

Understanding Russia's Strategic Engagement with the Indo-Asia-Pacific

By Alexey D. Muraviev

During his annual address to the Federal Assembly on February 21, 2019 Russian president Vladimir Putin highlighted Moscow's growing preoccupation with relationship building across the Indo-Asia-Pacific. China, India, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Japan were singled out as players with which Moscow plans to have either special partnerships or close and robust relations. With respect to Tokyo, Putin's remarks may have been more aspirational than realistic, given Russia's hard stance on the ongoing territorial dispute.

Russia does not have a clearly articulated and adopted regional policy for the Indo-Asia-Pacific. As in the past, the China factor dominates Russia's regional strategic thinking and will continue to be one of key determinants of the level of current and future involvement in regional affairs. The Russians have a different geo-strategic outlook, effectively rejecting the Indo-Pacific geopolitical construct, a system which they believe supports the interests of the United States and its key allies. Nevertheless, Moscow is accelerating efforts to develop regional political and security frameworks that would suit its long-term agendas based on both bilateral strategic partnerships and engagement with regional frameworks.

The Economic Vector

Contrary to the Cold War era, when strategic and ideological considerations were the prime basis of Soviet Pacific strategy, the current reengagement is driven by economic ambitions: extensive exploration and extraction of key natural resources; establishing a complete supply chain, particularly for the export of energy resources; turning the Russian Far East into a regional hub of national aerospace and shipbuilding industry; supporting export of advanced military technology to regional clients; creating a Europe-Pacific strategic transit corridor; and attracting foreign investment.

Russia is positioning itself as a future corridor between Pacific Asia and Europe, as well as a major supplier of energy resources and agricultural goods to growing Asian economies. To achieve this goal, the Russian Government aims to upgrade maritime infrastructure (currently, sea transport accounts for 97 percent of transport services offered by the Russians to foreign clients in the Pacific). The utilisation of the Northern Sea Route (NSR) is being viewed by the Russians as one of their geo-economic objectives with respect to the Arctic and the Far East. The set target is to see an increase of maritime traffic via the NSR to 80 million tons a year by 2030, compared with some 17 million tons in 2018. In addition, plans are in place to expand land-based communications networks. Russia continues advocating a strategic proposal to connect the Trans-Korean railway with Russia's Trans-Siberian railway, thus creating a strategic link between Western European and Russian industrial and transport hubs with South Korean warm water ports.

Russia's expansionist energy strategy aims at furthering Russia's position as the energy superpower in the Indo-Asia-Pacific context. In particular, the opening of the 2,600 mile-long 'Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean' pipeline network would help the Russians achieve their ambitious target of supplying China with more than 100 billion cubic meters of gas by the mid-2030s, in addition to other exports across the region.

Alexey Muraviev, associate professor at Curtin University in Western Australia, explains that "The Russians have a different geo-strategic outlook, effectively rejecting the Indo-Pacific geopolitical construct, a system which they believe supports the interests of the United States and its key allies."

Adding to that, Moscow's medium-term ambition is to secure select high-tech niches in the regional market, particularly in aerospace and shipbuilding. Besides, the Zvezda super shipyard mega project, Russia's Sukhoi aircraft construction facility in Komsomol'sk-na-Amure KNAAPO, and the Vostochny space launch facility will allow Russia to create a regional multi-role high-tech aerospace hub.

The Military Vector

Russia also has a set of more traditional geo-strategic considerations, including:

- Significantly lowering prospects of a military-strategic standoff with the United States and its Pacific allies;
- Addressing the continuous qualitative modernization of the Japanese Self Defense Forces (SDF) while managing the ongoing Russia-Japan territorial dispute;
- The standoff on the Korean Peninsula and the risk of unprovoked conflict or escalation;
- Considerable increase of People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) offensive capabilities and the qualitative leap they achieved over the past ten years; and
- The growing strategic significance of the Arctic theater, including the Northern Sea Route (NSR).
- Russia's growing strategic interests in the region, including Antarctica.

After years of continued decline and neglect, Russian military power in Asia and the Pacific is making a major qualitative leap. By 2020 forces of the Eastern Military District would receive a total of more than 7,980 items of new and upgraded armaments and heavy equipment, including main battle tanks; tactical missiles and heavy artillery systems; air defence systems; radars, electronic warfare; aircraft and other. For example, by mid-2018 Russian air force units deployed in the theatre received some 300 new and modernized fixed wing and rotary aircraft, which is approximately the total strength of the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF). The Russian Pacific Fleet is expected to receive some 70 new warships and auxiliaries, including at least 11 nuclear-powered and diesel-electric submarines, and 19 new surface warships by 2027. Russia is showcasing its ability to exercise military power in a variety of ways. From late August to mid-September 2018, the Russian military carried out the Vostok 2018 strategic manoeuvres and wargames, Russia's single largest show of its military power over the past 37 years. According to the Russian Ministry of Defense, the wargames involved 297,000 personnel, more than 1,000 fixed wing and rotary aircraft, a significant number of unmanned aerial vehicles, around 36,000 items of heavy military equipment, and approximately 80 warships and auxiliaries. The exercises signalled that Russia is readying itself for a possible confrontation with a large, technically sophisticated military force, reinforcing Putin's perceived intention to reassert Russia's status as a global power.

Russia's growing strategic intimacy with Beijing should not be underestimated. The Chinese military uses every opportunity to learn from Russia's war-experienced armed forces. The PLA's participation in Vostok 2018 under Russian command offered a major opportunity to learn first-hand from a battle-hardened major military force. Russia continues to be one of the two principal providers of advanced military technology in the Indo-Asia-Pacific. In 2017-18, Russia was supplying 52 countries, and foreign defense orders totaled \$45 billion, effectively retaining the number two position in global arms sales. Over 60 percent of Russian arms exports go to Asian countries, among them India, China, Vietnam, Myanmar, Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and others. In fact, Southeast Asia accounts for 43.1 per cent of Russian arms sales. Russian-made systems such as variants of the Sukhoi aircraft, S-400 long-range air defense systems, Type 636.1 Kilo class diesel attack submarines and other supplied to a number of regional clients allow their users to deploy advanced military capabilities. Besides close security and defense relations with China, India, and more recently Pakistan, Russia is very active in developing robust security and defense cooperation with small states in the region such as Sri Lanka and Fiji. Moscow sees opportunities vis-a-vis military-technological and maritime security cooperation; peacekeeping; search and rescue and disaster relief; combating various forms of organised crime such as piracy, counter narco-trafficking and contraband; and counter-terrorism.

Contrary to the 1990s and early 2000s Russia's strategic behavior in the Indo-Asia-Pacific context contradicts the conventional view of Moscow being a peripheral player with marginalized interests and even fewer options to exercise its influence. In fact, Russia acts as an experienced strategic spoiler, and its behavior is likely to impact the evolving geostrategic landscape of Pacific Asia.

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