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Russian Foreign Policy: Balance Sheet 2019

By Chris Cheang

SYNOPSIS

As a new decade dawns, Russian foreign policy can boast some successes, mainly in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. However, apart from China, Moscow's ties with the Asia-Pacific region are below par even though there is considerable potential for a stronger relationship.

COMMENTARY

MORE THAN five years after the annexation of the Crimea and separatism in eastern Ukraine, some European countries appear to have become anxious about the state of the European Union's relations with Russia. This has been epitomised by the efforts of French President Emmanuel Macron to reach out to Russia. He has accepted President Vladimir Putin's invitation to Moscow to attend the 75th anniversary celebrations of victory in the Second World War on 9 May 2020.

President Donald Trump has also been invited. It remains to be seen whether he will take it up. Victory Day, as this annual celebration is described in Russia, is a very important day in the history of post-Soviet Russia. Attendance by any major Western leader would be a significant symbolic boost to President Putin's standing with his people and to Russia's prestige – it would be seen as the end of Western diplomatic isolation of Russia.

Back to G-8 After Europe Thaw?

President Macron also supported President Trump's stand that Russia should be readmitted into the G-7, which was known as the G-8 before Russia was expelled following the annexation of the Crimea. President Trump will host the G-7 in 2020.

President Macron has also been active in reviving the Normandy Four Format – Russia, France, Germany, Ukraine– to resolve the separatist conflict. The leaders of these countries met in Paris on 9 December 2019, after a three-year pause.

This meeting was preceded by a Russo-Ukrainian exchange of prisoners in early September. Both sides agreed to a full and comprehensive ceasefire before the end of 2019. They also agreed to work towards local elections over the next four months.

President Putin has long been aware that the current state of Russo-Ukrainian relations is a major obstacle to normalising Russia's relations with the EU.

Stronger Ties with Turkey

A NATO member, Turkey's decision to purchase Russia's S-400 missile system and receipt of its delivery in summer 2019 created dissension within NATO. The United States has threatened to impose sanctions against Ankara. On the other hand, Moscow sees the Turkish move as a foreign policy success for Russia.

If Turkish threat to close strategic US bases in the country should sanctions be imposed on it is carried out, the Russians are likely to celebrate. Since NATO is considered a security threat by Russia, any issue which weakens its unity is certainly to Moscow's benefit.

Significant Role in Syria

Russian military intervention on behalf of President Bashir Assad in 2015 undoubtedly averted his fall from power and ensured that the conflict would not contribute further to instability in the Middle East. In their rivalry, Iran and Israel cannot act independently of each other in Syria, without Russian agreement or support.

Iran supported President Assad in the civil war and has mobilised resources to assist the Syrian president. Israel considers this a security threat. In any case, enduring peace and stability in Syria cannot be achieved without Russian participation. In that regard, Russia's prestige and status as a reliable ally in the region have risen as a consequence.

Return to Africa

President Putin spent quite some time at the Russia-Africa summit in Sochi in October 2019, the first of its kind in Moscow's external relations. Putin reportedly attended 16 bilateral meetings over two days. After the then USSR's collapse, Moscow's interaction with Africa decreased. This summit represented a concerted effort to revive links with the continent.

Economic ties are weak, with Russian exports to Africa totalling about US\$100 billion in 2009–2018, most of that with Algeria and Egypt. Nevertheless, the summit saw the attendance of 43 heads of state, along with delegations from all 54 African nations. Russia can be expected to step up its engagement with Africa, which might not want to become overly dependent on China, the US or the EU for its development.

Gains in Asia-Pacific

Russia and ASEAN do not have any contentious issues and hence, the potential to raise their relationship has always been there. Russia-ASEAN relations received a boost from the rise in trade volume in 2018, growing by 18.4% and amounting to \$19.8 billion. Nevertheless, compared to ASEAN's trade with some of its major dialogue partners, Russia's position remains one of potential yet to be fully realised, let alone exploited.

ASEAN's largest trading partner is China (\$483 billion) followed by the EU (\$288 billion), the US (\$262.4 billion), Japan (\$230 billion), South Korea (US\$160.8 billion) and India (\$81 billion).

Russo-India relations, already traditionally close, were enhanced with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's September 2019 visit to Vladivostok, during which he extended a \$1 billion credit line to develop the Russian Far East, the first time India had undertaken such a step.

This move, along with other agreements to strengthen bilateral links, testified to the resilience of Russia's ties with India. At the same time, Indian conversations with the policy strategists in the US are becoming more frequent and purposeful, which clearly indicated New Delhi is not putting all its eggs in one basket.

It is however with Japan that Russia's relations still have to be normalised. Without Japanese trade, technology and assistance to develop the Russian Far East, Russia must logically look to China. The official opening of the Power of Siberia gas pipeline in early December 2019 to serve China's energy needs only accentuates Russia's growing dependence on China.

The seemingly intractable Kurile Islands' issue stands in the way of a normalisation of relations between Russia and Japan. Both sides have been working hard to move forward; Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi met his Russian counterpart on 19 December 2019 in Moscow, their third meeting in four months.

Blow to Russian Prestige

The World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) decided in early December 2019 to impose a four-year ban on Russian teams competing under their flag at the Olympic and Paralympic Games of 2020 and 2022 and the football World Cup in 2022, among other global sporting events, for doping non-compliance.

WADA's decision is a major blow to Russian prestige and indirectly to its foreign policy. Russia, like its predecessor USSR, is a major global sporting nation. Not surprisingly, President Putin argued during his annual year-end press conference that the ban was not justified. In his opinion, bans should be handed out on an individual, not collective, basis, adding that the decision was political and unfair.

Prospects for 2020

Although the trajectory of Russia's relations with China seems positive and the two countries are expanding their economic and political cooperation, Moscow is not maximising its potential in the Asia-Pacific region. The stalemate in the Kurile Islands' issue and the lack of a strong and broad-based relationship with ASEAN are not helping Russia to increase its presence and role in Northeast and Southeast Asia.

In the wake of the uncertainty worldwide emanating from President Donald Trump's unconventional foreign policy, Russia can capitalise on the opportunities to project more responsibility and a wider stake in a peaceful international community. At the same time, the Russian economy's performance is below par and can continue to pose a challenge to even a strong leader like Vladimir Putin.

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