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## **Russian-American Relations: What Impact on ASEAN?**

*By Chris Cheang*

### **Synopsis**

*The current tension in Russo-American ties is likely to persist in the next few years. Would it have an impact on ASEAN?*

### **Commentary**

RUSSIA-US relations are strained by well-known differences: Ukraine, Syria, arms control issues, perceived Russian interference in the 2016 United States presidential election, and the long-held Russian standpoint that the West, especially the US has been meddling not only in Russia's domestic affairs but also in the former Soviet republics, its perceived sphere of influence.

However, this troubling aspect of international relations has not had any discernible impact thus far on ASEAN and its relationship with both major powers. Russia does not appear to seek to challenge the US in ASEAN, unlike in the Ukraine or Syria, judging by the words of the Russian Ambassador to Singapore, Andrei Tatarinov. This was the message that came across from his presentation at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), on 28 September 2017.

### **Russia's Policy in Asia**

The ambassador stressed that "Russia's policy in Asia is deliberate and focused, aimed at a truly stable balance of power and pursuing a cohesive regional agenda. The clear commitment of Russia is to ensure stability, security and prosperity in Asia, to develop relations with the regional partners, both in bilateral and multilateral formats". He said these objectives were outlined clearly in the new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation approved by President Vladimir Putin in November 2016.

Secondly, ASEAN itself does not have any troubling issues in its relations with Russia – there is neither an ideological challenge nor a perceived national security threat posed by Russia. Hence, there are no political obstacles to any ASEAN interest in enhancing its political, economic/trade links with Russia.

Thirdly, as argued [in an earlier commentary](#), Russia's foreign policy focus is on Europe and the West, despite its declaratory statements to the contrary. Russia's military and diplomatic resources are currently concentrated in the Middle East, specifically Syria. Hence, ASEAN is not on Russia's list of immediate foreign policy priorities to which substantial resources must be devoted.

Fourthly, China perceives ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific region as its sphere of influence, and is challenging the US in the whole region. Hence, it would neither look kindly upon nor countenance any Russian attempt to assert its influence in the region vis-à-vis the US and act as another factor in the big power struggle for influence.

Fifthly, the US too would not have an interest in seeing Russian power and influence rise in ASEAN. ASEAN's economic/trade links on the whole with the US are stronger than those with Russia. It is inconceivable that these links would drastically weaken or disappear in the foreseeable future, even in the face of an isolationist America under President Donald Trump.

### **Possible Challenge to ASEAN**

Russia and the US have taken a number of measures against each other over the last year, including actions against each other's media outlets. The most significant measure taken by the US against Russia which bears watching was the December 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) which identified Russia and China as competitors and rivals to US power, influence and interests.

Another critical move was the August 2017 US sanctions bill, entitled Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act. The sanctions bill appears to be of real concern to Russia – President Putin himself made his concerns known during a meeting with chief editors of the Russian media on 11 January 2018, stressing that Russia "will respond accordingly". "Any steps towards any restrictions and, obviously, any unlawful sanctions," he added, "will damage rather than improve our relations with the United States." The sanctions bill too might become an issue for ASEAN to deal with as well.

An insightful commentary on the bill by a Russian academic reveals Moscow's concerns in some detail. Professor Konstantin Khudoley, writing in the December 2017 issue of the respected journal, *Russia in Global Affairs* (RGA), argues that the bill "sets the most stringent policy towards Russia throughout the post-Soviet years".

He concludes that the sanctions "are aimed at pushing Russia out of global economic and political processes as much as possible and sidelining it to the periphery of the world economy and politics". The sanctions bill ranges from Russian activities in the financial, energy, cyber-security sectors to foreign sanctions evaders and human rights abusers in Russia.

The bill also requires the US Treasury, in consultation with the Director of National Intelligence and the Secretary of State, to submit to the appropriate congressional committees not later than 180 days (due by the end of January) a detailed report. This report would focus on senior political figures and oligarchs close to President Putin, their net worth and those of their family members, “indices of corruption” relating to them, and the identification of their non-Russian business affiliations.

### **ASEAN Relations with US, Russia**

The challenge would be whether the detailed provisions and above all, their full implementation, could affect, in one way or another, ASEAN’s current and future economic/trade links with Russia. Much would depend on the US’ perception of these links.

It is an accepted fact that big power rivalry and tussle over influence has been, is and will continue to be present in ASEAN. Thus far, the principals involved are China and the US. However, economic ties have all too often fallen victim to political and geostrategic and geopolitical considerations.

ASEAN values its current relationship with the US and Russia on all fronts. But it also places a premium on its ability to make decisions on its own, based on the merits of the case(s). One might find instructive the view of Fyodor Lukyanov, Editor-in-Chief of the RGA and a leading observer of Russia’s foreign policy, when he wrote recently in RGA that “Russian-American relations are not the core of world politics that overshadows the rest, as it used to be”. “It is impossible now,” he added, “to force other countries to do what the “heavyweights want.”

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