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Russia in Asia: Responding to Changing Times¹

Deep geopolitical shifts are fundamentally changing the global landscape. Against this backdrop, the Asia-Pacific is emerging as a significant region which is likely to influence international developments in the near future. Russia's policy in the Asia-Pacific region is deliberate and focused – it is aimed at a stable balance of power and an elaboration of a cohesive regional agenda, in line with the realities of the 21st century. Russia believes there is a need to establish a strong environment of international relations in the region to promote multilateral trade and investment cooperation, initiate joint efforts to counter security challenges and prevent the emergence of new threats – and create a launch pad to build an integrated Asia-Pacific political and economic space.

Andrey Tatarinov²

The geopolitical shift of power to Asia has become a reality and is expected to be even more substantial in the years to come. The region steps up as an influential player of the emerging polycentric world order architecture, as a locomotive of progress with the energy for further growth despite the current turbulence in the global economy. It is an attractive space for

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international cooperation, a cross-point of interests of large stakeholders and major multilateral institutions.

It is, therefore, natural that Asia is one of the key vectors of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation, which is an integral and organic part of the region. In fact, Russia could be fairly described as more Asian than European, as about 60 per cent of its territory stretches to the east of the Ural Mountains.

Russia's Asia Overtures

Historically, Russia has been inseparably connected with many countries of the region. Its support was one of the main factors which contributed to the victory of national liberation movements in Asia. The people of China, India, Indonesia, Mongolia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and other countries remember this very well.

Russia consistently intensifies its efforts to deepen engagement in political and economic cooperation and integration in Asia. It is a long-term policy carried out in a persistent and systematic manner no matter how Moscow manages its relations with the West. The allegations that Russia's proactive Eastern track policy is the result of complications in its dialogue with the United States (US) or the European Union are obviously short-sighted and do not reflect the reality. Greater involvement in the regional affairs is a matter of principle for Russia, which is not guided by any momentary considerations in this context. It serves the long-term interests of Russia and is consistent with the global development trends.

Russia's policy in Asia is deliberate and focused, aimed at a truly stable balance of power and elaboration of 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. These objectives are distinctly indicated in the new Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation approved by President Vladimir Putin in November 2016. Singapore is singled out in this document as an important partner in the Asia-Pacific region.

Russia enjoys time-tested friendship and multifaceted cooperation with many regional countries. Russian relations with China, India and Vietnam have been upgraded to strategic partnerships. The relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) states, Japan and South Korea are continuously developing on a strong and mutually beneficial basis.

Russia is a prominent player in the regional multilateral and trans-regional fora such as the East Asian Summits (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus Dialogue Partners, Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, Asia Cooperation Dialogue, Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) Forum, and the Russia-India-China forum. The focus of Russia's foreign policy in Asia is reflected by its membership in the Asian group of the Asia-Europe Meeting.

The development of productive interaction between these structures is an essential part of the long-term task to shape a strong regional and international system of relations. It is in Russia's interest to further expand the multi-tiered network diplomacy and build the architecture of multilateral partnerships in the region.

The logic of Russia's foreign policy in Asia proceeds from the fact that there is a strong need to establish an advanced environment of international relations in the region which will help promote multilateral trade and investment cooperation, boost joint efforts to counter security challenges and prevent the emergence of new threats – and create a launch pad to build an integrated Asian political and economic space.

Asia needs a system which would ensure equitable cooperation, genuine balance of power and harmony of interests. Every Asian country – large and small – must have a say in drafting the regional agenda. Moscow advocates a non-discriminatory regional order without imposition of unilateral approaches, with no division into leaders and supporters. The communication between the states is to be based exclusively on trust and mutual respect.

In September 2010, Russia and China came forward with a joint initiative to strengthen security in the Asia-Pacific urging the nations of the region:

- i. to respect sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, not to interfere in the internal affairs of each other;
- ii. to reaffirm the commitment to the principle of equal and indivisible security as well as the defensive nature of the military policies;
- iii. not to use or threaten to use military force, not to take or support any actions aimed at overthrowing governments or undermining the stability of other states;
- iv. to settle differences by peaceful political and diplomatic means based on the principles of common understanding and readiness to seek compromise;
- v. to strengthen cooperation in counteracting unconventional security threats;
- vi. to develop bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the military sphere not directed against third countries; and
- vii. to develop cross-border cooperation and people-to-people contacts.

Guided by the principles formulated in this initiative, Russia, China and Brunei proposed to create a new security and cooperation architecture for Asia-Pacific. This proposal was supported at the 8th East Asia Summit in Bandar Seri Begawan in October 2013. The EAS members have so far held six rounds of consultations – in Bandar Seri Begawan, Moscow, Jakarta, Phnom Penh, Beijing and Bangkok – to work out mutually acceptable arrangements on the “rules of the game” in the region.

Russia has no hidden agenda in the region. Moscow does not forge covert military alliances that would threaten anyone’s security. On the contrary, it looks forward to intensifying diversified political and economic cooperation with all the countries that show such willingness. Cooperation to ensure peace, stability and common prosperity is the key principle guiding Russia in Asia.

Asia has every reason to view Russia as a crucial element of military and political stability as well as of sustainable development. Russia has no ideological differences or thorny issues with the nations of the region which could not be settled through constructive dialogue. The regional efforts to counter international terrorism, emergency response, energy, transport, and science and technology cooperation are unimaginable without Russia.

Russia monitors the efforts to establish a system of free trade agreements (FTA) in the Asia-Pacific region, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Comprehensive Economic Partnership for East Asia. These FTAs should fall under the World Trade Organization principles and be as open as possible for all. It is counterproductive to develop free trade zones if they ignore the interests of other countries, especially the regional neighbours.

This is the approach Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Kyrgyzstan are committed to as member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) – a market of 180 million people with a total GDP of US\$4.2 trillion (about S\$5.7 trillion). It is hoped the establishment of the EAEU will forge a link between Europe and the Asia-Pacific region. Last year, an FTA was launched between the Eurasian Economic Union and Vietnam. A similar arrangement is being negotiated with Singapore. The first round of talks was held here in August 2017.

Unlike the TPP, which has a small circle of founding members while the rest can join but will have to follow the rules written without their participation, the EAEU aims to create a broader and more democratic economy-based partnership involving the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union, SCO and ASEAN with no restrictions on admission. The open nature of this initiative will ensure efficiency and meet the interests of all the participating countries.

Russia's proposal to move towards such free trade deals based on equality and mutual consideration of interests was supported by the leaders of the Southeast Asian states at the Third Russia-ASEAN Summit in Sochi on 19 and 20 May 2016, in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of dialogue partnership. This important meeting opened up the way to raise Russia-ASEAN cooperation to the level of strategic partnership.

Such a decision could not have been better timed. Since July 1996, when Russia became a full dialogue partner of ASEAN, the relations have matured and reached new heights. In 2004, Russia joined the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia. Three years later, the Russia-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership Financial Fund was set up to support joint projects. Today, its budget amounts to US\$5 million (about S\$6.8 million). In 2009, the position of the

Russian permanent representative to ASEAN was instituted. This year, a Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to ASEAN was established in Jakarta.

Russia and ASEAN

Russia enjoys a close friendship with ASEAN and has a precise strategic partnership agenda fixed in the Political Declaration and Comprehensive Plan of Action to Promote Cooperation for 2016-2020 adopted at the Sochi Summit. Both sides are working on the implementation of these documents designed to promote high-level political dialogue, cooperation in trade, investment, transport, energy, agriculture, emergency response, research, technology, education, tourism and culture. The relations between Russia and ASEAN are diverse in nature and have a huge potential for further growth.

The latest development is the adoption of the Russia-ASEAN Statement on Joint Efforts to Counter International Terrorism endorsed by the foreign ministers at their August meeting in Manila. There has been progress in efforts to establish a network of Russia-ASEAN think-tanks to serve as a Track 1.5 mechanism where Russia will be represented by the Moscow State University of International Relations and Singapore by the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) – Yusof Ishak Institute.

Russia and China

Another top priority for Russia is to strengthen relations with China. It is hard to underestimate the importance of bilateral ties that have grown into “comprehensive partnership and strategic collaboration” focused on ensuring international and regional security and stability, creating a global governance architecture addressing the imperatives of our time. The relations between the two countries have never been as good as they are now. In fact, they can serve as a model of state-to-state cooperation in the 21st century. Russia does not turn a blind eye to various issues where consensus is yet to be reached but discusses them in a spirit of frankness, friendship and sincerity to come up with mutually acceptable and beneficial agreements. Russia’s efforts are underpinned by equality, respect, trust and a commitment to take into account each other’s interests.

Close foreign policy coordination is a major part of the Russia-China strategic partnership. It is not spearheaded against any other country. The two countries' approaches to the majority of current global and regional issues either coincide or are very close. They firmly stand for the rules-based order governed by international law, oppose diktat and blackmail, unilateral sanctions, double standards and attempts to interfere in the home affairs of sovereign states.

China is a key Russian economic partner with more than US\$40 billion (about S\$54.4 billion) in trade last year. A target has been set - to expand it to US\$200 billion (S\$271.9 billion) in the next three to seven years. One may say this figure is too high in the current economic environment, but Moscow is confident that this goal can be achieved. A crucial prerequisite for success is to move to a new model of economic integration, forging closer ties in terms of value chains and investment.

A basic agreement has been reached to consolidate Eurasian integration in the EAEU format and China's Belt and Road Initiative. The Eurasian Economic Commission is working on a trade and economic cooperation agreement and a roadmap for priority integration projects between the EAEU and China.

Energy cooperation, including its nuclear component, is playing a cementing role in the Moscow-Beijing partnership. Russia has launched major oil and gas projects with China. Moscow is consistently moving towards a strategic energy alliance, aimed at promoting global energy security.

Military cooperation between Russia and China is highly diverse and has improved significantly in recent years. China is a large market for Russian weapons and military technologies. The two countries regularly conduct joint military training exercises, which are not targeted against third parties. Russia is not building a military alliance and does not practice complex integrated military operations similar to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) military activities.

The Russian position on the South China Sea has not changed. The states involved in the territorial disputes should honour the principle of the non-use of force and continue to search for a diplomatic settlement based on the international law in the spirit of the 2002 Declaration

on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Russia supports the efforts of ASEAN and China to draft a Code of Conduct with legally binding guidelines for the activities in the disputed waters.

Russia is not involved in the territorial disputes in the South China Sea and has no intention of getting involved. It is a matter of principle for Moscow not to side with any party. Russia believes the countries concerned should conduct talks in a format they define themselves. Any external party interference is counterproductive and goes to the detriment of the situation in the South China Sea.

Russia and Japan

Russia is reinvigorating its cooperation with Japan. Since 2013, President Putin and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe have met 19 times, including thrice this year. They most recently met on 7 September 2017 on the sidelines of the annual Eastern Economic Forum in the Russian Far East city of Vladivostok. The cooperation agenda keeps growing in the areas of energy, oil and gas, automobile industry, agriculture, healthcare, city and sea ports infrastructure development, high technologies and innovations.

The most important task today is to create favourable conditions for the settlement of the long-standing sensitive issues between the two countries, which include signing a peace treaty and resolving the Southern Kuril Islands dispute. Plans are being drawn up to conduct joint economic activities on the islands. Russia is pleased to see Japan's willingness to find common ground and Moscow is ready to work with Tokyo to reach a reliable solution where neither of the parties would feel defeated.

Russia's position on the peace treaty has not changed. Moscow believes Japan should recognise the results of World War II. This is the starting point of any serious discussion on this issue. The sovereignty and jurisdiction of the Russian Federation over the Southern Kuril Islands is beyond doubt. Progress can be achieved if Russia and Japan manage to build trust-based relations and advance to a qualitatively new level of mutually beneficial cooperation, especially in practical areas.

Moscow does not set any time limits. Russia was engaged in talks on border issues with China for 40 years and settled them finally on the basis of mutual trust and cooperation. The same principles should underlie efforts to end the abnormal situation in Russia-Japan relations lasting for more than 70 years.

Russia and India

This year marks the 70th anniversary of Russia's diplomatic relations with India. Today the Russian-Indian partnership has a genuinely strategic and privileged nature. In June, Prime Minister Narendra Modi attended and addressed the 21st St Petersburg International Economic Forum – one of the major dialogue venues to discuss the key global economy and finance issues and challenges.

Russia and India closely cooperate in the United Nations (UN) and other multilateral formats including BRICS and the G20, and work together to promote security and stability in the Indian and Pacific Ocean regions. Russia welcomes India's accession to the SCO, which was formalised at the SCO Summit in Astana in June 2017.

There is comprehensive practical cooperation between Russia and India, which have forged strong defence, trade, industry, agriculture and people-to-people links. The list of bilateral documents signed in St Petersburg reflects the diversity of Russia-India relations. The agreements touched upon the areas of investments, finance, intellectual property, the construction of nuclear power plants in India, development of rail transport vehicles, diamond industry and cultural exchanges.

Russia's Position on Afghanistan

Russia and India share the same views on the situation in Afghanistan. The NATO forces left the country in ruins, not resolving a single issue in the decade they were there. On the contrary, the terrorist and drug threats have substantially grown in Afghanistan. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has settled there while local drug production has increased more than ten times. The Afghan drug trafficking routes have expanded to Africa and Europe. Despite

many years of presence in Afghanistan, the US and NATO were unwilling or unable to provide effective assistance to the Afghanistan government in curbing drug production. That is bewildering indeed. The drug trade is a key source of terrorism financing.

The recent US decision to send more troops to Afghanistan is an issue of concern. Washington seems to have no strategy to deal with the problems in Afghanistan. The US has changed its Afghanistan policy many times over the past few years; increasing, cutting and redeploying troops. It is completely unacceptable, given the fact that the US-led coalition has not yet reported even once to the UN Security Council (UNSC) on the achievements in Afghanistan under the mandate issued many years ago.

The allegations of the US media that Russia is arming the Taliban are absolutely groundless. Moscow urges an end to the pointless efforts to create evidence to back up these insinuations. Russia does not support the Taliban. However, Moscow is working to implement a relevant resolution of the UNSC providing for the Taliban's inclusion in the political process if it recognises the current Constitution of Afghanistan, renounces violence and stops cooperating with terrorists.

On 14 April 2017, Moscow hosted the regional senior officials' talks on Afghanistan to consolidate the international efforts needed to advance the national reconciliation process. Unfortunately, Washington declined Moscow's invitation to this important event for unclear reasons. The representatives of Russia, Afghanistan, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan held an open and detailed exchange of views on the current situation, pointing out there was no military solution to the Afghan crisis; it can be settled only if national accord is restored by political means with respect to the relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

Russia supports the actions taken by Kabul to restore peace and urges the international community to provide comprehensive assistance to Afghanistan to stabilise the situation. Moscow appeals to the Taliban to launch direct dialogue with the government and stand ready to host intra-Afghan talks.

Russia and Pakistan

One of Russia's important partners in South Asia is Pakistan. The two countries take the same approach to the challenges they face, including terrorism, drug trafficking and nuclear proliferation. There are institutional frameworks and mechanisms in place to ensure full-value strategic dialogue on priority international issues.

Moscow's relations with Islamabad will never have any designs against India. Russia supports the normalisation of relations between India and Pakistan and an early and peaceful resolution of all contentious issues, including trans-border terrorism and Kashmir. However, Moscow is not in a position to interfere in any bilateral dispute unless it gets a specific consensus-based request or invitation. Russia acknowledges the existing legal architecture, which includes the 1972 Shimla Agreement and the 1999 Lahore Declaration, urging the two parties to resolve their issues bilaterally. Moscow hopes that New Delhi and Islamabad will show further restraint and continue to improve their relations.

This year, Pakistan along with India, joined the SCO as a full-fledged member. This step will drastically increase the capacity and effectiveness of the organisation to tackle the growing regional challenges and threats. With India and Pakistan on board, prospects for deeper integration within the SCO will obviously expand. Beyond that, there is a feeling that the SCO will help to narrow down the differences between the two countries through cooperation.

Military Actions and Sanctions

Russia's nuclear cooperation with international partners, including those in Asia, is based on Moscow's unfailing commitment to safe, secure and peaceful use of atomic energy. Unfortunately, North Korea is moving in the opposite direction. The nuclear tests conducted by Pyongyang are of the utmost concern as they run counter to the norms and principles of the international law, pose a serious threat to peace and security on the Korean Peninsula and in the Asia-Pacific region. Moscow urges the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to end its dangerous and reckless misadventures and implement the relevant UN Security Council resolutions.

However, the buildup of military hysteria is a dead end. All the UNSC resolutions must be implemented. All of them, along with sanctions, contain provisions on the need to resume talks. There is no alternative to the political and diplomatic methods of addressing the nuclear problem of the Korean Peninsula. Moscow calls on the responsible members of the international community to support the Russia-China roadmap on “double freezing” of missile and nuclear activities by the DPRK and large-scale joint exercises by the US and the Republic of Korea along with “parallel advancement” towards the denuclearisation of the Korean Peninsula.

Moscow is not happy with attempts to provoke and isolate North Korea. Russia is particularly concerned about the efforts of some countries to use the uneasy situation on the Korean Peninsula to boost their military presence in Northeast Asia and deploy new and clearly excessive types of weapons in the region. The US decision to locate the THAAD missile system in South Korea may lead to a further escalation of regional tensions and create new hurdles to a settlement of problems on the Korean Peninsula. Such deployment goes beyond the task of deterring “the North Korean threat”. It may disrupt strategic balances in the Asia-Pacific region and will adversely affect the fulfillment of commitments in the framework of the Non-Proliferation Treaty, particularly in the sphere of nuclear disarmament.

Today, the world is watching with alarm as the US imposes a new set of sanctions against Iran which threaten the implementation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action concluded in 2015 to resolve the situation around Teheran’s nuclear programme. Unilateral sanctions are unacceptable in principle and irresponsible if they are used to change a well-calibrated balance in one’s favour. Unfortunately, blatant pressure instead of diplomacy is becoming more prevalent in the arsenal of a number of Western countries.

Myanmar’s Rakhine State

Moscow continues to watch the developments in Myanmar’s Rakhine State, appealing for an end to violence, to reduce tensions, restore law and order, guarantee protection of civilians, reestablish normal socio-economic conditions and resolve the refugee problem. Russia welcomes the measures taken by the Myanmar government to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Commission on Rakhine State headed by former UN

Secretary-General Kofi Annan and supports the efforts to develop inter-religious dialogue with the participation of the spiritual leaders of all religions in Myanmar. An attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of a sovereign state may only further exacerbate religious strife.

Russia-Singapore Relations

Finally, on Russia-Singapore relations, Moscow is delighted to see that the ties are gaining strength and depth. The comprehensive and forward-looking agenda set up during Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's visit to Moscow in May 2016 is yielding good results.

Russian high-level delegations are frequent visitors to Singapore. In the last one-and-a-half years, the city-state hosted the Chairperson of the Council of the Federation of the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation (Upper Chamber of the Russian Parliament) Valentina Matvienko, Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolay Patrushev, First Deputy Prime Minister Igor Shuvalov, Vice-Premier and Special Envoy of the President in the Russian Far East Yury Trutnev. Russia's Minister of the Interior of Russia Vladimir Kolokoltsev visited Singapore to participate in the 37th ASEANAPOL Conference in September 2017.

Two important visitors are coming to Singapore in October 2017 – Minister of Transport Maxim Sokolov and President of the Republic of Tatarstan Rustam Minnikhanov. This well-developed Russian region has established close cooperation with Singapore in petrochemicals, engineering, education, information technology, innovation and other sectors.

Russia-Singapore trade, influenced by the world economy fluctuations, shows the potential for recovery, amounting to US\$3.3 billion (about S\$4.5 billion) last year. It is well below potential at the moment. There is every reason to believe the situation can and should be improved. A large number of economic projects are carried out both in Singapore and in different parts of Russia, including its Far East, which is shaping up to be an attractive venue for Singapore investments.

Olam International, Food Empire, Changi Airports International, Keppel Offshore & Marine and other Singapore companies have a strong foothold in the Russian market, pouring capital into agriculture, urban development, airport management, high technologies, shipbuilding

and education. Singapore, in its turn, as a large financial, business and logistic hub, houses the offices of hundreds of Russian companies including Gazprom, Lukoil, Bank VTB Capital, Sportmaster, Acronis, Kaspersky Lab, which are successfully operating in the city-state.

In November 2017, Moscow will host the 8th session of the High-Level Russia-Singapore Intergovernmental Commission and Business Forum co-chaired by Deputy Prime Ministers Igor Shuvalov and Tharman Shanmugaratnam. These mechanisms serve as effective platforms to forge joint economic and business projects integrated into the regional network of trade and investment flows.

Located just one degree north of the equator, Singapore nevertheless has become a promising partner in the development of the Russian Arctic region, thanks to the vast experience of the city-state in urban planning, transportation and seaport infrastructure building.

In August 2017, the first round of talks was held on the establishment of the Free Trade Area between Singapore and the Eurasian Economic Union. Moscow is looking forward to the expeditious conclusion of the relevant agreement to launch the FTA next year.

Russia-Singapore relations, of course, cover a lot more than just trade and business. Both countries also make a considerable effort to safeguard peace and security in Asia. This objective was clearly outlined by Russian Deputy Defence Minister Alexander Fomin at the 16th Asia Security Summit Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June 2017. In May 2017, the Russian Pacific Fleet flagship, the guided missile cruiser Varyag, took part in the inaugural International Maritime Review and the 11th Maritime Defence Exhibition IMDEX Asia to mark the Singapore Navy's 50th anniversary.

There are many good examples of growing cultural cooperation between the two countries. Russian performers regularly participate in the annual Singapore International Festival of Arts while Russian artists frequently bring solo exhibitions to showcase their impressive collections. The Russian imperial porcelain eggs are currently exhibited at the Singapore Philatelic Museum as part of the Liechtenstein National Museum's collection of precious eggs. The programme of the Days of Moscow held here last November included the Russian space exhibition at the Singapore Science Centre and the Russian jazz and vocal bands' performance.

There is room to enhance cooperation in education, including academic exchanges. Starting this year, Russian language courses were introduced into the curriculum of Nanyang Technological University. Moscow hopes that Singapore's future leaders will take part in the XIX World Festival of Youth and Students in Sochi from 14 to 22 October 2017.

Next year will mark the 50th anniversary of Russia-Singapore diplomatic relations. The two countries are moving towards this important milestone with resounding bilateral accomplishments made possible by hard and consistent teamwork looking into the future with even higher expectations empowered by a strong will to push bilateral cooperation forward.

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