

## Chapter 7

### Russia and the Rise of Asia

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#### Summary

Global geopolitical shifts and Russia's own obvious needs have pushed Moscow to pay more attention to Asia. While hardly a "pivot," this shift constitutes a measure of internal rebalancing within Russia's domestic and foreign policy. The Russian Government is responding to the challenges and opportunities in rather familiar ways. Domestically, it seeks to re-launch the development of the eastern Russian regions by means of various state-run megaprojects, from the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok, to establishing a special federal ministry in Khabarovsk, to planning a state corporation to oversee the development of the Far East and eastern Siberia. Moscow has been placing emphasis on energy and infrastructure projects, such as oil and gas pipelines, LNG, railroads (upgrading the Trans-Siberian) and new ocean lines, such as the Northern Sea Route.

In foreign policy terms, Russia has long been a member of the Six-Party Talks on the North Korean nuclear issue. It has managed to join, in addition to APEC, the East Asia Summit and the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM). It has also become a partner of ASEAN. Moscow has maintained active ties with India and Vietnam—both countries with complex relations with China—to whom it sells arms (as it also does to China). Russia has been eager to expand economic relations with the technologically advanced Asian nations, such as Japan and South Korea. It has reached out to Singapore and is discussing free trade area agreements with New Zealand and Vietnam.

Yet, Russia remains largely invisible outside of Northeast Asia. The trouble is, it has little to offer besides energy supplies and arms. The transit routes to Europe, either across Siberia by rail or across the Arctic by sea, are yet to be upgraded to be of real use. The Russians also find it challenging to navigate in an international environment where they are no longer one of the dominant players. Charting a course between Beijing and Washington, Delhi, Tokyo, or Hanoi is certainly not

easy. Sensing its relative weakness and the intricacies of Asian geopolitics, top Russian leaders have shunned several important summits of the organizations, such as EAS, which they had fought hard to be admitted to.

This situation should stimulate more and harder thinking. Russia needs to think of itself as a Euro-Pacific power, and act accordingly. It should develop a credible policy to develop its eastern provinces, integrating them both within Russia and into the Asia-Pacific region. It should reach out to the more advanced countries of the region first to secure technology and investment. In particular, it needs to turn the solution of its territorial issue with Japan into an engine for transforming Russo-Japanese relations along the lines of the present Russo-German one. It has to have a long-term strategy of relations with China, so as to use it to its maximum advantage and not to be guided solely by Beijing's preferences. It needs to work for a North Pacific partnership with its direct eastern neighbor, the United States, and with Canada, where climatic conditions approximate Siberia's. It needs to have a long-term policy on the Korean Peninsula way beyond the nuclear issue. And it would help if Russia's leaders chose to make Vladivostok their temporary residence instead of – or at least in addition to - Sochi: this would help both Russia's domestic development and its international integration in Asia-Pacific.

The rise of East and South Asia is universally recognized as the most significant geopolitical development of the early 21st century. It affects virtually all other nations, but probably none so intimately as Russia. The Russian Federation is essentially a European country, but two-thirds of its vast territory—Siberia and the Russian Far East - is located in geographical Asia. There, Russia shares a nearly 4,500 km-long border with China. Russia is also a close—though seemingly distant—neighbor with Japan. Of all Pacific countries, it has the longest, though also probably least developed, ocean coastline. Only the relatively narrow (180 km) Bering Strait—the gateway between the Pacific and the Arctic - separates mainland Russia from Alaska. What happens in Asia and in the Pacific can affect Russia in various ways: economically, through trade and investment flows; militarily, due to geographical proximity, e.g., to the Korean Peninsula; and demographically, in the form of cross-border migration.

## **New Global Balance**

The present Russian Government sees the rise of Asia, above all, in terms of global

rebalancing. Over the past two decades Russia has tried, and failed, to fit itself into the enlarged West. Early in their terms, each of Russia's three Presidents—Boris Yeltsin, Vladimir Putin, and Dmitri Medvedev—looked for political and even military alliances with the United States and NATO. Each time, however, they were disappointed. Back in the Kremlin again, from 2012, Vladimir Putin has reasserted Russia's stance as a separate geopolitical unit—a free non-Western agent, standing apart from united Europe and focused on building its own power base in the center of the continent: a Eurasian Union. If successful, this union should give Moscow more leverage vis-à-vis Brussels (and Berlin) in constructing a Greater Europe stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok.

As a self-described pole in an increasingly polycentric world, Moscow insists on maintaining its strategic independence, which is the essence of what the Russian officials mean when they talk of their country as a great power. From the Kremlin's perspective, the most serious perceived threat to Russia's independence comes now in the form of the U.S. global dominance and its interventionist practices. Anything that helps cut the U.S. global role down to size—be it China's GDP, ASEAN's regional diplomacy or India's military power—is thus more than just welcome. It is essential for a new global order to take shape, one which would be based on more or less co-equal relationships among the world's leading nations, some of them Asian. In this context, the Russo-Chinese partnership should, apart from everything else, create checks and balances to reduce U.S. global dominance.

Thus, the rise of Asia broadly agrees with Russia's interests regarding the global order. Asia's surge contrasts with the relative decline of the West, including of the United States. Since the Russians, despite their European origins, do not associate themselves with the West as a whole or even with political Europe for that matter, they view the changing balance of power between the West and the new (Asian) East as a positive process of global leveling at the top. The new situation gives Russian leaders both breathing room and more space to maneuver. There is also a pinch of Schadenfreude involved as the Russians look at the travails of the European Union and the partial retrenchment of the U.S.: the trauma of the break-up of the Soviet Union is recent, and still aches.

## **New Challenges**

Asia's rise, however, is far from problem-free for Russia. No longer seeking to join

the West, the Russians are certainly not becoming Asians. Even though two-thirds of the country's territory is located east of the Urals, only one-sixth of Russia's population lives there. These 25 million people equal, roughly, the population of Shanghai. Russia has a very long coastline in the Pacific, but its ports are tiny compared to those of its neighbors. When one takes the flight from Moscow to Vladivostok, one is impressed by two things, equally powerful. The plane spends 9 hours in the air and lands in the same country, without crossing international borders. And—on a clear day, looking down, one sees very few traces of human activity east of the Urals. The rise of Asia means that the most dynamic part of the world now physically touches the least developed part of Russia. Nothing illustrates it better than the contrast between glitzy and booming cities on the Chinese bank of the Amur River—where until recently primitive villages stood - and the dilapidated, crumbling towns on its Russian side.

This fact is of enormous significance, and carries potentially the highest risks. In a globalized world of instant communication and porous borders, Moscow can only hold on to its Siberian and Far Eastern territories if it manages to successfully develop them. Russia's former internal colony—Siberia—and its former strategic bulwark of the Far East, to stay Russian *de facto*, not just *de jure*, need to become attractive to Russians themselves and contributing to the regional economic prosperity. This is a tall order. However, should Russia fail in responding to this challenge, it can see its population-poor but resource-rich territories gravitate to outside magnets, and foreigners coming in to take control of the more lucrative assets, maybe leaving Russian sovereignty intact, but hollowed out. The vision of 21st century Khabarovsk as a latter-day Harbin should concentrate Russian strategic minds in order not to become reality. This concerns, above all, Russia's relations with China.

## **China**

The rise of Asia has often been used as shorthand to describe the rise of China. The recent transformation of Sino-Russian relations is truly fascinating. A quarter-century ago, Moscow and Beijing were still engaged in a cold war that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, erupted in bloody border clashes, which invoked nuclear overtones. A little more than half a century ago, China was a junior ally of the Soviet Union within the “socialist camp.” A century ago, imperial Russia dominated

Northeast China, then known as Manchuria, and Harbin, one of its major cities, with its 200,000 Russian residents, was known as “little Moscow.” Even three decades ago, as Deng Xiaoping was starting his reforms, China’s GDP was estimated to be no more than 40% of that of the Soviet Russian republic within the USSR.

Now, China dwarfs Russia economically, four-plus times over. Its defense budget is nearly twice as big. Russia no longer supplies machinery to China, but has essentially turned into a resource base for its giant neighbor. No other great-power relationship in modern history, including the U.S.-Russian one, has undergone a change so abrupt, profound, and so quick, under peacetime conditions—and no other relationship has undergone such a momentous change so smoothly. In power terms, Russia and China have traded places, and have happily adapted to the new situation. This was anything but automatic or pre-ordained, and owed everything to the management of the relationship by the two countries’ leaderships and elites.

As regards the Russians, they, almost miraculously, have adjusted themselves to a strong China which they had never known or had to deal with before. There were no hurt feelings, as toward the United States, and no envy. They have not become obsessive about China’s newly-grown power. They rarely remember the bitter 30-year-long confrontation with Beijing and have been happy to largely demilitarize the Sino-Russian border. They were able to make concessions to finalize the agreement which delineates and demarcates that border in its entirety. Vladimir Putin called the Russo-Chinese border agreement as the most important achievements of his first two presidencies. That fact alone speaks volumes about Moscow’s priorities, and more broadly about the relationship itself. It needs to be added that, during the 1990s, the Russians also used the China connection to help keep afloat, economically, their struggling Far Eastern provinces, as well as the starving defense industry.

On the global scene, the Russians have been happy to stand alongside China at the UN Security Council and in such new fora as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and BRICS. This, they believe, should enhance Moscow’s international weight and prestige. The Russians feel challenged, no doubt, by China’s spectacular growth in all areas; but hardly threatened, at least for now, which sets them apart from many of China’s other neighbors. The reasons for Russia’s relaxed attitude toward Beijing lie partly in the Kremlin’s view of China’s leadership as thoroughly rational, and focused mostly on the domestic agenda; the belief that China has no interest whatsoever in alienating Russia, and that Beijing is fully aware

where Moscow's red lines are, and respects them; the conclusion that China's main foreign policy and strategic vectors—now and for the foreseeable future—are pointed toward the east and the south; and, finally, on the unspoken fact of nuclear deterrence.

The Chinese should be credited with impressive tact and understanding as far as post-Soviet Russia was concerned. They might have despised Gorbachev's and Yeltsin's policies privately, but they never allowed themselves to crow over Russia's demise publicly. Instead, they showed respect for Russia and did not indulge themselves in damaging its self-pride. They proceeded to engage Russia in an ostensibly equal partnership, won Moscow's acquiescence for economic penetration of ex-Soviet Central Asia, and capitalized on the Kremlin's penchant for standing up to and quarreling openly with Washington. Very importantly, the Chinese, through a consistent policy of deepening engagement with Russian energy companies, such as Rosneft, have managed to win Moscow's approval for investment into the Russian energy sector. The whole thing, so far, has been a win-win for both parties.

It is wrong to conclude, however, that Russia has become, or is on the way to becoming, a tributary state of China, à la the Chinese traditional style of its foreign relations. The Chinese are smart enough to understand that Russia's great-power status fully applies to its relations with China, not just the United States. Rather, Beijing set itself a more practical and more realistic agenda: to keep Russia as a safe rear, so that China could look east and south without worrying too much about the threat from the north; to gain access to Siberia's vast resources: energy today, fresh water tomorrow; and to secure Moscow's backing on the issues which concern the Chinese, such as U.S. missile defense and the territorial dispute with Japan. Deepening the arms relationship beyond off-the-shelf deals to include transfers of advanced Russian technology to the PLA is another key priority for Beijing.

China and Russia have forged a diplomatic alliance on the global stage, taking similar views on such issues as national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. At the UN Security Council, Beijing and Moscow opposed NATO's use of force against Yugoslavia in 1999, and Syria in 2013. Moscow in 2003 took a harder line on Iraq—Beijing abstained, but on Libya in 2011 and on Iran and North Korea, over the years till the present day, Russia and China have virtually marched in lockstep. This alliance is solid, for it is based on the fundamental national interests regarding the world order as both the Russian and the Chinese governments would prefer to see it.

The Russo-Chinese relationship, however, carries no features of a military alliance. Yes, there is an arms and technology relationship, revived in 1992 after a three-decades-long break; yes, there are regular military exercises on land and on sea, held in the territory of either country; yes, Moscow and Beijing are de facto leaders of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which prioritizes security and development. Yet, China is reluctant to tie its hands by an alliance with another major power, even one which has grown much weaker in comparison to what it was in the second half of the 20th century. As to Russia, it certainly cannot lead a new alliance, and does not want to be led by a senior partner. The Sino-Russian security relationship is thus evolving toward a security community of two neighboring countries, rather than a military alliance between them.

Despite its many achievements, the Russian-Chinese relationship suffers from a number of problems. The overall balance keeps changing in Beijing's favor, making the notion of co-equality increasingly difficult to sustain. The structure of bilateral trade is skewed to China's advantage, with Russia largely reduced to the role of a raw-materials purveyor to Beijing. Even then, Gazprom and the Chinese companies have been haggling for years over the gas price for China. The People's Liberation Army's conventional military forces have modernized with Russian aid, and should be reckoned with. The Russian authorities still treat Chinese state-run companies with caution, and many Russians in Siberia view Chinese immigrants — a relatively small number, about 300,000, and mostly residing in Moscow and elsewhere in European Russia — with mistrust, even talking about Beijing's "demographic aggression."

The Chinese public, for its part, has not forgotten the past wrongs incurred at the hands of the Russian empire, including "unequal" border treaties – which, in turn, revives old Russian suspicions about the neighbors' territorial ambitions. The Chinese leaders were caught off guard a few times in the past decade by the vagaries of Russian domestic developments, which affected them, as in the case of the Yukos company, a major supplier of oil to China; or of the closure of a market in Moscow, used by Chinese wholesale traders. Beijing is also concerned lest the current wave of anti-immigrant sentiments in Russia, for the time being focused on the people from the Caucasus and Central Asia, affects Chinese citizens.

Internationally, China has risen to the role of the principal trading partner of Central Asian countries, and is economically active elsewhere in post-Soviet countries, including in Ukraine and Belarus. China is also Russia's competitor in the international arms market, sometimes offering clones of Russian weapons systems.

Russia, for its part, supplies arms to India and Vietnam, who see China as a credible military threat. Russian companies drill for oil and gas in the South China Sea off the coast of Vietnam, close to what Beijing regards as its economic area. At the same time, Moscow views future development of the Arctic as very much the business of the littoral states, and is not thrilled by China's interest in the area. So far, Moscow and Beijing have been able to control or manage these differences, and they will probably be able to continue doing so in the medium term—say, through the mid-2020s—but in the long term, the situation is open. In order to deal with a strong China more effectively, Moscow needs to diversify its Asia-Pacific policy by means of reaching out to other important actors, beginning with Japan.

## **Japan and North-East Asia**

Following the end of the Cold War, Russia's relations with Japan have experienced a generally positive shift. Essentially, Japan is no longer considered in Moscow to be a likely military adversary. Economic relations have also expanded with the Japanese automotive industry, e.g., investing in car production in Russia, and Russia covering about 10% of Japan's oil and gas needs. Political relations have markedly improved after Russia's rejection of communism, with Moscow and Tokyo now sharing a range of interests on the world stage. However, the Russia-Japan relationship has not been able to fully use its potential due, in large part, to the lingering territorial issue between them. Since 1991, several attempts to resolve the dispute over the Kuril Islands, which the Japanese refer to as the Northern Territories, have failed, leading to frustration.

In the current strategic environment of Northeast Asia, however, both Russia and Japan need each other more than before. For Russia, a solid "Japan connection" would mean not only more investment and technology transfers, particularly to help develop the Far Eastern regions, but a serious diversification of Russia's foreign policy options in the Asia-Pacific. The broad model Moscow could follow in its approach to Tokyo is the current Russia-Germany relationship. Since the reunification of Germany in 1990, that country has been Russia's key partner in Europe. The Russo-German reconciliation has also been a linchpin of security on the European continent. There can be no direct parallels, of course, between the situation in Europe and in Asia, but turning Japan into a "Germany in the east" for Russia appears promising, and is worth exploring.

For Japan, Russia, given its geopolitical position, could be an important strategic partner, improving for Tokyo the balance on the continent of Asia. A friendly and close relationship with Moscow would give Tokyo additional reassurance in security terms, complementing its long-standing alliance with Washington. A stronger Russia connection would contribute to Japan's energy security. Japan could also tap into the generally benign attitude toward the Japanese among the ordinary Russian people, which contrasts positively with the attitudes in China and elsewhere. A genuine people-to-people rapprochement would provide a strong basis for the relationship. Eventually, Japan and Russia should be able to form a security community, where recourse to force or a threat of force is no longer even conceivable.

After Moscow's abrupt about-face on Korea in the early 1990s, and subsequent attempts at policy rebalancing to win back at least some leverage in Pyongyang, Russia has been clearly giving priority to its relations with Seoul. South Korea's advanced economy is seen as a modernization partner for Russia. Moscow has also proposed to Seoul a joint economic outreach to North Korea in the form of a transit gas pipeline and a rail link connecting Russia and South Korea across the DPRK. In the distant future, Russians see a unified Korea led by Seoul, and are developing their policy accordingly. In the Six-Party Talks on the Korean nuclear issue Moscow has been careful, however, to coordinate its steps with Beijing, conscious of China's overriding strategic interests on the Korean Peninsula. Basically, Russia staunchly favors a non-military approach to North Korea, generally viewing Pyongyang's provocative behavior as a survival strategy rather than preparation for attack.

On the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas, Moscow has struck a neutral stance. It certainly does not want to become involved on either side. Taking China's position would not only harm Russia's relations with Japan and a number of ASEAN countries; it would de facto mean Moscow's acceptance of Beijing's leadership, and thus loss of Russia's strategic independence—the Kremlin's most precious international commodity. By contrast, siding with Tokyo and/or Hanoi and Manila would greatly damage Sino-Russian relations, reviving the Kremlin's worst nightmare—a hostile and powerful China on its doorstep. True to their general attitude, and in something of a nod to China, the Russians preach peaceful resolution of the maritime disputes by the countries concerned.

It is self-evident that in the present circumstances Russia and Japan have much to gain from their rapprochement, establishing a relationship based on cooperation and trust. Such a rapprochement should not constitute an alliance, or be directed

against anyone. It would help both countries to deal more effectively with its most pressing strategic issues: for Russia, development of its eastern territories; for Japan, improving the geopolitical balance on the continent of Asia. The United States, unlike in the Cold War period, should have every reason to support this rapprochement by reassuring its Japanese ally that the Russia relationship would not come at the expense of the U.S.-Japan security alliance, and that the success of the rapprochement would provide for a better balance in Northeast Asia and beyond.

### **South and South-East Asia**

Over time, Russia has learned to appreciate the rise of Asian multilateralism, particularly in Southeast Asia. Moscow views ASEAN's steady growth in size and stature as a positive development, leading toward a more balanced international system. Russia became ASEAN's dialogue partner, even though it generally views ASEAN as a regional cooperation mechanism and a discussion platform, rather than a strategic actor in its own right. Within ASEAN, Moscow has been able to revive and reconsolidate its historical relationship with Vietnam. Russia has also been seeking to use arms trade as an opening in relations with other countries in the region, especially Indonesia and Malaysia, but with much less success so far.

Having joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) arrangement in 1999 and having held an APEC summit in 2012 in Vladivostok, Russia has also acceded to the East Asia Summit set up to deal with security issues, and the Asia-Europe meetings (ASEM), the latter as an Asian country. In addition to the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Six-Party Talks, this creates a network of institutions covering economic, security and other questions across the Asia-Pacific region. Yet Russia is careful not to tilt to either of the competing free trade area projects in the area: the U.S.-led Trans-Pacific Partnership, which excludes China; or the China-preferred option, which does not include the United States. Instead, Moscow has been promoting Eurasian integration with Kazakhstan and Belarus.

In South Asia, Russia's traditional regional partner has been India. The relationship, which amounted to a quasi-alliance in the decades of the Cold War, was largely neglected in the 1990s, but re-energized somewhat in the beginning of the 21st century. Still, even today it remains too narrowly based, resting mainly on government-to-government contacts and Russian arms and technology transfers to India. Moscow, whose attitude toward Delhi has been unquestionably positive, would

like to turn the relationship with India into a fact with a global impact, much like the Russia-China one. Yet, the insufficiently strong economic ties between the two countries and Delhi's fixation on its own neighborhood have prevented more active Russo-Indian collaboration on the global stage. BRICS, to which both countries belong, has been more of a public relations exercise than a genuine international player. Another forum, RIC—for Russia, India, and China—which usually meets on the margins of BRICS, has been largely ceremonial.

## United States

No discussion of Asian geopolitics can be complete without a reference to the United States. The Russians are fully aware of the U.S. presence in the region. What is interesting is that, after the end of the Cold War, they have treated that presence rather differently than the U.S. presence in Europe. Unlike NATO and its eastern enlargement, Moscow does not protest against the continuation of America's alliances with Japan and South Korea, who are Russia's neighbors in Northeast Asia. The Russians took a more relaxed attitude to U.S. missile defense deployments in Alaska and California, in contrast to U.S. plans for missile defenses in Europe. The Russians did not feel threatened by the U.S. announced "pivot to Asia," even if they may have been offended slightly by not being mentioned by name in the description of the new U.S. policy by the then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

Basically, Moscow sees the United States in the Asia-Pacific region as a key political and strategic balancer. Washington's and Beijing's mutual focus on each other gives Moscow a respite and some space to maneuver. Since the end of the Cold War confrontation, the Russians may have learned to appreciate not being at the center of power struggles. The new situation, however, places its own demands on Moscow's foreign policy and diplomacy. It needs to learn to manage relations with both giants, America and China, without alienating or befriending either one too much. It is absolutely not interested in a collision between Beijing and Washington, but is equally not interested in a collusion between the two, which it fears might come at Russia's expense. And Russia needs to promote its interests from the position of relative weakness vis-à-vis both America and China.

Russia has managed to adjust to the rise of China and build a positive and productive relationship with Beijing. It is time that its foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region acquires an equally strong American dimension. The Russian Federation and

the United States share a range of important interests in the region: general regional stability based on balanced relations among the key powers; peaceful development of all nations and cooperation among them; non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and technology and prevention of military conflicts. Russia, moreover, is right to see the United States and its allies, such as Canada and Australia, as a potential modernization resource in the development of the Russian Far East and Siberia.

As for the United States, omitting Russia from the pivot strategy is a serious flaw which Washington would be right to correct. Russia is a weaker player compared to the Soviet Union, but it is no longer America's antagonist and is still in the game. In the 21st century, a stronger Russia in Asia and the Pacific, enjoying a co-equal relationship with China and a fully cooperative one with Japan, is squarely in the U.S. interest. A serious U.S.-Russian dialogue on the broad range of issues related to Pacific security and development is long overdue. It could lead to the common goal of a North Pacific partnership, a future pillar of stability, and a vehicle for development in the region.

## **Conclusion**

Global geopolitical shifts and Russia's own obvious needs have pushed Moscow to pay more attention to Asia. While hardly a "pivot," this shift constitutes a measure of internal rebalancing within Russia's domestic and foreign policy. The Russian Government is responding to the challenges and opportunities in rather familiar ways. Domestically, it seeks to re-launch the development of the eastern Russian regions by means of various state-run megaprojects, from the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok, to establishing a special federal ministry in Khabarovsk, to planning a state corporation to oversee the development of the Far East and eastern Siberia. Moscow has been placing emphasis on energy and infrastructure projects, such as oil and gas pipelines, LNG, railroads (upgrading the Trans-Siberian) and new ocean lines, such as the Northern Sea Route.

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This, no doubt, is a tall order. It is not clear whether the present Russian Government will rise to the occasion. The issues related to the rise of Asia, however, will not go away – they can be expected only to become more pressing over time. As they say, be careful what you wish for.