

The Asia-Pacific Region Strategy in Russian Diplomacy

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Abstract: When the Western sanctions caused Russian relations with the Western countries to come to early a Cold War frostiness, Russia started its Pivot to East strategy to uplift its diplomacy with the Asia-Pacific region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union for the newborn Russia the idea of a return to Atlanticism was the predominant view in the beginning, advocating that Russia's adoption of the Western system was in accordance to its national interests. Kremlin believed that Russia's key partners should be wealthy developed countries with mature economies and democratic systems, i.e. the United States and West Europe. To win the trust and help of the West, Russia actively responded to the U.S. and European requests and made concessions on major issues including economic reform, reduction of strategic nuclear weapons. Nevertheless, The U.S. has regarded Russia as its vital geopolitical and has been squeezing Russia's geopolitical space through an eastward expansion of NATO. Therefore, Russia sought to rebalance and diversify its foreign relations as well as resume more active relationships with its neighbors and countries in East Asia. Pivot to East in Russian diplomacy does not equate with departing from the West but shows Russia's increased attention to a balanced foreign policy. A master of diplomacy, Russia takes full account of short – and long – term interests, doubly true for its Pivot to East.

1. Introduction

Russia has been living under the conditions of undeclared war on the part of the USA and its satellites for almost five years. One can talk a lot on formal pretext of such “punishment”, but it would be better to cite Vladimir Putin's thesis on sanctions from his Address to the Federal Assembly : “Speaking of the sanctions, they are not just a knee-jerk reaction on behalf of the United States or its allies to our position regarding the events and the coup in Ukraine, or even the so-called Crimean Spring. I'm sure that if these events had never happened, they would have come up with some other excuse to try to contain Russia's growing capabilities, affect our country in some way, or even take advantage of it”.

2. Pivot to East was Put Forward by Russia as a Strategic Trend in Its Foreign Policy

Pressure from the US and its satellites in the form of diplomatic confrontation and economic sanctions caused Russia to seek this new path of national development. Called "Pivot to East" by scholars within and outside Russia, the systemic procedure covers political, economic and military spheres. Russia has significantly lifted the status of the Asia-Pacific in its whole diplomatic layout. Selling its oil and natural gas resources and attracting Asian investment to Russia's Far East are part of the economic plan, and cooperative military production of higher-tech weaponry with Asian countries is part of the military's planned direction [1].

In the political sphere, key changes occurred in traditional friendship and diplomatic strategy. Russia's first concrete step has been to strengthen traditional country-to-country friendships, first of all including raising the level of Sino-Russian relations. The latest Russian national security strategy document called the Sino-Russian relationship one of the "vital factors maintaining global and regional stability." The two countries declared their "Sino-Russian All-Around Strategic Cooperation Partnership" had entered a new stage. The leaders of the two countries have been meeting on

international occasions regularly and expressing shared views on strategic stability [2].

Another step has been in remedying diplomatic disagreements, with changes that have included Russia restarting its relationship with Japan, boosting influence on the Korean Peninsula, and connecting with ASEAN countries. Since 2015 Russia has communicated willingness to improve bilateral relations with Japan but this is stymied by their territorial dispute over the southern Kuril Islands. In August 2019 Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov had said of the signing of a treaty Russia, as the successor to the Soviet Union, was ready to fulfill its obligations, in particular, to transfer the islands of Habomai and Shikotan to Japan after the conclusion of a peace treaty. It means Moscow is ready to advance in dialogue with Japan only after it fully recognizes the results of the Second World War [3].

3. Russia's Pivot to East will Promote Long-term Development

Russia strengthened its relationship with ASEAN countries, too. Russia's relationships with these countries had been rather cool, but Putin approved a free-trade agreement between Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Vietnam, a first for the union with an outside country. Another step has been through cooperation with Asia-Pacific countries in economy and trade while enlarging domestic markets and resource exploitation.

Russia's main energy partners used to be Western countries. Pivot to East turned this around. In 2014 China and Russia signed agreements on natural gas supply that allowed Russia in 2018 to begin supplying China for the next 30 years with natural gas through eastern pipelines along the Sino-Russian border, at annual output reaching 3.8 billion m³. Another agreement regulates that Russia supply 3 billion m³ of natural gas to China every year through western pipelines. Sinopec and the Silk Road fund purchased respectively 20% and 9.9% of shares of liquefied natural gas project in Yamal [4].

India is another customer of Russian energy in the Asia-Pacific. A 2015 agreement regulates Russian supply to India of 0.1 billion tons of crude oil within 10 years. Besides selling them energy, Russia wants to attract Asia-Pacific countries to help develop its Far Eastern region. Economic development zones and free ports have been established there since 2014, and Asia-Pacific politicians and business leaders were invited to economic forums in Vladivostok.

China will become the first foreign customer of the S-400, Russia's most advanced air-defense missile, and of the Su-35 fighter. China and Russia plan to co-develop a heavy helicopter. Still, levels of India-Russian military cooperation are higher than Sino-Russian ones. Authorized by Russia, India produces the Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighter and T-90 battletank. The two jointly develop BrahMos supersonic cruise missiles and fifth-generation fighters and were in accord on selling BrahMos missile to a third country, an indication that bilateral military cooperation is in a new stage [5].

Military cooperation with Vietnam is evident. About 90% of Vietnam's weapon imports are from Russia and include the Kilo-class submarine, Su-30 fighter, Gepard-class frigate and Bastion anti-ship missile. Much more military coordination between Russia and Asia-Pacific countries is occurring, including Sino-Russian joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean and South China Sea, and an unprecedented joint amphibious landing. In August and September 2018 Russia and China militaries had joint exercises in Russia's Far East.

Russia's Pivot to East will promote long-term development because it is paralleling Asian prosperity and because the world's economic core moving eastward. Russian leaders realize that integrating with the Asia-Pacific economic zone might help. During the Eastern Economic Forum, Putin said that the 21st century is "Asia-Pacific Century" and that Russia should make use of this region advantages in economy, technology, and capability for innovation. Most in need is development of Russia's vast, resource-rich eastern territory, which has most of the country's oil, natural gas, hydroelectric power, and forestry.

4. Russia's Position in Eurasia Contributes to Interactions between Eastern and Western Civilizations

The Kremlin has wanted Russia to turn itself into a bridge linking the East to the West through Pivot to East. Its unique geography and history have made Russia swing between West and East but without being fully integrated into either. Russia is traditionally oriented toward Europe. Since the USSR's disintegration, Moscow had been centering on the West and trying to integrate in an equal partnership. To win the trust and help of the West, Russia actively responded to the U.S. and European requests and made concessions on major issues including economic reform, reduction of strategic nuclear weapons. The U.S. has been squeezing Russia's geopolitical space through an eastward expansion of NATO. After two rounds of eastward expansion, NATO absorbed three Baltic countries, Central and East Europe, as well as the main Balkan countries, and the new political and security order there became dominated by NATO [6].

Russian political scientist Sergey Karaganov said, "the biggest difficulty in finding intellectual substantiation for the need to make an economic turn to the East was a political one." The opinion of Russian elites has been "that all the good things had come to Russia from the West, and if Russia could only try to join it, or at least come close enough, all its problems would be solved. Putin has indicated Russia's position in Eurasia contributes to interactions between Eastern and Western civilizations [7]. In June 2016 Putin proposed that China, India, Pakistan and Iran join Russian efforts to establish a Greater Euro-Asian Partnership and that Europe could participate in the process. Putin desires that his proposal of Russia as bridge between Europe and Asia replace the concept of "Greater Europe Stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok."

5. Pivot to East has not Achieved the Results Expected

For Russia, Pivot to East has fostered some results in politics and relieved pressure from the West. After Crimea was incorporated into Russia, China and India opposed Western efforts to isolate Russia and declined participation in sanctions, though Japan imposed several which were symbolic rather than integral. India security advisor Shivshankar Menon claimed Russia owned legal interests in Ukraine [8]. Asia-Pacific leaders kept meeting with Russian leaders and sped up cooperation despite Western pressure.

Until now, Pivot to East has not achieved the results Russians expected. Although pressure on Russia was somewhat relieved and attempts to isolate Russia failed, the fundamentally unaltered Western policy is a triumvirate of diplomatic isolation, strategic extrusion and economic sanctions. Some Russian scholars complained that direct political support from Asia-Pacific countries was insufficient and that Russia did not get political support from China [9].

Economic results brought by Pivot to East are limited. According to one Russia Far East expert, Sino-Russian politics is heated but economic cooperation is frozen, with the bilateral trade anemic and no achievement in investment. Some Russians thought Chinese investment would swarm into Russia after financial cooperation with Western countries terminated, but it did not happen. Chinese partners seem really cautious in providing funds. Some Russian scholars thought China was abiding by sanctions, especially in finance, although it did not officially sign on to participate in them. The full potential of the Sino-Russia relations is yet to be uncovered. There is much work to be done in this regard. According to experts, there are two issues in the Russian-Chinese cooperation. The Russians do not understand the Chinese mentality, while Chinese businessmen tend to dominate in business. To summarize, differences and conflicts of interest still exist but should be well-understood and kept under control.

Reasons why Pivot to East was not a success include aspects of foreign trade, the global economy, and worldwide fuel prices. Planned cooperative projects were slow to start and expectations unrealistic that investments and technology from Asia could counterbalance losses from Western sanctions. Russian disappointment may stem from unrealistic expectations on Pivot to East. Asia-Pacific countries, China in particular, are unable or unwilling to provide Russia enough

financial support because economic relations are established based on mutual benefit. China, Japan, India and ROK say that because they need to maintain cooperation with the US for their own interests, it is impossible for them to unconditionally side with Russia over the Ukraine issue.

6. Deeper Sino-Russian Cooperative Relations May Reduce American Financial and Economic Capability

Pivot to East impacts global and regional development and Russia's relations with emerging Asia-Pacific countries. China could be regarded by the US as a threat to its hegemony. Pivot to East was put forward by Russia out of consideration of deterrence against American hegemony. China and Russia are taking actions which may threaten the interests of the US and its allies. Deeper Sino-Russian cooperative relations may reduce American financial and economic capability. The US must strengthen its Asia Rebalancing to meet these challenges. Under Donald Trump, US-Russian relations slid to the lowest level since the end of Cold War. America may view Russian Pivot to East as the route to an anti-US alliance and consolidate its power bases in Europe and Asia.

Pivot to East means opportunities for promotion of the Belt and the Road construction. China's Silk Road Economic Belt initiative caused heated debates in Russia, but the official word is there is no obstacle. Some perceived its ability to deepen Central Asia' dependence on China, erode Russia sphere of influence and negatively impact the EAEU. After Pivot to East, however, Russia switched to being positive. In March 2015 Russia applied to join AIIB as a founding member, and in May China and Russia signed a linkage document for the Silk Road Economic Belt and Eurasian Economic Union. The EAEU-Silk Road connection will promote infrastructure construction in Russia and Asia and will stabilize the Eurasian continent. In 2016 Putin proposed establishing a "Greater Euro-Asian Partnership" through which Russia could turn its political resources into economic power.¹ With the Belt and the Union linkage, CIS including Russia would be invigorated.

Pivot to East is not going to reverse but faces many problems. Most Russian projects with countries like China and India in the field of energy, economy, trade and military technology are long-term goals in early stages. Given time, they could make Pivot to East more influential. The role of the Asia-Pacific region in the overall layout of Russia's foreign affairs will also eventually be consolidated. The Pivot to East is objective and inevitable. Whether Russian politicians like or not, Pivot to East will be a given in the future.

7. Conclusion

For Asia-Pacific countries, implementing pragmatic cooperation with Russia is problematic. Though Russia's Far East and many Asia-Pacific countries are geographically near, development is not assured due to backward infrastructure and declining population. Pivot to East does not mean Russia will "depart from the West" and "embrace the East" wholeheartedly. Pivot to East really means that Russia will gradually change its overvaluing of the West, will seem less beholden in foreign affairs, and will pay more attention to relations with Asia-Pacific countries. By doing so, Russian can maintain the balance between East and West much better.

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