

PART III: LOCAL DYNAMICS OF REGIONAL SECURITY

RUSSIA IN THE PACIFIC: STRATEGIC OPPORTUNITY IN THE FAR EAST

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Russia is a geographically expansive country that occupies most of the Eurasian landmass. As such, the country influences and acts in two distinct theaters, in both Europe and Asia. Both Russia and the United States have vital national interests in both theaters, and great power relationships matter in both regions. But while Russian-U.S. interests are mostly at odds in Europe, there is some overlap in Asia, especially when considering the wider Indo-Pacific region, and therefore opportunity. This paper will focus on that opportunity. The characterization of Russia as a revanchist power is undoubtedly true in Eastern Europe, where Russia is consolidating land grabs in Georgia and the Ukraine and possibly contemplating more. But aside from a lingering territorial dispute with Japan over the Southern Kuril Islands following World War II, Russia has been mostly quiet on the international scene in the Pacific. Russia has no revanchist ambition in Asia, and so a different balancing approach is required in this region. There are indicators of restive tendencies as displayed by recent evolving cooperation with China in military exercises and posturing, but these actions do not show a desire for territorial expansion in Asia. Viewing Russia's differing behavior in Europe and the Pacific in hindsight can yield insight into its current global posture, and provide foresight in envisaging future strategic action to engage Russia.

Understanding Russia's global actions and countering Russia's malign behavior is possible regionally by implementing a disparate approach toward European Russia and Moscow's behavior in the Pacific. Comprehending Russia's simultaneous quiescent and revanchist behaviors will enable the community of Indo-Pacific states to find areas of cooperation

and to better influence Russian activity because of the hindsight, insight, and foresight produced from assessing these behaviors.

HINDSIGHT TO INSIGHT

To understand Russian conduct in the Pacific region it is necessary to understand Russian state behavior in a geopolitical context. Russia's actions are shaped mainly by its historical experience in Europe. Russia's long history in Eastern Europe as a balancing power to Europe's Western states sets Russia's current focus on European affairs. The fall of the Soviet Union, with Russia at its heart, was a setback in Russia's ability to balance the West. The renascent Russia formed from the chaos after the collapse of the Soviet Union, after a failed period of semi-democratic rule in which rich oligarchs dominated, ended with Putin as its autocratic leader. The resultant strong central government has been intent on recovering what it reasonably can of the previous Soviet empire that was lost when Russia was weak. While Moscow knows it is not possible to recreate the Soviet Union, Russia has been able to reacquire some lost territory that it considers most important, thereby returning to its historical role of balancer of the West. Balancing efforts have included forcibly acquiring parts of Russian-speaking Georgia, the Crimean peninsula, and parts of Eastern Ukraine.¹

President Vladimir Putin has been strategically brilliant at using Russia's limited power in innovative ways to achieve limited objectives, especially in recovering lost territory.² Recovering ground is also a way to recover influence, especially when it comes to recreating the buffer zone that the non-Russian republics of the former Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact provided. Russia is intent on upholding exclusive access to its near territories because Russia prefers a buffer zone to safeguard both its territorial and cultural integrity consistent in its role as balancer to the West. The armies of Napoleon and Hitler attempted invasion from the west, and it may appear to Russia that expanding North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) membership, rapid when Russia was at its weakest but still ongoing today, looks similar but at a slower pace.³ The rationale for Russian land grabs is the affinity it feels for ethnic Russian-speaking peoples and the belief that Russia must protect them, as is the case currently with territory inhabited by Russian-speaking peoples in Georgia and the Ukraine.⁴

Russian national interests are defined by its values and history. Russia has several vital national interests, those that it sees as affecting the core of its identity. The current sovereign, President Vladimir Putin, sees his own survival in office as vital. In this regard, he recently forced changes to the constitution to ensure his own rule beyond the current 2024 term limit.⁵ Historical Czarist culture appears to be alive and well. Russia is also interested in maintaining and recovering its once more expansive sphere of influence, as noted earlier.

Recovering lost territory, or more appropriately, recovering control over the Russian-speaking peoples in those territories, is also important culturally.⁶ Doing so may, however, come at the cost of continued economic sanctions. The European Union and the United States, along with Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, and others, have imposed numerous punitive sanctions on Russia following its invasion of the Ukraine in 2014. The United States alone has imposed sanctions for the Ukraine invasion, and in 10 other categories, against numerous Russian state and non-state actors.⁷ Sanctions notwithstanding, Russia is seeking to maintain its hydrocarbon and arms sales to existing customers both in the West and elsewhere.

INSIGHT TO FORESIGHT

Three features characterize Russia's current behavior. They are Russia's desire to maintain a strong central government, its desire to recover territory it considers lost, and its expanding partnership with China. Russia is acting consistently with its history and culture, but also acting pragmatically.

The lawlessness and corrupt oligarchy that reigned following the dissolution of the Soviet Union will remain at the forefront of the Russian experience with decentralized government, and perpetuate strong national leadership. Russia blames the West for the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resultant loss of power to balance the actions of the West. Both of these factors lead to the conclusion that Russia will continue to maintain its powerful central government headed by Vladimir Putin, who has pushed back against Western encroachment in its former sphere of influence. Russia's preoccupation with the West and its identity as European notwithstanding, it sees its growing association with China as expedient in many ways, and it is this relationship that offers much insight into current Russian strategic actions. Russia's expanded use of deterrent operations, through the many instruments available to it, both conventional and nucle-

ar, has been effective in countering Western influence globally.⁸ Russia sees recovery of land and influence in Europe as central to its identity, but sees pursuing technical, economic, and military relations with China as expedient to its future as a viable state. The relationship with China, then, brings Russian focus on its Far East territory into strategic view.

Beyond amending the constitution to perpetuate the regime of Vladimir Putin, Russia sees it as important to recover and reassemble what it can of the fallen Soviet Union and will continue to consolidate its land grabs in Georgia and the Ukraine as long as it can tolerate or offset economic sanctions.⁹ In fact, initial nationalist euphoria in this regard is waning as public opinion polls show increasing dissatisfaction with the second and third-order effects of these annexations.¹⁰ Russia will remain enmeshed in these disputes, its leadership determined to act in revanchist ways as an appeal to its populist base, despite any potential domestic repercussions, and in finding other often questionable ways to mitigate the impact of economic sanctions.

Russia sees adjacent Slavic states and those states formerly aligned with it as a buffer. For this reason, the Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, once part of the Soviet Union and with significant Russian-speaking populations, are potentially at risk. Moldova is another opportunity for Russia with similar circumstances. Poland, while not ethnically Russian, has historically fallen under Russian influence and is so often at the crossroads of Europe's geopolitical landscape. This will keep NATO busy, and Europeans preoccupied with defense issues and the related topic of NATO expansion, for another decade. In contrast, no such lost territory or peoples exist for Russia in the Indo-Pacific region. Russia's revanchist sentiment does not affect the Russian Far East, with Russia having consolidated its territory in the Far East more than a century ago and with no displaced Russian speaking populations in the region.

Moscow's neglect has left the Russian Far East mostly free from the animosity found in European Russia, and here Russia has an opportunity to show itself a responsible partner and to use the region as a catalyst for improved behavior worldwide. Aside from losing the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, Russia has had a positive experience in the Pacific theater and counts itself among the victors in the Pacific theater during World War II. Russian interests in the Far East include expanding its economy through arms and oil sales, exploiting its relationship with China, establishing dominance in the Arctic region, and showing itself to be an influential great power.

The Indo-Pacific states, in general, would like for Russia in the Far East to resolve its territorial dispute with Japan, to assist with eliminating North Korean nuclear weapons, to behave in accordance with international norms in the Arctic region, and to show itself to be a responsible great power. There is some overlap of interests that provides some scope for cooperation. Russia's historical propensity to balance the West will limit what it will be willing to do since the United States will undoubtedly be involved, however, and the same is likely true for many Indo-Pacific states in reverse.

Oil sales and arms sales are chief among the ways in which Russia is offsetting economic sanctions by the West. Russia is seeking additional markets for hydrocarbons beyond its current European arrangements. Russia's hydrocarbons help to fuel China, and in greater quantity could fuel the advancement of China's One Belt One Road initiative. Developing the Arctic and Far East regions are therefore important to Russia's future economic growth. In addition to hydrocarbons, Russia seeks to maintain its arms exports to Vietnam and much of Southeast Asia and South Asia, including India. Russia will, therefore, strive to maintain its position as primary arms supplier to both India and Vietnam, two states being heavily courted by the United States in an effort to sustain a free and open Indo-Pacific region.¹¹ Russia may, through arms sales, be simultaneously able to enhance its economy, maintain its influence at the expense of the West, and deepen its strategic association with China. That these markets come with influence in states through which China and the United States are defining their strategic perimeter may outwardly complicate matters, but it also engenders potential political influence over China if needed in the future. The Sino-Russian relationship is complex but essentially based in common understanding in several key issues.

Russia and China share several interests. Chief among them are ensuring survival of their respective governing regimes, countering Western influence, developing and maintaining regional spheres of influence, addressing Western ascendancy as it relates to their history, and advancing their economies. But despite some overlap in relatively recent Leninist ideology, their values differ. Russia is a European power, historically paranoid and long-suffering in a struggle to assert international legitimacy, and is currently focused on regaining the Eastern European buffer zone lost in the fall of the Soviet Union. China is an Asian power, historically the center, geographically and culturally, of tributary states over which China

could exert influence and extract wealth and deference, and is currently focused on consolidating territory and power in Asia.

The officially dubbed China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era has taken many expressions. China and Russia are cooperating in technical research and development. Both partners are actively involved in technical dialogues and exchanges, have developed and are developing numerous science and technology parks, and have established funding mechanisms and academic cooperation. Collaboration is centered on advanced telecommunications, led by Chinese technology firm Huawei, and on data collection, robotics, and artificial intelligence. The two states are also involved in jointly developing biotechnology, media and digital commerce. But there are signs of historical and underlying mutual distrust. The split in relations following World War II was due to differences in values and strategic outlook, and these differences will be difficult to overcome in the long term.¹² Although the current association of China and Russia is driven by the desire to counter the West, the core behavior of each state may ultimately drive them apart. Russia, increasingly seen as the junior partner, is at great risk of being mistreated by a partner with no long term interest in the wellbeing of Russia.¹³

A central feature of Russia's current actions includes its development of the Arctic region. Nowhere outside of Eastern Europe has Russia been more active and engaged. There are manifold reasons for this. The region is a growth area for infrastructure to support eventual shipping routes between Asia and Europe that are becoming more navigable as polar ice melts. Shipping lanes with their accompanying ports, cargo transportation capacity including hydrocarbons, icebreaking capability, and repair and maintenance facilities all could portend a huge windfall for Russia.

FORESIGHT TO ACTION

Although the future is difficult to predict, a broad projection of how Russia might act, as well as how it should act, is possible. As Russia acts in its interests, internal competition between its behavior in Europe and its behavior in the Far East will enable the Indo-Pacific community to potentially anticipate and shape its actions in both theaters. The United States, guarantor of freedom in the Indo-Pacific region since the close of World War II, could benefit from affirmative Russian activity in the Indo-Pacific region. So too could the rest of the Indo-Pacific community, and there is scope for all to reasonably obtain the outcomes they desire. Thoughtful

crafting of strategic approach in five prominent areas will enable long-term success: Japan, hydrocarbons, the Arctic Sea, Sino-Russian relations, and North Korea. These areas are those in which interests overlap or that present realistic opportunity to obtain collaborative accomplishment.

Japan

U.S. ally Japan would see its stability enhanced if it and Russia were finally able to settle the World War II-era dispute over the Kuril Islands. The Soviet Union occupied the southern Kuril Islands in 1945 and then annexed them outright, explaining its actions as an “outcome” of World War II. This has resulted in neither side signing a peace treaty following the war. The governments of both Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and President Vladimir Putin have recently made efforts to resolve this dispute and to finally settle the longstanding disagreement,¹⁴ albeit to popular protests in both countries. Resolution of this conflict would be a positive development for all involved, and Russia would see benefits and perhaps open new markets for its oil, which is much needed in the region. Growing Sino-Russian cooperation may actually influence a near-term settlement. China’s deepening involvement with Russia may increase pressure on Japan to negotiate a suboptimal conclusion in the near term rather than waiting for a more formal alliance to add even more pressure, forcing Japan to obtain even less favorable terms. But Japan needs oil, and improved Russo-Japanese relations that would result from a dispute settlement could provide a market for Russian resources, oil and otherwise. Likewise, Japanese technology and manufacturing proficiency would benefit Russia in many ways. This outcome is not realistic anytime soon, but is possible in the long term.

Hydrocarbons

Russia’s enhanced ability to bring its oil to the Indo-Pacific market more cheaply and efficiently, with resulting stabilizing effect on the Middle East, will benefit Russia, the region, and possibly the United States. This would necessarily entail Russia acting responsibly and enduringly to price its oil and regulate production, something it has not often shown desire to do. Responsible action in this regard could be a powerful attraction if Russia is simultaneously able to serve as a bridge to Central Asia, also rich with hydrocarbons.¹⁵ Improved market access and transshipment methods due to melting Arctic ice will be useful for Russia and its oil.

Arctic Sea

Russia has much to gain from melting sea ice, and Moscow's management of its Arctic region could benefit both Russia and the international community. Arctic shipping lanes connect Asia to Europe in a more geographically direct way and reduce transit time for traded goods to reach their destinations. Russian shipping companies and the related service industry will have the first share of new market access, making them potentially very profitable. Moreover, access to the Arctic sea will provide quicker routes for Russian hydrocarbons to reach European and Asian customers. The same is true for Russian Far East exports like timber and fish. Environmental restrictions notwithstanding, the Arctic is a potential source for additional hydrocarbon deposits and fishing zones.

The Arctic is an important link to the Indo-Pacific and provides Russia the opportunity to further integrate into the Indo-Pacific economy, and makes available much needed commercial expansion, if it can relieve itself of economic sanctions. Russia would improve its international standing, and enable much more economic growth, if it were to behave in accordance with international norms in the Arctic, unlike China does in the South China Sea. Russia has shown that it can cooperate in the Arctic Council by recently agreeing with the United States on Bering Strait navigation routes.¹⁶ Responsible behavior by Russia in resolving its maritime dispute over the Lomonosov Ridge, contested by Canada and Denmark, like Russia did in agreeing to the Bering Strait navigation routes, would likely garner it geopolitical rewards.¹⁷ The international community, and the Indo-Pacific states in this context, should reward Russia's actions as a responsible actor when deserved, and encourage more positive behavior.

Sino-Russian Relations

Increasing Russian and Chinese cooperation in the technical and military-technical fields will also feature prominently in the future of both states, as noted. The rapid progress of technology sharing agreements, academic collaboration, and telecommunications partnership is remarkable.¹⁸ But existing underlying distrust on both sides is for good reason. Both states are independent in thought and action, historically cynical of partnership, and neither is likely to be tied down for long being wedded to the interests of the other. China's longstanding practice of acquiring Russian technology to produce indigenously-made products is a solid indicator of what is to come. China's ongoing and aggressive theft of intellectual property,

coupled with the penetration of Russia's communications systems through Huawei 5G technology, will end badly for Russia. Russia may accept this risk if it sees China as a market for its hydrocarbons, but the long-term relationship will not be a positive one for Russia, and the relationship will likely end within a generation.

The United States and the West also factor into this association. Russian and Chinese cooperation is driving the creation of innovative technology where it was once obtained from the West. The West is increasingly countering the underlying source of much of this innovation by curtailing Chinese intellectual property theft through diligent policing, and by stymieing Russian invention through sanctions. This will negatively affect the Sino-Russian relationship in the long term. For its part, the United States will be progressively more competitive in this regard as its technical research and development budgets are increasing.¹⁹

North Korea

A revanchist Russia in Europe will not preclude a Russia that meaningfully participates in the international community in the Indo-Pacific region. One way Russia can contribute is through its relationship with the two Koreas, where it has already shown interest as a participant and contributor to the Six Party Talks from 2003-2009. Russia, as an established nuclear power with little desire for either North Korea or anyone else to acquire nuclear weapons, and flush with hydrocarbons that a developing North Korea would need, is in position to have positive influence in an eventual solution to the Korean peninsula. With the U.S. efforts to directly engage North Korea's Chairman Kim Jong Un at an impasse over demands that the other reverse policy first, Russia could be very useful in breaking the stalemate. Doing so would enhance Russia's prestige in the region, and indeed globally. South Korea, which would also benefit from a nearer source of oil, is a potential origin of the technology Russia desires to maintain its technical competence, and a market for quality consumer goods of all types.

Balancing and Risk

Russia may also desire to be a balancer in the Indo-Pacific region commensurate with its aspiration to show itself as a great power globally. Beyond its already extensive arms sales in the region, competing with those

of Western suppliers, there is more opportunity. Russia may see it is possible to balance the influence of China and the United States in Southeast Asia.²⁰ China, India, Japan, and the United States all provide extensive aid and investment to the region, and while there is seemingly no room for more great power involvement, Russia could bring some unique and desirable commodities. These include defense articles, hydrocarbons, fish and timber, and access to the Arctic Sea shipping routes. Expanding market access would seemingly be a win for Russia and the region. China would also likely not protest such a move as it would take some attention away from its own initiatives in the region, namely the One Belt One Road enterprise, and its continued unlawful activities in the South China Sea.

There are risks involved for Russia. Russia will be challenged to further expand into the greater Indo-Pacific region and, for many reasons, could fail to act positively, preferring instead to act along historically antagonistic European ways in the Indo-Pacific. Demographics, as they say, is destiny. Russia's current population of 141 million will decline in the future, and the small population of the Russian Far East, some 6 million citizens, is likewise declining. Despite Moscow's economic development efforts in the region, they may not be overly effective with fewer citizens to sustain an enhanced economy. Immigration from China, once thought possible to offset Russian population loss, seems less likely now as China faces its own population decline.²¹ Nonetheless, Beijing may force the issue with Moscow if it decides it can exert more political control in the region by doing so, and Moscow may be unable to prevent it.

Politically, many had hoped that President Vladimir Putin's grip on power and constitutional meddling would end in the year 2024 upon completion of his current term, but it appears increasingly likely that he will remain in power for life.²² Putin's adventurism in Europe is backfiring, and will continue to bring more discredit and economic hardship to the entire country—the Russian Far East included—his populist approval notwithstanding. Moreover, Russia's increasing interdependence with China in technical and military affairs will leave Russia vulnerable in both those areas.²³

Russia needs to diversify its state-driven hydrocarbon-based economy, and the Far East region with proximity to the world's economic engine, Asia, and access to the Arctic Sea, present it diverse opportunity. But Russia's challenges, and preoccupation with European affairs, may result in a situation in which its shared interests with the United States don't translate to positive outcomes in the Russian Far East for either party.

There are potential rewards despite the risks. Enhanced Russian presence and activity in the Indo-Pacific region could gently counter President Xi Jinping's "Asia for Asians" messaging. The Indo-Pacific community can encourage a responsible Russia that could balance against China and thereby offset China's desire to balance the West in the Indo-Pacific. Despite a dwindling population, Russia has many instruments available to balance against China. Russia's abundant oil and gas reserves, access to the Arctic Sea, ongoing arms sales, huge nuclear arsenal, and benign feelings for it in most parts of the region lend it outsized political influence on a scale that can potentially enable it to act the part of responsible great power in the Pacific region. China's aggressive expansionism in the region is beginning to cause a backlash as many states now see China's true colors. Russia can play a positive role, but one contrasting that of China in this environment.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There is opportunity for the community of Indo-Pacific states to act together and show leadership in the region, and globally, in creating a more stable international order for all, Russia included. This is a potentially troubled proposition as many states find themselves increasingly inwardly focused as the world grapples with responses to globalization. But the like-minded states of the Indo-Pacific have the opportunity to engage Russia where interests overlap and to balance the Indo-Pacific region toward more positive outcomes for the majority of its inhabitants.

Encouraging Russia to settle the Kuril Islands dispute with Japan, to cooperate in de-nuclearizing North Korea, and to continue responsible action in the Arctic would improve the regional geopolitical climate. The benefits outweigh the costs if Russia and its Indo-Pacific neighbors can exploit opportunities for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, Russia's bad behavior in Europe notwithstanding. All members of the Indo-Pacific region would benefit if Russia and the United States, and indeed the larger Indo-Pacific community, would pursue their common interests in the region with the goal of developing those positive aspects of Russia's potential behavior noted herein, most especially as a constructive balance to China in Asia. The Indo-Pacific community can show Russia the advantage of joining the partnership of responsible stakeholders through economic integration.

The resultant technical partnerships that Russia could undertake with Japan, South Korea, and others, will surely prove more beneficial in the

long term that those currently ongoing with China. Not only can Russia play a balancing role to China in the future, but reformed and modernized behavior will benefit Russia and the rest of the region. Russia need not limit itself to being a troublesome European power looking to spoil the gains of the West. By understanding the opportunity presented by its own Far East region, Russia and the Indo-Pacific community can take a more proactive path. Recognizing the reality of Russia's present state, and that Russia's current autocratic leadership will not likely cooperate in the near-term, the Indo-Pacific community can prudently think in the long-term, to continue to set the conditions, and to cooperate with Russia where possible toward the goal of ultimately bringing about this reality.

Insight into Russian interests and their potential overlap with like-minded states in the Indo-Pacific shows that Russia can play a positive role in the region. The community of like-minded states can seize upon the opportunity to engage Russia where appropriate, in this theater and where interests align, to start the slow work of inviting Russia into the community of responsible Indo-Pacific stakeholders.

Notes

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