

## Russia's Asia Strategy: Bolstering the Eagle's Eastern Wing



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# ***Russie.Nei.Visions***

*Russie.Nei.Visions* is an online collection dedicated to Russia and the other new independent states (Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan). Written by leading experts, these policy-oriented papers deal with strategic, political and economic issues.

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# Abstract

Among Russia's strategic priorities, Asia traditionally played a secondary role compared to the West. In the mid-1990s, then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov initiated a rapprochement with China and India. Then, in 2014, deteriorating relations between Russia and the West prompted Moscow to begin its "great pivot to the East". Russia's "new" Asian policy must avoid two pitfalls: focusing excessively on China, and managing relations with the countries of the region in a strictly bilateral way. Bilateral relations, even with China, need to be parts of a whole, and closely coordinated with other parts. As part of a broader Asian-Pacific strategy, Moscow should seek to build a "Great Eurasia". This requires an integrated approach to the region as a whole, and an overall approach that embraces geopolitical, geo-economic, military, informational and cultural dimensions.

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# Introduction

The Russian state emblem, the double-headed imperial eagle, seemingly symmetrical, has always been tilted toward the west rather than the east. Russia first aspired to be recognized as a European great power, and then proceeded to dominate a large part of the continent. Asia, by contrast, has mostly been Russia's backyard, where it faced relatively weak neighbors and vast territories open for colonization. Geopolitical and strategic underpinnings of Russia's Asia policies usually prevailed over the economic factors. This was basically true in the imperial times, during the Soviet period, and particularly in the quarter century following the end of the Cold War.<sup>1</sup>

Tsarist Russia expanded all the way to the Pacific Ocean, adding to the realm the huge territory of Siberia, the Caucasus and Central Asia. Soviet Russia first sought to link up with the forces of anti-colonialism, and later went on to consolidate the Communist bloc with China, North Korea, Vietnam and other countries of Indo-China. For a decade in the 1950s, the Soviet-Chinese alliance stood up against the United States and its allies in Asia, while the Warsaw Pact confronted NATO in Europe. Moscow's alliance with Beijing, however, soon unraveled, and was succeeded by three decades of stand-off between the two Communist giants, complete with border clashes and the specter of a nuclear war.

During the Cold War, Asia, unlike Europe, was a "hot" if auxiliary front. The Soviet Union tried to check and weaken the United States in Korea and Vietnam, and to balance US regional influence through a geopolitical alignment with India, but it got bogged down in the 10-year war in Afghanistan. To wind down confrontation in Asia, Mikhail Gorbachev normalized relations with China; established diplomatic relations with South Korea; reached out to Japan; agreed on a political settlement in Cambodia, and withdrew Soviet forces from Afghanistan. As a result, confrontation ceased, but Moscow's influence evaporated.

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1. This paper further develops some of the theses advanced in the author's other recent publications, including D. Trenin, "Russia and the Rise of Asia", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2013, available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org> and D. Trenin, "From Greater Europe to Greater Asia: the Implications of the Sino-Russian Entente", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 2015, available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org>.

Post-Soviet Russia initially focused on its relations with the West, wherein it hoped to integrate on its own terms. Asia was put on a backburner. Things began to change from the mid-1990s as Russia's relations with the West began to deteriorate. From 1996, Russia's relations with China began to grow progressively closer; from 1998, Moscow, at the prodding of then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov, started pushing for a continental triangle of Russia, India, and China (RIC); subsequently, the Russians initiated expansion of this group to BRIC (RIC+Brazil). Moscow also embraced Beijing's idea of transforming the format of security talks between China and the former Soviet republics into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The Russo-Chinese border was fully fixed in a series of agreements signed between 1991 and 2004.

# The Emergence of a Greater Eurasia

Following its rupture with the West in 2014 as a result of the Ukraine crisis, Russia's position in the international system has changed dramatically. Even before that, the European Union's interest in closer cooperation with Russia had waned. There is no question anymore of Russia integrating with the West in the framework of a "Euro-Atlantic common security space" or a "greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok". That paradigm is dead. On the other hand, Moscow's attempts at integration of post-Soviet lands in a "Eurasian Union" have revealed the narrow geographical and structural limits of the concept.

The dream is over. Eurasia – as another name for the former Russian empire, then the Soviet Union, and finally the former USSR – is no longer useful as a description of a geopolitical and geo-economic region.<sup>2</sup> The rump "little Eurasia" of the Eurasian Economic Union is a modest economic arrangement unlikely to evolve into a close-knit unit. Thus, Russia stands alone, partly in Europe, partly in Asia, while the country itself belongs to neither.

Meanwhile, the great continent of Eurasia, stretching from East Asia to Western Europe, which Russia used to dominate due to its central position, is going through profound geopolitical changes. In the west, much of Europe since the 1990s has made a major attempt to unite its many countries within a union, which now brings together almost the entire "western peninsula of Eurasia" all the way to the Russian border, but stopping there. For all its successes, this attempt, however, has not resulted in the emergence of a united Europe as a major strategic actor. Moreover, in the 2010s the European Union has faced a series of crises: financial, migration, and security. The future of the Union depends on how it manages to deal with these.

In the east, however, China has not only turned itself into the world's second largest economy and a modern military power, but has started to look beyond its borders. In 2013, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced

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2. Idea formulated before by the author, see. D. Trenin, *The End of Eurasia. Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C, 2001, available at: <http://carnegie.ru>.

the idea of “One Belt, One Road” (OBOR), which seeks to turn China’s geo-economic expansion into an instrument of Beijing’s foreign policy. In subsequent commentaries, Chinese officials pointed out that neighboring countries in Asia and Eurasia were now a priority for Beijing. For the first time since the days of Genghis Khan, Eurasia is being integrated by forces driven not from the west or the center of the continent, but from the east.

# Implications for Russia of the Break with Europe

These developments have important, even existential implications for Russia. The country is now engaged in confrontation with the United States, is experiencing long-term estrangement from Europe, and has little hope of building a bloc of its own in the former Soviet space. At the same time, Russia needs to cope with China's westward march, which increases Beijing's influence in the ex-Soviet borderlands of Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Eastern Europe. The adjacent region of the Middle East has become a generator of global instability, with Russia becoming more actively involved there in the fight against Islamist extremism and radicalism.

This new situation calls for a grand strategy aimed at survival of the Russian Federation as a major independent actor in Eurasia. The Kremlin has set the goal of confirming the country's great-power status, and it constantly maneuvers as it navigates the twists and turns of power politics. However, it hardly has a strategy worth the name. This may have something to do with the personal qualities and professional skills of President Vladimir Putin and his key aides; or it may be the function of the uncertain, constantly changing environment in which post-Soviet Russia has existed; or it may be just the wisdom of policymakers who realize that elaborate geopolitical strategies, as in war, usually do not survive the first shot.

Yet, if one manages, analytically, to make sense of the sum total of foreign policy moves, and uses the distilled logic so as to project the resultant policy direction into the future, one can talk of a *de facto* "strategy". This is what this paper will aim to provide in the first instance. This "strategy" may differ substantially from the sweeping declarations made by policy-makers and the commentaries provided by officials implementing policy decisions, but it is based on analysis of hard evidence, so as to have a modicum of credibility.

It is logical, given the "sum total" argument, that in the author's view there is no integrated Russian strategy toward Asia, but rather individual approaches to various states, which need to be harmonized due to the geographical proximity and growing interaction among Asian countries,

and attitudes toward various international organizations in Asia and the Pacific. It also needs to be mentioned up front that "Asia" in this context means East, South and South-East Asia. The Middle East is excluded, and Central Asia and Afghanistan are treated only to the extent that they matter to Russia's relations with China.

# Distilling Moscow's Grand Strategy in Asia

Vladimir Putin's long presidency is essentially about two things: keeping Russia in one piece and restoring its status as a global, not just regional, power. The Kremlin's foreign policy moves east of the Urals are geared to attaining both these main objectives: making sure that the Far East and Siberia remain Russian, and that Russia itself plays a major role in the Asia-Pacific.

Russia's so-called pivot to Asia pre-dates the rupture with the West. Vladimir Putin has been its driving force since the 2000s. Whereas in the west the main challenge to Russia comes from the United States, which since the end of the Cold War has stopped treating it as a great power with special interests and has spread its influence deep into Moscow's former spheres of control, the challenge in the east has taken the form of a rising China, which for the first time in modern history has surpassed Russia in terms of aggregate national might and is already projecting its influence across Asia, pulling neighboring countries into its orbit.

Until 2014, Russia sought a broad accommodation with the United States in Europe, the South Caucasus and Central Asia, while trying to bolster its position and hedging its bets by expanding and deepening its ties with China. It can also be argued that decent relations with Washington and thriving economic, political and cultural links with Europe provided balance to Moscow's relations with Beijing. While keeping the western and eastern dimensions of its foreign policy in some sort of equilibrium, Moscow was also busy strengthening its position in the center of the continental landmass—the "little Eurasia" of the former Russian empire/Soviet Union, which it hoped would form its own power base: a Eurasian Union.

Since 2014, this balance is no more. The West having turned into an adversary, and with the ex-USSR options dramatically downsized, Moscow went out to seek more support in Asia, particularly from China, the world's biggest economy, which has not joined the anti-Russian sanctions regime. With China's rise obviously challenging US dominance in East Asia and globally, and Russia pushing back against the US in Eastern Europe, hopes emerged in some Russian minds of China and Russia forming the nucleus

of a coalition of non-Western countries (formed around BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) that would replace the US-led Western domination with a new, multipolar world order.

## China

Indeed, Moscow and Beijing shared resentment of US dominance in global economic, financial, information, cultural and, not least, military matters; they rejected Washington's liberal interventionism and Western meddling in other countries' domestic affairs in support of democracy and human rights, which both the Chinese and the Russians saw as a mere tool of US foreign policy; and they felt intolerably constrained in their immediate neighborhoods by America's military presence and its political backing of US allies or partners, which were often at odds with Beijing or Moscow.

Yet, despite all this, Russia and China could only come closer to a certain extent. The two countries have not entered into conflict, or even experienced palpable tension, over their joint neighborhood of Central Asia, as many in the West had hoped. However, a united front against the United States was not to be attained. China had no interest in risking its vast economic ties with America by offering too much support to Russia. Neither was it interested in supporting Russia financially merely for the political gain of winning an important ally in its intensifying competition with the United States. In the end, China did not join the US-inspired drive to "isolate" Russia, but neither did it side with Russia in its battle against the United States.

Essentially, Beijing did not avail of the rare opportunity and tie Russia closer to itself by assisting it more actively in its hour of need, and cultivating it as a junior partner in the clearly intensifying competition with the United States. The closest analogy might have been the special relationship crafted by Washington and London that turned the United Kingdom, a declining power, into a loyal ally of the United States. This may suggest that China, despite its new strength, is still a geo-economic rather than a geopolitical player, and that its leaders do not think they can manage a country so ambitious and so independent-minded as Russia, even while it is obviously weak.

For a number of observers, the failure to establish closer Sino-Russian engagement constituted a failure of Moscow's "Asia pivot".<sup>3</sup> However, such

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3. For an interesting analysis of Russia's "pivot to Asia", see A. Lukin, "Povorot k Azii: mif ili realnost?" [Russia's Turn to Asia: Myth or reality?], *Mezdunarodnaya Zhizn'*, [International Affairs], N°4, April 2016, available at: <https://interaffairs.ru>.

an outcome, ironically, has turned out to be good for Russia. Beijing has consciously forfeited its unique chance to bring Russia into its orbit; the perceived risk to China's own relations with the United States was deemed unacceptable. Thus, Moscow has escaped, for the time being, becoming overly dependent on its great neighbor in the east. Russia is largely on its own in facing up to its major challenges, but it remains essentially free. Russia's problem is not that Beijing isn't reaching out enough, but that Russia itself has not yet managed to turn itself into a place that welcomes investment and innovation, and creates a propitious business climate.

Since 2014, Russia's relations with China have become upgraded to something I would call, for lack of a proper English word, *entente*. This means: mutual empathy and understanding at the top political level; more access for Chinese companies to Russia's energy assets; greater access for the People's Liberation Army to Russian military technology, and more opportunity to use Russia's territory for infrastructure projects linking China to Europe. For its part, China extends credit to Russian energy corporations that supply it with oil and gas; remains a major customer of the Russian defense industry; helps Russia with expanding or modernizing its infrastructure, and shares some technology with it.

This clearly falls far short of an alliance. Moscow and Beijing continue to coordinate their foreign policies on important global issues, including at the United Nations (UN) Security Council level, but not too closely. Russia plays solo not only in Ukraine but also in Syria, while China single-handedly deals with the issues in the East and South China Seas. Even on the subject of nuclear non-proliferation, whether in Iran or North Korea, Moscow and Beijing walk along roughly parallel routes rather than hand in hand. The motto of current Sino-Russian relations is: *never against each other, but not necessarily always with each other*. Beijing's studied neutrality on Crimea and Donbass is reciprocated by Moscow's impartiality over the island disputes off China's coastline.

Yet, the dynamics of the relationship greatly favor China. Its economy is slowing down as it goes through a period of transformation, but it is six or seven times bigger than Russia's, which is in deep recession that may last a number of years. Moscow needs investments; Beijing has vast resources. In a growing number of areas, China is technologically ahead of Russia. Chinese exports to Russia are mostly manufactured goods, including machinery; Russia's to China are mostly energy and raw materials. Beijing's defense budget is more than twice the size of Russia's. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a Eurasia-wide political framework, is a Chinese creation, with its headquarters in Beijing. When Beijing and Moscow agreed in 2015 to harmonize their plans, such as

OBOR and the Eurasian Economic Union, it was clear that China would play the leading role.

At present, Russia's strategy vis-à-vis China appears to be to manage its neighbor's rise by maintaining good neighborly relations across the long border; minimizing friction in the areas where the two countries' competing interests intersect (Central Asia, and Russia's relations with its two other strategic partners in Asia, India and Vietnam); seeking to balance the skewed trading relationship by maintaining or expanding China's dependence on Russia in some areas (weapons sales, and potentially water and food supplies), and of course limiting China's sway over Russia (restricting Chinese immigration and China's access to Russian defense technology, the natural resources of Siberia, and strategic waterways such as the Northern Sea Route).

This approach is largely working, for now. China and Russia are close, but not too close: they coordinate but do not collide. The duo are not a bloc, but nor are they rivals. The "unequal treaties" of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are anything but forgotten in China, but the border is quiet, and across it popular attitudes toward each country are overwhelmingly positive. Trade has recently slumped by 40% in dollar terms, but mostly as a result of the collapse of the oil price and the Russian structural crisis. Economic relations are based on no-nonsense pragmatism, with no political strings attached. Outwardly, Russia gets treated by China as a great power, although in the Chinese hierarchy it deserves a significantly lower status than the United States.

It is less clear where and how exactly Russia wants to move from here. The dynamic in the relationship points to China taking an ever-stronger position within it, and to Russia becoming increasingly dependent on its neighbor. There is the prospect of China eventually turning out to be Russia's only option in Asia, very much to Moscow's disadvantage. Naturally, the Russians seek to diversify their Asian policy away from overreliance on China. There are several candidates, starting with Japan.

## Japan

To Moscow, Japan is above all a source of advanced technology and investment capital. It is also a gateway to East and South-East Asia and the Pacific. It is a Group of Seven (G7) member with vast financial power. True, there is the legacy of World War II and the Cold War. Japan is a staunch ally of the United States, a home to its military bases and the linchpin of the entire US position in the Western Pacific. Having refused to sign the 1951 San Francisco peace treaty with Japan, Moscow has created a territorial issue with Tokyo, which considers four islands in the South Kuril chain as Japan's "northern territories".

Moscow's objectives in relation to Japan included (a) attracting Japan's economic resources to develop Russia's Far East and Siberia, and (b) agreeing on a mutually recognized maritime border between the two countries by means of a peace treaty. Russia has also counted on Japan as a market for its energy exports. Under President Putin and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the two-way trade and other ties have been growing thicker. Since 2014, however, when Japan joined the sanctions regime against Russia, attaining the dual goal referred to above has become all but impossible. Tokyo professed solidarity with Washington, on which it wholly depends for its national security.

In this situation, Russian policies received a boost from Japan. In 2016, Prime Minister Abe moved to reach out to Putin directly and exchange top-level visits to improve relations. The idea is to help Tokyo counterbalance Beijing's rising power and its growing ambitions, while hedging against putative US withdrawal from East Asia or Washington's potential collusion with Beijing, at Tokyo's expense. More directly, Abe seeks to prevent Moscow from associating itself too closely with Beijing on China's anti-Japan platform. There are also economic interests involved. Japan does not want to allow China to exploit Russian resources alone and to dominate the Russian market. In this context, the solution to the territorial dispute remains a real, but largely symbolic goal for Shinzo Abe.

Putin is expected to respond positively to these passes. The entente with Beijing notwithstanding, Moscow does not want to be left one-on-one with China. In a number of areas, such as advanced technology, Japan can provide to Russia what China cannot. Unlike the Chinese, the Russians bear no grudge against Japan from WWII. *Their* Great Patriotic War ended three months before the Soviet Union, in accordance with its alliance commitments, declared war on Japan. The US-Japan alliance is far less of a concern to Moscow than it is to Beijing. As for the United States, China looms larger in Russia's foreign policy than Japan, but the Kremlin believes

there is room for both in its approach to Asia. Yet, Moscow has recently taken a hardline approach to the South Kuril Islands issue, refusing to talk about a territorial problem. Putin can consider a compromise on the border delineation – this is how it can be framed – only if he believes the payoff from better relations with Japan deserves it. So far, he remains to be convinced.

## South Korea

Japan is not the only option. While relations with Tokyo continued to fester in the wake of the Ukraine crisis, Moscow was considering expanding its ties with North-East Asia's other advanced economy, South **Korea**. However, the relationship has not really taken off. Putin never struck a strong bond with Republic of Korea President Park, and Seoul remained too dependent on US protection vis-à-vis Pyongyang's nuclear antics. The Russians also learned the lesson of the early 1990s when a nearly complete break in Moscow's links with Pyongyang left Russia without much leverage in Seoul. Today, in order to be able to weigh in with the South, Russia seeks to retain a modicum of influence in the North. While Moscow has few illusions about the Democratic People's Republic of Korea regime, and is highly negative about its nuclear and missile programs, it sees dangers in crude US moves aimed at cornering the North Koreans.

On the Korean Peninsula, Russia is treading carefully. As a global P-5 power, it is conscious of its responsibility concerning nuclear non-proliferation. It has participated in the now moribund Six-Party Talks, but must acknowledge grudgingly that it has to take a back seat to both the United States and China. As a regional power in North-East Asia, it cannot ignore a potential military conflict so close to its own borders, yet its options are limited. As a close partner of China, it recognizes the interests of Beijing, which sees Korea, particularly its northern part, as its "near abroad". Moscow sees the current regime in Pyongyang as historically doomed, but would not welcome its sudden implosion. It sees Seoul as a development resource for the Russian Far East, but leaves open the possibility that the division of Korea will last a long time. Finally, while it is generally relaxed about the US military presence in South Korea, it views US missile defense deployments in and around Korea as a security issue for itself.

## Other Asian relationships

Since 1949, Moscow has been consistent in recognizing **Taiwan** as part of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since the end of the Cold War, its newly-established relations with Taipei have been limited to economic and cultural exchanges. Basically, the Russians see Beijing as fully sovereign with respect to its island province, and should not be expected in the future to condemn publicly any steps that the PRC might decide to take toward Taiwan. In contrast, Moscow has taken a firmly neutral stance on the maritime security issues in **the East and South China Seas**, where it does not have compelling national interests. It has resolved not to become involved in potential conflicts over the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands, the Paracels, Spratlys, Scarborough Shoal, and others. While broadly favoring negotiated solutions to all those problems, Russia is critical of the US "meddling" in the issues.

Recently, Russia has upgraded the importance of **South-East Asia** for its foreign policy. Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries are deemed potentially important trading partners, with which Russia has no baggage of past problems. Vietnam, a former Soviet ally in the region and a current major customer of the Russian defense industry, is traditionally regarded as a gateway to ASEAN, but other countries, such as Malaysia, Singapore and particularly Indonesia, are seen as offering even more opportunities. Besides seeking to sell arms, passenger airplanes and nuclear power plants to these countries, Russia is attempting to link the Eurasian Economic Union to Vietnam by means of a free-trade area. In May 2016, President Putin hosted Russia's first summit with ASEAN countries, in Sochi. Yet, a coherent approach to this important region of 500 million people is largely lacking.

In South Asia, Moscow's main partner since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century has been **India**. It is one major power with which Russia has never had disputes or major problems. In 1998, then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov came up with the idea of closer interaction between Asia's three great powers, Russia, India and China (RIC). In the early 2000s, Moscow took the initiative of turning the acronym for the emerging economies, **BRIC**, into a club of major non-Western countries. While RIC *de facto* balances China, BRIC presents a complement, or alternative, to the Western-dominated institutions, particularly since the G8 in 2014 reverted to its former G7 format, excluding Russia.

Russia's bilateral relations with India, while politically non-conflictual and genuinely friendly, suffer from too narrow an economic foundation. Particularly for the Narendra Modi government, which is focused on

spurring the country's economic development, this is a serious drawback. Russia has made steps to involve the Indians in its energy projects in Siberia, but that is not enough. Even in areas where Russia has long dominated, such as arms sales to India, it is now meeting with serious competition: not only European, but American as well. Confronted with this new reality, Russia needs to make a major effort to involve the Indians in co-development and co-production of weapons systems, and thus to bring the relationship to a much higher level.

While arming both India and China, Moscow is fully aware that Delhi sees Beijing as a likely adversary. Yet, the Russians have managed to navigate this delicate situation. They stay away from the Sino-Indian historical border dispute, cooperate with China on a much larger scale, but supply India with more sophisticated weaponry than what they sell to China. When India in 1998 developed its own nuclear weapons, Russia acknowledged this as a fact and refrained from any sanctions against Delhi.

During the Cold War, and particularly during the ill-fated Soviet war in Afghanistan, **Pakistan** used to be a security problem for Russia. In the 2000s, the relationship thawed somewhat. In the 2010s, Pakistan has won some space in Russia's policy in South Asia. Moscow recognizes Islamabad's importance for future stability in Afghanistan; it even sells some arms to it, to fight against the Taliban, despite India's disapproval, and this can serve as leverage vis-à-vis Delhi's desire to diversify its arms purchases away from Russia. In 2016, Pakistan, alongside India, will formally join the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)**, a regional grouping of China, Russia and Central Asian states.

SCO annual summits provide Russia with an opportunity for regular meetings with leaders of continental Asian states, including China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, Mongolia, and Central Asian countries. SCO gives Russia some sort of assurance that Sino-Central Asian cooperation stays mostly economic, and security aspects of cooperation, including joint military maneuvers and collaboration against terrorism, are tackled with the participation of Russia.

Moscow clearly prioritizes the SCO over the security-focused **East Asia Summit** to which it acceded in 2012, but has not really used very much. One reason is Moscow's unwillingness to take a stand on contentious geopolitical issues in the Asia-Pacific. **APEC**, the economic forum, has fared slightly better in Russia's foreign policy; in 2012 Russia hosted an APEC summit in Vladivostok to signal its presence in the region. On the **Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP)**, Russia is ambivalent, for lack of expertise and the absence of strong domestic drivers in favor of regional economic integration.

The SCO is essentially a Chinese project aimed at promoting security and development in **Central Asia**, an area of Chinese economic expansion. Moscow understands China's motives in establishing the organization, and has used its membership in it to keep an eye on China's activities in the region; make sure that these activities do not undercut Moscow's key interests there, and to cooperate with China, as necessary, on regional issues. At the same time, Russia has promoted its own institutions: the **Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)** for security, and the **Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)** for economic integration.

So far, Russia and China have managed to avoid direct clashes in Central Asia, where their ambitions overlap. Beijing has been careful not to cross Moscow's red lines – a military presence in Central Asian states and political alliances with them – while Moscow has tacitly accepted the growth of China's economic and political influence in the region, which quietly displaces residual Russian influence. The countries of Central Asia themselves, meanwhile, have learned to draw benefits for themselves from the competition of the two friendly, yet tacitly competing powers. With the inclusion of India, a Russian partner, and Pakistan, a Chinese ally, competition is likely to become more lively. It will also include Afghanistan.

From Russia's perspective, war-torn **Afghanistan** is a major source of regional insecurity. Since the toppling of the Taliban regime there in 2001, to which Russia contributed through its links with the Northern Alliance, Moscow has been keeping a low profile in the country where it lost 13,000 servicemen during the Soviet Union's Afghan war of 1979-1989. After 9/11, however, Russia assisted in the US/NATO troop and cargo transit to and from Afghanistan. This cooperation was completed by 2014. Since the departure of the main part of the international security forces from Afghanistan, Moscow has been keeping its lines of communication open to the government in Kabul and various ethno-regional groupings. With the emergence of Islamic State forces in Afghanistan, Russia has considered engaging with anyone capable of fighting them, including the Taliban.

After the initial success of its Syria operation, Moscow has become confident about using military force as an effective foreign and security policy tool. In the future, Afghanistan and Central Asia might become new theaters of operation for the Russian military – if they are threatened by Islamist extremists; there are no credible barriers between Kabul and Moscow. For the time being, Islamist extremism will remain Russia's most real enemy, both along its southern border and within the country.

Russia's foreign policy toward Asia remains squarely focused on geopolitics, with economic issues still playing a supporting role. In terms of the foreign policy toolbox, Moscow can play with only a few instruments: energy resources, from oil and gas exports to access to natural deposits; arms sales and military technology transfers, and transit opportunities. Russia obviously wants to diversify its partners, but faces clear limitations in doing so. Its energy projects with China make Beijing a sole customer. It is arming countries – such as India and Vietnam – that have problems with China, another major Russian arms client. It faces stiff competition from the US in the Indian arms market, and seeks to send a signal to Delhi by concluding modest arms deals with Pakistan.

# Conclusion: Building Blocks of a Regional Strategy

This overview has essentially described a series of customized approaches toward countries in a highly diverse region. There is clearly a need for a more integrated approach. The point of departure must be the realization that, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Asia, to Russia, is at least as important as Europe, and probably more. The implications are obvious: get to know the Asian neighborhood far better, rebuild Asia-focused expertise, and work hard to increase connectivity to the neighbors in Asia and across the Pacific.

The key task is to make the plans to develop eastern Russia – what used to be called, a hundred years ago, Asiatic Russia – work. Infrastructure development, agricultural production and recreation facilities should be prioritized, alongside natural resources, such as energy. Russia's strategy in Asia needs to always keep Siberia and the Far East at the top of the policymakers' minds. The main objective is not to spread Russian political influence outside of Russia's borders, but to find the best-suited position for it in the regional economic order. Russian leaders need to spend more of their time in Russia's Far East, turn Vladivostok into the country's Pacific metropolis, and become less Euro-centric in their approach to the world.

Further, Russia's Asia strategy has to be both integrated and comprehensive. Integration means developing a general view of region-wide objectives, in which bilateral relations, even with a global power such as China, are parts of a whole, closely coordinated with other parts. The Asia strategy should in fact be an Asia-Pacific strategy, including countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. It helps that in Asia there are fewer points of contention between Moscow and Washington than in Europe. The Pacific is not so much a divider as a connector.

A comprehensive strategy includes all relevant dimensions of policy: geopolitical, geo-economic, geostrategic (military), information, and cultural. Russian leaders and diplomats have a penchant for geopolitics, and its military are now reclaiming a role beyond the country's borders, but other dimensions are not nearly sufficiently developed, above all economic diplomacy. Russians, as well, usually have a hard time explaining their

motives and objectives to foreigners, and gaining an empathetic response from them. Clearly, for Moscow's economic diplomacy to become effective, it needs to be supported by real improvements in the country's business climate, including the legal environment.

Priorities in the Asia strategy should focus on how best to promote Russia's own development through its relations with Asia's great and major powers: China, India, and Japan, as well as other developed economies like South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. Whenever geopolitical conditions permit, which may not be soon, Russia needs to restore and expand ties to the English-speaking neighbors in the Pacific, from Alaska and California to Australia and New Zealand. Even now, however, expansion of non-political ties in such areas as education, science and technology, and regional development should be pursued.

Security-wise, Asia-Pacific, for Russia, offers for now the least threatening strategic environment. The Korean Peninsula is the biggest issue. It requires careful handling and international collaboration. Preventing a new stand-off in Asia with the United States and its allies is of utmost importance. Keeping the Russo-Chinese relationship friendly is an existential task. Yet, staying out of third-party conflicts in the region, particularly those involving China, is absolutely essential. This naturally excludes a Sino-Russian military alliance, although good neighborly relations and active cooperation with Beijing are indispensable conditions for Russia's peace and prosperity.

A purely geopolitical agenda needs to answer key questions about practical ways of structuring optimal relations with China and re-energizing partnership with India; using the potential of cooperation with Japan and eventually resolving the outstanding issues with it, and identifying ways to build stronger ties with ASEAN countries. As the great continent of Eurasia is becoming ever more closely integrated, Russia's foreign policy strategy needs to be both more integrated and more evenly balanced between its European and Asian departments. A new strategy in Asia requires a new strategy toward Europe. Greater Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok has not worked. A Greater Asia from Shanghai to St Petersburg is not in Russia's interest. Moscow should aim instead for a greater Eurasia, benefiting from its equally close ties with its neighbors east, west and south.

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