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## ASIA-PACIFIC AND CHINA

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**Introduction**

This chapter assesses the trajectory of Russia's policy towards Asia, principally Asia-Pacific, but will also touch on policy towards Central Asia and South Asia. It has been suggested that four 'old' regions are being 'pushed into one' (Central, South, Northeast and Southeast Asia), which facilitates the formation in the 'East Eurasian space' of a new geopolitical regional complex of 'Greater East Asia' (Sevastyanov, 2012). In defining the parameters of Asia therefore, a 'contest is emerging over how to define Asia conceptually, including choice of terminology' (Kuhrt, 2014a; Medcalf, 2016).

We first look at the evolution of Russia's policy in Asia, including attempts to craft an Asia-Pacific strategy, before outlining the aims and objectives of contemporary Russian policy in the region, including the role of the Russian Far East region (RFE), before detailing the trajectory of Russian bilateral relations with the key actors in the region: China, India, Japan and South Korea. Finally, we raise the question of how China's One Belt, One Road (OBOR) might reconfigure the international politics of the region, before drawing some conclusions regarding the success of the overall policy and outlining longer-term challenges.

**The evolution of Russia's policy in Asia: wither the "pivot"?**

Until the late 1990s, little scholarly attention was paid to Russia's Asia policy. In Russia, those working on Asia were sidelined, as Russian foreign policy focused principally on Europe and the US, reflecting the traditional emphasis on relations with the West during the Soviet period. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was criticized for 'continuing and even exaggerating its Soviet predecessors' "Euro-Americocentrism" and sidelining the South and the East' (Kuhrt, 2007:10). In the early 1990s, the MFA was headed by the pro-Western Andrei Kozyrev, who lacked expertise on China and Asia in general. This led to some embarrassing episodes which hampered Moscow's official China policy in these first years of Russian diplomacy. For example, there was an attempt to develop non-governmental links to Taiwan, which nearly threatened to derail relations with China at a time when the joint border remained undemarcated.

Furthermore, Beijing was fearful of the contagion of new Russian democratic and reformist ideas into China itself. Concerns in Beijing that Moscow might bring human rights considerations

into bilateral relations went unrealized, however, as Moscow soon moved relations to a more pragmatic footing, and in 1995 refused to join the European Union in condemning China's human rights record, suggesting this might destabilize the internal situation in China. The same year it was declared that 'complete political unanimity' existed between China and Russia: Russia reaffirmed its adherence to the 'one China' policy while China expressed 'complete understanding of the actions taken by the Russian side to preserve the country's unity' (Kuhrt, 2007: 18). Kozyrev made it clear, however, that China was 'With all due respect . . . not a world economic leader for the time being' (Kuhrt, 2007: 9) and indeed, until 1993 the chief focus of economic efforts in the Asia-Pacific region was Japan.

Although relations with Japan continued to develop under Yeltsin, the furor over apparent plans to make territorial concessions to Japan in 1993 in exchange for investment, meant that relations became hostage to the territorial dispute, and even the 'summit without neckties' between Yeltsin and Hashimoto in 1997 failed to break the impasse. Research on the Russia-Japan relationship has tended understandably, to focus mainly on the history of the territorial dispute, and the lack of dynamism in these relations has inevitably meant fewer works on this topic in both Russia and the West.

The 2001 US intervention in Afghanistan focused global attention on Central Asia and saw the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which had evolved from confidence-building measures around border talks between Central Asian states, Russia and China, bringing the Eurasian region into sharper focus.

As Russia and China strengthened relations, principally with the declaration of a partnership aimed at strategic alliance in the twenty-first century, there was a growing recognition that the long neglected 'Asian leg' of Russian foreign policy was gaining in significance. Despite this, the focus remained squarely on the Sino-Russian relationship, rather than on Russia and Japan, or Russia and Asia more widely. Russian analysts generally provide 'optimistic' accounts, and this tendency has strengthened under Putin. However, in the 1990s, Russian scholarship on Russia-China relations had often been more alarmist – in particular regarding the Russian Far East and issues around territorial demarcation, Chinese migration and cross-border trade, reflecting real security fears as the Sino-Russian border opened up (Miasnikov, 1996; Gel'bras, 1997).

Since the start of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, Russia has intensified cooperation with China in an apparent 'pivot' to Asia. However, while this is presented in both Russia and the West as a sudden one, the broader context shows that this is more a gradual recalibration that has been taking place over several years. This must be seen in the context of the US pivot, or 'rebalancing', to Asia under Obama, and also in light of heightened rhetoric following the Ukraine crisis in 2014. This leads to the conclusion that the intensification of relations is partly designed to produce a reaction from the West and to highlight the dangers of isolating Russia.

The 'pivot' was declared by Putin in 2012 in the same year that Russia hosted the APEC summit. What does it entail?

At the discursive level, there is greater recognition of, firstly, the importance of regional powers, given the rise of China and India, arguably both more powerful in their respective regions, than as global powers (and reconfirmed by the 'BRICS' grouping); and, secondly, there has been some limited recognition by Russian academics and policymakers of one-dimensionality – that Russia's Asia policy had been overly focused on China in the post-Soviet period as a whole. In fact for much of this period, Russia's Asia policy was predominantly a China policy. Further, the Russian Far East was highlighted as a priority area.

The US 'pivot' or 'rebalancing' to Asia-Pacific, and Russia's growing rift with the West accounts at least in part, for the greater significance attached to relations with Asia-Pacific. This was borne out by the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, and later reinforced in the 2016

Concept (Kuhrt, 2014a; FPC, 2016). A certain ‘mirroring’ of US language is evident – this plays a performative role – that true great powers (read the US, Russia) are capable of projecting power outwards and acting in more than one region simultaneously. In this scenario, Russia is not ‘just one of the BRICS’, i.e. mainly regional powers and ‘not-quite’ global powers, but rather a power that can act both regionally and globally, on a par with the US.

Is there really a pivot? The Russian approach to China is widely seen as a new, more accommodating one: the economic impact of sanctions and a falling oil price have forced Russia to yield economic positions to China.

However, in 2009, following the global financial crisis, Russia also talked of pivoting to Asia. Then too, Dmitry Medvedev suggested that Russia and China had been ‘pushed together by the crisis’. It was at this time too that Moscow gradually began to cast around for alternative partners to reduce reliance on China. This demonstrates the fact that Russia is fully aware of the dangers of overreliance on China to the extent that it might forfeit foreign policy autonomy were it to pursue a formal alliance with China. Russia’s China policy is a strategic partnership that is more than an ‘axis of convenience’ (Lo, 2008) or an alliance but that amounts to less than a full-blown alliance (Gelb and Simes, 2013; Bordachev, 2016) While alliances are significant phenomena in international relations, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership is more akin to an alignment than explicit alliance. There is no military component to the partnership, neither are there grounds to think it will evolve into such; furthermore, the disparities in the economic realm make full-blown alliance unlikely. Russia needs Chinese financial clout; the alignment with China acts as a force multiplier due to their status as P5 powers; the reinvigoration of the UN Security Council since the end of the Cold War in the context of increasing multipolarity acts to bolster Russia’s great power status. Furthermore, Russia’s increased ‘othering’ of the West at both domestic and foreign levels, means that powers like China assume increased significance in identity terms. In the wake of Ukraine, it seems that Russia’s *economic* reliance on China is more about a lack of other options than a strategic choice.

## **The role of the Asia-Pacific in contemporary Russian foreign policy**

### *Identity*

In identity terms, the Ukraine crisis has helped to re-emphasize ‘the importance of Russia’s “Asia vector”, and dramatized how “Other” the West is’ (Wishnick, 2017). As Iver Neumann points out, the idea of Europe is ‘the main “Other” in relation to which the idea of Russia is defined’ (Neumann, 2017: 3). Yet the West/Europe is both self *and* other, for ‘Russians, when they make out they discuss Europe, also discuss themselves’ (Neumann, 2017: 3). Further, in engaging with Asia, Russia becomes once again *European* – i.e. in Asia it is perceived as European, not Asian, while in Europe, Russia tends to be viewed as unEuropean/non-Western (Kuhrt, 2014a). Thus turning to Asia helps paradoxically to *reinforce* Russia’s Europeaness. Again, as Neumann suggests, Russia has sought recognition principally from the West of its great power status, and that while China, and possibly India, might be alternative centres from which to gain great power status recognition, ‘the point when such recognition would make the recognition of Western powers superfluous for Russia to maintain its great power status remains a long way off’ (Neumann, 2017: 188). Deep-seated historical fears have often been played on: Milan Hauner describes Russian ambivalence, encapsulated by the term ‘Aziatchina’, i.e. the almost unlimited capacity among Russians to identify themselves with Asia while showing their contempt for the Asian peoples and civilizations as ‘utterly barbaric’ (Hauner, 1990). This ambivalence still manifests itself in debates regarding the strategic partnership with China (Tsygankov, 2009; Kashin, 2013)

Sergei Karaganov has cautioned that following the 'Asian way of development will take us not to advanced Asia (we cannot go there), but to Africa . . . Either we move closer to Europe or go barbaric' (Karaganov in Kuhrt, 2014b: 101). Yet the pivot to Asia has in many respects become even more Sinocentric than before, threatening to undermine previous attempts at diversification of Russia's Asia policy declared ahead of the APEC summit of 2012. Paradoxically, however, this intensification of the Chinese part of the pivot has been accompanied by an acceleration of diplomacy with Japan, relations with which have been stagnating for many years – in fact, the acceleration could in part be explained by this very Sinocentrism.

### ***Politics and status***

Russian scholars explicitly depict the pivot as being at least in part driven by the advent of the 'new Cold War': 'Russia needs the turn towards Asia to gain more confidence and become less vulnerable to these aggressive attack' (Kanaev and Bordachev, 2017). Further, the development of Siberia and the Far East is a central part of Asia-Pacific policy, which is seen as preserving stability in the event of long-term confrontation with the West.

There is alignment between the two states on issues of sovereignty and self-determination within the regional agenda that is central to the SCO: the 'three evils' of religious extremism, separatism and terrorism. In this way the organization provides a potent ideological symbol of a multipolar world. Yet regarding Crimea, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, China appeared cautious in lending support to Russia.

At the global level, Russia and China ostensibly present a united front, with Russia, and to some extent China, both presenting their relationship as moving to a qualitatively new stage. They highlight the need to combat not only the Western order but also to defend their interests as members of the P5, where their opposition to issues such as regime change and 'coloured revolutions' provide points of convergence. China could be seen as a 'freerider' on Russia, due to Russia's greater diplomatic experience and 'clout', while China has only relatively recently begun to participate more actively in global affairs. Yet apart from Syria, where both have vetoed attempts at passing resolutions in an 'axis of obstruction' (Pei, 2014), they do not practice wholehearted solidarity. Indeed, China sometimes appears uncomfortable with Russia's actions, often preferring to exercise restraint (Snetkov and Lanteigne, 2014). Geir Flikke suggests the relationship is best viewed as one that is 'new, transformative, and mutually constitutive for both partners, arguing that the relationship is a mechanism for *upgrading* their status in international affairs as against Western-U.S. dominance' (Flikke, 2016). Certainly, the importance of status and resistance to Western hegemony, is indisputably at the core of the Sino-Russian partnership. However, the transformative potential of the relationship should not be overstated.

Russia and China also appear to agree that the events of Maidan in Ukraine are not evidence of a popular uprising against a corrupt authority, but rather the latest in a series of 'coloured revolutions', whose genesis can be traced back to the Orange Revolution of 2004 and of which the Arab revolutions are also part.

Russia and China increasingly stand together in international forums: for example, deputy Russian defence minister Antonov used the APEC summit to suggest that:

No one can feel absolutely safe, entertaining the fact that 'color revolutions' have not come to the Asia-Pacific. The thing is, it may happen at any moment once the Western elites feel unhappy about the policy of a state and make a decision on the introduction of 'democratic' values. We recall the Umbrella revolution in Hong Kong. Who is next?

World's leading countries should pursue responsible policy in the Asia-Pacific . . . In this context, we are concerned about the US policy in the Asia-Pacific given that it becomes more and more focused on systemic 'containment' of Russia and China.

(Antonov, 2014)

This has prompted suggestions that there could eventually be an informal Sino-Russian alliance which Russia and China might use to escape what they see as a "dual containment policy" by the West' (Gelb and Simes, 2013), what Alexander Gabuev calls a 'soft alliance' (Gabuev, 2015a). However, despite often rather optimistic analyses of bilateral relations, several voices in Russia are advising caution. Viktor Larin believes that China is deliberately changing the emphasis in bilateral relations from bilateral economic and political relations to global and regional security, asserting that Moscow often follows 'in the wake of Chinese initiatives' (Larin, 2014: 185). Another Russian scholar close to the Kremlin, emphasizes that:

China and the Chinese leaders have played an exceptionally important role in the difficult period from 2014 to 2016 by making it easier for Russia to uphold its interests. However, at the same time he raises concerns that '*With this paradigm still in existence, Russia will never be able to take decisions interfering with the Chinese interests*'.

(Bordachev, 2017; author's italics)

Thus Chinese support provides psychological comfort at a time when Russia has few friends. Yet it is clear also, that this comes at a price: for example, Moscow may be increasingly called upon to support China, including in territorial disputes in Asia-Pacific.

### ***Economic and regional development***

The area that has been consistently singled out by both sides as lacking in dynamism and failing to fulfil its potential, is the area of economic cooperation. In the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept, relations with China were singled out – it was noted that the 'scope and quality of economic interaction' should be brought into line with 'the high level of political relations' (MID, 2013).

The bilateral economic relationship is to some extent a 'hangover' from the 1990s when the opening of the joint border led to an upsurge in informal trade relations. As Larin notes, this 'created an ideology and infrastructure (including a social one) of relations that still influences both countries' and people's minds and actions' (Larin, 2014: 183).

Economics has long been the laggard of bilateral relations; while trade has shown a huge increase since the late 2000s, the pledge for trade to reach \$100 billion in the year 2015 has yet to be attained.

The general trend has been for trade between the two countries to be on the decline: Chinese exports to Russia fell by 36% in the first half of 2014 and trade stalled at \$90 billion. In 2015 the figure fell to around \$64 billion and recovered only slightly to \$66 billion in 2016. An economic slowdown in China meant less demand for key Russian goods such as metal and chemicals, while the share of oil and hydrocarbons in total exports to China increased from around 50% in 2008, to nearly 70% in 2013 (Federal Customs Service). Raw materials have long been the staple diet of Russia's exports to China, and while this has been heavily criticized even at the official level, the trend shows no signs of abating. The rents extracted from this trade remain a powerful disincentive to modernization and restructuring for those currently in power.

At the height of the Ukraine crisis in May 2014, a huge gas deal was signed with China – 'Power of Siberia'. Given that Russia and China had been in negotiations for nearly two decades over price

issues, there was speculation that the crisis had spurred Russia to clinch the deal. Previously price had been an issue for Russia, but given the economic ramifications of the Ukrainian crisis, Moscow appeared to have run out of options, making China, with its huge economic potential, a far more attractive partner than before. Some suggested that the deal would barely cover Gazprom's costs. Gas prices also dropped significantly at this time. While on paper the deal looked impressive, on closer examination it appeared that the economic impact of sanctions was forcing Russia to yield economic positions to China. The launch was tentatively postponed from 2018 to 2019, possibly even to 2021, with the gas supply only reaching the agreed-upon amount by 2024 (Kuhrt, 2015b).

The dependence of the Russian economy on oil and gas revenues is particularly evident in Russia-China relations. The increasing asymmetrical dependence of Russia on China (rather than vice versa) remains a cause for concern. Russia's Energy Strategy has advocated increasing the share of Asia-Pacific energy markets from 3% to 30%, which may be achievable, but it also stated the long-term objective of reducing raw material exports from 64% to 34% by 2030, which seems far less so. The 2009 National Security Strategy characterized as potential threats *both* a failure to reduce Russia's dependence on raw materials *and* the loss of control over Russia's resources (Kuhrt, 2012: 487).

Oil is Russia's main export to China, indeed in 2015 Russia overtook Saudi Arabia as the biggest supplier of oil to China. Oil is pumped through the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean pipeline as far as Daqing on the Chinese border, and then is shipped by rail further onwards, which has become a lucrative source of rents.

Russia has attempted to portray itself as a potential 'swing supplier' between Europe and Asia. However, the strategy is difficult because Europe has become quite an unstable market in energy terms. For this reason, then, the markets of East Asia, and China in particular, appear increasingly attractive to Russian energy companies. However, the amount of gas going to China is still only around one-quarter of what Russia supplies to Europe (Krutikhin, 2014: 64).

Russia risks becoming over-dependent on China in the energy sphere, while at the same time remaining a minor supplier in relative terms, with the chances of Russia becoming a 'swing supplier' between Europe and Asia remaining low. Yet, one encounters such optimistic scenarios as:

Russian gas supplies to China alone are expected to equal those to Europe in 10 to 12 years, which will take the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership to a new level and consolidate Russia's and China's roles in the Asia-Pacific region and the world at large.

*(Kanaev and Bordachev, 2017)*

Russian rhetoric regarding a switch of gas supplies from Europe to Asia should therefore be treated with caution. Supplying China will not substitute for the European energy market. It is widely expected that instead there will be a reorientation of Russian gas towards Europe (NSDR, 2016).

Russia is only one of a range of energy supply sources for many Asian states, including China. This fact has been described as a potential source of instability by regional leaders; for example, in the Khabarovsk Krai Social and Economic Development Strategy this was singled out as a negative factor in the longer term (Khabarovskii Krai Government, 2011: 37).

The creation of a Ministry for Far Eastern Development in 2012 appeared to signal a greater focus on the neglected RFE region, which is seen as a key component of Russia's Asia-Pacific policy. Yet despite the fact that as one Russian analyst notes, there is more attention paid to the RFE rhetorically than ever before, the region receives far less financial support and investment from the centre than other regions like the Arctic and Kaliningrad, which calls into question

the priority that the Kremlin apparently devotes to it as part of its Asia-Pacific strategy. Further, the development plans for the Siberian regions have been dropped (Valdai, 2014) due to lack of resources but also a belated acknowledgement that the ‘Soviet’ approach of setting up megaprojects has been unproductive.

This region more than any other represents a ‘litmus test’ of Russia’s Asia-Pacific policy. It has been suggested that a failure to integrate the region with broader integrative processes would consign the RFE to the status of a ‘double periphery’, i.e. a region on the periphery not only of the Asia-Pacific, but also of European Russia, thus making re-integration with the rest of Russia an urgent task. The socio-economic decline of the region has been marked by massive outflows of the local population. As noted in one report, the ‘degree of the local population’s fatigue is well seen in the mass emigration of retirees (usually less inclined to seek a better fortune elsewhere) to China’ (Valdai, 2014: 37). Many in the RFE are also more likely to have visited China than their own capital.

In the 1990s, the growing dependence of the RFE on China was often securitized by governors seeking to make political capital in bargaining with the centre. Yet there remain whole *oblasts*, for example Amurskaya oblast, that are nearly wholly dependent on China for external trade. In 2014, 87.6% of exports went to China, and 84.9% of imports were from China, making China the biggest trading partner (Government of Amurskaya oblast, 2014). A report by the Valdai club in 2014 noted, however, that with the exception of Heilongjiang, due to the regional cooperation agreement with neighbouring provinces of the RFE, China does not intend to pursue ‘intense economic relations with Russia’ (Valdai, 2014).

This regional cooperation and development plan (approved 2009), linking Northeastern China and the RFE (Lee, 2013) has not gone smoothly, mainly due to a lack of coordination, although a commission was subsequently established, co-chaired by Yuri Trutnev, the presidential envoy to the RFE and Chinese Vice Premier Wang Yang. In order to boost interregional trade, transport infrastructure needs to be improved dramatically. This is why Russia has in recent years increasingly begun to participate in East Asian multilateral forums, signalled above all by Russia’s hosting of the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Vladivostok (Kuhrt, 2014a; Koldunova, 2016). The 2012 APEC summit was meant to provide a focus for such infrastructure projects, yet the projects were fraught with accusations of corruption and reports of bridges being built to ‘nowhere’ (Kuhrt, 2015a).

A promising new development is the establishment of regular meetings of the new ‘Eastern Economic Forum’ (EEF). Forums took place in 2015, 2016 and a third in 2017. The forum is attended by high-level political figures as well as business leaders (participants at the second forum included President Putin and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe). Various mechanisms have also been established for attracting foreign investment (most importantly the Advanced Special Economic Zones and the Free Port of Vladivostok (EEF, 2017). Japan had a significant presence at the 2016 Forum and various draft agreements were signed on possible plans for Japan to invest in the Northern Sea Route, amongst other energy projects (Kozinets and Brown, 2016).

As before, Russian analysts persist in seeing the RFE as a bridge, a view that has remained unchanged since the 1980s. Thus the Valdai report: ‘It is also a bridge connecting Europe and Asia not only ideologically but also spatially’ (Valdai, 2014: 41).

### Russia in Asia-Pacific

A new body of Russian scholarship is now emerging that seeks to engage more robustly with work on regions and regionalism in relation to Asia-Pacific (Sevastyanov, 2012; Koldunova,



2016) This reflects the greater emphasis in general on the importance of integrative structures in Russian foreign policy, but also the emergence of comparative work at the scholarly level, prompted by the advent of the SCO, and interest in EU studies and 'non-Western IR'. The proliferation of regional organizations in Asia-Pacific also explains this interest.

### ***Arms sales and the regional strategic balance***

Russia's turn to Asia remains, above all, an embrace of China: yet Russia has also embraced China for lack of other viable partners in the region (Trenin, 2014). Furthermore, this 'wary' embrace (Lo, 2017) is fraught with security challenges, which means that Russia still needs to 'hedge' against a rising China where possible. While Russia has expressed support for the major Chinese initiatives in the sphere of trade liberalization in the Asia Pacific, the US abandonment of Trans-Pacific Partnership by the Trump administration also leaves China unchallenged in economic terms. However, the economic 'threat' is a far more tangible one in some ways than the military one.

While discussion of any military threat from China remains taboo, as Russian politicians never emphasize military and political deterrence of China (Kuhrt, 2007; Kashin, 2013; Valdai, 2014: 23), Russia has reinforced its Pacific Fleet and strengthened forces in the Far Eastern district close to the Chinese border. Furthermore, tactical nuclear weapons are viewed by Russia as being key in countering a potential threat from China. Thus while Russia does not openly acknowledge a threat from China, plans have been made to offset it to some degree. At the same time, China is one of Russia's best purchasers of weapons.

Russia has been selling weapons to China since the 1990s. At that time the Russian arms industry was largely unregulated, which led to some embarrassing episodes such as an attempt to sell arms to Taiwan (Kuhrt, 2007). Initially these arms deals were conducted on a barter basis rather than hard currency, in the so-called 'frying pans for submarines' scenario (Kuhrt, 2007). The rationale tended to be 'if we don't sell them someone else will'. Concerns began to be expressed, however, especially by the defence establishment, regarding the wisdom of selling arms to a former enemy and a rising power, and in the context of an undemarcated border.

It should be noted that Russia has traditionally ensured that the next generation of weapons systems were sold to India, rather than China (Kuhrt, 2007: 120). This policy appeared to continue under Putin (Blank, 2013), but then some began to advocate selling China the newer generation of Su-30 fighter jets, and lifting restrictions on the sale of multipurpose ships. It was even suggested that such a policy was the only means of ensuring the preservation of the Russian defence industry (Kuhrt, 2007: 121). This may have been prompted by discussions within the EU regarding a possible lifting of the arms embargo on China in 2005, which was ultimately kept in place.

While China and India together account for 56% of Russian arms exports in the years 2000–2016, it would be incorrect to conclude that China and India are the only two significant purchasers of Russian arms in Asia. Vietnam, Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia are also important customers, and Asia now makes up 70% of Russia's total arms exports in 2000–2016. In fact, Russia supplied nearly half of all arms exported to Asia-Pacific in the same period, at 43.1% (Connolly and Sendstad, 2017: 11).

Vietnam and other smaller Asia-Pacific countries will remain important customers, in particular as China and India continue to explore ways in which to build up their own weapons industry, either by means of reverse engineering, which leads to a loss of revenue for Russia, or by purchasing production licences. The effects of sanctions and the drop in oil price make the weapons industry an even more crucial source of hard currency than before. While China had

obtained production rights and licences for some weapons systems, Russia continued to withhold more sophisticated technology, aware that China was engaging in reverse engineering.

Since the Ukrainian crisis, Russia has begun selling the more advanced Su-35 fighter jets to China in an apparent reversal of its previous policy to always sell India the latest models. One reason for this change of policy may be the fact that China has developed its own fighter (Tikhonov, 2014).

The sale of advanced weaponry to China, combined with an acceleration of military cooperation as evidenced by the increasing frequency of Sino-Russian joint military and naval exercises in the region since 2012, including 'Maritime Cooperation' and the Vostok exercises near Vladivostok, as well as in 2016 in the South China Seas, caused widespread alarm in the region. Russia has not, however, given unqualified support to China on territorial issues in the South China Sea. Thus Russian ambassador to the Philippines Kudashev affirmed that Russia shared concerns about freedom of navigation, provoking Chinese commentators to express concern about lack of support of China's 'nine-dash line' in the South China Sea and also Moscow's adherence to the 'freedom of navigation' debates (Kozyrev, 2015).

However, it is interesting to note that in China they frequently 'play up' Russian support, even when Russia has actually issued non-committal statements or statements of neutrality. Similarly, Russia also tends to exaggerate Chinese support on territorial issues such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and then the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

### ***Russia-Japan relations***

If the intention in Moscow behind such cooperation was to signal to Japan that its relationship with Beijing was moving to a higher level, then this was met with some success. Japanese voices, such as the Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), stated explicitly that concern, even fear, of 'the potential dangers posed by this Russo-Chinese "united front against Japan" had prompted Tokyo to push for high level meetings with the Russian President' (NIDS, 2016: 223–224).

In the run-up to the APEC summit in 2012, some think tank circles had already recommended developing closer ties with Japan in order to maintain a 'flexible geopolitical posture' as concerns grew that Russia was hitching its wagon too closely to China.

Even before the Ukrainian crisis, Russia had begun to explore the potential for rebuilding relations with Japan. The Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline showed the dangers of Russian overestimation of Japan's oil thirst – Russia overplayed its energy hand by unsuccessfully attempting to play off Japan against China (Kuhrt, 2015a). After '3/11', Russia had hoped that Japan's need for alternative energy sources post-Fukushima would push it in Russia's direction. However, Russia had overestimated Japan's need for energy and the extent to which that might move it towards Moscow.

The Ukraine crisis led to the postponement of Putin's 2014 visit. The sanctions imposed by Japan, although far less punishing than those imposed by Western countries, were to Russia symbolic of Japan's tendency to follow the US's lead. Russia and Japan's trade turnover has long been miniscule and has traditionally consisted mainly of hydrocarbons and fish products; in fact, now trade is even less diversified.

Public opinion in Russia on the territorial dispute is unsurprisingly uncompromising, and since the annexation of Crimea has become more so. Nevertheless, there has been a huge increase in the diplomatic activity between Russia and Japan, including the drafting of an eight-point cooperation plan in December 2016, as well as meetings involving regional leaders and the Far Eastern Development Minister Galushka. In 2018 a summit is planned which will bring to an end a proposed 'Year of Japan in Russia and Russia in Japan' (MFA, 2017).

Talks on the peace treaty are ongoing, and there have been several rounds since 2014. However, the official Russian view is that ‘progress can only be made if Japan fully recognizes the results of World War Two, including article 107 of the UN Charter’ (MFA, 2017).<sup>1</sup> A not untypical view of relations with Japan suggests that:

[t]he issue of territorial delimitation has already been decided by history, and any discussion of the matter should be concerned only with the conditions for using (including jointly) the territories in question without changing the status quo with regard to sovereign control over them.

(Shvydko 2017)

As before, Japan will only sign a peace treaty once there has been agreement on territorial concessions, while Russia insists on signing a peace treaty first, and only then discussing territorial issues. Interestingly, however, there is much discussion of joint economic development of the islands, which was one of the proposals put forward during the Yeltsin years – although issues of sovereignty will make this difficult. Russia may be hoping that Japan will revert to the policy of the 1970s when it applied the notion of *sekei fukabun* or the ‘inseparability of politics and economics’, which in practice meant that despite the territorial issue Japan and the Soviet Union maintained a reasonably good economic relationship (see Kuhrt, 2007).

### ***The Korean Peninsula***

Relations with South Korea have improved steadily since normalization in the mid-1990s. Moscow and Seoul agreed on visa exemptions, and trade has maintained a steady, if unremarkable, trajectory. The normalization with Seoul initially came at the expense of relations with Moscow’s erstwhile ally in the north, however, as in 1996 the DPRK designated Russia as an enemy state and relations stalled again in 2012 with the incumbency of Kim Jong-un (Shin, 2014: 133–135).

The whole peninsula has begun to take on a bigger role in Russia’s Asian diplomacy, and since the Ukrainian crisis in 2014, bilateral relations between Russia and the DPRK have become more active. Like China, Russia has generally been reluctant to strengthen sanctions on Pyongyang, although the interests of China and Russia do not necessarily always coincide. Furthermore, Russia was somewhat taken aback when China joined the US in drawing up sanctions against the DPRK in 2015, which threatened Russian economic interests (Toloraya, 2016) As one Russian scholar suggests, Russia needs to ensure its economic and trade relations with the DPRK are not neglected, stressing the importance to Moscow of participating in ‘the future opening up of North Korea’ (Bordachev, 2014). This partly explains the Russian Duma vote to write off the DPRK Soviet era debt, and Russia’s policy of continuing to supply oil to the DPRK despite the imposition of sanctions.

Russia tends to see the future of the peninsula in terms of a gradual integration of the North into the South (Ivashentsov, 2013). This is of course very different from the US policy of regime change, but also markedly different from China’s policy which prefers to maintain the status quo of two Koreas (Zhebin, 2014).

Good relations with the DPRK are viewed as essential in ensuring Russian security in the Asia-Pacific. Given that Russia has a seventeen kilometre border with the DPRK near Vladivostok, instability on the peninsula would clearly threaten the RFE, perhaps leading to a refugee outflow over the border into Russia.

Russian plans involving the DPRK focus on construction of a Trans-Korean pipeline, which would benefit Pyongyang, as it would be able to charge transit fees. A further project seeks to build a railway across the peninsula. Some have mooted the idea of using North Korean labour

in the RFE as North Koreans are perceived to be relatively skilled and ‘well disciplined’ (Valdai, 2014). It should be noted that there are already a large number of North Koreans working in the RFE, mainly in the logging industry.

Russia therefore has clear, if limited, economic interests in the Peninsula and is able to take advantage to some extent of the DPRK’s isolation, by being a niche supplier.

South Korea has generally taken a positive view of Russia, but relations have been negatively affected by the Ukrainian crisis as well as Russia’s condemnation with China of the THAAD missile deployment. While Seoul has not imposed sanctions on Russia, this is largely because its constitution does not allow it to do so, rather than for any other reason. Nevertheless, Russia and South Korea have a good, if modest, trade balance.

### **India**

At the beginning of his third presidential term, Putin underlined the need for the restoration of the relations with former allies and geopolitical “friends” in Asia such as India, Iran and the DPRK.

In the 1990s, Evgeniy Primakov had spoken of a *Russia-China-India strategic triangle*. The Indian vector was formalized by the ‘Declaration on Strategic Partnership between India and the Russian Federation’ in 2000, and the strategic partnership with China in 2001. Relations with China appeared to go from strength to strength, while by contrast the traditionally robust Russo-Indian relationship began to decline, to the extent that some Russian experts on India described it as ‘stagnating’ and even as an ‘empty shell’ (Trenin, 2010; Belokrentskiy, 2011).

The greater emphasis on ‘Greater Eurasia’ has emerged since the renewed interest in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Accordingly, the SCO is undergoing enlargement with the addition of Pakistan and India as full members. It might be suggested that because the SCO promotes illiberal norms, India’s inclusion could be problematic, India being viewed as a democratic state, being groomed by the US as a beacon of democracy in East Asia. As Alexander Lukin notes, India’s membership of the SCO is not ‘problem free’ (Lukin, 2015b); on the other hand, the inclusion of a traditionally non-aligned power such as India might help to assuage the fears of Central Asian states regarding Sino-Russian hegemony.

The US is widely seen as attempting to ‘groom’ India as its proxy in the East Asian Regional Security Complex as part of its rebalancing strategy, and India is increasingly being seen as an Asia-Pacific power, confirming Buzan’s thesis of a more assertive China bringing India into East Asia to balance China (Buzan, 2012). With the rolling out of the OBOR, questions arise as to India’s future stance. China seeks to reassure India of its motives by stressing that Indian participation in the OBOR will ensure the smoother running of the Maritime route in the Indian Ocean region. Yet Chinese reassurances have been rather unsuccessful so far, and India continues to see the Maritime Silk Route as a Chinese strategy to encircle India militarily.

Russia and, to a greater extent, China, view India’s role in the Asia-Pacific region with ambivalence; however, Russia has brought India into the heart of Eurasia with the admission to the SCO as a full member, perhaps in an attempt to parry Chinese regional designs.

### ***New challenges: China’s OBOR***

Putin’s idea of a Greater Europe stretching from Vladivostok to Lisbon is countered by China’s OBOR project, which envisions a ‘Greater Eurasia’ going from Shanghai to St Petersburg (Lukin, 2015a).

The May 2015 agreement on cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the OBOR project looked as if Russia was again making concessions to China. The OBOR is still a rather undefined project, but it also tends to highlight China and Russia’s different approaches

to regionalism, where China has seemed critical of the EEU for its exclusive approach, and as cutting off China from Central Asia. The process whereby a Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union together with the Chinese 'one belt, one road' in Central Eurasia, fuse together to form a 'Greater Eurasia' has been hailed by Aleksandr Lukin as a paradigm change in geopolitical terms (Lukin, 2015c), although he acknowledges the difficulties in coordinating within the SCO.

The lack of clarity on the content of this project is unsettling for Russia. At times Russian officials have appeared sanguine, but at others, have expressed concern that while Beijing does not present OBOR as an integration project, the reality will be rather different (Gabuev, 2015b). Thus Artyom Lukin and Rens Lee suggest that as part of the OBOR, the RFE would be just 'one piece in China's long-term geopolitical game aimed at creating zones of influence along its continental frontiers in Eurasia' (Lukin and Lee, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Some of the key longer-term challenges in the central Sino-Russian relationship are Chinese territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific, and the extent to which Russia might feel obliged to give China greater support in the longer term. The trajectory of China's OBOR initiative, which has the potential to transform Asia-Pacific, including Central Asia, is at the heart of Chinese strategy. Russia will need to be prepared for this. The development of the RFE will also remain key, although this region appears to be dropping off the domestic agenda. If Russia's Asia-Pacific policy is no longer driven by a desire to integrate the RFE, then what is driving it?

Russia has to proceed cautiously. If China is indeed preparing to take a more assertive role in global affairs rather than prioritizing 'short-term economic interests to promote development goals', and instead moving to promote national security interests (Zeng et al., 2015: 258), then Russia may find China less accommodating. Furthermore, while there is a certain amount of normative convergence in the political arena, in the economic field there is clear divergence: this is not just in terms of tensions between the two states regarding trade and spheres of influence, but also in terms of differing attitudes to globalization (Kaczmarek, 2017). Russia has increasingly railed against globalization and emphasized import substitution, not least as it needs to justify the current isolation from the rest of the world economy in the wake of sanctions.

It is true that the US and the West often 'underestimate rapprochement between China and Russia' (Kozyrev, 2015). On the other hand, there is also a tendency in Russia to overestimate the potential of this relationship to transform bilateral and regional ties (Lukin, 2015a). Elizabeth Wishnick takes a more balanced view, pointing out that Russia and China are 'partners of consequence' and that the relationship should not be undervalued (Wishnick, 2017).

The lack of clarity as to the substance of the relationship may also indicate the way in which the bilateral relationship is used discursively in both countries for domestic legitimization purposes, as well as externally to create uncertainty regarding intentions among neighbours. While Sinocentrism inhibits the diversification of Russia's Eastern 'pivot', could it be that Russia sees this Sinocentrism as the key to an Asia-Pacific strategy, i.e. that Sinocentrism acts as a force multiplier to make Russia more resilient, and thus better able to deal with the immediate security environment in Asia?

Neighbours such as Japan, with whom Moscow has sought a more cooperative relationship, may also be difficult to engage in the wider region. While Moscow may worry that aligning more closely with Beijing brings with it the associated risk of being drawn into Chinese territorial disputes, it may also be concerned lest rapprochement with Japan look as if it is aligning with Tokyo against China. Therefore, the transformative potential of the Sino-Russian relationship beyond bilateral relations is limited. Furthermore, Russia must ensure that it does not become cut off from integrative processes in Asia-Pacific. As a Valdai Club report warned:

[t]here is a risk that priority will be given to Eurasian integration. For Russia, this will mean not only huge untapped opportunities but also a danger of remaining on the periphery of global economic and political processes, whose center is moving to the Asia-Pacific.

(Valdai, 2014)

## Note

- 1 Article 107 is the 'enemy state' clause in the UN Charter regarding Japan and Germany.

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