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Russia: Still Searching for Security Without the USSR

By Alexey Kupriyanov

SYNOPSIS

Russia over the past century and a half, being an Indo-Pacific power, has never been a leading regional actor. However, this situation is now changing. Due to economic isolation from Europe and the United States following the open military conflict in Ukraine, Russia has no choice but to turn to the East. The consequences of this turn will be manifold.

COMMENTARY

For Russian scholars, the rift of 24 February 2022 has become, paradoxically, less sharp than for their colleagues in the West. If for the latter, this is the end of the familiar world, then for the former, it is yet another stage of a protracted security problem that dates back to the late 1980s, albeit a stage that is more overt and leading to more profound changes.

NATO Problem

The assertion that the anxiety of Russian society and the expert community as a whole is caused to a large extent by North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) expansion is often considered by Western experts, journalists, and politicians as simply a justification for Russia's behaviour. From the Russian point of view, however, it explains much of Russia's foreign policy. After the end of the Cold War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) collapsed, and the new states formed from its fragments ceased to be hostile to the West.

Russian strategic culture, like any other, is largely irrational. We tend to seek answers to current questions in history and we are sensitive to any threats from the West because it was Europe that produced both Napoleon and Hitler. That is why Russian

society could not help but raise the issue of NATO. Why is NATO continuing to actively expand after the collapse of the USSR? Whom is NATO directed against? Why does it not remain the military alliance it was originally constituted but constantly accepts new members approaching the borders of Russia?

The Ukrainian crisis reinforced this impression even more. For Russia, this is a delayed consequence of the collapse of the USSR when territories with significant Russian-speaking populations turned out to be part of Ukraine. After the start of direct conflict in 2014, the stubborn refusal of Western leaders to force their Ukrainian counterparts to fulfill their promises and accept Russian proposals to defuse the situation in Europe finally convinced Russians of the hypocrisy of the West and its role in provoking the current escalation. It is obvious that the West is now closed to Russia, and Russia has no choice but to look for its future in the East.

Eastern Frontier

For Russian society, given the orientation of its strategic culture to the West, this will be a traumatic experience. Russia's previous attempt at expansion in this direction, which on the whole coincided with the expansion of other European powers, resulted in a painful defeat in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05.

The issue of the security of the eastern borders was the most worrying for the Russian leadership over the following decades. Throughout the entire interwar period, the Far Eastern border was one of the most turbulent, including regular clashes with Chinese and Japanese troops.

Although the Russians took revenge in 1945 for their defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, they limited themselves to minimal territorial acquisitions. After the ensuing war in Korea, which led to a strategic stalemate, the Soviet leadership lost interest in the Far East and did not try to radically change the balance of power in that region.

In July 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev (then General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) tried to propose the USSR's new policy for the Asia-Pacific. It was time to end the Sino-Soviet standoff, develop relations with the United States to create a comprehensive international security system, reduce fleets in the Pacific, resume negotiations on a zone of peace in the Indian Ocean, and build confidence between all players in the region. This plan did not work, primarily because the USSR soon collapsed, and Gorbachev's political career collapsed with it.

In post-Soviet times, Pacific Russia has become a valuable but remote province for the metropolis which must be constantly supplied from the national budget. On the one hand, it was obvious that the Far East was necessary for Russia; on the other hand, its development required large investments. The population of the Far East was getting smaller, and the economy became closely connected with China, Korea, and Japan. Russia's policy in the Indo-Pacific was extremely passive and largely comprised supporting the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). But the current conflict in Ukraine may change everything.

Difficult Turn to the Indo-Pacific

It is not yet clear how the current conflict will end, but sooner or later the Ukrainian issue will be resolved; with a high probability, a hostile peace will be established on the western border of Russia. The new *cordon sanitaire* will cut it off from Western markets, investments, and technologies. Significant efforts will be made to ensure the stability of the border and Russia will not hesitate to use nuclear weapons to stop possible full-scale invasion by NATO and its allies. Both the Russian elites and the population will approve of this posture.

In this situation, Russia will have to consider shifting the main focus of its activities to the East. This is a difficult task for both objective and subjective reasons. The main population of Russia and its key infrastructure have historically been and are located to the west of the Urals, where the most fertile territories and the main production centres are located.

In addition, over the past few decades there has been a gradual outflow of population from the northern and eastern regions, and it will not be easy to reverse this trend. Another important problem is the deep Eurocentricity of the Russian political, economic, and military elites who will have to completely change their view. But sooner or later this will happen and then Russia will have to manage a number of important tasks.

Looking for New Horizons

The first task is the security of shipping on which the survival of the Russian economy will depend. The high freight cost due to Western sanctions and the detention of Russian ships in European seas make Russia think about recreating the merchant marine, creating insurance and reinsurance companies to reduce the freight cost for foreign ships, and the construction of a powerful fleet in the Far East in order to protect its merchant marine. Most likely, a significant strengthening of the Russian Pacific Fleet will follow with an emphasis on frigates capable of operating throughout the Indo-Pacific to protect Russian trade routes.

The second task is finding Russia's place in this new world and building new relations with the countries of the East. With some, notably Japan, Russia will have problems from the outset. Since Russian elites are now looking at the situation in the Indo-Pacific through the prism of events taking place in Ukraine, those who helped Ukraine or imposed sanctions on Russia are included in the list of unfriendly countries. Of the countries and territories of the Indo-Pacific, this list includes the USA, South Korea, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Micronesia, Singapore, and Taiwan. Russia considers the other Indo-Pacific countries as *a priori* friendly since trade with them helps its economy survive under the sanctions. China and India are seen as key partners for Russia in the region.

In this imaginable new world, it becomes critical for Russia that NATO does not expand into the Pacific. Russia regards "cold war on the western border, peace in the east" as a working scheme. Developments such as the Quad and AUKUS that carry the risk of a split of the region along military lines or which attempts to isolate members of the community of Indo-Pacific states are perceived negatively. Russia legitimately fears that it will quickly find itself among the "revisionists who must be restrained" and seeks

to avoid this. It takes a similar position on the possible isolation of China and any other country that Russia considers friendly.

In Russia's view, the Indo-Pacific is ASEAN-centric. Moscow has established good relations with almost all ASEAN countries and Russia views ASEAN as an independent organisation, which is interested in developing economic cooperation between the participating countries and does not try to isolate China and Russia. ASEAN is the pivot around which the Indo-Pacific revolves and where freedom of navigation and trade is observed; this is the ideal of Russia.

In summary, Russia is on the cusp of tying its future to success in and with the Indo-Pacific community. Russia will have to show considerable skill in establishing economic, political, and military interaction with countries, many of which are hostile to each other. But its skillful performance in the South China Sea, where Russia manages to maintain good relations with all parties to the territorial dispute, gives hope that it will succeed.

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