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Russia's Role in EAS: Promoting inter-regional cooperation

By Alica Kizekova

Synopsis

Russia's membership of the East Asia Summit and its hosting of the 2012 APEC Leaders Meeting provide an opportunity to define Moscow's role in the Asia-Pacific and in promoting inter-regional cooperation.

Commentary

THE ASIA-PACIFIC region has been identified as the world's new centre of gravity. The emerging new architecture revolving around Asian powers has given rise to questions about Russia's role in the region, given that the Eurasian giant has an Asian presence in the Far East.

The mutual threat perceptions between Russia and other Asian nations have altered over the course of 20 years since the collapse of communism. Russia is now recognised as a non-threatening great power with global significance. However, regional analysts still voice scepticism over the degree to which Russia's vested interests lie in Asia and whether these interests are compatible with those of other regional players.

Residence in the Far East

Earlier Russian assessments from 1997 implied that China, rather than the United States, posed the greatest threat to Russia's interests and allies. Leading Russian scholars of international relations such as Alexei Arbatov predicted that in the next five to 20 years, Russia should carefully watch China's expansionism towards Siberia and the Russian Far East as well as Central Asia. Such anxieties have, however, dissipated in light of increased confidence-building efforts which led to the creation of a formal regional body, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) in 2001. However, a notable exception to the usually non-threatening views of China emerged in 2009, when Russia's Army General Nikolai Makarov suggested that China and NATO "are the most dangerous of our geopolitical rivals".

After a period of decline, Russia has been fighting back to prove that it does not lack the capacity to change its foreign policy focus from the West to the East. Vladivostok, the former capital of Russia's Pacific Ocean Fleet, is hosting the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Leaders Meeting. Vladivostok had previously experienced protests triggered by collapsing sea-faring and fishing companies, unemployment, poverty and population decline. In addition, Moscow has extended the federal programme for developing the Far East until 2013, raising Vladivostok's development funds from 7.5 billion rubles (US\$241.2 million) to 426 billion rubles (US\$13.7 billion).

The intensive economic and social development of Siberia and Russia's Far East are part of Russia's main strategic priorities in the region. Speaking at the Singapore Global Dialogue in September, another prominent

Russian scholar, Sergei Karaganov, presented Siberia as the new source to quench Asia's thirst for resources; Siberia could attract foreign capital from investors as diverse as the US, China, Indonesia and Singapore.

Building Effective Multilateralism

Commentators from around the world have expressed misgivings about the return of Vladimir Putin as presidential candidate next year, with *The Economist* going so far as to label Putin "Russia's humiliator-in-chief" (26 September 2011). Others, however, do not find Putin's comeback surprising. They note that Russia's foreign policy under President Putin was marked by a policy of "Asianisation" from the very beginning. Putin's Russia increasingly saw NATO's eastward enlargement as detrimental to its interests in the former USSR's sphere of influence. The Kremlin thus engaged in a multidirectional foreign policy in order to create partnerships and integrate Russia within various multilateral structures, such as the leading emerging economies in BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the SCO.

In an effort to provide ideas to Russia's leadership, the Russian Council for Security Cooperation Organisation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP) presented to President Dmitry Medvedev a report entitled "Going East: Russia's Asia-Pacific Strategy" in 2010. The council introduced the slogan "Lean on the West, stabilise the South and go East", describing Russia as a "Euro-Pacific" country.

It suggested that Russia be a flexible player in setting up a new regional architecture, distinguishing itself from countries proposing specific mechanisms such as Japan's East Asian Community and Australia's Asia Pacific Community. However, Russia risked being sidelined if it were not active enough in the region. Another Russian CSCAP paper entitled "Russia in Asia and the Pacific" painted the country as a potential "bridge" between Europe and the Asia-Pacific and spoke of the prominence of the G20 within the new Asia-Pacific regional model.

Asia does not need a Bridge to Europe

Asian nations, particularly ASEAN as a diplomatic player, have a history of directly dealing with Europe and other extra-regional players. Speakers at the recent Singapore Global Dialogue referred to the centrality of ASEAN in facilitating dialogues and linkages among all key players in the region. In the words of a prominent Singapore scholar, ASEAN is the "silent hero". Because it is weak and does not pose a threat to anyone; it is a trustworthy player and can facilitate the transition to a new architecture that would balance the competing forces in the region.

These circumstances therefore necessitate the creation of an effective "intra-Asian Dialogue", because Russia's view of Asia appears significantly different from that of China or Southeast Asia. Russia needs to show that its interests are in line with those of other Asian nations. Russia has already called for the intensification of cooperation between the SCO and ASEAN, both of which signed a formal Memorandum of Understanding in 2005. They share a similar understanding of non-traditional threats. The SCO does not pose a threat to ASEAN's prominent role in Asia. On the contrary, it could be argued that China's learning process towards multilateralism took place within ASEAN-led frameworks, and was further advanced within the SCO.

A full-fledged participation by Russia in the East Asia Summit (EAS) should bring a more balanced and stable regional architecture and elevate the EAS as the main forum for discussing security issues in the region. Additionally, it is expected that Russia will use its EAS membership to actively support measures to boost free trade in Asia.

Russia can cater to the increasing demand for energy by offering policies which are beneficial to both suppliers and recipients. It can also make a valuable contribution in preventing and managing conflicts and natural disasters in the region. Thus, in defining a role for itself in the EAS, Russia can not only promote inter-regional cooperation but also make a positive contribution to the security architecture of the Asia-Pacific region.

Alica Kizekova is a Visiting Associate Fellow at the Centre for Multilateralism Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. She was previously a teaching fellow and a senior tutor fellow at Bond University in Australia and has also worked as a ministerial adviser in the Slovak government.