

'Sino-Russian relations – a Russia pivot to Asia?' – Leangkollen Security Conference, 3 February 2014

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I. Introduction

- It has become commonplace everywhere to speak of the **'shift of global power to the East'**.
- Russia, too, has become a follower of fashion. The most recent (2013) Foreign Policy Concept speaks of 'global power and development potential ... shifting to the East, primarily to the Asia-Pacific region.'
- Vladimir Putin has spoken of the opportunity to **'catch the Chinese wind** in the sales of our economy', and of **Russia becoming more involved in the 'dynamic integration processes in the "new Asia"'**.
- **The question** is whether such declarations reflect **a new level of commitment toward Asia**, or whether the so-called 'turn to the East' is **a grandiose sham**.

II. Definitions

- We should begin by defining terms. The first of these is 'Asia'. For the most part **Russians understand 'Asia' in the 21st century as East Asia plus India**.
- The expression, **a 'turn to the East', equates roughly to 'east of Moscow'**. At the same time, large parts of the Asian continent are not regarded as belong to the East, but rather the 'south' – for example, Central Asia.
- The 'East' can also be interpreted in symbolic and normative terms. Thus, **a 'turn to the East' implies the dilution of Moscow's traditional Westerncentrism**.

- All this ties into various **debates about Russian identity**. Russia has been described as a European civilization, Eurasian power, Asia-Pacific nation, and, most recently, a Euro-Pacific power.
- The most important **distinction** is **between Eurasian and Euro-Pacific**. The former term describes the post-Soviet space and the great Eurasian hinterland (or Heartland). **Eurasia conveys the core idea that Russia is not so much European or Asian, but has an identity that transcends both**. It is an **'independent' power and civilization**.
- **'Euro-Pacific'**, does not necessarily preclude any of this. However, it is a much more modern construct than Eurasia. It signals an appreciation of the latest, post-Western trends in international politics, above all, 'the shift of global power to the East'. It **envisages harnessing the dynamism of East Asia to Russia's European-ness and Eurasian identity**.

III. The 'turn to the East' in Putin's foreign policy

- **Historically, Asia has carried little intrinsic importance for Russian decision-makers**. During the Cold War, it was important primarily as a theater of superpower rivalry with the United States, and as a source of threat from China.
- **For much the post-Soviet period, too, Asia and 'the East' have mattered more to Moscow in terms of global geopolitics** than as a region for bilateral and multilateral cooperation. This is **exemplified by the Sino-Russian partnership**, which the Kremlin has long seen as **key to 'counterbalancing' American power**.
- **The 'turn to the East' reflects the lasting influence of this mindset**. Although the Russian elite has begun to appreciate Asia as important in and of itself, the **emphasis** is still very much **on the *global* geopolitical picture**.
- **The 'turn to the East' is consistent with the objective of reinforcing Russia as one of the 'poles' in the 'multipolar world order'**. In this context, **engagement with Asia is more the means to a larger end than the end itself**. It serves to reinforce not only Russia's **'uniqueness'**, but also its **indispensability** in today's world.
- Since the global financial crash, **the West has become associated in Russia with decline and decadence**. By contrast, the rise of Asia appears to offer a dynamic alternative. **By identifying itself with an emerging Asia**, and China in particular, **Moscow hopes to position Russia as one of the 'winners' in a new world order**. The 'turn to the East', along with the emphasis on the BRICS, is also consistent with the ambition of **establishing an alternative legitimacy to Western-led global governance**.

IV. Objectives

- The Kremlin is looking to realize five main, and closely interrelated, objectives. They are: (1) to enhance national security; (2) to develop the Russian Far East;

(3) to gain geopolitical advantages; (4) to advance economic interests; and (5) to promote Russia as a 'good' Asian citizen.

To enhance national security

- Moscow's number one objective is to enhance national **security**. This has been **the chief driver behind the rapprochement with China**, and it underpins the 'turn to the East'.
- Russia has an obvious interest in regional stability, all the more so given the **sparse population of the Russian Far East**. The security implications of this demographic imbalance are heightened by the **decline in Russia's military capabilities** since the end of the Soviet Union.
- Putin operates on the **assumption that a close partnership with China represents the best guarantee of the long-term security of the RFE and of Russia's territorial integrity**. The subtext is that only China poses a possible existential threat in the foreseeable future. **Making 'friends' with it is not merely desirable, but essential**.
- Although Putin has consistently downplayed the **'China threat'**, this is **never very far away in Russian thinking**. It is implicit, for example, in the Kremlin's refusal to entertain further nuclear disarmament, unless this includes other nuclear weapons states, above all China.
- For much of the Putin era, **Moscow has not pursued an Asia policy so much as a 'China-plus' policy**. The latest 'turn to the East' is not anti-Chinese, but reflects **an appreciation that true security also rests on strengthening relations with other countries** in the region, such as Japan, India, Vietnam, and even the United States.

To develop the Russian Far East

- **The RFE is the frontline – and shop window – of Russia in Asia**. It can serve to validate or, alternatively, discredit the 'turn to the East'.
- The obstacles to integration of the RFE into the wider region are formidable. First, **the RFE has never been a gateway to Asia, but a barrier against it**. This defensive mentality remains powerful today.
- The RFE is also **very backward compared to the neighborhood**, excepting North Korea. Moreover, the **development gap is growing** all the time, highlighted in particular by the striking contrast along the Sino-Russian border.
- **The Kremlin has sought to address the challenge of RFE development** through various measures, such as creating a **Ministry for Far Eastern Development**, and **hosting the 2012 APEC summit** in Vladivostok. It has also embarked on yet another major **development program for East Siberia and the RFE**, and is desperately seeking investment from Asian countries and companies.

To gain geopolitical advantage

- **The chief geopolitical objective behind the ‘turn to the East’ is to promote Russia as the global ‘swing power’ between the United States and China.** Although Putin is keen to constrain the exercise of American power, he is also wary (if discreet) about the emergence of a potential new ‘hegemon’ in the form of China.
- **Moscow hopes that a more diversified approach to the Asia-Pacific will improve its chances of acting as the regional swing power.** Accordingly, it has been reaching out to Japan, Vietnam, and India.
- **In an ideal world, Moscow would have equally good relations with Tokyo and Beijing.** In practice, however, the **territorial dispute has proved a deal-killer.** Lately, **Russian hopes of regional balancing have been revived,** following the visit of Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in April 2013.
- The emphasis on strategic diversity is also reflected in closer ties with **Vietnam.** The latter has become a **major market for Russian arms exports,** and there is talk of reestablishing a presence at the former Soviet base at **Cam Ranh.**
- Similarly, Moscow is interested in expanding strategic engagement with **India,** which is **the leading customer of Russian arms and nuclear energy.**
- However, it is **one thing to aspire to strategic flexibility, quite another to be able to reconcile the contradictions** inherent in such a choice.
- The most difficult is the **tension between global and regional geopolitical priorities.** Globally, **China is the kernel of Russia’s balancing strategy toward the United States.** Sino-Russian ‘solidarity’ also underpins attempts to **legitimate the BRICS as an alternative international consensus.**
- **Putin must calculate how far he can pursue strategic diversity in Asia without alienating Beijing.** For no amount of improvement in relations with Japan, Vietnam, and India, can compensate for damage to the Sino-Russian partnership. Moscow is extremely wary of being seen to collude in a ‘containment’ policy against China.

To advance economic interests

- Moscow has focused its efforts in three main areas: (1) energy cooperation; (2) attracting Asian investment into the RFE and for large infrastructural projects; and (3) arms transfers.
- By far the **greatest priority is to expand energy cooperation.** Throughout the Putin years, Moscow has consistently emphasized the importance of diversifying exports to Asia. Yet it has largely failed to follow this through, despite periodic threats to divert gas from its primary European customers.

- **Since the global financial crash, the need for Moscow to develop Asian markets has become more urgent.** European demand for Russian gas has slumped as a result of the Eurozone crisis, the shale revolution, and the new-found unity of EU member-states on energy policy.
- **The Kremlin has raised the tempo of cooperation.** The East Siberian-Pacific Ocean (**ESPO**) pipeline is delivering increasing amounts of oil to China; the visit of Xi Jinping to Moscow in **March 2013** saw an **oil deal that could eventually triple exports to China**; and Russia and Japan are stepping up cooperation in LNG. Russia has also relaxed its previous hardline stance on significant Chinese participation in joint ventures. **Rosneft and CNPC** have signed an agreement to explore three offshore areas in the Arctic. These developments highlight a **new level of commitment toward energy cooperation** with Asia, and China in particular.
- From time to time, Moscow talks up the prospects of a ‘partnership for modernization’ with Beijing. But **Russia and China are customers – and competitors – for Western technology.** Russia’s important ‘modernization’ partnerships are with Western companies, exemplified by the Rosneft-ExxonMobil joint venture in the Arctic.
- The Kremlin retains hopes of **attracting Asian investment into the RFE** and for large-scale infrastructural projects (Trans-Siberian and Baikal-Amur Mainline railways; ideas of a ‘new Silk Road’)
- **Asia is a growth area for Russian arms exports. But this does not reflect a consciously pro-Asian (or balancing) strategy.** Russia sells weapons to whomever it can, whenever it can, and is motivated largely by commercial considerations.

To promote Russia as a good regional citizen

- The Kremlin is beginning to realize the **importance of ‘good regional citizenship’** in Asia. Over the past few years, it has raised the level of government representation at Asian multilateral meetings, while Putin has consistently participated in APEC summits.
- **But the sincerity of the Russian commitment is unconvincing.** The Kremlin’s preference for traditional Great Power diplomacy is evident in its continuing **mediocre participation** in Asian multilateral forums.
- For Moscow, such forums are seen mainly as **opportunities to engage with key interlocutors** (Americans, Chinese, Japanese), or to lobby for Asian investment.

V. Outcomes

- This brings us back to the original question – how real is Russia’s pivot to the East?

Intent

- There is no doubt that **Moscow takes the Asia-Pacific more seriously than before**. It appreciates that this is the most dynamically growing region in the world, and that it cannot afford to ignore developments there. This importance is **accentuated by two factors: the vulnerability of the Russian Far East; and the importance of Sino-Russian partnership**.
- However, there has been **no dilution in Moscow's long-standing Westerncentrism**. Today, **virtually every major foreign policy priority of the Putin regime is centered on interaction with the West**: missile defense; Syria; the Eastern Partnership; the organization of the international system; and even energy policy. **China has a role to play** on some of these issues, but as viewed by Moscow this role is **secondary and instrumental: to support Russia**.
- **China's importance** to Moscow does **not** point to a **new Asian direction**, but rather an **old reliance on traditional geopolitical balancing**. **China matters because it is the next global power, not because it is Asian**.
- **Few Asian priorities are also priorities for the Kremlin**. So far, it has shown **little interest in security-building and economic integration**, or becoming involved in regional problems such as North Korea. In general, **Asia is a supplement to**, not a replacement for, **Russia's primary relationships with the West**.
- **Putin's rejection of Western liberal norms and values in no way implies embracing Asian values**. For Russia, there is no 'China model', much less a 'Beijing consensus'.
- Ultimately, Putin's **intention is to promote Russia as an 'independent' actor** in the 'polycentric system of international relations'. This means the **reaffirmation of Russia as the great Eurasian power**.

Performance

- **Russia's influence in Asia-Pacific affairs is modest at best**. With the exception of the so-called 'strategic partnership' with China, Russia's other relationships in the region are weak and undeveloped.
- Moscow's tendency to see international relations as primarily a matter for Great Power diplomacy is self-limiting. **It does not have an Asia policy as such, but instead a policy toward the major powers in Asia. The practical effect of this has been to accentuate Russia's China-dependence**.
- **Asian countries view Russia as an outsider** – and an **uninfluential** one to boot. They see it not as a geopolitical balancer vis-à-vis China or the United States, but as a useful provider of energy and other natural resources.
- But even here, Russia's impact is secondary. It remains a niche rather than primary supplier of Chinese energy requirements, only **one among many**.

VI. Outlook

- **Russia will remain a peripheral player in the Asia-Pacific** over the next decade, and probably much longer. Even if it is able to tap into rising Asian energy demand – by no means a given – its influence will be narrowly sector-specific.
- **Putin will continue to prioritize the ‘strategic partnership’ with Beijing.** He will try to reduce Russia’s China-dependence, but will fail. **The thaw in relations with Japan** may be sustained for some time, but **will not become much more substantial**, and will not develop into a strategic entente ‘balancing’ Chinese power. **A Russia-US partnership in the Asia-Pacific is improbable.**
- **Russia’s overall foreign policy orientation and outlook will not change.** From time to time, Moscow may reprise the mantra of Russia as a Euro-Pacific, Asia-Pacific, or Asian power, but this will be mainly for form’s sake.
- **If there is a shift to the ‘East’, then it will be toward post-Soviet Eurasia,** rather than the Pacific. The Kremlin will continue to **stress Russia’s identity as an ‘independent’ center of global power**, and as a civilization unto itself. Within this framework, devices such as a ‘turn to the East’ will serve principally to **reassert Russia’s distinctiveness and indispensability.**