



Russia's Pivot East :

A contemporary Potemkin village ?

Alexander Ballegeer

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Direction :
Tanguy Struye de Swielande

Centre d'étude des crises et conflits internationaux
Université catholique de Louvain
Place Montesquieu 1, bte L2.08.07
1348 Louvain-la-Neuve
Belgique
www.cecrilouvain.be

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A propos de l'auteur

Alexander Ballegeer is a master student of the Université Catholique de Louvain (Relations Internationales-Finalité diplomatie et résolution des conflits) and an intern at the CECRI

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Introduction

In the 21st century, the vector of Russia's development will be the development of the East.

Siberia and the Far East represent our enormous potential... And now we must realise our potential. We have the opportunity to assume a worthy place in the Asia-Pacific region, the most dynamic region in the world.¹

- Vladimir Putin 2012

I have had closer interactions with President Putin than with any other foreign colleagues.

He is my best and bosom friend. I cherish dearly our deep friendship.²

- Xi Jinping 2019

If one looks at the coat of arms of the Russian Federation and its predecessors throughout history, except for the Soviet era, one can see a proud double-headed eagle, looking to the East and the West at once. The eagle sends a message of a strong country, with both an Asian and European identity. Throughout time this has led to several fundamental changes in foreign policies, leading to temporal rapprochements to either the East or the West. There is for example Mikhail Gorbachev's speech in Vladivostok in 1986, when he tried to prioritise the Soviet Union's relations with Asia.³ The opposite example is the mere existence of Sint-Petersburg, also known as Peter the Great's window to the West. The end of the USSR in 1991 led to a paradigm shift in the constellation of the international relations at that time. The new-born, slimmed down, democratic government of Russia initially had high aspiration of a quick integration process in the western led world order. This however soon turned out to be a disappointment, leading to an ever-increasing level of tension between the Kremlin and its western counterparts.⁴

The aim of this article is to research the most recent Russian turn to the East. Here below, I will first research the roots of this change in foreign policy and the objectives the Kremlin aims to achieve. Thereafter I will research the consequences of this turn to the East. I will focus most on the ties between Russia and China, which is clearly the most important partner in Russia's pivot to the East. I will also pay attention to the Russia-ASEAN relations, which are of second importance.

¹ Address to the Federal Assembly, 2012 (<http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/17118>), Accessed on 20 August 2019.

² Xi tells Russian media he cherishes deep friendship with Putin, 2019 (<http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1153186.shtml>), Accessed on 20 August 2019.

³ KOROLEV, A., 'Russia's Reorientation to Asia: Causes and Strategic Implications', *Pacific Affairs*, 89 (2016), 55.

⁴ TSVETOV, A., 'After Crimea: Southeast Asia in Russia's Foreign Policy Narrative', *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, 38 (2016), 58-59.

1. Causes and ambitions

To be able to completely understand the roots of the pivot East and how it came into being, it is first important to know what exactly the Kremlin aims to achieve. This change of foreign policy is after all built around both domestic and foreign issues.

Firstly, there is the long-lasting issue of the vastly underdeveloped Far Eastern and Siberian Federal Districts. These areas account for 72 percent of Russia's territory. Before the pivot towards Asia, the Far East however barely produced 5,6 percent of the country's GDP and only inhabited 4,4 percent of the Russian population. Siberia equally only produced 10,6 percent of the country's GDP with 13,5 percent of the population.⁵ Due to the chronic levels of underdevelopment, the population in the region has reduced by 20 percent in the 20 years after the fall of the USSR.⁶ Moscow however wants to bring an end to the long-term draining effect of the two regions on the federal budget. It also wants to ensure its influence in the region, out of fear that the region will enter completely in the economic and political orbit of China. This fear is not entirely unfounded, given the fact that 6 million Russians live in the Far East, while 110 million Chinese live on the other side of the once disputed border. To combat these problems the Kremlin thus wants to develop the Far East and Siberia into a manufacturing hub and energy supplier for Asia, rather than its traditional European partners.⁷ The choice for the Asian market is evident, given the growth of the economy of the Asian countries in the last decades. This has already partially shifted the global centre of economic exchange to the Asia-Pacific.⁸ One of the goals of the pivot to the East thus has its roots in anxiety about Russia's economic vulnerability in the sparsely populated eastern regions. Consequently, the objective is to improve the economic situation by the integration of the Russian economy in the Asia-Pacific.

The second motive is of a geostrategic nature. In 1991, Russia believed that it had been given a second chance and that it would swiftly be integrated in the Atlantic dominated world order. The following decades however led to a disillusion for the Kremlin. This is due to the fact that the Russian administration and society believe that they have been treated as a junior partner by the West, which is perceived as hypocritical and opportunistic. The general believe is that Russia never was given the opportunity to truly become a part of the western-centric liberal world order. Moscow for example remained excluded from Europe's most important institutions. It consequently failed to develop strong financial institutions. Capitalism only led to an ongoing economic decline, rise of oligarchs and a transformation of the country into a middle-developed provider of raw materials and energy for the West.

The Kremlin was equally unhappy with the European security arrangements. It believed that it could never become a part of it, leading to a threatening situation. The

⁵ MANKOFF, J., 'Russia's Asia Pivot: Confrontation or Cooperation?', *Asia Policy*, 19 (2015), 72-74.

⁶ STRONSKI, P. and NG, N., *Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Russian Far East, and the Arctic*, 2018 (<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673>), Accessed on 20 August 2019.

⁷ ROZMAN, G., 'The Russian Pivot to Asia', ROZMAN, G. (ed.) and RADCHENKO, S. (ed.), *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, Singapore, 2018, 12-13.

⁸ LUNKIN, A., 'Russia's Pivot to Asia: Myth or Reality?', *Strategic Analysis*, 40 (2016), 575.

expansion of NATO towards the East only worsened these feelings. After the disintegration of the Warsaw pact in 1991, NATO incorporated countries which were seen as both a part of the Russian sphere of influence and a crucial buffer against possible western aggression.⁹ It was however not only the expansion of NATO which was perceived as a threat. There were also several conflicts which led to the conclusion that the West often ignores Russian interests and that it couldn't be trusted. One can for example think of the bombing of Serbian forces in 1999 by NATO and Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, both without UN authorisation. There were also several Colour Revolutions in Russia's sphere of influence, which were all to some degree supported by the West.¹⁰ Another example is 2008, when the West recognised Kosovo's independence given its *unique* situation. Not much after there was the Bucharest conference, where both Georgia and Ukraine were given the unprecedented political promise of unspecified future membership of the NATO.¹¹ More recently there was the Arab Spring, where the West toppled one of Russia's partners: Colonel Gaddafi. As a result of these conflicts and many others, the Kremlin concluded that there was a need for an alternative system. After all, it understood that it would never become one of the rule makers. This, combined with the systematic rejection of Russia's status as a great power, was unacceptable given the Russian self-identity.¹²

The new international system should no longer focus on the areas in which Russia is ill-equipped, such as legal institutions, innovation, commercialization, financial institutions, democracy and human rights. The new system should focus on the more traditional measurements of power such as territory, resources and military might.¹³ One could thus state that the Russian pivot to the East can certainly be described as a revisionist image for the future. The world should become polycentric and the norms of international relations should change back to non-interference and respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity.¹⁴

In 2010, the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev for the first time proclaimed the ambition to make a pivot towards Asia. However, there were no consequent actions taken in the following year and it took until 2012 when Russia internationally declared this ambition again at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Vladivostok. To underscore the Russian ambitions, the administration decided to invest 20 billion dollars, the largest investment in Russian history for any Russian city, to upgrade Vladivostok's infrastructure prior to the

⁹ BRATERSKY, M., 'Russia's Pivot to Asia: Situation Interest or Strategic Necessity?', *Asian Politics & Policy*, 10 (2018), 591-593.

¹⁰ *The junior partner: How Vladimir Putin's embrace of China weakens Russia*, 2019 (<https://www.economist.com/briefing/2019/07/25/how-vladimir-putins-embrace-of-china-weakens-russia>), Accessed on 20 August 2019.

¹¹ BRUNNSTROM, D. and CORNWELL, S., *NATO promises Ukraine, Georgia entry one day*, 2008 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-nato/nato-promises-ukraine-georgia-entry-one-day-idUSL0179714620080403>), Accessed on 20 August 2019.

¹² KOROLEV, 'Russia's Reorientation to Asia', 69.

¹³ BRATERSKY, 'Russia's Pivot to Asia', 585-589.

¹⁴ WISHNICK, E., 'In Search of the 'Other' in Asia: Russia-China relations revisited', *The Pacific Review*, 30 (2017), 116.

summit.¹⁵ Once again however, almost nothing happened thereafter and the pivot was solely based on rhetoric's. Even though the administration recognised the importance of Asia, there were more important domestic issues.¹⁶

It was eventually the annexation or *reunification* of Crimea and the conflict in the East of Ukraine that strongly catalysed the actual implementation of the pivot East.¹⁷ According to Russia, the whole crisis was the result of western support for the Maidan protesters. This was one step too far, due to Ukraine's and Russia's significant shared history and culture. The latter's unilateral military actions in both regions eventually led to the complete breakdown of political ties, resulting in for example the suspension of Russia in the G8. Mutual economic sanctions were also taken, which clearly had a strong impact on the already faltering Russian economy.¹⁸ This conflict and the consequent escalation was simply the last straw, which led to the acceleration of the pivot East.¹⁹

2. China: from threat to investment partner

According to the Kremlin's new vision, the gateway towards Asia and thus the strengthening of Russia's eastern regions and the creation of a new alternative world order is China. This is a notable change of the earlier self-imposed restriction on cooperation with China until the late 2000's.²⁰ Here below I will focus on the aim to improve the economy and more specifically the eastern regions with the help of China.

There is a historic and deep-rooted distrust in Russia in regard to trade with China. The former refrained from developing deep and durable ties with the latter in all sorts of sensitive spheres. The Kremlin and many Russian citizens were after all afraid to become a *resource cow* and overrun by Chinese in their own country.²¹ President Medvedev even warned up until 2012 against *excessive expansion by bordering states*.²²

Russia's economic turn to China is driven by China's hunger for raw materials and energy. It is only after the economic crisis of 2008 that China is increasingly allowed to invest in Russia's energy sector. From then on it is believed that Asia and more specifically China is the future for Russian economic growth. This is due to the fact that the European market no longer offers the possibility to expand. The opposite is true, given Europe's aim to diversify its

¹⁵ KUCHINS, A. C., 'Russia and the CIS in 2013: Russia's Pivot to Asia', *Asian Survey*, 54 (2014), 129-131.

¹⁶ LUBINA, M., 'Between Reality and Dreams: Russia's Pivot to Asia', MIERZEJEWSKI, D. (ed.) and BYWALEC, G. (ed.), *Building the Diverse Community: Beyond Regionalism in East Asia*, 2016, LODZ, 165-168.

¹⁷ KARAGANOV, S., 'The new Cold War and the emerging Greater Eurasia', *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 9 (2018), 90.

¹⁸ TSVETOV, 'After Crimea', 58-60.

¹⁹ PAIKIN, Z., *Russia's pivot to the east: Where does it leave the EU?*, 2019 (https://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_russias_pivot_to_the_east_where_does_it_leave_the_eu), Accessed on 20 August 2019.

²⁰ KACZMARSKI, M., 'Domestic Sources of Russia's China Policy', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 59 (2012), 7.

²¹ KACZMARSKI, 'Domestic Sources of Russia's China Policy', 4.

²² GROVE, T., *Russia's Medvedev hints of Chinese threat to Far East*, 2012 (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-china-territory/russias-medvedev-hints-of-chinese-threat-to-far-east-idUSBRE8780Y320120809>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

energy dependence.²³ Traditional import of general Russian fuel into Europe has after all dropped from 71,1 billion dollar to 48,5 billion dollars between 2006 and 2016.²⁴

As mentioned above, the true pivot to China only happened after 2014, due to the sanctions imposed by the West on the Russian economy. Since then on, the Kremlin not only realised the possible opportunities, but it also took thorough action. Several multibillion deals have been made between both countries to increase the export of Russian gas and oil to China. A prime example hereof is a deal in May 2014, right after the annexation of Crimea. This deal is worth 400 billion dollars and foresees that Gazprom will deliver up to 38 billion meters of cubic gas for 30 years to the China National Petroleum Corporation.²⁵ This deal took a decade to finalise and was only made possible due to Xi's and Putin's personal interference. That being said, China probably managed to obtain a significantly lower price, due to Russia's isolation and thus poor negotiating position.²⁶ It also succeeded in pushing through its preferred routing of the gas, leading to a near Chinese buyer's monopoly. After several delays, the Power of Siberia gas pipeline is foreseen to open later this year. This project was an important message to the West: Russia is not alone and it has powerful partners.²⁷ Due to China's more recent focus on air quality and environmental issues, the demand in gas is estimated to grow even further in the future. This means that Russia and China will probably conclude more agreements on the exportation of Russian gas. Negotiations are for example already under way for the Power of Siberia 2 and the Far East pipelines, which offers great future possibilities.²⁸

A similar story can be told about the Russia-China oil exports. The latter has provided Rosneft with billions of dollars in assistance in the form of advanced payments for future oil supplies. A Chinese company also bought a 14,6 percent stake of the company in 2017 for 9 billion dollars. As a result of the improved cooperation one can see that the oil exports to China have more than doubled between 2013 and 2016. This eventually meant that Russia surpassed Saudi Arabia as China's biggest oil provider in 2016 and it has not given away this position since.²⁹ One can consequently conclude that Chinese companies are becoming ever more prominent in the Russian energy sector.

²³ HENDERSON, J., *Russia's gas pivot to Asia: Another false dawn or ready for lift off?*, 2018 (<https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Russias-gas-pivot-to-Asia-Insight-40.pdf>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

²⁴ CORBIN, M., *Kennan Cable No. 33: A Russian Pivot to Asia? Russian Trade with Asia from 2006 to 2016*, 2018 (<https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/kennan-cable-no-33-russian-pivot-to-asia-russian-trade-asia-2006-to-2016>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

²⁵ STRONSKI and NG, *Cooperation and Competition*, Accessed on 21 August 2019.

²⁶ RUTLAND, P., 'The Political Economy of Energy in Russia', RASZEWSKI, S. (ed.), *The International Political Economy of Oil and Gas*, Cham, 2018, 34-35.

²⁷ HENDERSON, *Russia's gas pivot to Asia*, Accessed on 21 August 2019.

²⁸ *China faces energy supply challenge despite Russian pipeline*, 2019 (<https://www.energy-reporters.com/consumption/china-faces-energy-supply-challenge-despite-russian-pipeline/>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

²⁹ *Russia comes in as China's top crude oil supplier, ahead of Saudi Arabia*, 2019 (<https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/25/russia-is-chinas-top-crude-oil-supplier-ahead-of-saudi-arabia.html>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

Both China and Russia expressed several times their joy in the growth of mutual economic exchange in the last years. This eventually meant that in 2018, for the first time in history, the trade between both countries exceeded 100 billion dollars.³⁰ One must however not overexaggerate the decisive nature and success of Russia's economic turn to China. One of the problems of the strong focus on energy export is the fact that this sector is not particularly labour-intensive and the impact on the regional economy can thus be questioned.³¹ Even though several actions have been taken to improve Russia's export of commodities and services, progress still remains lacking. The same can be said when it comes to the implementation of pledged investments of China.

Many of the projects, most certainly those which are not in regions or sectors of key importance, simply stall, due to several reasons, after the promised agreements. The projects for example face too much resistance at the local level, given the fact that the Russian population is afraid of the consequent environmental pollution. There are also the problems of Russia's business culture, which is marked by a slow pace and many bureaucratic hurdles. It is estimated that it takes around five to seven years of preparation before a project moves forward.³² Corruption, Russia's difficult and unpredictable legislation, mutual distrust, the small local market, implementation delays and the lack of efficiency also form obstacles. All of this has not only frustrated Chinese investments, but also led to the fact that the Chinese investments are not up to Beijing's promise nor are they fulfilling Moscow's expectations. The western sanctions as such did not only directly hurt the Russian economy, they also made it more difficult for Chinese companies to invest in Russia.³³ Many of the actual investments are not realised because of mutual economic interests, but because of politics. Russia however hasn't got a lot of leverage to pressure China in meeting its commitments, when the latter is not willing or able to replace the previous western investments and technology transfers.³⁴ An excellent example of disappointing Russian initiatives to attract Chinese capital was the creation of Priority Development Areas and the Free Port of Vladivostok. Only half of the projects in the Priority Development Areas involved Chinese companies. The Free Port of Vladivostok even performed worse, because only 3 per cent of the projects involved Chinese capital.³⁵

The impact of these problems is reflected in some of the statistics of Russia's general trade. Even though China is the biggest sole exporting country for Russia, worth 56 billion

³⁰ LUKIN, A., *China in Russia's Turn to the East*, 2019 (<https://www.eastwestcenter.org/publications/china-in-russias-turn-the-east>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

³¹ LUBINA, 'Between Reality and Dreams', MIERZEJEWSKI (ed.) and BYWALEC (ed.), *Building the Diverse Community*, 173.

³² BLANK, S., *Russia's "Pivot to Asia": The Multilateral Dimension*, 2017 (https://www.nbr.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/publications/workingpaper_blank_062817.pdf), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

³³ ROSETH, T., 'Russia's energy relations with China: passing the strategic threshold?', *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 58 (2017), 43.

³⁴ STRONSKI and NG, *Cooperation and Competition*, Accessed on 21 August 2019.

³⁵ SPIVAK, V. and FOY, H., *Russia struggles to attract Chinese capital to its Far East*, 2019 (<https://www.ft.com/content/d4cf3486-681b-11e9-a79d-04f350474d62>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

dollars in 2018, the European Union still remains the biggest export market.³⁶ If one for example looks at the trade statistics of 2017, one can see that the European Union remained the leading trade partner of Russia, accounting for 44 percent of the total Russian turnover.³⁷ This makes it clear that Russia is still very dependent on for example European technology, chemicals, medicines, machinery and transport equipment. While China has arguably become Russia's most important trade partner, the same cannot be said for China in relation to Russia. For China, trade with the EU and the US remains more important, than trade with Russia. The US is after all its number one export partner, accounting for 19,2 percent of China's export in 2018. Russia comes nowhere near the US, with only 1,9 percent.³⁸ China's net Foreign Direct Investment to Russia has increased substantially, but the EU is still the biggest investor in Russia.³⁹ This is reflected by the fact that the EU accounts for three quarters of Russia's FDI in 2018.⁴⁰ Several of Russia's other FDI originates from offshore hubs, popular with Russian firms, such as the Bahamas and Bermuda, indicating the reinvestment of Russian capital by oligarchs instead of true FDI.⁴¹

One can thus conclude that Russia's economic pivot to the East is indeed underway. This has brought with it far going cooperation with China, shedding away the earlier fears of becoming economically too dependent on China. The latter increasingly provides a substitute for the European and American markets. The change however should not be overestimated, given the fact that Europe remains a crucial market for export, technology, FDI, et cetera. The Kremlin is simply not in the position to alienate Europe completely in the near future, given the fact that it is one of Russia's most important economic partners.⁴² The pivot towards the East should for now thus be seen as a balance between the East and West. This being said, more and more people are of the opinion that Russia, in its aim to avoid the hegemony of the dollar and the euro, is moving towards the hegemony of the yuan.⁴³

³⁶ WORKMAN, D., *Russia's Top Trading Partners*, 2019 (<http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

³⁷ *Trade*, 2018 (<https://russiaeu.ru/en/trade>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

³⁸ *China's Top Trading Partners*, 2019 (<http://www.worldstopexports.com/chinas-top-import-partners/>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

³⁹ SANGHI, A., *Russia's Pivot to Asia: Desirable, but Possible?*, 2018 (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/opinion/2018/05/25/russias-pivot-to-asia-desirable-but-possible>), Accessed on 21 August 2019; Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)

⁴⁰ *Countries and regions: Russia*, 2019 (<https://ec.europa.eu/trade/policy/countries-and-regions/countries/russia/>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

⁴¹ TRICKETT, N., *Is Russia's Asia Outreach Bearing Fruit?*, 2017 (<https://thediomat.com/2017/04/is-russias-asia-outreach-bearing-fruit/>), Accessed on 21 August 2019; *Russia: Foreign Investment*, 2019 (<https://en.portal.santandertrade.com/establish-overseas/russia/foreign-investment>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

⁴² KHLEBNIKOV, A., *A Russian Pivot to Asia?*, 2018 (<https://nationalinterest.org/feature/russian-pivot-asia-34892>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

⁴³ *Russia and China Partnership is much better for China than it is for Russia*, 2019 (<https://www.economist.com/leaders/2019/07/27/partnership-is-much-better-for-china-than-it-is-for-russia>), Accessed on 21 August 2019.

3. A shared world view?

Here above, I mentioned the fact that the Pivot East does not solely focus on economic goals. It is also about the ambition to fundamentally change the global political system and sending the message that Russia still is a great power. Here below, I will argue that China and Russia have a partial common view on the need for change of the US-centric world order. China is thus not only crucial for the domestic economic goal, but also for the political part of Russia's pivot to the East. One must however also add some nuance, there are after all several constraints and conflicting interests in their relation.

The foremost binding characteristic of the relation between Russia and China is their aversion of the American dominance of global politics and the centrality of the US dollar.⁴⁴ Both countries increasingly reveal their concerns over the US' actions and the need for joint reaction against it. Beijing and Moscow are apprehensive to the liberal norms and values promotion, which is seen as only harmful, destructive and no more than a strategy of the US to constrain the ability of China and Russia to take up their rightful position as great powers and rule makers. Both countries instead promote entirely other values such as non-interference in the domestic affairs of countries. This is underpinned by their fear of secessionist movements such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Chechnya in their own country. They thus advocate the respect of sovereignty, non-use of force, peaceful coexistence and territorial integrity.⁴⁵ Above all both countries appreciate stability and predictability in the world order.⁴⁶

As a result of the pivot East and the hereabove mentioned common views, there has been an increased coordination of several sorts of politics between both countries. This can for example be seen by the coordination of actions in the UN Security Council. Although China has no direct interests in the conflict, both China and Russia have opposed to all sorts of outside intervention in the Syrian conflict based on sovereign equality and non-interference in domestic affairs, except when specifically requested by the Syrian government. Both countries also increasingly work together to criticize and replace the dominance of the dollar. Doing so, they promote the use of national currencies in bilateral and multilateral trade.⁴⁷ They also have increasingly started to cooperate and coordinate in the cyberspace, researching the weaknesses of the US military's communication systems.⁴⁸

One of the, arguably, most important changes after 2014 is the sharp acceleration in military cooperation. Both countries have started working together, creating a more interdependent relationship with regards to the joint design and production of new weapon

⁴⁴ DOBBINS, J., SHATZ, J. H. and WYNE, A., *A Warming Trend in China-Russia Relations*, 2019 (<https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/04/a-warming-trend-in-china-russia-relations.html>), Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁴⁵ WISHNICK, 'In Search of the 'Other' in Asia', 116-117.

⁴⁶ GABUEV, A., *Why Russia and China Are Strengthening Security Ties*, 2018 (<https://carnegie.ru/2018/09/24/why-russia-and-china-are-strengthening-security-ties-pub-77333>), Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁴⁷ WISHNICK, 'In Search of the 'Other' in Asia', 118-120.

⁴⁸ GABUEV, *Why Russia and China Are Strengthening Security Ties*, Accessed on 22 August 2019.

systems. Today the largest cooperation focusses on anti-aircraft weaponry, aircraft engines and satellite navigation. Russia has also changed its policy in regard to its most sophisticated weaponry. Since 2014 the country sells its most advanced weapon systems, boosting the People's Liberation Army's combat capabilities significantly.⁴⁹ China has consequently become the first foreign purchaser of the S-400 Triumph anti-aircraft weapon system and Russia's SU-35 fighter aircrafts. Some analysts consequently emphasize the giant leap forwards in the strategic cooperation between both countries.⁵⁰ Others point out that because of China's investments in R&D this is simply the last chance for Russia to cash out. China will after all catch up within a decade and develop its own high-tech weaponry.⁵¹ Both countries' militaries also increasingly exchange military personnel, for long- and short-term education programs. The most visible part of the improved relations is the increase and change of joint military exercises. For one, these military exercises clearly changed from solely anti-terrorism to anti-terrorism, joint sea and peace missions. The aim of these joint sea operations is to better coordinate the Navies of both countries. The Joint Sea-2015 was a clear geopolitical message after the Ukraine crisis. The second part of the operation after all occurred in the Mediterranean Sea, which is historically considered the area of the NATO. The Joint Sea-2016 equally sent out a clear message, given the fact it was held in the disputed South China Sea. This was right after the overruling of China's nine-dash line claims on the South China Sea by the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Since 2014 both countries have held one or two large-scale military exercises.⁵² In Russia's biggest army exercise in decennia, Vostok 2018, with almost 300,000 Russian troops, China also participated, all be it with a small force of 3,200 men.⁵³

Both countries thus cooperate more and more on a strategic and military matter in regard to international political matters. One must however keep in mind that there are also significant constraints. This is mainly due to the fact that while the ties between Russia and China are growing, so is the asymmetry between them. Here below I will shortly mention some of them.

Firstly, the economic gap between both countries has rapidly and significantly grown. While in 1997 China had a slightly smaller economy than Russia, in 2017 China's economy has become almost eight times bigger than Russia's economy. The gap between both economies and their power capabilities will only grow and so will Russia's dependency on China.⁵⁴

Secondly there is the problem that both countries want to diminish the US' influence, just like many others, and create a pluralistic world order. Yet, both countries have a very

⁴⁹ People's Liberation Army (PLA)

⁵⁰ KOROLEV, A., 'On the Verge of an Alliance: Contemporary China-Russia Military Cooperation', *Asian Security*, (2018), 9-10.

⁵¹ BAEV, P. K., 'Russia's pivot to China goes astray: the impact on the Asia-Pacific security architecture', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 37 (2016), 98.

⁵² KOROLEV, 'On the Verge of an Alliance', 12-13.

⁵³ ZI, Y., *Vostok 2018: Russia and China's Diverging Common Interests*, 2018 (<https://thediplomat.com/2018/09/vostok-2018-russia-and-chinas-diverging-common-interests/>), Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁵⁴ DOBBINS, SHATZ and WYNE, *A Warming Trend in China-Russia Relations*, Accessed on 22 August 2019.

different vision on how to achieve this. Russia interprets this in a very revisionist manner, by openly criticising the US and western values, but also annexing conquered territory, invading neighbouring countries and by supporting insurgent forces. It thus has a clear ambition to end the current liberal order and it does so in an offensive manner.⁵⁵ China however has been the chief beneficiary of the current post-Cold War order. It recognises that this system allowed the country to become the second biggest economic power in the world.⁵⁶ China was after all one of the largest recipients of loans from the World Bank. It is consequently not prepared to go as far as Russia in its assault on the foundations of the world order.⁵⁷ China does not seek to completely overthrow the system, but aims to achieve a gradual modification instead. It uses its economic power to gain influence globally, a prime example hereof is the Belt and Road Initiative.⁵⁸ The only area where China has truly shown a more aggressive foreign policy stand is the South China Sea, which it claims on historic grounds.⁵⁹

Thirdly there are some straightforward constraints, due to the different geopolitical interests and lingering distrust. The fact that Russia did not scale down its nuclear weapons and refused to negotiate other START-like treaties with the US, was due in part to concerns about the PLA's military potential.⁶⁰ This is despite Putin's numerous statements in which he stressed that Russia does not perceive China as a threat. The closer cooperation also constrains both countries to pursue their own particular interests, restricting their own opportunities. China for example prefers a big and integrated European single market for commercial reasons. Russia on the other hand aims to create as much division and weakness as possible.⁶¹ Russia for example has to walk a fine line to keep good relations with South-Korea, Japan, Vietnam and India. All of them form important geopolitical and economic partners. The latter two are also important importers of Russian arms, much to China's dismay.⁶² Though South-Korea and Japan are clearly aligned with the West and India aims to be non-aligned, they still offer Russia opportunities. Russia consequently does not want to jeopardise its relations with these countries, to avoid overdependence on China.

The most sensitive area of possible friction between both powers might very well be Central Asia, which currently witnesses a major rebalancing and a consequent trajectory towards intensifying competition. The former Soviet countries of Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan, Kirgizstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are still seen as Russia's near abroad and natural sphere of privileged interest.⁶³ Since the early 2000's the region is heavily influenced by China's strong rise in the regional economy and infrastructure. By 2014, Beijing displaced

⁵⁵ STRONSKI and NG, *Cooperation and Competition*, Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁵⁶ LITSAREVA, E. Y., 'Pivot Toward Asia: The Strategic Direction of Russia's Foreign Policy Concept in a Changing Balance of Powers', *Journal of Advocacy, Research and Education*, 2 (2015), 52.

⁵⁷ BAEV, 'Russia's pivot to China goes astray', 93.

⁵⁸ Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

⁵⁹ STRONSKI and NG, *Cooperation and Competition*, Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁶⁰ MANKOFF, 'Russia's Asia Pivot', 77.

⁶¹ STRONSKI and NG, *Cooperation and Competition*, Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁶² ZI, *Vostok 2018*, Accessed on 22 August 2019.

⁶³ FREEMAN, C.P., 'New strategies for an old rivalry? China-Russia relations in Central Asia after the energy boom', *The Pacific Review*, 31 (2018), 635.

Russia in the region as the top trading partner. China mainly has two aims in the Central Asian states. Firstly, these countries offer the possibility to become transit states for the BRI. Secondly, China wants to promote political and social stability in the region. Beijing is after all afraid of extremism imported from Afghanistan and the Middle East. This could negatively influence the already restless and poorly developed Muslim majority Xinjian region in western China.⁶⁴ For Moscow, the more problematic trend is Beijing's increasing military support for the Central Asian states. This goes directly against Russia's self-identity as the hegemon and security provider in the region. Beijing has become an important alternative security partner for countries such as Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, with whom Moscow has strained relations. There are consequently increasing signs that suggest Moscow's zero-sum logic in the region. The Kremlin after all supports New Delhi's growing engagement in the region as a counterbalance to China. Russia also increased its military assistance to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. In 2019 it still remains the sole foreign state with permanent military presence in Central Asia.⁶⁵ This being said, China understands Russia's sensitivities in the region and has not yet matched its ambitious economic plans with comparable security actions. There is a clear understanding that within Moscow, more and more people are afraid of losing ground in the region to China. Beijing has consequently offered to connect its BRI to the Russian dominated Eurasian Economic Union.⁶⁶ The question however remains how a project to connect multiple markets, the BRI, can cooperate with a project that aims to close a common market from foreign, read Chinese, influence.⁶⁷ There consequently has been no true progress in the coordination of the two projects.

One can conclude that China and Russia have very common views of the world. This led to a strong increase in political and military cooperation since the Ukraine crisis. Putin and other high-ranking officials have stated multiple times that there is no fear whatsoever of Beijing's growing economic and political power. However, there are also clearly several constraints on the relation between the two countries. This is due to three different reasons. Firstly, there is the unmistakable trend of growing asymmetry. Secondly is the fact that both countries aim to change the US-centric world order in a structurally different way. The last obstacle is the increase of China's influence in Russia's near-abroad.

4. Russia-ASEAN: underdeveloped cooperation

Russia's policy is first and foremost concentrated on the improvement and strengthening of ties between Russia and China. It is however also clear that the Kremlin realises that the relationship is of an asymmetric nature, which could damage the country's interests on the

⁶⁴ STRONSKI and NG, *Cooperation and Competition*, Accessed on 23 August 2019.

⁶⁵ FREEMAN, 'New strategies for an old rivalry?', 646-649.

⁶⁶ Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)

⁶⁷ BLANK, S., 'Russo-Chinese Relations in Strategic Perspective', ROZMAN, G. (ed.) and RADCHENKO, S. (ed.), *International Relations and Asia's Northern Tier: Sino-Russia Relations, North Korea, and Mongolia*, Singapore, 2018, 96.

long run. The pivot East consequently goes beyond China. Here below I'll further research the ties between Russia and ASEAN.

The ASEAN organisation fits in perfectly with Russia's world view. It is home to several rising powers, one can think of Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam, which all aim to build a new polycentric world. The organisation and all its sub-groups are built around the principles of non-alignment and non-interference in the domestic politics of sovereign states. These values are identical with Russia's views on the international arena.⁶⁸ As a result of the shared connection, Russia's isolation after 2014 and fear of overdependency on China, Russia has become more active in the organisation. It has gradually become part of all the principal multilateral formats around ASEAN, such as ASEM, EAS, ADMM-plus, ARF, et cetera.⁶⁹ In recent years, the Kremlin has increasingly given more importance to the organisation. This was clear in 2016, when the Russia-ASEAN Summit was held in Sochi, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the ASEAN-Russia Full Dialogue Partnership.⁷⁰ Last year, in 2018, the Russian president for the first time attended the EAS since Russia's membership and he also took part in the ASEAN-Russia summit. The aim of Russia is to assure the Southeast Asian nations that Russia is serious about advancing their common economic and political ties.⁷¹

However, if one looks beyond the rhetoric's of the summits, it is clear that the ties between Russia and ASEAN are underdeveloped. The second most important partners in the pivot East after China, are Japan and India and behind them is South-Korea. The ties with these countries are still valued above the Russia-ASEAN relationship.⁷² As long as Russia favours bilateral ties above multilateral ones, ASEAN and much of Southeast Asia will remain at the bottom tier of Russia's foreign policy priorities.⁷³

The same holds true for ASEAN's perspective of Russia. The country after all lags seriously behind in comparison with other economic powers when it comes to trade and investment cooperation with ASEAN. In 2017, ASEAN traded for around 440 billion dollars with China, 269 billion dollars with the EU, 235 billion dollars with the US and 219 billion dollars with Japan.⁷⁴ Russia on the other hand only traded around 17 billion dollars with ASEAN. The country thus stands dramatically far behind the other states, with whom Russia aims to compare itself.⁷⁵ The Russian-ASEAN bilateral trade consequently only accounts for

⁶⁸ TSVETOV, A., *Russia and Multilateral Diplomacy in East Asia*, 2018 (<https://russiancouncil.ru/en/analytcs-and-comments/analytcs/russia-and-multilateral-diplomacy-in-east-asia/>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁶⁹ *Overview ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Relations*, 2019 (<https://asean.org/storage/2012/05/Overview-ASEAN-Russia-Dialogue-Relations1.pdf>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷⁰ KANAIEV, E. and KOROLEV, A., 'Reenergizing the Russia-ASEAN Relationship: The Eurasian Opportunity', *Asian Politics & Policy*, 10 (2018), 732-733.

⁷¹ CHEANG, C., *Russia's Pivot to the East: Putin's Broadening Move*, 2018 (<https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/rsis/russias-pivot-to-the-east-putins-broadening-move/#.XWEHhegzY2w>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷² HUTT, D., *Russia and Asia: Putin's own 'Pivot to Asia'*, 2016 (<https://southeastasiaglobe.com/russia-asia-pivot/>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷³ GORENBURG, D. and SCHWARTZ, P., *Russia's Strategy in Southeast-Asia*, 2019 (<http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/russias-strategy-southeast-asia>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷⁴ *ASEAN Statistical Highlights*, 2018 (<https://www.aseanstats.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ASEAN-Statistical-Highlights-2018.pdf>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷⁵ KANAIEV and KOROLEV, 'Reenergizing the Russia-ASEAN Relationship', 734.

just 0,7 percent of ASEAN's total trade turnover.⁷⁶ Given the fact that Russia is part of the EEU, all future decisions to open up the market need to be coordinated and negotiated with the other EEU partners. If one keeps in mind that the EEU only has two Free Trade Agreements, it becomes clear that it is unlikely that several agreements will be reached in the near future with ASEAN members.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Russia does not take a part in the RCEP, which is an ASEAN-led initiative of economic regional cooperation.

Political and security cooperation between Russia and ASEAN does not promise a bright future neither. This is related to the fact that both Russia and ASEAN have to walk a thin line of cooperation with China on one side and with other countries with strained relations to the latter on the other side. As mentioned above, Russia for example refuses to recognise the 2016 ruling of the International Court of Justice about the nine-dash line and also took part in Joint Sea-2016. These decisions make it difficult for Russia and ASEAN to become true political and security partners. There is also the matter that Russia, partially due to its interference in Ukraine and Syria, almost has no military presence in the region. It is thus not able to come close to the US' or China's military influence in Asia. There are thus considerable doubts in the region whether Russia can act autonomously in regard to Asian affairs.⁷⁸ This is both due to its relationship with China and its lack of economic, political and military power in Asia.

However, Russia does have good bilateral ties with several ASEAN members. The most notable relationship is arguably with Vietnam. The country is often seen as the bridge between Russia and ASEAN. These good relations date back to the Vietnam War, when the USSR offered support to the country against the US.⁷⁹ The close ties are resembled by Vietnam's view as Russia being *first among equals*.⁸⁰ This has led to the signing of an FTA between Vietnam and the EEU.⁸¹ The two countries also work closely together in the development of several joint petroleum projects in Asia and also in the creation of Vietnam's first nuclear power plant. Most important however is the military cooperation between Vietnam and Russia. The former has become the eight biggest arms importer globally and purchases 80 percent of its weaponry from Russia.⁸² In the last years, Vietnam spent an enormous budget to counter the security threats in its region. The country mainly buys naval weaponry, cruise missiles and recently also acquired SU-35 fighters. This build up in the country's military is clearly meant as a response to China's increasing assertive behaviour in

⁷⁶ GORENBURG and SCHWARTZ, *Russia's Strategy in Southeast-Asia*, Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷⁷ MAKAROV, I. A., 'Accelerated Development of the Russian Far East', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 16 (2018), 116-120.

⁷⁸ TSVETOV, *Russia and Multilateral Diplomacy in East Asia*, Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁷⁹ TSVETOV, 'After Crimea', 70.

⁸⁰ ASEAN-Russia security ties will outpace trade links, 2017 (<https://dailybrief.oxan.com/Analysis/DB221909/ASEAN-Russia-security-ties-will-outpace-trade-links>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁸¹ TRICKETT, *Is Russia's Asia Outreach Bearing Fruit?*, Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁸² KRUGLOV, A., *Business booming for Russia's arms traders*, 2019 (<https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/04/article/business-booming-for-russias-arms-traders/>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

the South China Sea. Since 2014, Russia has gained access again to the Cam Ranh Bay, which was once used by the Soviets.⁸³ In 2002 the Kremlin was forced to withdraw its military personnel and assets from the harbour, which was the symbol of Russia's decline from power in the region.⁸⁴ Russia's return can thus be seen as a clear statement: we're back.

One can conclude that Russia's pivot to the East struggles to go beyond China. An example hereof is the relationship between ASEAN and Russia, which is seen by both partners as of secondary importance. Relative trade is growing between both partners, this however is not surprising giving the low baseline to which it can be compared. If one however looks at the absolute numbers, it is clear that ASEAN is not an important trading partner for Russia and the opposite is true as well. Russia's political and military influence in the region also remains rather limited, certainly compared to the US and China. Moscow does however have some good bilateral ties within the region, notably Vietnam. It remains the question how Moscow will respond to the increasing pressure from Beijing related to its military equipment deals and energy cooperation with countries such as Vietnam. Moscow's stance on the South China Sea matter might also heavily influence some of its bilateral relation with several ASEAN members.

In 2019, it is clear that Russia does not have the resources to become a third pole in the region. The interests of the Kremlin consequently remain superficial in Southeast Asia. It mainly wishes to send a double message. Firstly, Russia does not stand alone. Secondly, Russia is a great power and has a consequent role to play in Southeast Asia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Russia's turn to the East is not new, it however only really started taking place after the catalysator effect of the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The annexation of Crimea was a breaking point, which led to a profound schism between the West and Moscow. The pivot to the East mainly aims to achieve two goals. Firstly, it wants to finally resolve the draining effect of the vastly underdeveloped regions of the Far East and Siberia on the federal budget and give the Russian economy a much needed boost. Secondly, Moscow aims to reshape the US-centric world order, based on democracy, a strong rule of law and liberalism.

For both of these goals, Russia has turned away its view from the West to the East. The Kremlin believes that China is its gateway to Asia and is consequently of paramount importance in Russia's foreign policy. It is clear that Russia's economic pivot to the East is underway and this is typified by far going cooperation with China. The latter has increasingly become a substitute for the markets of Europe and the US. China, which previously had been excluded from sensitive areas, now has an important market share in Russia's energy export. The strong growth of China in the Russian economy has already led to several warnings against overdependence in the near future. That being said, mostly the EU remains of crucial

⁸³ *Russia's Pivot to Asia*, 2016 (<https://www.economist.com/asia/2016/11/26/russias-pivot-to-asia>), Accessed on 24 August 2019.

⁸⁴ MANKOFF, 'Russia's Asia Pivot', 81.

importance for the Russian economy in regard to export, technology and FDI. In 2019, the economic pivot East can best be understood as a rebalancing exercise of Russia's economy.

China and Russia also work closely together in their foreign policy. This is due to their common goal: the creation of a polycentric world and the consequent end of the US-centric world order. The new system should be based on sovereignty, peaceful coexistence, territorial integrity and non-use of force, which would lead to a stable and predictable international system. As a consequence of their cooperation both countries have increasingly worked together politically and militarily. Both countries' foreign policy objectives are however not identical, which leads to a number of constraints in their cooperation. It is clear that Russia's and China's cooperation as equal partners will not be able to last in the future, due to the increasing rise of asymmetry. China has arguably been one of the main beneficiaries of the current global political constellation and consequently aims to gradually modify the system. Since the fall of the USSR, Russia however has seen its great power status waver. It consequently acts in a revisionist manner, which led to the Kremlin's policy of systematically attacking the foundations of the current international system. At times, China and Russia also have conflicting interests, which might lead to tensions in the future. Exemplary hereof is the suppressed competition in Central Asia, where Russia is losing its historical privileged position as an economic powerhouse and security provider.

Russia acknowledges the fact that China is its most promising partner, but also that it needs to go beyond the country. As a consequence, hereof, Russia has aimed to improve its ties with ASEAN. This however proved to be mostly unsuccessful. This is mainly due to Russia's poor economic and military presence in the region, which makes it impossible for Russia to become an influential third pole in the region. Most ASEAN countries also doubt whether Russia can truly be an autonomous actor, due to its dependence on China. Russia's move towards ASEAN thus remains underdeveloped and is mainly meant to mark its footprint in the region and by doing so, sending a message to China and the West.

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L'analyse des éléments déclencheurs des conflits et des instruments de leur gestion - sanctions et incitants économiques comme moyens de politique étrangère; crises et interventions humanitaires; rôle de la mémoire dans un processus de réconciliation, par exemple - est combinée à l'étude empirique de différends internationaux et de processus de paix spécifiques.