

India and President Putin's Pacific Pivot

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As Russia pays renewed strategic attention to Asia, New Delhi has the strategic opportunity to broaden the basis of its engagement with Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin will visit Singapore in November 2018 to participate in the East Asia Summit (EAS) for the first time. On the margins of the EAS, [Putin will separately meet with the Southeast Asian leaders](#) in the familiar ASEAN+1 format.

For Moscow, it opens the prospect of emerging as an independent actor in a region that is getting caught in the cross-fire between the United States (US) and China. While the idea of Russia as a 'third force' in Asia might be somewhat far-fetched, Russia could certainly contribute to the regional security order.

For New Delhi, Moscow's active participation in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) structures loosens the geopolitical framework that has begun to constrain India's relations with Russia. India has tended to view its ties with Russia through the prism of great power relations with the US and China, and the regional dynamics in South Asia, especially in relation to Pakistan and Afghanistan. At both levels, the game tends to be zero-sum.

Russia's interest in Asia is not new. Most of Russia's national territory lies in the East while its demographic and economic weight bears to the West. Moscow has always seen itself as an Asian as well as a European power. After all, the double-headed eagle – in Russia's national insignia – looks both west and east.

At the height of its power in the second half of the 20th century, competition with the US for influence in Asia was very much part of the Soviet Union's international relations. However, the geographic constraints on its reach into maritime Asia, the nature of the Soviet economy, the division and weakening of the region's communist parties and the normalisation of Sino-US relations limited Soviet strategic possibilities in Asia.

As it restructured its economy following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia inevitably turned its attention to East Asia that had become an economic powerhouse by the 1990s. Russia became a member of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum in 1998.

ASEAN, which was becoming the regional fulcrum for the promotion of stability and security, sought to draw in Russia. Moscow participated as an observer at the first EAS in 2005 and joined it as a member in 2011 along with the US.

Putin had hosted the APEC Summit in 2012 and launched with some fanfare a pivot to Asia. However, Russia's intensifying confrontation with the US and the European Union (EU), especially after the 2014 crisis in Ukraine, pulled Russia away from East Asia to Eurasia – the former Soviet space straddling the regions between Europe and Asia.

Amidst the mounting Western political pressure and new Western economic sanctions against Russia, Putin's alignment with China's President Xi Jinping got stronger. This, in turn, reduced Russia's room to expand the engagement with ASEAN and East Asia.

Moscow's support for Beijing's rejection of the ruling of the Permanent Court of Arbitration on the South China Sea dispute in 2016 dismayed the region, especially Vietnam, a traditional friend of Moscow, now locked in a maritime territorial dispute with Beijing. Beyond Vietnam, many other countries are troubled by China's assertive policies in the region and are wary about the growing intensity of Moscow's military engagement with Beijing in the Pacific.

As the prospects of a potential deal with US President Donald Trump seems to recede and Moscow's dependence on Beijing grows, Putin appears to be taking a fresh look at Russia's possibilities in the East. Four incentives seem to nudge Putin towards the Indo-Pacific.

One is economic; as Western sanctions bite, Asian countries can lend greater breadth to Russia's economic partnerships. Second, unlike the EU, the ASEAN has a tradition of non-intervention in the internal affairs of other countries and could offer a comfortable political setting for Putin. Third is strategic; participation in the ASEAN forums reinforces Putin's efforts to reclaim a role in the Korean Peninsula, normalise relations with Japan and engage the US outside the Euro-Atlantic framework. Four, Russia has been exporting arms to some important countries in the region besides India and Vietnam, including Malaysia and Indonesia. There is much room for consolidating these ties.

Russia's more productive engagement with East Asia will help mitigate the increasingly zero-sum character of India's great power relations. The sharpening tensions between Washington and Moscow and India's growing strategic warmth towards the US have begun to constrain the atmosphere of India-Russia relations. So has the new bonhomie between Moscow and Beijing.

Although these complications are unlikely to disappear any time soon, the East Asian framework has the potential to mitigate some of them. New Delhi and Moscow have a history of collaboration in the east, especially in Indochina during the 1970s and 1980s. India was the only country that had supported Russia and Vietnam during the Cambodian crisis.

While the context is radically different today, the ASEAN-led East Asian regional framework offers a valuable complement to India's participation in the Eurasian institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Although India has bought naval platforms and weapons from Russia for many decades, their strategic partnership lacked a maritime dimension. The Indo-Pacific framework might provide just that.

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