingauz and Ono 1995:10). But Japan’s support for environmental projects was conditional on progress on other fronts, while Russia in particular saw the environmental goals as a luxury not worth compromise on matters of real priority. Talk of environmentalism faded with disillusionment in Japan as a result of several political shock. In September 1992 Russian President Boris Yeltsin rudely cancelled his visit to Japan. In 1994 a nuclear weapons crisis was brewing in North Korea. The next year public opinion in Japan nose-dived over nuclear testing and other issues in China. No less important were cross-border problems such as confiscation of joint ventures in Russia that reduced trust in bypassing national decision-making.

In 1994-95 regionalism remained on the agenda, but with much less reliance on decentralization. The agenda changed, lessening talk of environmental goals. Suddenly great power relations needed to be stabilized. Of course, Sino-Japanese trade climbed rapidly, and high levels of Japanese ODA kept environment as a major focus. Localism was fading from debates on this subject even though nations still pursuing a regional agenda kept environmentalism as one of many possibilities for cooperation.

Environmentalism lost some of its momentum during these years. Japan’s economy had begun to stagnate, and coalition politics left leaders with little consensus. The situation had worsened in areas of the Russian Far East as new governors closer to the military-industrial complex brushed aside the reformers who had raised international hopes in the transition from the Soviet Union. China had turned more to nationalism, gaining in confidence about its economy and finding increased legitimacy also by stirring emotions against Japan and the U.S. These were not propitious times for idealist goals. Yet, the momentum of regional aspirations continued from early in the decade, and nothing had so soured the ties among the powers as to cause them
to abandon the earlier agenda.

As environmental issues have risen to the forefront, they have rarely been handled in a way that boosts mutual confidence. The depletion of fish, crabs, and other marine resources is of general concern, but Russian cooperation has been lacking. Oil spills and the prospect of more, especially as Sakhalin offshore drilling and transport expands, catch the public’s eye, but Japanese do not have confidence that Russia is spending what it should to prevent marine pollution or will pay the costs of a big cleanup. Especially Hokkaido worries about the negative impact of Sakhalin development. Russians point to Chinese pollution along rivers that divide the two countries. In discussions of border demarcation, residents of Primorskii krai warned of damage to Lake Khasan, and in discussions of the nearby Tumen river area development they charged that a unique marine environment would be spoiled. In general, these alarms are less a sign of a high priority to sustainable development and more a reflection of searching for any reason to bolster a nationalist cause. The region has paid a price for its failure to boost cooperation on the environment.

The low point for environmentalism as a mutual theme came in 1996-99 when great power competition and jockeying for leverage overwhelmed regionalism. Sino-Russian relations grew closer, focusing on multipolar leverage rather than on working together to attract capital for projects to develop Russian resources with Chinese labor. Then U.S.-Japanese strategic ties were tightened as a means to pressure North Korea and China, not as a step toward luring others into regionalism. Soon efforts were made to bolster U.S.-Chinese relations and Japanese-Russian relations, but rising expectations were quickly dashed. These were not favorable conditions for environmentalism. The momentum was lost, even if the subject drew occasional attention.

To be sure, support for the Kyoto accord against global warming suggested for a time a possible boost in environmentalism in idealistic Europe and the U.S. under a democratic president. Northeast Asia with its great power rivalries departed from the mainstream of globalization.
While many Japanese could take pride in playing a global leadership role at the Kyoto conference, they were losing confidence in their regional leadership opportunities. Regionalism had become divorced from globalization as well as from localism, while nationalism was not ready to embrace it.

There was still a place for environmentalism when Japan was pursuing its broadest goals. In the fall of 1997 when Japanese-Russian negotiations turned serious, it was decided to make environmental cooperation one of the themes. Plans followed for Japanese investment in Russian plants that discharge excessive carbon dioxide in return for the trading of Russian credits under the Kyoto plan for combating global warming. When the Hashimoto-Yeltsin plan for economic cooperation was announced in 1997 it was assumed that because the priorities of Japan and Russia overlap in nuclear waste management and marine protection, they will likely remain the two most prominent areas for environmental cooperation. It is not only the global failure to sustain the momentum of Kyoto, but also the impasse in talks between Moscow and Tokyo over issues with higher priority that has delayed this discussion. Again we see that vague ideals at the start of talks are conducive to environmental interests; however when negotiations run into trouble, the real priorities for each side eclipse such secondary topics. In 1999-2001 we discern contradictory forces at work. On the one hand, a sense of tension has heightened in Sino-U.S. and Russo-U.S. relations. This was evident both in the last phase of the Clinton administration during the Kosovo war and in the transition to the Bush administration as a more suspicious leadership in Beijing and the new Putin regime in Moscow showed their distaste for aggressive unilateralism. Renewed economic problems and deep suspicions of North Korea and China in Japan as well as uncertainty about the U.S. leave a vacuum in leadership for regionalism as well as environmentalism. Even Japan was turning its attention away from environmental concerns. This was not a propitious time for bold initiatives.

On the other hand, new developments in bilateral relations within
the region along with the emergence of a quiet champion of regionalism raised some hopes. In each case, the new bilateral pursuit had an environmental element. First, China changed its approach toward Japan by the end of 1999 and through 2000 kept intensifying its “smile diplomacy.” Many Japanese politicians under the sway of the downturn in Sino-Japanese mutual perceptions from the mid-1990s, especially of Jiang Zemin’s flawed visit in November 1998 when the history theme stole public attention, were insisting on a reduction of ODA to China. Instead of treating this as a betrayal of the longstanding tacit agreement that Japan would assist China in place of reparations, the Chinese reacted calmly. A compromise was reached in which Japan cut its ODA across the board and justified it as a reflection of budgetary problems, while Beijing accepted that the thrust of future assistance would be to assist Western China, where development lagged, and environmental priorities were greater. The two countries could agree that they have a shared interest in the regional environment.

Second, Japan intensified its pursuit of a breakthrough with Russia from the spring of 2000. Japan modified its demand for the return of four islands to allow for a peace treaty after agreement was reached on two islands as long as talks continued on the other two. With Russia’s political system still unprepared to create an attractive climate for foreign investments, Japan turned to environmental initiatives as a way to smooth the way for a settlement. It recommitted itself to funds for the decommissioning of rusting nuclear submarines that posed a regional threat of radiation.

Third, South Korea made improvement of relations with China the cornerstone in its sunshine strategy to the North. Not only did this mean sustained investment in the Chinese economy, it also involved cooperation to reduce acid rain, blamed in Korea as well as Japan for considerable damage to forests. As in the cases of China approaching Japan and Japan approaching Russia, the great power aims were foremost, but environmental objectives facilitated understanding.

In the year 2000 under the leadership of Kim Dae Jung, regionalism
regained some momentum. At last, China had shown an interest in a multilateral organization that would bring it and Japan together. Kim Dae Jung emerged as the champion of regionalism. As a middle-sized power in the midst of self-proclaimed great powers, South Korea is well positioned to balance diverse interests. By personally improving relations with each of Korea’s neighbors, Kim Dae Jung enjoyed the rapport needed to take some initiatives. In Singapore in late November 2000 China, Japan, and South Korea agreed to start three-way cooperation through a 5-point plan. One of the points calls for environmental cooperation. The ASEAN Plus Three Framework has been the format for breakfast talks over the past three years. Beginning in 2001 there will also be a separate summit. While the environmental theme has been rather lost in the coverage of the importance of these talks, an agenda for sustained cooperation in this region is likely to include an environmental component. A vision statement to identify the goals of regionalism will no doubt include environmental themes. Although in early 2001 there were snags in relations with North Korea and Sino-U.S. relations that added to the skepticism about Kim Dae Jung’s idealistic approach, the prospects for environmentalism were being kept alive by continued steps towards regionalism.

Through the middle of 2001 three new setbacks occurred. One, the Bush administration rejected the Kyoto accord on global warning, setting international efforts back. Prospects were dashed for reducing emissions through global targets that would filter down to the regional and local levels, although Japan joined with European states and others at an international meeting in Bonn to keep alive flickering hopes. Two, the economies of the region slumped badly as part of the global economic slowdown, driving both South Korea and Japan to new bouts of alarm over what they should do next. Three, Japan’s approval of middle school textbooks that were seen in South Korea and China as glorifying periods of aggression led to the suspension of many forms of cooperation. The spillover into environmentalism continued.
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Japanese continue to see their country as the champion of environmental globalization and regionalism. They argue that the globalization of the economy demands a new political order and new cooperation to deal with the problems caused by it. To be sure some of this is posturing in a country whose record towards sustaining the forests of Southeast Asia and protecting whales leaves much to be desired. Japan’s government has been fine-tuning ODA to China, while cooperating with the China Council set up in 1992 and its various working groups dealing with environmental issues. In one project Japanese ODA was used by the local government of Kitakyushu to develop the design of an environmental model city in Dalian, China (Economic Research Institute for Northeast Asia 2000:199). Lately Japan’s attention has turn forestry and grassland preservation in connection with the development of West China. But the atmosphere is rather precarious as the Japanese Diet is fresh from a debate over whether to cut ODA sharply in protest over China’s weapons buildup and ingratitude. Although the actual cuts were not so great, the mood of punishing China has not disappeared. Meanwhile, the Bush administration’s rejection of the Kyoto global warming accord leaves Japan with less momentum for globalization that could boost its regional role as an environmental leader. Rising nationalism shows signs of setting back that role.

Russians for many years have been reporting that the environment of their country is deteriorating. Even in 2000 the first good year for economic growth in a decade there is no sign of improvement. Russians along with the people of nearby Kazakhstan were the most pessimistic in a 1998 survey of thirty countries. When asked if “environmental pollution is such a big problem that there is very little the individual can do about it,” 86 percent of Russians agreed. Russia is not likely to turn to sustainable development until it decides that it really must
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welcome development through regionalism and that too awaits decisions on Russia having the security it feels it needs. Meanwhile, the Putin leadership has encouraged nationalism in defiance of globalization. It has lowered the voice of environmental officials in its administration. This leaves only a weak mandate for that cause.

Chinese face severe environmental restraints, which are being addressed without adequate urgency. The central government has its mind on two greater priorities: the recovery of Taiwan through great power nationalism, and the maintenance of economic growth despite new obstacles. It will take a global and regional consensus to draw China into a framework for raising the environmental priority. With Japan troubled by weak and unstable leadership and the U.S. focused on realist security issues, that framework is not in sight. Meanwhile, jockeying for power in the leadership transition of late 2002 and early 2003 favors the military and security over the environment.

South Korea’s preoccupation remains the North. Kim Dae Jung’s opening of 2000 slowed under the impact of the Bush administration and the lack of reciprocity in Pyongyang. While Seoul can be expected to continue to try to bring Beijing and Tokyo closer together, it will not find the task easy. Already in early 2001 China’s “smile diplomacy” was flagging, as Japan remained too divided, suspicious, and keen on adding nationalist rhetoric to its textbooks. Tense relations between the U.S. and China also complicate Kim Dae Jung’s task.

Despite the uncertainties the situation in the region continues to be fluid. The status quo is unlikely to last long. There is a possibility of a new wave of regionalism building on nationalism as well as globalization. One shared objective is likely to be energy projects. The future of regionalism depends not only on agreement on security and economic ties; in Northeast Asia energy also plays a prominent role. Proposals for cooperation invariably highlight the value of massive projects of natural resource development and transportation. They stress a division of labor between resource-poor countries and Russia and the clean up of dangerous sites left by the one-sided exuberance of socialist
economic planners. In this region energy and environment are necessarily paired. When other conditions of regionalism are realized, the agenda will inevitably save a place for environmentalism. In 2001 it is still possible to find ways to build on the momentum for regionalism generated over the previous year.

CONCLUSIONS

The 1990s were a difficult period for regional cooperation in Northeast Asia, including environmental projects. Despite much talk of cleaning up the mess left in the Russian Far East, only modest programs (as in dealing with rusting nuclear submarines) went forward while new damage was occurring such as depletion of marine resources. North Korea remained virtually beyond reach. Northeast China gave priority to dealing with severe layoffs, although it had some success in reducing severe air pollution. As the economies of Japan and South Korea faced new troubles, funding for high-sounding environmental goals looked less likely. No less important, new challenges to a mood of cooperation dimmed hope of environmental priorities.

What can we learn from this record of linkages between regionalism and environmentalism in Northeast Asia through the 1990s? Three points are worth stressing. 1) We must avoid naïve environmentalism, assuming that progress on this issue is independent of other cooperation or can disregard the power of nationalism in pursuit of still weakly embedded forces of localism and globalization. 2) As one set of negotiations after another includes an environmental component, we can find hope from the fact that this concern continues to have a place in regional and bilateral relations, but also we must be realistic that its place on the agenda is precarious until other matters are settled. 3) Finally, new strategies must uncover linkages, such as with energy projects, which persuade governments driven by other priorities to
pursue environmentalism.

One country’s environmental concerns may give other countries leverage. Japan wants to reduce acid rain from Northeast China. China, in turn, is anxious about energy security as it imports more and more of its oil from the Middle East. Explaining that Japanese investment in Russian natural gas and a pipeline to carry it through Northeast China would reduce reliance on coal, China makes its pitch to Japan. Russia, in turn, recognizes that the western variant through Mongolia for the pipeline from Irkutsk province is less desirable to China for domestic political reasons and to Japan for ecological reasons; so it reconciles itself to the eastern variant. These tradeoffs show the potential for regional coordination.

If we look back on discussions of Northeast Asia through the past decade it is not hard to discern a dichotomy between idealists who discuss environmental causes as if they are independent of other problems and within reach and the realists who dismiss these issues as if the only way forward for regional cooperation is through military pressure that forces concessions that will be slow in coming. Neither side has paid enough attention to the linkages between regionalism and nationalism, drawing on globalization and localism as well. The challenge remains to bridge the gap between the two sides. The momentum towards regionalism of the year 2000 may be revived. It is important to find ways to boost it, enhancing the vision of what can be gained through joint regional efforts and including activities to solve environmental problems as part of that vision.

NOTES

1 This paper was presented at the workshop, Japan, the US and the Promotion of Sustainable Development in East Asia, organized at the University of
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4 “Strategiia razvitii Rossi v Aziatsko-Tikhoookeanskom raione v XXI veke,” Analisticeskii vestnik, special issue no. 17 (Moscow: Sovet Federatsii Federal’noy Rossiiskoi Federatsii, 2000:7-8).

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