

Russia's Ambivalence about an Indo-Pacific Strategy

By Ekaterina Koldunova

More than half-a-decade has passed since Russia started its 'Turn to the East', a foreign policy reorientation toward Asia. Throughout this period, the international environment as well as the Russian position in global and regional affairs has changed dramatically. In 2012, hosting the APEC Summit in Vladivostok, Russia saw a generally positive international attitude and was optimistic about cooperation with both West and East. However, the 2014 political crisis in Ukraine followed by a referendum in Crimea, which laid the background for the peninsula's incorporation into Russia, and sanctions against Russia from the United States and the EU brought Russia's relations with the West to their lowest point since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Ekaterina Koldunova, Associate Professor at Moscow State Institute of International Relations, explains that "The economically vibrant Asia-Pacific region, home to Russia's key strategic partner China, represented the core geographical area where Russian foreign policy decision-makers naturally looked to as the alternative [to the West]."

Under these constraints it seemed logical to enhance interaction with partners beyond the West whose attitudes toward Russia remained more pragmatic rather than ideological. The economically vibrant Asia-Pacific region, home to Russia's key strategic partner China, represented the core geographical area where Russian foreign policy decision-makers naturally looked to as the alternative.

Russia's relations with partners in the Asia-Pacific, however, are not unproblematic. Japan de jure joined sanctions against Russia, but retained a much softer approach to their practical implementation compared to that of the United States and the EU. China is getting stronger economically and more proactive politically. This rise of Chinese comprehensive clout provoked various discussions in Russia and abroad concerning the changing nature of Russo-Chinese relations and their movement toward more asymmetry; not least because the Chinese mega-project Belt and Road initiative (BRI) initially did not presuppose any links with Russia. The situation on the Korean peninsula has not shown much silver lining lately though Russo-South Korean relations retain a strong element of economic pragmatism. In regards to North Korea, Russia and China were working out a coordinated approach which resulted in a proposal for a 'double freeze' initiative — under which the United States would "freeze" certain forms of military exercises with South Korea and North Korea would freeze its missile launching activities. ASEAN, also Russia's strategic partner since 2018, remained politically important but still economically distant.

Another avenue of Russia's international efforts was to recreate an economically integrated area of the post-Soviet space by establishing the Eurasian Economic Union (the EEU), including Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. In 2015, this new center of regional integration started cautious movement toward broader economic liberalization, signing a free trade area agreement with Vietnam and pondering whether to expand this experience to other ASEAN countries. This same year Russian President Vladimir Putin brought to the public discourse the idea of 'integration of integrations' a cornerstone of which should have been cooperation between the EEU, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and ASEAN. The year 2015 also saw an agreement between President Putin and Chinese President Xi concerning the interconnection of the EEU and BRI.

At that time the most serious challenge to all of these efforts may have come from the U.S.-supported Trans-Pacific Partnership (TTP), which involved such Asia-Pacific countries as Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam. The U.S. ambition to create new geo-economic area, which was only partially overlapping with the Asia-Pacific region, had structurally different foundations compared to the existing FTAs in the region and presupposed creating cleavages within such already well-established integration blocks as ASEAN, which seemed problematic to many in Russia.

President Donald Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the TTP in 2016 suspended this alternative way of regional economic development for the near future. Instead, the region has faced the rise of multiple Indo-Pacific strategies, which aim at rethinking and reconstructing the Asian landscape in the geostrategic and geo-economic terms.

The initial idea of the Indo-Pacific originated from the then-Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs Marty Natalegawa who, in 2013, proposed to sign the Indo-Pacific Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. This treaty was designed to replicate the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia but with a broader number of participants. In addition to ASEAN states, the treaty was to also include Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, South Korea, and the United States. ASEAN policy makers regarded such a treaty, if signed — with its provisions of respect to sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs — as a legal security belt against the mounting controversies in the South China Sea and generally in the region.

This line of thinking about the Indo-Pacific did not prevail and more geostrategic and ideological versions of it started to emerge. Thus, Australian and American versions, articulated in 2016 and 2017 correspondingly, had strong anti-Chinese components and normative emphasis on the necessity of a 'rules-based order' in the region. The Japanese version, which initially also included these components, later acquired a new dimension due to Japanese Prime-Minister Abe's efforts to reconcile the Japanese Indo-Pacific vision with Chinese BRI through joint economic projects in Southeast Asia. Indian Prime-Minister Narendra Modi also tried to sound inclusive about his Indo-Pacific vision including China, Russia, Japan, ASEAN member states, and even African countries. In 2019, ASEAN itself after several years of procrastination finally started to look for the ways to frame (once again) its own vision of the Indo-Pacific.

The mushrooming of these concepts and counter-reactions reflected the rise of proactive positions of many previously 'silent' regional powers – like Japan, Australia, or India — alongside with the lack of clear understanding on how to reconcile their interests and the interests of antagonistic China and the United States in a non-confrontational way. What makes Russia uneasy about the Indo-Pacific idea is what it sees as the echo of Cold War-era U.S.-led security alliances – this time multilateralized and directed again towards containing China and Russia –with no constructive way out of this new zero-sum game. Despite the overall rising geostrategic importance of the area of confluence between Indian and Pacific oceans, to proclaim the creation of a new region is not enough. A more important and challenging task is to understand what kind of institutional structure can accommodate these changes without leading to open conflict.

In this situation, one of the ways Russia might face this new challenge is to search for the contours of its own strategy for the Asia/Indo-Pacific region through reconciling 'integrations' and 'connecting connectivity' with the existing ASEAN-centered regional institutional structure. This search, however, will not be an easy task.

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