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GOV 365F: Asian Regionalism

5 May 2020

Shifting Russian Engagement with Asian Regionalism Post Crimea

Russia's foreign policy trajectory with respect to Asia has undergone a paradigm shift since 2014. Facing widespread animosity from the West after the annexation of Crimea, President Vladimir Putin and the Kremlin have allocated increased resources to develop the potential of their multilateral and bilateral relations with Asian powers. Russia borders both Europe and Asia, placing it in a unique position to engage with Asian regional institutions despite the uncertain compatibility of Russia with these uniquely Asian institutions. This paper characterizes Russia's future multilateral engagement in Asia by exploring the background of organizations where Russia has significant involvement, identifying new priorities resulting from Russia changing course in the Asian Pivot, and anticipating facets of Russian culture, history, and statehood that could stand in the way of regional cooperation. Despite Russia's marked increase in multilateral engagement with Asia after their deterioration of Western relations in 2014, the author finds that this "Asian Pivot" is insufficient to make Russia a true stakeholder in most Asian regional institutions due to extant historical barriers, issues of identity formation, and weakness of available institutions.

I. Background: the Russian Federation and Asian Regional Institutions

Understanding the development in the Russian Federation's new orientation toward Asia requires tracing the evolution of Russian behavior in Asian organizations and exploring how national leadership impacted regional cooperation from the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union. Russia has engaged with a range of multilateral organizations by establishing membership or observer

status with prominent institutions across Asia's subregions. The dynamics of regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), among others, partially determine the extent to which Russian interference in a region is permitted. Regions with stronger institutions or with closer geographic ties to Russia have naturally seen more participation than those that are more distant.¹ Alongside these general trends, Russian presidents from Yeltsin to Putin have, to differing extents, turned to Asian engagement to help strengthen their own foreign policy positions.

While the Russian Federation's interests and actions in the Asian regional organizations are presented mainly as milestones and key events, it is necessary to understand that complex and varying expressions of national interest have prompted leaders to make these decisions. When analyzing potential causes for the shifts in Russian multilateral activity over time, it is imperative to grasp that leadership drives foreign policy formulation, and that post-Soviet Russia was certainly not an ideological monolith.² Each president, supported by their minister of foreign affairs, approached diplomacy with the Russian Near Abroad, as well as Asia and Europe, with their own priorities and preconceptions.

The collapse of Soviet Union constrained the newly formed Russian Federation's foreign policy options and limited the political viability of deepening regional collaboration. Under President Yeltsin's early years from 1991-96 with Andrei Kozyrev as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yeltsin dismantled the infrastructure of the Soviet Union and struggled to manage coordination with former Soviet republics in Commonwealth of Independent States.³ Under his set of "Westernizing" policies, Russia was focused on internal economic revitalization and joining European security structures. With such a focus, opportunities for collaboration with

Asian regional structures were minimal. During Yeltsin's later years, Yevgeni Primakov served as Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1996-1998 and Prime Minister from 1998-1999. He developed the Primakov Doctrine, which brought realist balance of power logic to the forefront of state decision making. Under this doctrine, outreach to Central Asian republics and integration of these CIS states into Russia's sphere of influence was an immediate priority so that these states could serve as buffer against Western and NATO encirclement. Primakov laid the foundation for future rapprochement with Asia through his "strategic triangle" approach. Following his leadership, Russia sought increased bilateral relations with China and India as part of a balancing act against the Western US-led hegemony; later, Putin would expand on this initial foundation.

Russian participation in Asian regionalism from the mid-1990's onward has been shaped by the opportunity for Russia to gain membership or status in regional bodies as well as the Russian leadership's geopolitical interests. Residual ties, such as the histories of shared governance, migration, and trade between Russia and states in these Asian subregions, resulted in uneven levels of Russian influence across of the continent. Russia has been and remains a major player in regions on the Russian periphery, particularly in Central Asia and Northeast Asia. Russian access to these subregions, and particularly subregions farther away from their borders, like Southeast Asia, is facilitated by either through bilateral relations with individual states or agreements with regional organizations.⁴

Russian influence and ability to build lasting institutions in former Soviet client states in Central Asia and in their "near abroad" was initially limited by the rather ineffectual nature of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the successor to the Warsaw Pact. Russia's own CIS was founded in 1991 upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It establishes a potential

multilateral framework for overtures to former Soviet states in Central Asian. CIS counts the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as active members with Turkmenistan serving in a limited “associate” role.⁵ However, the Commonwealth of Independent States has largely been neglected as tool for political integration and a full analysis is outside the scope of this paper as the organization’s dynamics are much more closely tied to Russia’s “near abroad” than to Asian regional participation. The use of CIS for further Central Asian bloc integration is too closely associated with Soviet era repressions and loss of sovereignty for state leaders to be wholly comfortable deepening existing mechanisms⁶.

As Central Asian states coped with newfound independence, several successive regional organizations formed, resulting in the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia was highly involved in the SCO founding, as the Kremlin saw Central Asia as a territory of key national interest due to historic Russian control. The initial presence of Russian military material and bases across Central Asia also heightened concerns over instability.⁷ Since 2001, the Peoples Republic of China alongside Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan void spearheaded the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to jointly solve Central Asian security concerns. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an outgrowth of the initial Shanghai Five association founded in 1996 (which included all above states except Uzbekistan), and the modern SCO reflects a concerted desire among the member states to jointly solve contentious issues of sovereignty, prevent border disputes, and confront international terrorism.⁸ In the face of rising extremism, especially radical Islamic extremism, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has cemented its relevance through the SCO Regional Anti-Terror Structure.⁹ Despite its initial goal of combating terrorism through military coordination, the SCO expanded its goals and aimed to develop friendly cooperation in a myriad of fields

including “politics, trade and economy, science and technology, culture [...] education, energy, transportation, tourism, environmental protection, among others.”¹⁰ The SCO is one of the more dynamic Asian regional institutions, and moreover, it is one of the few where Russia, as a founder, can easily adopt leadership roles. Russia has historically seen Central Asia as a region that falls under their purview,¹¹ so any strategy to increase Asian cooperation would likely exploit historic ties and economic dependencies to consolidate Russian influence in Central Asia before any dramatic overtures to new partners are launched.¹²

In South and Southeast Asia, geographic and cultural distance limits the potential for the inclusion and full membership of Russia in local multilateral structures. Despite these difficulties, Russia, with varying levels of success, has reached out to the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). As of 2013, Russia has applied for observer status in SAARC; however, SAARC as an organization has weakened considerably. Russia plays no appreciable role in SAARC.¹³ BIMSTEC, the potential SAARC successor, prioritizes development initiatives with a narrow focus on the Bay of Bengal. Outreach to partners outside the bloc remains limited.¹⁴ ASEAN, a forerunner in the development of Asian regional institutions, offers Russia greater opportunities to make beneficial trade and security agreements through their ASEAN Plus X talks and the ASEAN Regional Forum¹⁵⁻¹⁶ As a country outside Southeast Asia, Russia cannot become a member of ASEAN itself, but Russia has conducted extensive negotiations through its role as dialogue partner of the bloc. With little progress toward coordination with South Asia, Russia devoted substantial attention toward ASEAN as an alternative partner.

Russia received ASEAN dialogue partner status in 1996. Since then, significant progress in strengthening relations was made in 2005 at the First ASEAN Plus Russia Federation Summit with the *Joint Declaration of the Heads of State of ASEAN and the Russian Federation on Progressive and Comprehensive Partnership*. This pronouncement and the subsequent 2005-2015 action plan created a roadmap for extensive joint efforts on counter terrorism, transnational crime, trade and joint investment, energy projects, and other areas of cooperation. ASEAN documents state that ASEAN-Russia coordination acts as a useful mechanism to shape “evolving regional architecture in the Asia-Pacific,” and both ASEAN and Russia have established frequent working group meetings and summits to capitalize on mutually beneficial projects.¹⁷ Russian engagement in ASEAN offers significant opportunities for closer integration by building on a history of friendly cooperation to bring about increased trade and security cooperation.

In Northeast Asia, regional cooperation is driven by distrust of the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the need to play a restraining role on this nascent nuclear state rather than any deep desire for increased foreign policy and security coordination between North Korea’s neighbors. Russia, alongside Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), the United States and China participated in the 2003- 2007 Six-party Talks which sought to curtail North Korean weapons systems development and nuclear enrichment capability. North Korea historically has been both a catalyst and sticking point for broader cooperation between states in Northeast Asia. Future regional efforts will likely seek to contain this rogue state, whose leadership will most likely attempt delay any coordinated efforts against them by playing major powers in the region off each other (particularly China, Russia, and the United States). Recent rising tensions over member action – particularly US tariffs and sanctions enforcement – have splintered the unity of

this bloc, with China and Russia seeking to skirt sanctions that damage their own economic interests.¹⁸

Many of Russia's recent initiatives reflect Putin's eagerness to use multilateral cooperation to confront crime, terrorism, and security issues. Russia under Putin's direction (including Dmitry Medvedev's 2008-2012 presidential stint) has seen the largest and most pronounced attempts to integrate Russia into Asia-Pacific regional institutions. Putin, especially in the early years, followed a doctrine of pragmatic cooperation where he was willing to explore new alliances, such as those with Asia, so long as such opportunities served Russian interests. After a series of 1999 Russian apartment bombings preceding the Second Chechen War and the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US, Putin saw rising extremism as an existential threat.¹⁹ To confront such delocalized and transboundary security concerns, Putin engaged broadly with international organizations and countries that Russia had historically been ambivalent or even antagonistic toward to contain the threat. Russian interactions with multilateral organizations in the early 2000s, such as the SCO and ASEAN, all reflect a strong desire to contain separatism and terrorism. The concept of terrorism as a significant security concern promoted more coordinated efforts across regional bodies to prevent radicalization and suppress violence. After initial frameworks for joint action were established, these agreements could be easily expanded to promote member countries' diplomatic and economic integration.²⁰ However, in 2014, Russia's status quo with the West was shattered in the face of rising tensions due to the annexation of Crimea. Russia faced immense repercussions after annexing Crimea, notably a forty billion USD in sanctions and an abrupt cooling of diplomatic relations.²¹ In the face of hostility from the West, it was time for Russia, according to Putin and Medvedev, to "pivot to Asia."

II. A New Trend: the 2014 Asian Pivot

Russian engagement in Asian political, economic, and security initiatives assumes a more central position in Putin's foreign policy agenda after 2014. This shift, known as the "Asian Pivot" or "rebalancing" can be rationalized by viewing Crimea as a turning point or inciting event, and by evaluating the consequences in terms of increasing activity in regional organizations.²²⁻²³ The fallout of the Russian annexation of Crimea, particularly the cooling of Russia-US and Russia-European relations, is the major driving force behind the pivot. After facing a tit-for-tat scenario of retaliatory sanctions with the EU in 2014, Russia needed access to both new markets and consumer goods to offset the economic consequences of the annexation. Coupled with the slump in global energy prices, Russia's economy was in a precarious situation. Before this turning point, Russia, through a geopolitical lens, sought recognition and dominance in each of the Euro-Atlantic, Eurasian, and Asia-Pacific spaces.²⁴ After Crimea, Russia's ability to influence Europe was severely curtailed, so more effort and resources were diverted to Eurasian and Asia-Pacific foreign policy projects. Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev describes the Asian Pivot as a "natural course of events and a thought-through response to the changing conditions of economic development ... with the "growth of [Russia's] role in the Asian region contributing to raising our authority in other places as well, including in the West."²⁵ The immediate outcome of this pronouncement was the clear ambition to reduce Russia's reliance on markets in Europe for Russia energy and other exports by diversifying trade partners. New energy and development projects now aim to connect Russian natural resources to rising demand in northern China. One sign of this shift is the negotiation of a \$400 billion gas deal between China and Russia, resulting in plans to construct a pipeline from Siberian oil fields to China.²⁶

The Asian Pivot is deeper than just a warming of bilateral relations with the People's Republic of China. Economic ties between the Asia-Pacific and Russia are growing and with trade to economies in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) increasing from 23 percent to 31 percent over the period from 2012-2017.²⁷ With the Asia-Pacific region rising in international prominence and Russia locked out of most Western institutions and economies, multilateral engagement is a key element for Moscow's economic recovery. Increasingly, the populous markets of Southeast Asia's rising economies are export destinations with ASEAN as an "outlet to diversify international relationships away from Europe, and more particularly the sanctions hitting the Russian economy."²⁸ Defense deals and energy contracts reflect two major dimensions of growth. Russia's ASEAN energy exports grew five times over during 2013-2017.²⁹ To capitalize on these potential markets, post 2014 Russia has grown more receptive to ASEAN diplomatic overtures and signaled their intent to further current relations by hosting a 2016 summit commemorated 20 years of involvement with ASEAN on the aim of "Moving Towards a Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit." Two later at the Third ASEAN-Russian Federation Summit, ASEAN-Russian relations increased to the level of a strategic partnership. A new 2016-2020 comprehensive action plan was released detailing future integration areas for strategic cooperation.³⁰ While Russia appears to be genuinely interested in strengthening economic ties to ASEAN and other regional bodies, this desire seems to stem from reduced Russian access to traditional EU/European markets. While Putin may desire to exert control or shape the future of Asian regional cooperation, currently Russia has worked within existing institutions rather than offering a competing vision of Asian regionalism.³¹

While Russia's renewed focus on Asia includes does include significant bilateral engagement, the Kremlin has hedged its bets and not relied solely on burgeoning relationships

with China and India to exercise control and influence in the region. Scholars Marlene Laruelle and Jean Radvanyi claim that despite the opening to the PRC, Putin “sought to develop relations with other Asian countries and to involve Russia as much as possible in all the Asia-Pacific regional structures” to avoid overdependence on a single relationship.³² Russian efforts to strengthen connections to other Asian subregions and organizations through multilateral action are clearly visible. Economic links between Asia and both the Russian periphery and the heartland underscore the importance of Asia to Russia’s future stability and illustrate potential growth opportunities that increased Asian engagement can provide. As Asia continues to rise Russia will continue to use their location as a Eurasia bridge on the edges of Europe and Asia to their own geopolitical advantage. To succeed, Russia must try to integrate with regional organizations and exercise its national interests within the bounds of these multinational institutions or risk alienating an increasingly dynamic Asia.

III. Roadblocks to Successful Integration

Three key issues must be overcome for the successful inclusion of Russia in the Asian regional framework. These include (1) Historical barriers such as the former Soviet threat, (2) Russian identity and culture vis-à-vis Asia, and (3) Weakness of regional institutions in Northeast Asia. It is the author’s opinion that these collective difficulties will effectively stall future Russian engagement in multilateral Asian institutions or at least prevent Russia from playing a strong leadership role. Through opportunistic behavior, Russia can benefit from increased economic trade deals and market access, but, barring the development of a more coordinated grand strategy for the region, Russia is unlikely to contribute significantly to the development of Asia’s own unique brand of regionalism.

Cultural memory and Russia's Soviet legacy still casts a shadow over prospects for Asian regional integration. As recently as 1986, the Soviet Union had extremely troubled relations with the People's Republic of China with full normalization only coming in 1989. Russia has done an impressive job rebuilding this relationship with Putin and Xi Jinping recently pledging "to double their trade over the next five years, to \$200 billion by 2024 — up from \$107 billion worth of trade in 2018."³³ Unfortunately, memories of great power rivalry persist and as a result in Russian actions in Asia are viewed with suspicion. Russia's tense history with Japan in Northeast Asia also complicates their ability to form meaningful institutions based on mutual trust. Both countries are interested in mutually beneficial economic cooperation and stability in the region, but the territorial disputes over the Kuril Islands and Japan's close security ties with the United States make trust hard to foster. Additionally, Japan spoke out strongly against the Russian annexation of Crimea with the Foreign Minister declaring "Japan will never overlook any attempt to change the status quo by force."³⁴ In spite of this statement, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has met Putin and expressed that cooperation could potentially develop if the territorial question is resolved. Currently, the author thinks that is unlikely that Russia will agree to cede any territory, especially in a Russian Far East region that Moscow already views as vulnerable to cross-border threats due to its low and collapsing population. Additionally, in the eyes of many Russian observers, Japan does not have complete independence in its decision-making as it appears beholden to the US. This dependence would complicate any major security agreements between Russia and Japan. Existing security ties and residual distrust from past aggression make Russo-Japanese relations an area of contention and a roadblock for more cohesive regional action.³⁵

Internal Russian issues also serve to weaken the political commitment for membership in Asian regional institutions. For example, most Russian citizens identify as European or Eurasian, not Asian. Within Russia there is a rich history of looking to West to define culture and even national identity (i.e., defining Russianness as Orthodox Christianity or through a pan-Slavic identity). Variations in Russian cultural identity, whether the people see themselves as European, Asian, or uniquely Eurasian, make shifting the country's foreign policy orientation to Asia contentious among certain factions of the political elite. If the general population does not identify as Asian, what place does the country itself have in the heart of Asian regional institutions?³⁶ Many Asian organizations set membership standards based on regional or continental or regional exclusivity and are open to only fellow Asian states as core members. Contentions surrounding Russian identity do not prevent Russia cannot take leadership where it is already a founding member, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, but it places limits on Russia's centrality and access to key institutional decision-making process when regional grouping is based on shared culture or geographic proximity (i.e. Russia can be in ASEAN only as a dialogue partner). As Russia's population are west of the Urals, Russia may have a issues achieving full admittance into any future Pan-Asian organizations and may have limited authority in organizations Russia odes join due to distances between Russian and Asian/East Asian identities. Migration and demography, particularly the Slavic birthrate crisis, enflame this tension and promote divisive nationalism over cooperative regionalism. Russian anxieties in terms of Far-East demography and territorial sovereignty result in cultural backlash against immigrants. The Far East has faced dire population loss with region having lost 22% of its population since 1990. Russian anxieties over border security are compounded by the relative difference in population density with the sparsely Russian Far Eastern Federal District and

China's northeastern borders. Xenophobic conceptions of migrants – particularly the “yellow peril” fear of Asian immigration – grip the Russian Far East, where Slavic and ethnic Russian population density is collapsing, and serve as a roadblock against a full embrace of Asia.³⁷

The divided nature of Asian regionalism also modifies the benefits of concerted Russian involvement with regional institutions. The lack of strong organizations in Northeast Asia reduces the scope of Russian engagement in a subregion where their involvement makes the most sense geographically. The development of Northeast Asian regional organizations has been largely stunted by geopolitical tensions; although recently, trilateral investment and free trade agreements of the form China-Japan-ROK Plus have arisen. Even if such agreements do deepen into broad-multisectoral regionalism, Russia does not currently have a seat at the table. Stronger regional organizations like ASEAN are further south, where Russian influence is weaker.

Lastly, Russia may find that participation in broad multilateral Asian regionalism fails to help meet their strategic and economic aims, so other alliances should be pursued outside this framework, resulting in fewer resources being directed toward regional organizations. Currently, Putin and the Russian Federation's major outreach toward Asian regional institutions is somewhat new and a change from a previous preoccupation with securing influence in Central and Eastern Europe. It remains to be seen if the “Pivot to Asia” will be a sustained foreign policy course or merely a deviation. Multilateral action and bilateral relations are primary methods of securing diplomatic influence and receiving security guarantees. If regional institutions fail to be a productive space for negotiations or have such limits to their sovereignty that they are ineffectual, Russia may see bilateral agreements, such as further strengthening ties with the PRC through trade and joint energy projects, as the preferred way forward. When benefits of strong

bilateral relations outweigh those received from membership in regional institutions, Russia will likely scale back their involvement in Asian regional institutions.

Assessing Russia's engagement with Asian multilateral structures, it is likely that Russia will struggle to successfully integrate due to their distance in history, cultural identity, and geography from Asia. Despite an increased foreign policy focus on Asia, Russia lacks the sustained political will and desire to become a leader in most Asian regional organizations as their national interest and threat perception are historically oriented westward. Putin turned to Asia when the annexation of Crimea limited Russian influence in European affairs, but increased attention alone does not translate to successful foreign policy. Numerous barriers, notably cultural and geographic dissimilarities make enacting meaningful strategic shifts in Asia difficult for this hybrid Eurasian state. Putin and Russia may still be preoccupied with the West and the turn East may be superficial, particularly if Russian efforts in Asia fail to adequately strengthen Russian influence globally.

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