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China in Russia's Turn to the East

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In his February 2019 annual address to the Federal Assembly (the Russian parliament), President Vladimir Putin put Asian countries first in the foreign policy section of the speech — ahead of Europe and the United States — and spoke in positive terms about Russia's relations with China, India, Japan and ASEAN. Putin's statement is another indication of what has come to be known as Russia's "turn to the East."

The Moscow-Beijing axis is growing stronger

Russia's pivot East began in the late 2000s, when Moscow fully realized the rising economic importance of Asia. However, at that time the Kremlin still entertained the hope of having the best of both worlds: maintaining beneficial partnerships with both the West and the East, and possibly even acting as a trans-continental connector between the Atlantic and Pacific wings of Eurasia. Those hopes were destroyed by the Ukraine crisis of 2014 and other developments that brought Russia's relations with the West relations to their lowest point since the early 1980s.

Finding itself in an implacable confrontation with the West, Russia had no choice but to turn to the East, and that mostly meant embracing China. The Kremlin dropped whatever apprehensions it might have had about Beijing and ordered an acceleration of the economic shift to China. In 2018, Russia-China trade for the first time exceeded \$100 billion. The Russian-Chinese axis has also been strengthening in the political-military domain, epitomized by the unprecedented participation of over 3,000 Chinese troops in Russia's large-scale strategic Vostok-2018 drills in Eastern Siberia.

Apart from China, Moscow has been cultivating ties with other Asian powers, albeit with mixed results so far. Vladimir Putin and Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe are engaged in a complex diplomatic dance to achieve the closure of the long-festering territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, but the prospects for the conclusion of a peace treaty are dim. In 2015, a bilateral FTA between the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and Vietnam was signed — Russia's first FTA in Asia — and Moscow expects to sign more FTAs in Southeast Asia. However, Russia's trade with Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries remains modest. The Kremlin touts the "privileged strategic partnership" with India, and high level summits between the two countries leaders regularly occur. Nonetheless, Washington has been aiming to overtake Moscow's historical role as New Delhi's principal strategic partner.

Playing along with China in East Asia

It is important to distinguish Russia's strategies toward continental Eurasia from those toward East (Pacific) Asia. For Moscow, the former is a top concern, while the East Asian geopolitical theater, south of the Russian Far East, is much lower on the priority list. Although Moscow's concept of Greater Eurasia nominally encompasses East Asia, the Kremlin is not deeply invested in Pacific affairs. Moscow does have some political and economic interests in East Asia, but historically the Asia-Pacific has seldom occupied the top spot in Russia's foreign policy priorities. The only time the Pacific dominated Russian grand strategy was a brief period in the late 19th - early 20th century, when

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Czar Nicholas II and his entourage fancied the ambition to make the Russian Empire the hegemon of Northeast Asia. Those grand designs abruptly ended with Russia's humiliating defeat by Japan in the 1904-05 war. Since the Russo-Japanese War, Russia has not attempted to play a leading role in East Asia, opting to save strategic resources for other regions it deemed of higher importance, such as Europe and the Middle East. Moreover, the deficiency of blue water naval capabilities limits Russia's ability to project power in the predominantly maritime Pacific theater.

Even though this strategy has never been spelled out officially or publicly, the Kremlin appears to have chosen to refrain from balancing China in East Asia and may even be aiding Chinese hegemonic pursuits in the Asia-Pacific. On the major issues of East Asian geopolitics, such as the Korean Peninsula or the South China Sea, Russia has tended to support China or displayed friendly neutrality. Mongolia is the only East Asian nation that relies on Russian security guarantees vis-à-vis China. Most of East Asia lies outside the area of Russia's vital interests. Russia's overriding priority in the region is purely defensive: keeping sovereignty over the geopolitically vulnerable Russian Far East. As long as Russia remains a formidable military and nuclear power, its Far Eastern territories are thought to be safe against aggression from any potential predator.

The Sino-Russian collaboration in East Asia is helped by the fact that both adhere to the logic of geopolitical spheres of influence. There appears to be an understanding between Presidents Putin and Xi that Moscow defers to Beijing on East Asian issues while, in return, the Chinese recognize Russia's leading role in much of the former Soviet republics and the Middle East.

Chinese expansionism in East Asia and the Pacific even benefits Russia because it diverts American attention and resources from confrontation with Moscow. The Kremlin will not lift a finger to balance Chinese advances in the region. Moscow is preparing to enjoy the spectacle of the epic Sino-American contest in the Asia-Pacific and beyond.

Conducting geopolitics in the West while doing business in the East?

Russia's ongoing turn to the East has been predominantly of a geo-economic nature. On the one hand, it is happening naturally, and is driven by Asia's own economic rise. On the other hand, sanctions by the United States and its European allies have forced Russia to step up the re-orientation of its trade and investment strategies to Asian countries who generally do not share the West's hostility toward Moscow and are ready to do business with Russia.

Despite viewing itself as a global great power, Russia has kept a relatively low political-military profile in the Asia-Pacific. This is partly due to Moscow's tacit recognition of East Asia as China's geopolitical sphere of influence. Another reason is the Kremlin's preoccupation with Europe and, lately, the Middle East, where Putin has established himself as a kingmaker of sorts. He seems to be fascinated with the geopolitical game in the Middle East and is happy to leave East Asia to his "intimate friend" Xi.

Probably for the first time in Russia's history, the thrust of Moscow's geopolitical endeavors is diverging from the main direction of its geo-economic strategy. While its reliance on Asian — especially Chinese — markets is increasing, Russia's security and diplomatic concerns, as well as its military-political leverage, are concentrated in the western part of Eurasia. This may have interesting implications which are still hard to predict. It is possible that Russia's gradual economic decoupling from its traditional economic partners in Europe could give Moscow the freedom and rationale to pursue foreign policies which will be even bolder and more audacious than has been the case in recent years.

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