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Russia's "Pivot" to the East: Short-lived with China?

By Chris Cheang

Synopsis

Since the Ukrainian and Crimean crises, much has been written about Russia's "pivot" to the East, chiefly China. The gravity of the current tensions between Russia and the West has, however, been exaggerated. Russia's culture, history, and geography have inextricably been tied to the Western/European world.

Commentary

THE COLLAPSE of the Soviet Union in 1991 left the country with an identity crisis. However, one could conclude that while Russia's 1917-1991 flirtation with Marxism - itself a Western ideology - represented a long break from Russia's European roots, it did not lead to the total purge of Western cultural influence from Russian life. The fact that the Russian Orthodox Church could not be totally eliminated from Russian life by the Bolsheviks and their successors illustrates that any attempt to totally eliminate one's past is futile, especially relatively recent historical past.

Hence, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 did not lead to a total break of Russia's cultural links with Europe and the West in general. One reads all too often that Western sanctions over the Crimea and the Ukraine issues have "forced" Russia to intensify links with China and that would or could eventually lead to Russia becoming the junior partner in a loose alliance. Apart from China's declared intentions of not entering into any alliance relationship and Russia's own considerations (not wanting to become the junior partner), the cultural, historical, traditional and geographic realities point to a short-lived "pivot" to China.

The Cultural Factor

The cultural factor, broadly-speaking, must not be underestimated – generally Russians of all stripes and political persuasions, even those who live in Siberia and the Russian Far East, which is geographically closer to Asia, would prefer to spend their holidays in Rome, Paris, London or New York to Beijing, Tokyo or Seoul. They would feel more at home in the West than in the East. Needless to say, there are exceptions but this is the rule.

The Russian would not say he is a European but is more familiar and comfortable with European traditions and customs as well as history. Despite initiating and pushing the “pivot” to China, Putin himself has never ceased to remind his people and the world of Russia’s European roots. During the 14-22 October 2017 World Festival of Youth and Students held in Sochi, he stressed that while Russia was a “Eurasian space”, its “culture, language group and history” is “undoubtedly a European space as it is inhabited by people of this culture”.

Under President Yeltsin, Russia openly aspired to returning to the “civilised world”, two words bandied about very often by its intellectuals and leaders and even today. This description of Europe and the West in general continues to capture the imagination of Russia’s liberals who would like to see a Russia as part of the West in one form or another.

In the 1990s and early years of this century, Russia’s membership of the G-8; its declared intention of joining the OECD; membership of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; Putin not ruling out joining NATO (in an interview with the BBC’s David Frost in March 2000); all represented attempts to “*join the civilised world*” (my emphasis) - to no avail.

In that regard, the West must assume some blame for rejecting Russia’s “application” to join its “club”; deeply rooted in the European/American psyche is fear of the Russian colossus. While a chequered history is one reason, Russia has also long been considered an “Asiatic” power. A measure of prejudice, justified or not, is at the heart of the European and American perception of Russia.

History and Geography

The historical context is relevant: Russian history has been and still is inextricably linked to European history. From the rise of the Russian political entity; the introduction of Christianity; subjection to Mongol/Tatar rule; wars against the Teutonic Knights, the Poles and Swedes; its role in the European Concert of Power before, during and after the Napoleonic wars; to the Crimean war against England and France; the war with Turkey over the Balkans in the 1870s and 1880s; the first and second world wars; and the 1945-1991 post-war world, all these developments tied Russia to Europe.

Finally, geography is a constant one cannot change. While it is a huge transcontinental landmass, with most of its territory lying east of the Urals, the bulk of its people live west of that mountain divide. Russia’s challenge is to develop its sparsely-populated and dwindling Siberian and Far Eastern territories.

Russia’s leaders have been aware all along of the need to accomplish this

monumental task; but the fact remains that many of the people of these two large territories would rather live in the more developed and economically stable European part of Russia.

Hence, any pivot to China cannot logically be sustainable for any length of time. Much depends on the character, temperament and above all, worldview of Putin's successor, particular his perception of the West. Judging by the recent and historical past, there is no doubt that he is likely to return to his European roots.

Being the only European country sharing one of the world's longest land borders with China cannot but be uncomfortable for any European state, much less one with an imperial past, messianic political and economic ideology and superpower status, not to mention tense and openly hostile relationship after the Sino-Soviet split.

Implications for Southeast Asia

The state of US-China relations will continue to shape and dominate the security, economic and political architecture of Southeast and the Asia-Pacific. On its own, Russia cannot exercise influence on the scale of the US or China, given the fact that its engagement with the region has been and remains limited. This could change were Russia to place more or equal focus of its "pivot" to this region.

However, at this stage, it is difficult to conceive this taking place for China obviously matters more to Russia than our region. Southeast Asia need not perceive the "pivot" in negative terms, should it become sustainable.

If the "pivot" leads to a more stable and more predictable relationship between the two giants and that results in economic spin-offs for the region and balanced ties with Southeast Asia, then we cannot but welcome it. The development of the "pivot" deserves to be carefully monitored by the regional countries.

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