



The “Asian Turn” in Russian Foreign Policy

Edited by

Anatoly Torkunov · Dmitry Streltsov ·
Ekaterina Koldunova

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Foreword. Russia's Pivot to the East: Achievements, Problems, and Prospects

Anatoly Torkunov[✉], *Dmitry Streltsov*[✉],
and Ekaterina Koldunova[✉]

The Russian Federation boasts a number of unique regional advantages that allow it to play an important role in the Asian economy, as well as in politics on the continent. These include its geographical proximity to the Asia–Pacific region, which, despite the geopolitical challenges, continues to be economically dynamic, has huge transit potential, and the high saturation of natural resources. Moscow has a great deal of clout in the region, and deservedly so, enjoys the status of one of the most influential powers there. Russia is interested in the development of multilateral formats of

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interaction in the Asia–Pacific and, as such, it is a member of most organizations and forums in the region, both political and economic, and is actively involved in regional political processes.

Russia’s pivot to the East was based largely on geostrategic and geo-economic considerations. It is obvious that the balance of power in the world today to a great extent depends on the situation in Asia, and Russia needs reliable support in that part of the world, where global economic and political processes are manifested in a concentrated form. The fact is that East Asia remains a major source of global economic growth, and Russia’s status as a global power will largely depend on the strength of its positions in the region. At the same time, geostrategically speaking, Moscow is no less concerned about the military and political situation in the Middle East, as well as about its relations with India, its key partner in South Asia. Otherwise stated, in order to maintain and increase its influence at the global level, Russia needs to seriously improve its relations with the non-Western world in the broadest sense of the word.

The policy of pivoting to the East proclaimed by Moscow in the late 2000s came at a time of enormous economic, technological, administrative, political, and strategic challenges. Admittedly, Russia’s economic position in the Asia–Pacific is still not strong enough. The regions of Siberia and the Far East are among the least developed in Russia, borderline depressed compared to the regions in the European part of the country: their economies are suffering from depopulation, trade with China that is heavily favoured towards the partner country, a dependence on raw materials, and a lack of sources of innovative development. Until recently, the sum total of these circumstances effectively determined their potential role in economic processes in the Asia–Pacific as a fuel and raw materials appendage to the economies of more developed countries in the region.

At the same time, the geographical proximity of these territories to the dynamically developing economies of East Asia contributes to the rise of trade and investment ties between them. In other words, Russia’s Far Eastern territories can serve as “entry points” for capital, technology, services, and labour from the dynamically developing East,¹ assuming that the internal structural problems of their economic development are fully resolved.

¹ Akaha, Tsuneco, & Vassilieva, Anna (Eds.). (2014). *Russia and East Asia: Informal and Gradual Integration*. Routledge, p. 10.

There are also psychological barriers to implementing the pivot-to-the-East policy. These include the preoccupation of several generations of a significant part of the Russian elite and business moguls with Europe in the 1990s and early 2000s, who did not take Asian countries seriously or, most importantly, see it as a necessary target of foreign policy and economic efforts. Despite the fact that three quarters of Russia's territory is located east of the Ural Mountains, less than 30% of the population lives there, and, at the level of mass consciousness, a significant part of Russians continue to view the problems of the Asian regions of the country as "distant" and not "their own." As of the mid-2010s, most residents of Russia believed that the country was still closer to Europe than to Asia (55%, compared to 18%).² Until recently, the structural problems of Siberia and the Far East were also exacerbated by the lack of a consensus on the development model for these regions and the tools for its implementation.

Against this background, the main task of the pivot-to-the-East policy is to eliminate the imbalance in the development of the regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East, on the one hand, and European Russia, on the other, and to integrate them into the system of economic relations in the Asia-Pacific, with due account of modern political and economic trends taking place in this region.

Russia's policy when it comes to tackling these problems covers three tasks:

1. Accelerating the socio-economic development of the Russian Far East through the comprehensive implementation of official state investment programmes in the region.
2. Stepping up efforts to integrate Siberia and the Russian Far East into the Asia-Pacific economically.
3. The further qualitative deepening of strategic bilateral and multi-lateral political interaction with regional partners, and, ideally, the joint development of a practical and tangible implementation of the Greater Eurasia idea with a sober consideration of the ins and outs of both competing and inter-related macro-regional projects initiated by other major Asian actors.

² How Interested Are Russians in China? Public Opinion Foundation, May 7, 2015. Available at: <https://fom.ru/Mir/12150> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian).

We are talking here about maximum diversification of economic and geostrategic partners in Asia, which must necessarily include the largest economies in the region—China, Japan, South Korea, India, the ASEAN integration bloc, and several others. The first task is internal, while the second and third, deeply interconnected, are external.

THE PIVOT TO THE EAST: THE BACKSTORY

Historically, the eastern dimension of Russia's foreign policy has always occupied a special place in the Russian identity. For many decades, the Russian intellectual elite have argued about the extent to which the country's fate is intertwined with the East, and the degree to which its future will depend on the state of affairs in Asia.

In the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, Russia pursued a policy in Asia as if it were, in the words of a famous Russian writer of the nineteenth-century Dostoevsky, "a European in Asia." He wrote, "Russia is not only in Europe, but also in Asia; because the Russian is not only a European but also an Asian. Moreover: there are probably more hopes for us in Asia than in Europe."³ Russia moved to the East, relying on the idea of messianism, which stated that the Russian Empire was destined to fulfil a great civilizing mission in Asia.

At the end of the nineteenth century, many Russian thinkers argued that the future of their country would be inextricably connected with the East, by which they meant the Muslim world, and Central Asia in particular. Later, in the 1920s–1930s, this idea would be reflected in the activities of the founders of Eurasianism—Pyotr Savitsky, Nikolai Trubetzkoy, George Vernadsky, and others. After the formation of the Soviet Union, the ideology of Leninism was based, among other things, on solidarity with the colonized and enslaved peoples of Asia. By preaching the ideas of "national liberation," Russia had to set an example for the peoples of Asia in finding ways to move towards socialism.

In the post-Soviet period, Russia sought to remain a key player, which could influence political process in Asia, while remaining a global power. At the same time, Russia's search for areas of common interest with a number of Asian countries was largely based on exploiting their mutual dissatisfaction with the Western-centric institutional architecture of global

³ Dostoevsky, F. M. (1995). *Collected Works in 15 Volumes. Vol. 15*. Nauka, p. 504 (in Russian).

governance, formed at a time when the West enjoyed unconditional dominance over the global economy.

The eastern dimension of Russia's foreign policy was given a conceptual framework in the late 1990s, during the final years of Boris Yeltsin's presidency. This vector of foreign policy was inextricably linked with the personality of Yevgeny Primakov, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation in 1996–1998 and then Prime Minister in 1998–1999. Primakov was critical of the dominant role of the United States in resolving world affairs, and called for a world order based on the principle of multilateralism. He proposed pursuing a balanced foreign policy aimed at maintaining friendly relations with the West, while simultaneously developing cooperation with Asian countries, primarily China and India. Primakov was the one who came up with the idea of creating the Moscow–Delhi–Beijing strategic triangle. In his speeches, Primakov insisted that Russia should prioritize relations with the countries of East Asia and the Middle East, adopting a multi-vector strategy that rejects unipolarity.⁴

When Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000, Russia stepped up its diplomacy in Asia, placing great emphasis on closer economic integration with Asian countries, specifically China, Japan, South Korea, and the ASEAN countries. In the early 2000s, Moscow advanced the idea of a single space from Lisbon to Vladivostok based on the idea of the geostrategic role of Russia as a transcontinental link between the Atlantic and Pacific “wings” of Eurasia. In response to the proposal put forward in 2001 by President of the European Commission Romano Prodi to create a common economic space in Europe, Russian spoke at Russia–EU summits about their desire to speed up the process of creating a Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok.⁵

The pivot to the East underwent a reimagining in the late 2000s, when, learning the lessons from the financial crisis of 2008–2009, trade and economic relations with the countries of Greater East Asia became vitally important for Russia.⁶ The Kremlin in turn recognized the need to

⁴ Primakov, E. M. (2011). Thinking Out Loud. *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 145–205.

⁵ Ilyin, E. Y. (2015). The Concept of Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok: Problems and Perspectives. *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, 2(41): 87.

⁶ Voskressenski, A. D. (Ed.). (2010). “Greater East Asia”: *Global Politics and Regional Transformations*. MGIMO University Press, pp. 16–17.

maintain beneficial partnerships in both directions, both in the East and in the West.

A major event in the implementation of Russia's pivot-to-the-East policy was the September 2012 APEC Summit in Vladivostok, at which Russia, as the host country, positioned itself as a full-fledged member of the Asia–Pacific community, capable of setting the regional agenda at a forum attended by all players in the region.⁷ In the run-up to the summit, *The Wall Street Journal* published an article by Vladimir Putin in which the Russian President described his country's position in the Asia–Pacific as follows: “Our country is an inalienable part of the APR historically and geographically. We see a full-scale entry into the Asia–Pacific region as a key guarantee of a successful future for Russia and the development of our Siberian and Far Eastern regions.”⁸ In his annual address to the Federal Assembly in December 2013, Putin stated that the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East was the country's “national priority for the whole twenty-first century.”⁹

However, the crisis in relations with the West after the referendum in Crimea in the spring of 2014 forced the Kremlin to make significant adjustments to its policy in the East. Russia's pivot to the East was initially a calculated move on Moscow's part, based on the prediction that Asia would become the main source of economic growth in the future, and that it was therefore necessary to develop mutually beneficial trade and economic relations with the countries in the region. After 2014, however, one of the main motives behind this pivot was the desire to alleviate Russia's dependence on the West (and Europe in particular) in general and significantly diversify the supply routes of Russian energy resources.¹⁰ Another factor that played a role in Russia's rethinking of its Eastern Policy was that Russia's main partners in Asia (China, India,

⁷ Sumsy, V., Koldunova, E., & Kanaev, E. (2012). *Russia's Interest in the Context of Asia–Pacific Regional Security and Development*. RIAC, p. 8 (in Russian).

⁸ Putin, V. V. Vladivostok 2012: The Russian Agenda for the APEC. Article by Vladimir Putin for the Asian Edition of the Leading American Business Newspaper, *The Wall Street Journal*. President of Russia, September 5, 2012. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/16390> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian).

⁹ Putin, V. V. Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. President of Russia, December 12, 2013. <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/19825> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian).

¹⁰ Savchenko, A. E., & Zuenko, I. Y. (2020). The Driving Forces Behind Russia's Turn to the East. *Comparative Politics Russia*, 11(1): 111 (in Russian).

Kazakhstan, and Southeast Asian countries) refused to participate in the anti-Russian sanctions, and that Japan after 2014 took part in them more in name only, and little damage was caused to the Russian economy as a result.

After 2014, Moscow's pivot to the East acquired, in addition to the reassessment of the domestic drivers of its foreign policy, another dimension through the launch of its own integration project in Eurasia—the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). By 2015, the EAEU had brought together Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, and a proposal was addressed to key Russian partners in Asia to develop formats of mutually beneficial cooperation.¹¹

In the post-Crimea period, Russia started to actively seek investment from Asian countries, primarily China, in order to develop new oil and gas deposits in Siberia and the Russian Far East. The role of the Asian dimension in Russia's foreign policy priorities was emphasized in particular in the public speeches of the Russian President. For example, in the foreign policy part of Putin's February 2019 Presidential address, Asian countries were named ahead of Europe and the United States as Russia's foreign policy priority.¹²

Russia's pivot to the East was clear to see in the financial sphere too. In 2018, the Central Bank of Russia slashed its share of assets located in the United States, from 29.9% to 9.7%, while simultaneously increasing its assets in China (from 2.6% to 14.1%) and Japan (from 1.5% to 7.5%). The share of the Central Bank's reserves in US dollars fell from 45.8% to 22.7%, with its Chinese yuan assets surging from 2.8% to 14.2%.¹³

Moscow gradually adjusted its priorities in the part of the turn to the East that concerned the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East. Traditionally, this shift has been thought of in terms of attracting Asian investors to major infrastructure and energy projects that would help revive the region. However, it turned out that such projects had a limited

¹¹ Torkunov, A. V. (2014). On the New Russian Eastern Policy. *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, 1(34): 9–13 (in Russian).

¹² Putin, V. V. Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly. President of Russia, February 20, 2019. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/59863> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian).

¹³ Bank of Russia: 2018 Annual Report. Official Website of the Bank of Russia. Available at: http://www.cbr.ru/Collection/Collection/File/19699/ar_2018.pdf (accessed May 31, 2020), p. 95 (in Russian).

impact on the regional economy, primarily because they did not affect the interests of most people living there.¹⁴ The problem with these projects was that many of them were overly politicized from the get-go, and they overestimated the interest that foreign partners would have in them. This was especially true for infrastructure construction projects (for example, the projects to build a trans-Korean railway, a trans-Korean gas pipeline, or a gas pipeline and railway bridge between Sakhalin and Hokkaido). While these projects had commercial promise, they did not take the political risks as seriously as they should have, and, as a result, they did not attract the attention of potential partners. In those cases where such projects did get off the ground (the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline and the Power of Siberia pipeline, for example), the revenue from their implementation went mostly to Moscow, while the regions in question saw little in the way of economic benefits. These projects were thus not a reliable basis for the economic revival of these regions. The proposal was then made to focus on attracting foreign investors to hi-tech industries with high added value, using tax, visa, and administrative benefits for this purpose. To this end, the Russian government set about establishing advanced special economic zone (ASEZs) in Siberia and the Russian Far East to attract investment, accelerate economic development, and improve the quality of life of the population.

RUSSIA’S PIVOT TO THE EAST: EAST ASIA

The most noticeable part of the pivot to the East has been the increased role and importance of China in the Kremlin’s eastern policy. Things have improved dramatically in Russia–China relations since Putin took office in 2000. In 2001, the two countries signed the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation. The tensions that had carried over from the period of Sino-Soviet confrontation disappeared, and by 2004 all border issues had been resolved—as a result, the largest land border with China (some 4200 km) became a zone of good-neighbourliness and cooperation. A significant achievement of Russia–China relations during this period was the formation of a common

¹⁴ Lubina, M. (2016). Between Reality and Dreams: Russia’s Pivot to Asia. In D. Mierzejewski, & G. Bywalec (Eds.). *Building the Diverse Community. Beyond Regionalism in East Asia* (p. 162). “Contemporary Asian Studies Series.” Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.

security space along the perimeter of the border between the two countries,¹⁵ which was enshrined at the multilateral level thanks to the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in 2001.

Cooperation between Russia and China has intensified significantly since the 2008 financial crisis exposed the inadequacy of the system of global governance run predominantly by Western countries. During his 2011 presidential campaign, Putin called for catching “Chinese winds” in the “sails” of the Russian economy. Putin’s return to presidency in May 2012 breathed new life into the course towards priority development of the Russia–China partnership. In his speeches, the Russian leader stressed that economic and strategic partnership between Russia and China was based on their shared approach to the transformation of the world order and international institutions.

It was not long before the partnership bore fruit. Russia received substantial financing from China for the construction of a new oil pipeline in the east of the country. In early 2014, Russia made an exception for China by allowing it to be the first foreign investor in the extraction of oil and other resources. That same year, amid deepening political and economic tensions with the West, Russia signed a 30-year, \$400-billion agreement to supply China with 38 billion cubic metres of gas annually from fields in Eastern Siberia. The Power of Siberia gas pipeline built to implement the agreement was put into operation in December 2019, and was expected to reach its design capacity by 2024.¹⁶ Russia has overtaken Saudi Arabia as the main supplier of crude oil to China.

Back in 2011, China surpassed Germany as Russia’s biggest trading partner. In 2018, China–Russia trade reached \$100 billion. The leaders of the two countries announced plans to double that figure by 2024. At the same time, we should also note the qualitative changes in the structure of foreign economic relations. In addition to Russia’s traditional exports to China—arms, minerals, timber, machinery, and equipment—Russia has increased its agricultural supplies to the country, gaining a foothold as a key supplier of soybeans to the Chinese market.¹⁷

¹⁵ Voskressenski, A. D. (2020). China’s Relations with Russia. In D. Shambaugh (Ed.), *China and the World*. Oxford University Press, 233–250.

¹⁶ Wishnick, E. (2020). Sino-Russian Consolidation at a Time of Geopolitical Rivalry. *Monitor*, March 1, 2020. Available at: <https://www.prcleader.org/elizabeth-wishnick> (accessed May 31, 2020).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

By the end of the 2010s Chinese partners and Chinese capital were involved in around 30 investment projects in Russia worth some \$22 billion. A significant portion of Chinese investments—\$3.5 billion—have been pumped into the Russian Far East.¹⁸

Another track in Russia–China cooperation is the search for agreements that would coordinate the efforts of both sides within the framework of the macro-regional projects they had each launched—the EAEU, and the Belt and Road Initiative announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013. This led to the signing of the 2015 agreement on linking the two projects. Thus the use of the word “linking” became a compromise, and it implied that while Russia was not an object or part of the Belt and Road Initiative, it would have a say in the project’s implementation. By the early 2020s it became evident that Russia and China also started to compare notes on their policies even in the regions beyond the northern part of Eurasia.¹⁹

The personal friendship between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping is an important factor when it comes to promoting cooperation projects, especially in such politically sensitive sectors as energy and national defence. Defence in particular has proven to be the most dynamically growing area of bilateral relations in recent years. For example, in 2016–2017, Russia and China held a number of joint anti-missile defence exercises, and in July 2019, joint air patrolling of the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea was launched.²⁰ In October 2019, Putin announced that Russia would be helping China to develop an early rocket launch warning system. An objective factor pushing Russia and China to search for common approaches to military security is their shared awareness of the need to maintain strategic stability now that the United States has effectively withdrawn unilaterally from all the key treaties of the system: the ABM Treaty,

¹⁸ Statement to the Press following Russia–China Talks. President of Russia, June 5, 2019. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/60672> (accessed May 31, 2020).

¹⁹ Slykov, P., Koldunova E. (2023). Russia and China in the Eastern Mediterranean: On Parallel Tracks? *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 25 (1): 48–64.

²⁰ Petrov, I. (2019, July 23). Russian Federation and China Carry out First Ever Joint Patrol of APR. *Rossiyskaya gazeta*. Available at: <https://rg.ru/2019/07/23/rf-i-kitaj-vpervye-proveli-sovmestnoe-vozdushnoe-patrulirovanie-v-atr.html> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian.).

the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF Treaty), and the Open Skies Treaty.

A number of events have taken place that are symbolic of Russia–China cooperation: the opening in March 2019 of the first railway bridge over the Amur River connecting the cities of Tongjiang in Heilongjiang province, China, and Nizhneleninskoe in the Jewish Autonomous Region in Russia; and the completion in November 2019 of construction of a road bridge between the city of Heihe in north-eastern China and Blagoveshchensk in Russia. The opening of these bridges was symbolic because they were the first permanent bridges across the Amur, which had for centuries served as a natural border between the two countries.

Following the visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping to Russia in June 2019, the sides signed the Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era, which set ambitious targets and long-term guidelines for cooperation.²¹ From the Russian perspective, these relations accord the long-term goal of transforming the world order dominated by the West in general, and the United States in particular. And the current state of bilateral relations is a manifestation of the multipolar world order that President Putin spoke about at the Munich Security Conference in early 2007.²² Therefore Russian official position stick to the claim that relations between Moscow and Beijing have reached an all-time high in the first quarter of the twenty-first century. While these relations are in essence largely independent of external conditions, their rapid development in recent times have come to reflect the increased tension in U.S.–Russia and U.S.–China relations since 2018 and the increased sanctions pressure on Russia following the transition of the crisis in Ukraine to its hot stage in 2022.

At the same time, looking at these relations from Russia's point of view, we can discern certain trends that give cause for thought. The

²¹ Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for the New Era. President of Russia, June 5, 2019. Available at: <http://kremlin.ru/supplement/5413> (accessed May 31, 2020).

²² Spanger, H.-J. (2016). Russia's Turn Eastward, China's Turn Westward: Cooperation and Conflict along the New Silk Road. *Russia in Global Affairs*, June 14. Available at: <https://globalaffairs.ru/articles/povorot-rossii-na-vostok-povorot-kitayana-zapad-vzaimodejstvie-i-konflikty-na-shyolkovom-puti/> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian).

current structure of trade and economic ties, for example, does not fully reflect their inherent potential. Given that energy accounts for approximately 70% of Russia's exports to China (2018 data),²³ Moscow is growing increasingly concerned about becoming overly dependent on the Chinese market and becoming a raw materials appendage of Beijing. This makes Russia extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in demand from Chinese enterprises, thus affecting the overall volume of Russian exports, in which China is already dominant.

Even before 2022, calculations suggested that the goal of increasing trade turnover was only realistic if the structure remained unchanged, that is, if Russia's commodity exports to China and China's exports of equipment to Russia increased in lockstep (which duly happened later). However, for the reasons mentioned above, this would not be entirely to Moscow's liking. This is why Moscow is keen on stepping up interaction in the innovation sector, accelerating economic integration in the framework of production models, and intra-company cooperation, where various stages of the production process scattered on both sides of the border involve the creation of substantial added value on each sides.

Russia also has to be mindful of the fact that the structural features of its economy prevent it from playing a key role in the region, particularly in the context of the ongoing economic and technological development of Asia. In the context of the fierce global competition for Chinese investments, Russia should not be expecting "easy money" from China. One of the key tasks moving forward is thus the search for promising projects that Chinese investors will find attractive.

Another issue is respect for each other's national interests, which do not always coincide on the most pressing issues on the international political agenda. Moscow is perfectly aware that China will not always side with Russia on issues related to its conflict with the West. Taking China's economic and military-political rise as a given, Russia has its own views on the emerging world order, which do not always coincide with those of China, and has no interest in being China's "junior partner" as a result of the widening gap in the economic power of the two countries.

With China involved in a number of border conflicts with its neighbours, Moscow would not want to be forced to take sides in such matters

²³ Drobysheva, I. (2019, November 4). Scale of Cooperation Grows. *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 248 (8006). Available at: <https://rg.ru/2019/11/04/rf-i-knr-uvelichili-investicii-v-proekty-na-dalnem-vostoke-i-v-arktike.html> (accessed May 31, 2020) (in Russian).

due to its special relationship with Beijing. We are talking specifically here about India and Vietnam, time-tested partners of Russia and major buyers of Russian arms, as well as about Japan, with which Russia before 2022 was trying to establish mutually beneficial relations with regard to investment in the Far East. Russia was developing relations with these countries on the basis of mutual respect for other's positions on key regional issues, and did not want their territorial disputes with China to harm its relations with them.

To avoid falling into the trap of a bilateral relationship in which China may "one day" be the dominant partner, Russia must develop strong partnerships with all Asian countries, offering them equal access to its sizeable domestic markets and natural resources. Objectively, it serves Russia's interests for the rapidly developing countries in the Asia-Pacific to have equal opportunities and for there to be healthy competition between them, as this could increase Moscow's confidence in the region's markets and give it more room for diplomatic manoeuvre in Asia.

In this context, Russia should continue to seek support from India, which is already included in many multilateral formats involving Russia and China (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Russia-India-China triangle, BRICS). Economically speaking, before 2022 Japan and South Korea were also important partners for Russia in East Asia, although bilateral trade with these countries (\$21 billion with Japan and \$25 billion with South Korea in 2018) was well below that of China.

In the geopolitical sense, Japan is, by virtue of its security treaty with the United States, an adversary of Russia. However, a rapprochement of sorts took place between the two countries during Shinzo Abe's time as Prime Minister (2012–2020). A number of experts and politicians in Russia even saw Japan as an important partner in Asia, as stable relations with the country could prove key in the context of the pivot to the East.

Strong personal relations between leaders were important factors in bilateral relations. Putin and Abe met 27 times in total before 2020. At the initiative of Japan, an eight-point plan for economic cooperation between the two countries was launched in May 2016. Some 100 investment projects have been developed since the turn of the century.

However, stable relations with Japan have been hampered by the unresolved issue of the peace treaty, which reflects the fundamental differences in the approaches of the two sides to the results of the Second World War. Little wonder, then, that the Russian President described the situation as

“abnormal.” Matters became worse in 2022, when Japan joined the anti-Russian sanctions and relations were frozen once again. The same fate befell Russia’s relations with South Korea, and for the same reason.

Another promising area that combines the potential for the development of bilateral and multilateral relations is Russia’s interaction with ASEAN, which was elevated to the level of strategic partnership in 2018. As a collective partner, ASEAN allows Russia to participate on an equal basis in all the key multilateral formats centred around it. These include the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) on security, the East Asian Summit, and the ASEAN Defence Ministers’ Meeting with the main Dialogue Partners (ADMM-Plus). In terms of economics, Vietnam and Singapore became EAEU economic partners in the free trade area in 2016, and negotiations with Indonesia are under way. Russia and ASEAN also have similar views on the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR) concept, which is making the rounds in world politics. Both sides see the opportunities for its implementation from a politically and economically inclusive, rather than a military-strategic, angle.²⁴

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The pivot-to-the-East policy that Russia has been pursuing since the 2010s has turned out to be a more lasting and content-rich phenomenon than Russia’s policies towards the East in previous historical periods. It is a long-term policy based on prioritizing economic over political interests and the link between diplomacy and domestic needs. What makes it different now is that it is being implemented against an increasingly tense foreign policy background: confrontation is prevailing over cooperation; the confrontation between Russia and the West concerning key issues of the world order is worsening; the security situation is becoming increasingly complex in the Euro-Atlantic, and the Asia-Pacific, which is rapidly turning into the main driver of global economic growth.

Russia’s turn to the East was inevitably influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has posed a serious challenge for the global governance

²⁴ Interview with Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Morgulov for the Newspaper *Izvestiya*, published May 4, 2018. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/ru/maps/cn/-/asset_publisher/WhKWb5DVBqKA/content/id/3208456 (accessed May 31, 2020); ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. ASEAN. June 22, 2019. Available at: https://asean.org/storage/2019/06/ASEAN-Outlook-on-the-Indo-Pacific_FINAL_22062019.pdf (accessed May 31, 2020).

system as a whole. Yet even before the pandemic hit, there were signs of a growing geopolitical confrontation between the world's two biggest economies, the United States and China, which prompted talk about "a new bipolarity," albeit in a more modern geo-economic and technological guise. The Report "United States Strategic Approach to the People's Republic of China" published by the Trump administration in May 2020 signalled a qualitative and irreversible shift from containing China to rejecting it outright. The confrontational tendencies in international relations received further impetus following the launch of Russia's Special Military Operation in Ukraine in 2022. The sanctions imposed against Russia by the United States, the European Union, and several Asian countries (Japan, South Korea, and Singapore) caused Russia to lean even more into its pivot to the East.

It is objectively true, however, that Russia's biggest successes in its pivot to the East have been achieved in its economic cooperation with China, the second-largest economy in the world after the United States since 2010. The priority development of relations with China forms the key element of the foreign policy part of Russia's national security strategy, which is aimed at neutralizing the West's efforts to isolate Russia internationally and mitigating the consequences of the economic sanctions.

At the same time, the lopsided nature of economic flows towards China is fraught with the risk of increased dependence on the Chinese market and the strategic vulnerability of the Russian economy. And China may, if it so desires, use this dependence for political purposes, which threatens Russia's national security. Against this background, Russia faces the need to diversify its economic partners and integrate into the economic life of the region by taking part in multilateral projects of mutually beneficial cooperation in the Asia–Pacific.

As its resources in the Asia–Pacific are limited, Russia is interested in a stable political and economic environment and reliable rules of international behaviour in the region. This is why Russia is, by and large, a status quo power in the region that opposes any attempts to revise the established order. Russia's "anti-revisionism" performs a balancing function in the system of regional relations, which allows it to play a far more significant role in the Asia–Pacific's security and diplomacy. In order to continue to perform this function, Russia needs to make a sober assessment of the main trend of the regional dynamics in recent years, namely, the shift of focus from the Asia–Pacific towards the Indo-Pacific. Distancing itself

from the military-geopolitical aspects of this construct, it makes sense to establish a more productive dialogue on the development of the Indo-Pacific with those regional forces that are truly at the centre of this region and want it to be inclusive—primarily India and the ASEAN countries.

Speaking at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum in June 2016, President Putin outlined the concept of the Greater Eurasia Partnership, presenting it as a way to develop Eurasian economic integration and extend Russia's influence to Asian countries. The partnership is called upon to consolidate Russia's status as a key player on the continent, and not just on the territory that links Asia and Europe geographically. The purpose of the Russian initiative is to provide a platform for effective cooperation among all countries and all regions on the Eurasian continent, including Russia, the countries of East, Southeast, and South Asia, and the centre of Eurasia, as well as the countries of the European subcontinent and their respective organizations, to the extent to which they are capable of, and committed to, constructive cooperation.

Russia can rally support for its macro-regional projects by taking the key role of India in the Indo-Pacific and China's role in the Asia-Pacific into account, and by recognizing the central role of ASEAN in the institutional organization of this huge emerging political and economic space. With respect to Russia-China relations, the concept of the Greater Eurasia Partnership would create a situation in which the partners can avoid competition and develop strategically important cooperation by harmonizing the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative and the EAEU. The initiative is still at the conceptual stage, outlining the direction in which interaction among the states of Eurasia may develop. However, as it seeks to transform Eurasia into a centre of global economy and politics, it is extremely attractive for the less developed and smaller countries in the region, enabling them to accelerate their development while remaining in a non-confrontational position.

PART I

East Asia



Russia and China: Developmental Models for Eurasia

Andrey Vinogradov 

Russia's pivot to the East is part of the general movement of the world's leading powers to Asia, or more precisely, to the East Asian part of Eurasia. The formation of a global economic and political centre along with the North Atlantic region has revealed an important feature of this process—namely, that countries that are geographically close to the region are the ones that are most interested in it.

In this context, Russia's turn to the East has two dimensions. First, it has meant that Russia has stepped up its foreign policy activities in the East, in a number of strategic directions: the Middle East and North Africa, the Far East and the Asia–Pacific, and South Asia. Russia is systematically strengthening its role and influence in all of these regions, which in turn compensates for the tensions in relations with the European Union,

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