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The "Other" Major Power in the Region: Russia and Southeast Asia

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In recent years Southeast Asia has seen the intense competition for influence and involvement between two big powers – the United States and China. Another major power, standing on the sides and taking in the rivalry, is Russia, which, in the heady days of the Soviet Union, was also an interested player in the Southeast Asian theatre. Since the 1990s Russia has largely avoided inter-power contestation and has sought to rebuild its multifaceted relationships with member states and regional organizations. While its political-economic ties are relatively small compared to other powers, and its foreign policy does not prioritize the region, it has nevertheless been a consistent partner within the geo-political canvas of the area and a key ally for some SEA states. The paper examines the various linkages between Russia and Southeast Asia and offers an assessment of current and future alignments considering its close ties with the leading Asian power, China.

*Russian foreign policy,
Russia in Asia,
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Geo-political setting in Southeast Asia

Big powers have had a presence in the region bound by the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, later to be known as Southeast Asia, since the quest for resources influenced the competitive advance into foreign lands. Asian powers, India and China had begun their foray several centuries before western powers divided up the region into their colonial entities. Czarist Russia did not possess any colonies in the said region and thus was not in the race to conquer and maintain its distant possessions. Links were limited to sailors and whaling ships that sometimes-reached maritime Asia¹. The end of the Second World War saw the emergence of independent Asian states that somewhat altered the political dynamics for some while colonialism remained for others for another decade or so. Post-colonial linkages by the western Big Powers especially the US, UK, and France intensified after the 1950s as they sought to retain influence over their ex-colonies through political, economic and socio-cultural relationships. In addition, another factor in international linkages was ideology communism that provided the opportunity for an inroad into Southeast Asia. Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union held its attractions for certain sections of the communities while its variant, Maoism-Leninism from China had other supporters that saw its potential influence in Southeast Asia. For states that were against communism, the encroaching pull from the Soviet Union or from the much nearer Chinese heartland was a major threat to domestic stability². Hence the presence of western capitalism and political prowess versus the socialist support

¹ It is not the intention of this paper to swell into the historical and colonial aspects of the region. Several scholars have written on the subject. The main link is that some of the early colonial powers resurfaced as important actors in the contemporary geo-politics of the area.

² In the 1940s and 50s Marxism-Leninism from the Soviet Union had a strong appeal in Indonesia where the local Communist Party was aligned to Moscow until its demise in a domestic military coup in 1965. The Soviet influence remained in mainland Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam where sections of the society had embraced Marxism as early as during the French

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colonial period. Chinese-influenced communism found root in sections of the population in Singapore, Malaya, Thailand, and the Philippines. The communist parties and their sympathizers were defeated after about two decades of domestic operations while the insurgency in the Philippines is still operating in parts of the republic. It was in mainland Southeast Asia that the communist ideologies of the Soviet Union and China found competing for influence.

³ For insight into Soviet links with Southeast Asia, see for example [4; 20; 23].

⁴ Russian clandestine activities in Southeast Asia were notorious in the 1970s through 1980s through tactics such as espionage and intelligence gathering. During the period, counterintelligence forces in Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia separately caught and expelled Soviet diplomats and agents who were suspected of collecting sensitive information.

⁵ For an in-depth analysis of the origins and continuation in Soviet-Vietnam relations, see [27].

subsequently found fertile ground for proxy engagement in parts of Asia.

Small States and Big Powers

As each of the Southeast Asian countries attained statehood, their choice of external relations was with the western powers, supported by their political and economic potentials. The post-colonial period was also characterized by the intense rivalry of the western 'camp' led by the US against the socialist group aligned with the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, the Soviet Union or more formally recognized as the USSR comprising the Russian Federation and its allied states in Eastern Europe and Central Asia emerged as one of the two superpowers. It posed a serious challenge to the only other superpower, the United States. Given the enormous size of the Soviet Empire, stretching from the Baltic to the Pacific covering about 8 time zones, its vast resources, technical prowess, and nuclear capability, it was poised to confront its Cold War adversaries. Smaller states, depending on their political or ideological orientations were also drawn into the global alignment. Some states that either wanted to withdraw from the big power theatrics or sought to benefit from the global antagonism, claimed to be non-aligned (even to the extent of establishing a non-aligned movement) but were in fact aligned to one or the other superpowers. Nevertheless, they were mostly on good diplomatic terms with both the United States and the Soviet Union. Southeast Asia was characteristic of it as well.

The Soviet Union that had little official contact with maritime Southeast Asia, with the emergence of its status as a leading power it showed keen interest. Exploring its potentials in Southeast Asia, the Soviet Union was able to exert its influence in selected countries. It gradually elevated its involvement by supporting domestic political parties (in Indonesia, Vietnam, and Laos) that shared its ideological interests³. Eventually, the Soviet Union established state-to-state relations following the success of the national communist parties in North Vietnam (later with a unified Vietnam and Laos that adopted the communist rule in 1975). In states where the communist ideology was outlawed (as in Malaysia and Singapore), the Soviet agents were intent on acquiring political information and influence most notably through clandestine activities⁴. This was in addition to pursuing trade and shipping activities. Thailand had maintained diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union since the late 1940s while Indonesia has established ties in 1950. Malaysia and Singapore established their ties in 1967 and 1968 respectively, though trade links had begun a few years earlier. By the late 1970s, the Soviet Union had established diplomatic relations with all, except one, Southeast Asian state. Brunei had been a British protectorate until 1984. Moving gradually in its external foray, Brunei Darussalam exchanged diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union in September 1991, just months prior to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

The decade of the Vietnam War (also known as the Second Indochina War), from the mid-60s to the mid-70s witnessed Big Power engagement and rivalry in the Southeast Asian region⁵. It pitted the Soviet Union and China against the US and its allies in a proxy war to gain a permanent foothold for or against communism in Southeast Asia. Marxism took root in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Soviet Union was not the sole exporter of communism in Southeast Asia in the 70s; it had to contend with the influence of China. The rivalry that it created between the two powers has continued, though in a subdued manner over the following decades

when the new Russia had a positive vision for strengthening relations with China and other states in the region. Vietnam in the meantime remained as the Russians' strongest allies ever since it sought the Soviet Union over its earlier close ally of China⁶.

Southeast Asia was thus an arena for big power influence in the 70s and 80s till a new geo-political structure emerged with changes in the Soviet political system. Global stability and cooperation under a new international order dominated by the United States created a political environment while the Soviet Union had to resurface after its unexpected collapse. The rump Russian Federation saw a domestic tussle amongst its political factions. Ideology took a back seat as economic development and political stability took precedence. Meanwhile, the Southeast Asian states (communist and non-communist) were positive in their expectations of the new Russia as a returning global actor. The regional grouping of ASEAN states extended its collective relationship to Russia, according it a valuable role as a P5 (Security Council member), engaging it in the settlement of the Cambodian issue, offering it core membership in the ASEAN Regional Forum, inviting its officials to some ASEAN meetings and by 1996 making Russia a full Dialogue Partner.

New Russia in a 'crowded' region

The first decade of new Russia was characterized by a sudden exuberance of multiple forces competing for influence and control in the political and economic sphere. A clash of free capitalism and mainstream centralized political system created instability at various levels of the state. Russia's new foreign policy took time to evolve into a more focused area of pursuit. While the country appeared friendly to all foreign states, its initial priority lay in affirming good ties to the US and European states. Russia's near abroad, or those states that had been part of the larger USSR and later formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) were also of immediate concern. Thus, Southeast Asia appeared distant both geographically and politically. Nevertheless, Russia's participation in the international order gave it some measure of interest in the Vietnam-Cambodia issue and was thus party to the UN/ASEAN amicable settlement of the issue. The resultant Cambodia emerged as a multiparty, constitutional monarchy, under the watchful eye of the international community that had labored to bring a peaceful settlement. Russia was also able to share the collective role in the process of peace making⁷.

As peace returned to mainland Southeast Asia and each state concentrated on its much neglected regional political and economic cooperation within ASEAN, ASEAN invited all major powers for a cooperative Southeast Asia. The step included the invitation to all to accede to its Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), expanding its core set of Dialogue Partners to other powers and establishing avenues for security dialogue and cooperation through the ASEAN Regional Forum. Russia benefited from the initiatives. Since its engagement with ASEAN/UN in the Cambodian issue, Russia evolved into a permanent actor within the Southeast Asian regional process. The regional access also provided it with positive inroads into several of the Southeast Asian states with which it had limited relations in the earlier decades. Undoubtedly it lacked the wider political and economic involvement of some of the other big players that had been around the region much longer, for example, the United States, Australia, Japan, and

⁶ In June 1978, Vietnam became a full member of the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) that had been established by the Soviet Union and its East European allies. In the same year, the two countries signed a 25-year Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation. The Soviet Union obtained military access to Vietnam's air and seaports. Cam Ranh Bay was a significant port for the Russian Navy until 2002 when Russia withdrew at the end of the lease. Separately, relations between Vietnam and China took a turn most notably in 1979, when both sides clashed in a brief border war.

⁷ The Soviet Union was one of the 18 states that participated in the Paris Peace Agreement on Cambodia, signed in October 1991. The peace treaty, endorsed by the UN Security Council and the General Assembly, installed an interim UN administration in Cambodia. It was followed by supervised general elections in 1993 that established the new local government.

⁸ For an interesting study on elite perception, please see [21]

⁹ This section only briefly touches on the country's foreign policy. Among several resources, one study provides an interesting insight, see [16].

¹⁰ It can be asserted that after the first decade of domestic instability, the new Russia emerged more 'self-confident' under President Putin. Foreign policy was a major focus, although the US and Europe still occupied the main thrust of its external concerns. See for example [17; 30].

the European Union. The other major powers had been around the region since the end of the Second World War. The allied forces and the US were engaged in the restoration of peace after the Japanese surrender, while Japan itself emerged as a major economic partner. In the political history of Southeast Asia, Russia did not hold the advantage as a colonial power or as an imperial power like ancient China that enjoyed association with the small polities scattered in the South Seas. Thus, the new Russia's road to relations with Southeast Asia was at times minimalist, ad-hoc, reactive rather than proactive as it grappled with demanding domestic and foreign issues. Whatever ambitious external goals it had been not immediately visible as it reassessed its potential roles⁸.

Southeast Asia in the Russian scheme of foreign policies

From Moscow's vantage perspective, Southeast Asia is distant – geographically, politically and culturally⁹. There appear to be little in overlapping interests. It was the Cold War era that had inadvertently dragged the Soviet Union into the theatre in Indo-China. Fortunately, it was not in combative role but in a supportive political and ideological role for Vietnam. The end of the Vietnam War in 1975 provided the confidence for the Soviet Union with its ideological allies in power in Vietnam. A resurgent Soviet Union resulted in its intervention and occupation of Afghanistan. In 1979, a military disaster that incurred great losses for the Soviet military for almost a decade before its withdrawal. It had also suffered international condemnation for its Afghan conflict and earned global boycott by some states, including the Moscow Olympics. In the meantime, the Soviet Union was also stretched thin while supporting Vietnam in its Cambodian intervention. Both actions created tense diplomatic relations between some of the Southeast Asian states and the Soviet Union. Thus, the distant group of states was not particularly in the Soviet radar of priority until the political dynamics of 1991 brought changes to the Soviet Union and subsequent alignments in the international order.

Changed circumstances provided for a new foreign policy outlook where mutual interest between ASEAN and Russia formalized their engagement. The fact that there were 'familiar' allies in ASEAN, viz. Vietnam and Laos that shared Russia's Marxist ideology, encouraged Russia's entry into the collective relationship. Thus, the Cold War-era focus in foreign policy had to be re-evaluated to factor in the new realities, of a new international order where big powers were willing to cooperate with international organizations, and where smaller states were actively forging regional cooperative regimes. The foreign policy thrust towards Southeast Asia may have had precedence in President Gorbachev's Vladivostok 'look east' speech of 1986 [8]. However it was the changed geo-political circumstances and the visions of President Putin who forged an inclusive approach, never mind that Asia was not top on his priority list¹⁰.

The past decade has seen increased Russian interests in Southeast Asia, albeit on a gradual scale. President Putin has re-emphasized the growing links with partners in Asia. In 2010 Putin had expressed his interests in the 'turn to the East'. It was in line with a domestic policy initiative to ensure that Russian territories in the East, including Siberia, the Far East and Vladivostok would enjoy development through economic engagement with neighbors China and Japan. Putin's Look East was later dubbed Putin's Pivot to Asia. Facing political and economic issues with the West, Russia

found China to be more promising as an economic and political ally as its border issues had already been settled amicably. The rest of East Asia was also economically vibrant as opposed to Russia's own economy, especially with the fall in oil prices. Russia was one of the world's largest exporters of energy and the slump affected its domestic growth. In 2013 Putin claimed that Russia's economic growth would be enhanced through ties to the Asia-Pacific region rather than with the traditional markets of Western Europe¹¹. Mounting problems with Ukraine reached a climax when Russia annexed Crimea while at the same time supported anti-Kiev rebels in Southeast Ukraine. The international condemnation over the Crimea issue only enforced Putin's determination to reassess his existing relations and forge other channels of links¹². A Foreign Policy Concept signed by Putin in November 2016 (a revision of the 2013 Concept) single out Asian countries China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia, Vietnam, Mongolia, Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia [22]. Since the expression of interests, Russia has sought for more involvement, especially in the economic sector in Asian countries, through bilateral and regional diplomacy. The Russian diplomat is more visible today than he/she was a decade ago, hosting delegations from home in search of political and economic ties.

Russian Pivot and ASEAN/Southeast Asia

ASEAN included Russia as a full Dialogue Partner in 1996. Since then Russian leaders have increasingly participated in the annual ASEAN Summit, the Foreign Ministers Meeting, ASEAN Regional Forum and ASEAN ministerial-level meetings covering among others, economic, defense and energy related issues. Some of those meetings are with the ten ASEAN members while others, for instance, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF, instituted by ASEAN in 1994) include a wider circle of regional and extra-regional countries. Russian official participation has included the President, Foreign Minister and other relevant minister. In 2004, Russia acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), the grouping's standing endorsement of friendship by an external partner. ASEAN had initially introduced it for its members; TAC was then extended to other partners as a token of their support of the ideals in TAC. Special summits with dialogue countries is a practice in ASEAN. The initial ASEAN-Russia Summit was held in Kuala Lumpur in 2005 during the annual gathering of ASEAN leaders. President Putin led his delegation while Present Medvedev led the next ASEAN-Russia Summit during the ASEAN Summit in Hanoi in 2010 when statements highlighting cooperation were issued. Encouraged by developing relations between Russia and ASEAN under Russia's new foreign policy initiatives, Russia hosted a special anniversary summit in May 2016 in Sochi. A Comprehensive Programme of Action (CPA) to Promote Cooperation for the years 2016–2020 was adopted by ASEAN and Russian leaders. It followed the earlier CPA2005–2016 which had seen some advancement in economic cooperation and the first meeting of ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM) with the Russian Economic Minister in 2010. Since 2011 Russia has also participated in the annual ASEAN Summit 'follow-up' called the East Asia Summit where leaders of ASEAN and the Dialogue Partners convene for their half-day meeting. In 20¹⁴ the ASEAN–Russia Trade and Investment Cooperation Roadmap was initiated that offers programmes that the public and business community could jointly implement. Despite being the partner with the lowest trade

¹¹ Putin mentioned this at an international forum in June 2013 at St Petersburg. At the Valdai Club in Sochi in October 2014 he again expressed interests in looking to Asia. See also [15].

¹² For a detailed study of Russian foreign policy, please see: [28].

and investment input, Russia, like other Dialogue Partners has established a Mission to ASEAN in Jakarta and accredited a special Ambassador in 2017 [1].

ASEAN and Russia have forged new linkages through several institutional arrangements. The regional association has in turn provided scope for more interactions at the bilateral level with several Southeast East Asian partners. There is room for advancement from the current low volume of trade, investments, socio-cultural exchanges and connectivity between Russia and Southeast Asia. There are potential in mutually beneficial macro level organizations that can also provide the linkages. Several mutually significant organizations are: The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation organization (APEC), Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Eastern Economic Forum. The various multilateral avenues have provided connectivity for enhancing a wider scope for ties between Russia and countries in the region the public and private sector levels.

Southeast Asia's utility and links to Russia

Scholars have remarked that "on balance, Moscow needs South-east Asia more than the region needs Russia" [25]. They attribute it to Russia's need to tap onto the vast ASEAN economic market to cure them of their economic woes and to lower Russian's risks of becoming dependent on China, and show to the West that Russia is a major power that should be taken seriously [25]. Russian rhetoric suggests that Southeast Asia and ASEAN are significant components in Russian foreign policy, however reality has suggested otherwise.

Economically, Russia remains one of ASEAN's smallest trading partners among all dialogue partners, both in terms of export and import of goods. In terms of the composition of exports, ASEAN mainly exports electrical machinery and mechanical equipment to Russia. On the other hand, Russia mainly exports mineral fuels and minerals to ASEAN.

A significant component of Russia's trade to this region is in military technology and arms. Russia is one of the key providers of arms and military technology to the Asia-Pacific region. In fact, strong sales with Asian states has led to year-on-year growth in arms sales for Russia and this in turn has allowed Russia to overtake and become the world's second largest arms producer [2]. While Russian arms sales to China and India have contributed significantly, more surprisingly is the fact that Southeast Asian states have purchased more Russian arms than Indian, and China put together [2]. Over half of ASEAN's member states have bought Russian arms [25]. Matt Bartlett comments that arms deals have helped Russia's "soft" power by "helping to bring Asian states into Moscow's sphere of influence" [2]. These deals are not without its unintended consequences. Owing to the influx of arms, Southeast Asia has seen a rise in weapons trafficking.

Another significant area that Russia is cooperating with ASEAN on is energy. Russia is building Vietnam's first nuclear power plant (though plans have stalled) and over half of ASEAN member states have sought out Russian expertise in the energy sector [25]. In Indonesia, there are also plans to build an oil refinery under a joint venture between Pertamina, Indonesia's state-owned oil company, and Russia's Rosneft [26]. Given that Asia Pacific is pegged to be the region that will account for most of the growth in future energy demand, it is natural that Russia will be interested

in and want to cater to this demand [3]. ASEAN and Russia have developed a ASEAN-Russia Energy Cooperation Work Plan 2016-2020 that "marks the willingness and readiness of ASEAN and Russia to deepen energy cooperation, in areas focusing on oil and gas, the electric power sector, civilian nuclear energy, and promotion of renewable energy" [1].

Another separate link, albeit minor, between Southeast Asia and Russia is tourist arrivals. Both sides have held regular dialogue to promote tourism in a bid to promote cross-cultural understanding on both sides.

Despite the perceived Russian detachment from the region, one ASEAN member state that Russia has enjoyed positive relations with is Vietnam. This bilateral relationship has a dense and high level of interaction. Both leaders meet each year in format or another. One concern for Russia, however, is that other states such as the US, Japan, or India, may erode Russia's competitive advantage with Vietnam. Other factors, such as US sanctions which has halted the Russia-Vietnam Long Phu 1 thermal power plan project, also threaten relations. Anton Tsvetov specifically warns that it will be difficult in the coming years for Russia to keep Vietnam interested [29].

Revisionist or status quo?

What are Russia's interests and intents for the region? Does it seek to be a revisionist power or a status quo power, and how will it navigate the great power dynamics that occur in Southeast Asia?

Russia wants to be perceived as a balancing power in the region as iterated by Ambassador Andrey Tatarinov, Russia's Ambassador to Singapore, in Dec 2017 [6]. Russian officials have asserted that they are not asking ASEAN Member States to pick sides, and they believe that AMS should all have their own independent foreign policies. Russia's preference to serve as a balance between US and China stems from its strong objections to military alliances and blocs. While regional integration is preferred and encouraged, Russia is strongly against countries forming alliances and blocs. Despite their claims of wanting to be a balancing power, Russia cannot be a true balancing force if it remains aloof and distant from the Southeast Asia region and from ASEAN.

Other Russian scholars are more conservative in their assessment. They do not share the strong view possessed by Russia. One expert commented that if Russia could operate as an independent 'pole', then its presence would be welcomed in the region as part of a multipolar framework¹³. Right now, however, Russia lacks this independence as it relies heavily on China [11]. On the other hand, another expert felt that Russian presence in this region would not be welcomed as it would overcomplicate the power dynamics in this region. Additionally, the expert saw little 'pull' for Russia to want to be involved in the ASEAN region. Burdzik remarks that Russia is "a country that supports the regional order; not interested in being a real security actor in the Asia-Pacific, but rather a trade partner trying to keep neutrality" [3].

The differing views suggest that there remains much ambiguity over Russian presence in the region. While Russia has declared itself as being 'Asian' (given that 60% of its landmass is in Asia) on a number of occasions, its policy stance, which remains largely and primarily focused on US and Europe, indicates more clearly its perceived self-identity (i. e. that it is an European state, rather than an Asian one). In more recent times, the differing views expressed by Russian officials working in the ASEAN region

¹³ This came from personal interviews conducted with both Southeast Asia- and Russia-based scholars working on ASEAN-Russia issues.

¹⁴ See also [5; 24] for extended analysis on Russia's presence in the region.

and with those based in Moscow suggest that there is now a more apparent split in thinking and mindset between the two groups. The leadership based in Kremlin remains more concerned with the West, while those based in the Russian Far East have been trying to highlight the significance of the Asian region to those in Moscow. At present, Russian policies remain controlled by Moscow and there is no desire to decentralize interest to other areas nearer to Asia (e. g. Vladivostok).

What are the major issues in this region that Russia takes interest in? One is the rise of competing concepts of regionalism. Russia does not welcome the Indo-Pacific idea (and by extension, the concept of the Quad) for several reasons. First, the Indo-Pacific concept would undermine ASEAN leadership and centrality. Russia regards ASEAN as an important central driver in the regional architecture and the Indo-Pacific concept threatens to create new artificial boundaries (This was mentioned by Russian Ambassador to Singapore Andrey Tatarinov at a talk given at the Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore on March 28, 2019). Russia perceives the value of ASEAN in its unity and its history of working out norms and practices which are genuinely inclusive and deploy rooted in international law. One expert raised the Treat of Amity and Cooperation as a clear example. Second, Russia is adamant that states cannot possess a bloc mentality and that the Indo-Pacific and Quad are manifestations of such a mindset (Russian Ambassador to Singapore Andrey Tatarinov spoke of this at a talk given at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore on December 7, 2018).

Additionally, the Russians perceive current great power dynamics (between the US and China) to be working against ASEAN and are concerned that it will challenge and question ASEAN's role in the region. Experts in Russia opined that they would like to see ASEAN as a consolidated region that is not polarized by rising US-China tensions but are contemplating about the extent to which ASEAN will be able to manage the tensions and stay united. A unified ASEAN that can extrapolate its norms and practices to the rest of the region is a preferable partner for Russia than a disunited and weak ASEAN.

Third, there are political and security challenges that are common to both Russia and ASEAN. The first challenge concerns international terrorism and transnational crime. Both sides have pledged to step up cooperation on these fronts [25]. Another area of concern to both parties is the South China Sea disputes. Russia shares ASEAN's preference for peaceful negotiations to resolve the disputes and regards any external party interference as counterproductive and detrimental to the situation at hand (Russian Ambassador to Singapore Andrey Tatarinov spoke of this at a talk given at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore on December 7, 2018).

Prospects for Russia-Southeast Asia relations

Russia maintains a presence in Southeast Asia that is disproportionate to its size¹⁴. Despite its claims of being a major power, its presence is low key. They have very little to no soft power to speak of in the region (arms trade notwithstanding) and this is largely due to a lack of investment on the part of those in Moscow. While Russians have been around in this region for a long time, it remains perceived as a distant, western-oriented power by the populaces in this region. Other factors like geography (too far), history

(lack of shared history), and lack of cultural familiarity (there is still a gap in understanding between Russia and Southeast Asian culture) make it difficult for Russia to ever exert any real influence in this region. In fact, both Ian Storey and Anton Tsvetov highlighted that the people-to-people exchange between Russia and ASEAN is perhaps "the weakest component of the ASEAN-Russia partnership" [25]. They added that awareness of ASEAN issues and events is very low in Russia [25].

More crucially, there is no well-articulated grand plan or vision when it comes to its relation to this region. Jonathan Eyal, Global Affairs correspondent at the Straits Times, commented in 2017 on the back of Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's tour of Southeast Asian capitals that while Mr Lavrov's tour could be perceived as a significant step forward for ASEAN-Russia ties, the whole policy stance remained unclear. Eyal wrote:

"...for Mr Lavrov's tour of the region does herald an important step: an evolving new Russian approach to Asia as a whole, an initiative which seeks to reposition Moscow as an Asian power, with its own stakes in the region. It is not yet a fully articulated Russian strategy, and it is still a policy initiative too obsessed with countering the United States, rather than truly engaging with Asian nations. Still, this is a strategic development which deserves far more attention than it currently gets" [7].

Russia has a predilection to base its Asian strategy on countering the United States and whatever Asia foreign policy it has is Sino-centric¹⁵. As an example, Russia's turn to becoming more active in multilateral forums in the Asia-Pacific is "to demonstrate to the West that it has places to turn to politically and economically" [12]. This shows yet again Russian tendency to view Southeast Asia/ASEAN to an end than an end¹⁶.

Russia does not have a clear Asia, let alone ASEAN, foreign policy [18]. Even the oft-proclaimed Russian 'pivot to Asia' is a misnomer; it is a term that is disputed by the Russians themselves. Russian officials remark that they have always been in Asia and that it is erroneous to think otherwise. There is also no major soft power initiative or grand infrastructure plan by which to draw the attention of other states; specifically, there is no Russian equivalent of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative nor an American Dream.

Despite Moscow's purported claims to being both a European and Asian power, its attention is still predominantly on events happening in Europe. Eyal wrote:

"... the truth is that Moscow remains a resolutely European city, ruled by a political elite far more concerned about, say, the slightest mishap in a small northern European country like Estonia or the defense strategy of tiny Montenegro on Europe's southern approaches, than about the epic strategic shifts of truly gigantic proportions now unfolding in Asia." [7]

In terms of regional security, there is no explicit desire on the part of Russia to play any strong role in this region. Russia has not increased its investment in its Far East military capabilities which suggests that it sees itself as having little role to play in terms of regional security. Even for security challenges as major as the Korean peninsula nuclear issue, Russia has seemed somewhat comfortable to take a seat back. Although Russia was part of the Six Party Talks framework, for "most of the time [they] were just content to be there with the "big boys", rather than offer any genuine contribution" [7]. Even for other security concerns, it seems "the belief in

¹⁵ See also [14] for an analysis of Russia's 'reorientation to Asia'.

¹⁶ See also [28] which outlines the notion that Southeast Asia is secondary to China in Russia's pivot to Asia.

Moscow remained that on all such matters Russia's best approach was to have no approach" [7]. This approach is not new; Koldunova notes:

"...Russia was considered an additional partner that, to use an expression coined by the famous Russian international relations expert Aleksey Bogaturov, would "condense" the regional space. That is, Russia was more of a "background" participant in regional processes, whose presence, as far as the ASEAN countries were concerned, should, to a certain degree contain the growing regional ambitions of major powers, primarily the strategic military ones." [12]

There are some indications that this might change. Russia has been investing in its Pacific fleet; by 2019, the Russian Eastern Military District in charge of operations across the Pacific will receive more than 6,240 new pieces of equipment and the Russian Pacific Fleet is expected to receive 70 new warships by 2026 [19]. The Vostok 2018 war games, regarded as the largest single show of Russian military power in 37 years, was seen as a signal for Russia's military preparedness for possible confrontation in the Asia-Pacific region [19].

In terms of economic prospects, trade and economics form the bedrock of most diplomatic relationships and ASEAN-Russia relations is no different. On this front, Russian officials are cognizant that the present Russia-ASEAN trade and economic relationship is neither reflective nor indicative of its full potential. There is a desire for Russia to engage more economically in this region. This would involve the enlargement of economic engagement to include other areas. One possible idea is the linking of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), ASEAN, and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in a large-scale free trade agreement (Russian Ambassador to Singapore Andrey Tatarinov spoke of this at a talk given at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Singapore on December 7, 2018).

There are several potential barriers that might hinder progress within ASEAN-Russia economic ties. First, the Russian economy remains largely as a resource-based economy (or a developing world economy). Many Russia's exports are raw materials and there is little investment in the value chain. For example, Russia's trade in fur revolves around the export of raw pelts. The more valuable (or value-added) processes of designing and refining the pelts into fur are still mostly done in Europe. This has constrained the type of goods that comes out of Russia and has limited the scope and depth in which Russia participates in the global economy. Related to the concerns on Russia's economy, large swathes of capital flight from the country in the past two decades have not helped the economic situation.

Second, Russia's economic ties (and dependence) remains with Europe and China. Russia is not expected to de-prioritize the economic ties anytime soon [13]. A potential third barrier is the presence and imposition of Western sanctions on Russian trade and economic involvement and cooperation that may potentially impact trade dealings with Asia. While these may present obstacles to cooperation with Asia, they are unlikely to hinder cooperation in areas such as digital cooperation and digital trade.

On the point of a possible EAEU, ASEAN, SCO free trade agreement, Russia is hopeful of greater Eurasian partnership and regard ASEAN as a key player for regional economic integration. Experts, however, are pessimistic about the arrangement for a few reasons. One, they regard the EAEU as a disparate group and are unsure how such an economic arrangement

would work. Two, some assert that any FTA would be perceived as having little utility given the low trading volumes between the EAEU region and ASEAN. Third, the SCO is not perceived as an economic giant and there are concerns on how one might link the three groupings together economically. Fourth, Russia only has a few FTAs of its own and has thus far not shown that it is convinced of the benefits of free trade.

Most experts commented on the limited trade agenda between ASEAN and Russia. At present, ASEAN-Russia economic ties tend to revolve around oil and gas, energy, and military technology. Even then, trade is done with only a few ASEAN Member States (e. g. Malaysia and Vietnam). In wanting to expand the trade agenda, Russia is presently prioritizing digital and high-technological innovation products as key items to market to and trade with the ASEAN region. While they will not be able to compete effectively with China in areas such as the fast-moving consumer goods market, they are thus focusing their efforts on the high-end technological and digital products and services.

In terms of economic outlook, there is pessimism about the direction and magnitude of ASEAN-Russia economic cooperation. While it might evolve in a positive way (e. g. possible expansion to include high-technology innovation), it is highly unlikely that there will be a substantial increase in trade volumes between the two partners in the next five years. The experts raised the point of the Russian habit of making declarations with little follow-up action. Dmitry Gorenburg and Paul Schwartz remark that "although Russian leaders routinely praise such initiatives, they have failed to fundamentally improve trade and investment, often because Moscow has failed to follow through on its associated commitments" [9]. As such, they see little change in the status quo.

It is far more likely that Russia will remain involved in this region through the various means that would allow it to maximize its profile. For example, it will continue to want to be at every ASEAN-led forum (particularly those where the great powers are at) in order to be seen at where the 'action' is. Koldunova adds that:

"Russia-ASEAN dialogue is gradually evolving its own unique agenda that includes cybersecurity, food security, fight against terrorism, military medicine and emergency response. The parties have indeed stepped up cooperation in many areas, including a separate track of collaboration between the defense ministers of Russia and ASEAN countries as part of the Moscow Conference on International Security, as well as a business dialogue, cooperation in education and research via university forums held on the side-lines of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia-ASEAN youth summits and the Network of ASEAN-Russia Think Tanks (NARTT)" [12].

This implies that while present ASEAN-Russia relations are far from maximizing its full potential, incremental steps suggest that things are moving in the right direction. The danger for Russia is that these incremental steps are being outpaced by developments in the region that may well threaten its own interests¹⁷.

Conclusion

Cognizant of competition amongst external powers, countries in Southeast Asia, either singly or collectively through ASEAN, are exploring various channels of cooperation with regional and extra-regional partners to propel

¹⁷ For an alternative approach to strengthening Russia-ASEAN relations, see [10].

their national goals while remaining cautious of their positions vis-à-vis great-power rivalry. In the meantime, Russia, a major global player and a Permanent Five member of the United Nations Security Council, has been generally left behind in its dealings in Southeast Asia. Its political and economic status trails far behind other actors, big and medium. It has not fully explored the advantages of soft power or succeeded in recreating a positive image void of the Cold War stance it portrayed in the 1970s and 1980s. Southeast Asia offers vast opportunities for expanding the relationship in a mutually beneficial environment. Only a revitalized and comprehensive policy towards the region will rectify the situation if Russia desires to be a Power that is commensurate with its perceived global status; it is simply not enough to only be an arms and nuclear technology salesman for Southeast Asia.

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