

Recalibrating Moscow's Strategies in Asia: Russia and Southeast Asia in a Multipolar World¹



Reajustando as Estratégias de Moscou na Ásia: Rússia e Sudeste Asiático num Mundo Multipolar

Reajustando las Estrategias de Moscú en Asia: Rusia y el Sudeste Asiático en un Mundo Multipolar

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ABSTRACT

Russia's partnership with China acted as a strategic cushion for the country's leadership to launch the military operation in Ukraine. At the same time, warm relations with long-term allies in Asia reinforced Russia's decision to make such a dangerous move and take the risks of being cut-off financially from the West. In this sense, relations not only with China but with other Asian middle and small powers is crucial for Russia's development in the upcoming years. Southeast Asia appears to be one of the most important prospective partners. Russia-Southeast Asia relations show that despite evident achievements in various spheres, Russia's plans in the region remain unsubstantiated in terms of policies and lack a comprehensive strategy. Ultimately, Russia has first to determine to what extent it is serious on its "reorientation" to Asia and what it expects from it, and whether it is ready to recalibrate substantially its relationship with Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Russia; Asia; ASEAN; Southeast Asia; China; perceptions; multipolarity.

RESUMO

A parceria da Rússia com a China serviu como um colchão estratégico para a liderança do país lançar a operação militar na Ucrânia. Ao mesmo tempo, as relações cordiais com aliados de longo prazo na Ásia reforçaram a decisão da Rússia de tomar uma medida tão perigosa e assumir os riscos de ser cortada financeiramente pelo Ocidente. Nesse sentido, as relações não apenas com a China, mas com outros poderes médios e pequenos da Ásia são cruciais para o desenvolvimento da Rússia nos próximos anos. O Sudeste Asiático parece ser um dos parceiros prospectivos mais importantes. As relações entre Rússia e Su-

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deste Asiático mostram que, apesar das conquistas evidentes em várias esferas, os planos da Rússia na região permanecem não fundamentados em termos de políticas e carecem de uma estratégia abrangente. Em última análise, a Rússia precisa determinar em que medida está comprometida com sua “reorientação” para a Ásia e o que espera dela, e se está pronta para recalibrar substancialmente seu relacionamento com o Sudeste Asiático.

Palavras-chave: Rússia; Ásia; ASEAN; Sudeste Asiático; China; percepções; multipolaridade.

RESUMEN

La asociación estratégica de Rusia con China fungió como amortiguador en la decisión del liderazgo ruso de lanzar una operación militar en contra de Ucrania. Asimismo, los lazos estrechos de Rusia con aliados históricos en Asia contribuyeron en la determinación del gobierno ruso para realizar un movimiento tan peligroso y tomar el riesgo de ser aislado por Occidente. En este sentido, para Rusia en el futuro próximo son cruciales sus lazos no sólo con China sino con otras potencias asiáticas. De esta forma, el sudeste de Asia se perfila como una de las regiones más importantes para Rusia en el mediano plazo. Las relaciones entre Rusia y los países del sudeste de Asia muestran que, a pesar de éxitos notables en diversos ámbitos, los planes de Rusia en la región carecen de cierta congruencia y no son parte de una estrategia integral. En definitiva, Rusia tiene que determinar hasta qué punto está dispuesta a llevar a cabo su “reorientación” a Asia y lo que espera de ella, así como si se encuentra presto a recalibrar de manera sustancial sus relaciones con el sudeste de Asia.

Palabras clave: Rusia; Asia; ASEAN; sudeste de Asia; China; percepciones; multipolaridad.

The armed conflict in Ukraine and the geopolitical confrontation between Russia and the West has proved to have a global component and may be the beginning of a significant recalibration of the international order. In this context, Russia’s policies in East Asia seem to gain more relevance as Russia’s confrontation with the West over Ukraine evolves. At the same time, Russia aims to enhance its status in Asia and the world by seeking business and strategic opportunities to compensate to a certain extent Russia’s loss following the sanctions imposed by the West. In this sense, diverse partnerships are being developed between Russian and Southeast Asian countries; this research will analyse the key components of those partnerships along with their potential benefits and impeding factors. Evidence for this paper was drawn from governmental documents, academic articles, news resources, think tank’s publications, and occasionally personal interviews with academics and officials in Bangkok, Hanoi, and Moscow. This article is organized as follows. Firstly (1), it argues that Russia’s self-perception of being a great power in a multipolar world plays a central and defining role in Russia’s foreign policy. The following section (2) is devoted to Russia’s “turn” to Asia. It succinctly describes the historical background of the alleged shift and the function of the China-component in the equation Thirdly (3), this paper examines historical and current trends in Russia-Southeast Asia relations to understand their shifts and continuities. In the following section (4), this research analyses current relevant issues of the Russian-Southeast Asia partnership as well as obstacles and catalysts to development in the

context of the military conflict in Ukraine. This paper concludes (5) by reflecting upon the relevance of the topic and connects it with a broad historical context.

RUSSIA'S STANCE IN INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

Russia's self-image as a great power plays a central and defining role in Russia's foreign policy and critically shapes Russia's understanding of its relations with the world. For the Russian leadership and most of its citizens, greatpowerness or "velikoderzhavnost" is inherent to the existence and survival of the Russian state. Russia's great power identity has been scrutinized by a large number of authors and publications over the last decade (Clunan, 2014; Leichtova, 2014; Smith, 2016). Andrei Tsygankov (2020) argues that Russian greatpowerness consists of three main elements: "(1) a sphere of cultural and value influence in Eurasia and Europe, (2) political and economic self-sufficiency, and (3) military capabilities sufficient to defeat any other power". For Russian elites, it is crucial to maintain the internal unity of a geographically vast and complex country; a socially diverse state bordering non-Western and Western states and powerful neighbours.

Accordingly, the Russian elite has developed the concept of multipolarity: an international system in which a handful of large states (great powers, poles) were the guardians of the global order based on a balance of power among them. The Russian government has declared numerous times that multipolarity is the basis of the Russian approach to international politics. Former Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov was the main advocate of multipolarity during the Yeltsin era (Rangsimaporn, 2009), but at that time in the 1990s, the arguments seemed unconvincing as Russia was a weak state. The aim of achieving the status of a great power was more clearly defined under Putin's government, and he began to pursue this end more pragmatically. Putin's purpose was not to restore the Soviet as a superpower, but to make Russia a "normal great power" (Tsygankov, 2005).

Russia's conception of a multipolar world constitutes a prime component in the country's foreign policy decision-making. As Margot Light observes: "The sanctification of Russia's great power status and the declared preference for a multipolar world order based on sovereignty and non-interference in states' internal affairs has been a constant" (Cadier; Light, 2015:23). In this sense, at a summit in Saint Petersburg last year, President Putin reiterated this idea: "A multipolar system of international relations is now being formed. It is an irreversible process; it is happening before our eyes and is objective in nature" (Tass 2022). As a global power in a multipolar world, Russia has pursued a multi-vector foreign policy in the last fifteen years and the Asian vector has gain considerable strength. Russia's 'pivot' to Asia initiated as a long-term rebalancing project under Putin's administration, aimed mostly to maintain its global power identity by preserving Russia's freedom of manoeuvrability and independence in world affairs, and to be recognised as an Euro-Asian power.

RUSSIA'S PIVOT TO ASIA

In 1986, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev made a landmark visit to the Russian Far East and delivered an important speech in Vladivostok, signalling that the USSR would engage in international politics as an Asia-Pacific power as much as a European (Thakur; Thayer, 1987). This Soviet version of *Ostpolitik* launched by Gorbachev was followed by President Putin in the 2010s. In December 2012, in his annual address to the Federal Assembly, President Putin established the development of Siberia and the Far East as a national priority for the whole twenty first century. As a result, the Russian Government commenced to elaborate a long-term project to develop and improve living conditions in Asiatic Russia and advance its integration into Northeast Asia. Subsequently, Russia's "pivot" to Asia has been a highly discussed topic within Russian elites and leading scholars. In this regard, the Russian think tank *Valdai International Discussion Club* presented a series of analytical reports entitled *Toward the Great Ocean* to impulse debate between the Russian elites and leading scholars.

President Putin used the 2012 APEC summit in Vladivostok as a means to turn assertively to East Asia and to push for development projects in the region. Afterwards, Asiatic Russia attracted important federal-level attention and investment. According to Vladivostok scholar Sergei Sevastianov, one of the main achievements of this "pivot" to Asia has been the implementation of a new institutional framework aimed to improve the investments climate in the RFE (Personal Communication, 2022). This certainly gave impetus to the development of the region. Most analyses on Russia's shift to Asia recognise recent efforts towards the development of Asiatic Russia and the improvement of socioeconomic indicators; there is a general agreement in Russia that in recent years "the government is paying more attention to its eastern part" and "has done a lot" (Bashkatova, 2022).

Indeed, the Russian government has devoted much effort and resources to impulse regional development; the problem seems to be that these are isolated efforts reflecting a narrow viewpoint – to certain extent overly technocratic – and full of provisional variables, there is a lack of a comprehensive plan whatsoever and strategies have been guided primarily by fiscal needs based on national security considerations (Kireev, 2017). Russian scholar Igor Makarov considers that Putin himself was committed to the development of the region and the creation of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East under his presidency corroborates this fact. Nonetheless, Russia had many other national priorities, namely the Sochi Winter Olympics, the FIFA World Cup in 2018 (which did not include cities from Asiatic Russia), and the integration of Crimea into the Russian Federation. As Makarov underlines, there were too many other projects for the Asian century project to succeed (Personal Communication, 28 September 2022). In this context, success would mean to halt the outflow of population from the Russian Far East that continues to this day.

In terms of foreign policy, the much-touted "pivot" to Asia has been subject of discussions for the Russian elites and Russia specialists alike.

Nevertheless, for many Russian experts in Asia it remains a vague concept that lacks true depth and they cast doubt on the feasibility of such a project. As per Andrei Dmitrichenko, Minister Counsellor of the Russian Embassy in Thailand, it is a futile discussion as Russia cannot simply “turn” to Asia as rhetoric suggests. The Russian diplomat draws a parallel between the alleged “pivot” to Asia and a transatlantic liner: the largest state on Earth cannot “turn” as easily and smoothly to Asia, Russia as an ocean liner can only turn slowly, one degree at a time (Personal Communication, 30 May 2022).

Russia's policies in East Asia seem to gain more relevance once more as Russia's confrontation with the West over Ukraine evolves. Following the military operation in Ukraine, Russia had to drastically reassess its relations with the West, which apparently has accelerated the country's turning to Asia. Nonetheless, the crisis in Ukraine has simultaneously pushed Russia into a sort of insulation, and into China's growing dependence. Both scenarios have their own opportunities and risks.

Russia-China relations have developed into arguably the best relations between great powers. The Sino-Russian comprehensive strategic partnership is one of the most important elements of the world order and the achievements made by the two countries in the last two decades are impressive. Both countries have many common strategies and interests, from global to regional and there is a growing systematic coordination. Suffice to say that in the last ten years, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have met more than forty times.

The relationship with China acted as a strategic cushion for Russia to launch the military operation in Ukraine (Tchakarova, 2022). Seemingly, Russia would have never launched such a large-scale military operation if it were not to rely to a certain degree on China's economic and political support. China has maintained a “friendly neutrality” because the country “needs the stability of external sources, resource security, stability at the borders and the presence of a ‘strategic buffer’ in competition with the United States.” (Safronova, 2022). Still, China's economic involvement in several Russian projects came to a halt and the country has restrained from an all-out economic support to Russia as Chinese companies do not want to risk being sanctioned. After initial disengagement, China has gradually deepened economic cooperation with Russia in the second part of 2022 and compared to the same period in 2021, trade volume has increased 50 percent. Still, actual figures may be higher as there are no official data of bilateral trade volume (Trofimov, 2022). According to Igor Makarov, Chinese business has tried to hedge the menace of sanctions from the West by diversifying its partnerships with Russian companies and creating parallel infrastructure to deal specifically with Russia through firms not exposed to foreign markets.

Irrespective of the outcomes of the armed conflict in Ukraine, China will not let this spoil relations with Russia (Wishnick, 2022). Apparently, even some segments of Chinese public support Russia. According to opinion research carried out in China in 2022, Russia turned out to be the most positively perceived country: 70 percent of the respondents claimed to have positive views of Russia. Similarly, 80 percent of the respondents

said that their image of Russia has improved in the last three years (Turcsanyi; Dubravcikova; Kironska, 2022).

For Russia, the partnership with China is essential not only at the global level but also at the regional level. The high profile of the bilateral ties legitimises to a certain extent Russia's claims to Asian power. China remains central to Russia's Asia policy and the Russian leadership seems to agree on the need to keep China as a key partner. Nevertheless, Russia necessitates different partners in East Asia as excessive dependency on China would probably jeopardise Russia's sovereignty. Russia's diversification attempts toward Japan and South Korea ultimately did not succeed; therefore, Russia requires to develop relations with other states and Southeast Asian states appear to be one of the most prospective partners.

RUSSIA-SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

Relations between the Russian Empire/Soviet Union/Russian Federation and Southeast Asian states have followed distinct and at times contrasting paths. Still, there are some long-term points of confluence throughout different periods; one of the recurrent lines of convergence has seemingly been the struggle from both sides to be recognised as equal partners in Europe. Indeed, at different periods of time, counterbalance to the perceived Euro-centric world has served as common ground for mutual interactions. It should be noted that this was not exclusive to the Soviet period when the USSR portrayed itself as a non-Western power.

Arguably, the first landmark event in mutual interactions occurred when future Russian emperor Nikolai Romanov visited Asia. After inaugurating the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway in Vladivostok in 1891, the Tsarevich embarked in a historic trip to Japan, India, and Siam. In Bangkok, the future Russian Emperor received a sumptuous welcome by King Chulalongkorn the Great, marking the beginning of mutual interactions between both countries. Six years later, as part of its landmark visit to Europe, King Chulalongkorn visited the Russian Empire and was hosted by Nicholas II. According to records, they met "as two old friends", spending plenty of time only the two of them; during the seven days visit, the King of Siam was taken as part of the family by the Romanov (Phiramontri, 2017).

In political terms, for Siam it was the most consequential visit of the entire trip. Amidst threats from colonial powers such as France and Britain, the Russian Emperor asserted that "the independence of Siam will never be curtailed" (Phiramontri, 2017). It has to be emphasised that the Siamese King was treated by the Russian Emperor as equal (Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya, 1997). This was immortalised in a famous photograph of the two supreme leaders taken in the outskirts of Saint Petersburg. The picture, which was published in different newspapers across Europe, intended to send a political message to European powers. In this sense, the visit of King Chulalongkorn the Great to Saint Petersburg 1897, "sitting side by side with Emperor Nicholas II, boosted Thai position as an equal partner in Europe" (Phubunlap, 2022). In the end, "amicable relations

between Emperor Nicholas II and King Chulalongkorn helped Siam to avoid colonial dependence and maintain balance between the great powers of the time” (Koldunova; Rangsimaporn, 2012).

By the end of the 1960s, the Soviet Union had managed to establish stable relations with all actors in the region. Nonetheless, the Soviet Union had significantly less official contact with maritime Southeast Asia. The USSR exerted influence in determined countries, especially Vietnam and Laos after adopting communist rule in 1975 (Huan; Thambipillai, 2019), whereas relations with Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, and the Philippines were characterised by “discontinuous political involvement” and “nominal economic interests” (Kapoor, 2020). In the case of Indonesia, bilateral relations gained momentum after Sukarno-Khrushchev visits and stable relations remained even under Suharto anti-communist regime.

Relations between the USSR and the five ASEAN members at the time strained after the Soviet Union and Vietnam concluded in 1978 the Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation, and the subsequent invasion of Cambodia. At that time, ASEAN states tilted towards the United States. Soviet support for the Vietnamese occupation of Kampuchea remained for a decade the main impending issue for developing relations between the USSR and ASEAN (Thakur; Thayer, 1987).

Following the demise of the Soviet Union, Russia practically vanished from East Asia. Still, Russia became ASEAN Dialogue partner in 1996. As noted by Viktor Sumsky, former Director of the ASEAN Centre of MGIMO University, this was a crucial moment as Southeast Asia signalled it wanted Russia to be there notwithstanding its weakness (personal communication, 28 September 2022). Henceforth, Russia has participated in most ASEAN-led forums and joined ASEAN regional structures. At the same time, Russia has developed cooperation with countries with whom it had limited relations in earlier decades. In 2018, ASEAN-Russia relations finally were elevated to a strategic partnership.

Distant neighbours or strategic partners?

Southeast Asia's main goal developed into avoiding being a sphere of ideological and political struggle and limit the influence of major powers. ASEAN countries have managed to develop “a regulatory framework for managing interstate relations, regional cooperation has made the crucial difference between forces of conflict and harmony that lie at the core of the international relations of Southeast Asia” (Bainus; Manurung, 2021). ASEAN Centrality and ASEAN norms so called ‘ASEAN Way’ (consultation and consensus, non-intervention) are well founded in broader East Asia regionalisms (Acharya, 2017). Analyses frequently emphasise the hedging strategy pursued by regional powers in Southeast Asia aimed to manage regional order: a range of policies encouraging middle positions and avoid taking sides to prevent the dominance of foreign powers (Busbarat, 2016).

ASEAN and Russia have forged diverse linkages in the last thirty years through different institutional arrangements. These multilateral avenues have provided Russia the possibility to enhance ties with

different Southeast Asian states (Huan; Thambipillai, 2019). Certainly, Russia's interests in the region have grown and Russia's diplomacy is more visible in the region. Similarly, the strategic value of Russia for Southeast Asia can hardly be denied. According to Viktor Sumsky, during the last decade Russia has signaled its interest to take incremental steps to engage with the region, and Southeast Asia has made clear that it wants Russia to be there. In this sense, "the welcoming of increased Russian interest is a well-thought out move as [ASEAN countries] they focus on hedging to deal with the challenges posed by a changing regional order" (Kapoor, 2020).

Russia's neutral stance has enhanced its position in the region. Arguably, Russia has managed to establish itself in the region as a responsible power. Russia's foreign policy in Southeast Asia, in contrast to that in the West, is much more pragmatic and conciliatory. For Dmitrichenko in Bangkok, unlike the United States, Russia avoids picking sides and has good working relations with all ASEAN states, as a result, Russia is seen as a balancing power in the region.

As in other cases in Asia, economic cooperation between Russia and its partners lags behind from political collaboration. Russia is ASEAN's 11th largest trade partner (Kapoor, 2020). Efforts to further develop economic ties have had limited success and Russia's economic presence in Southeast Asia continues to be weak. In contrast to other powers' economic involvement in the region, Russia's involvement is minimal: before the pandemics Russia constituted barely one percent of ASEAN's total trade. It should be noted that Russia is the largest arms exporter to Southeast Asia, from 2000 to 2021 the value of the country's arms exports to the region was US\$10.87 billion. US exports by comparison, accounted \$8.4 billion for the same period (Storey, 2022).

Certainly, there is a dissonance between the economic and political vectors of the Russia-ASEAN strategic partnership. This is, "economic obstacles against growing strategic congruence in their perceptions of international processes" (Kanaev; Korolev, 2019). Most analysts agree that weak economic linkages between Russia and ASEAN countries comprise the major impediment to the qualitative improvement of ties.

Inadequate high-level representation at regional summits also has negatively impacted mutual dynamics. President Putin has shown certain unwillingness to forge personal connections with other ASEAN leaders (Mahaseth; Wong, 2022). This in contrast to personal interaction with other leaders in the region such as Xi Jinping, Shinzo Abe, and Narendra Modi. Russia is not represented at the highest levels in regional forums. Indeed, interactions between Russia and ASEAN countries often take place |on the sidelines of world summits. Putin's visit to Singapore for the 2018 East Asia Summit constituted his first attendance to the ASEAN-flagship Forum.

In recent years, Russia has focused ties with Vietnam, Indonesia and Myanmar while also forging ties Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines. It should be highlighted that Russia has succeeded in forging closer ties with Indonesia, which apparently has become one of its most important partners in the region. Russia and Indonesia have

managed to establish broad contacts in different spheres since the beginning of the administration of President Widodo, favouring multilateralism over global power competition. For Indonesia, “Russia is an important partner in maintaining stability and security in the region” (Bainus; Manurung, 2021).

Relations with Vietnam comprise one of the main pillars of Russia's policies in Southeast Asia. After relations were close to zero in the 1990s, after Putin's first visit to Vietnam in 2001 bilateral ties improved substantially and the partnership is based on totally different principles; it is a strategic partnership conceived for a long-term perspective determined by a wide range of common interests. Thus, Vietnam remains the closest and more stable partner for Russia (Lokshin, 2021). This strategic partnership reflects in many aspects “the multifacetedness of bilateral relations and the high level of trust” (Vershina, 2022).

Russia's political relations with Southeast Asia remain Vietnam-centred to a certain degree. Aside from forums and news about high-profile summits, for most Russians Vietnam remains ASEAN's centre of attention whereas Thailand and Indonesia's province Bali constitute the pole of attraction to Russian tourists. In this sense, Russia should attempt to make a “breakthrough in Asian affairs” and activate its Asian vector that should consist not only of conferences, seminars and summits but recipes to solve political issues in the region” (Trofimchuk, 2022). In this sense, for Russia it seems imperative to participate in the decision-making processes in the region and not only at declarative level, otherwise, Southeast Asia may ultimately overlook Russia.

In contrast to other major powers, Russia has a historical disadvantage in the region. Russia does not form part of regional integration processes and ASEAN countries are not in rush for cooperation. Russia is arriving to a region that has already its own dynamic and is unable to determine the agenda. ASEAN countries engage with Russia because of what it is at global level but it is perceived as a distant partner. As for many in the region, “Russia is a European power focused primarily on its relations with the West, drawing strength from its high-profile ties with China” (Dave, 2016). Russia's relations with Southeast Asia are insufficient in substance and effort (Tsvetov, 2016), and at times “minimalist, ad-hoc and reactive” (Huan; Thambipillai, 2019).

ASEAN states have decided not taking sides and to hedge the growing antagonism between the US and China in Asia-Pacific – seeking opportunities but working to place controls and limits on its development. Ergo, Southeast Asia welcomes Russia's great power interests in the region as part of its hedging strategy and attempt to bring other great powers to the region to increase interdependence and reduce the possibility of conflict. This opens up different opportunities for Russia.

The armed conflict in Ukraine has certainly added a sense of urgency to Russia's plans in Southeast Asia. But to what extent can the hybrid war between Russia and the West in Ukraine affairs alter current trends in Russia-Southeast Asia relations?

PROSPECTS FOR INTERACTIONS AFTER THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

The Russian military operation in Ukraine has been seen with ambivalence in Southeast Asia; ASEAN countries have continued to focus on regional issues related to integration and development whilst being vocal against excluding Russia from international structures. Responses and attitudes from the ten ASEAN members towards the armed conflict have significantly varied, ranging from the strong condemnation of Singapore and the subsequent imposition of sanctions to Myanmar's outright endorsement. For most ASEAN countries, it is clear that even while condemning the violation of other countries' sovereignty, officially they have not placed Russia or Ukraine in an aggressor-victim axis.

Singapore was the only ASEAN member to condemn Russia by name and impose sanctions. According to Russian scholars, despite sanctions are far from being symbolic, the impact will be minimal as since 2014 economic cooperation considerably decreased. Other countries have only condemned violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and called to end hostilities. Thailand has maintained cordial relations with Russia and has tried to avoid taking sides remaining neutral during the conflict. Laos and Vietnam have sought to preserve their time-hallowed relations with Russia and have refrained of any criticism and constantly exercise restraint. Myanmar is the only ASEAN member to vocally support Russia. Indeed, Russia has been one of the first countries to recognise the military government in Naypyidaw. Multilaterally, ASEAN has expressed deep concern over hostilities in Ukraine and calling all parties to exercise maximum restraint (ASEAN, 2022). In this sense, ASEAN simply followed its approach which maximises diplomatic options and manoeuvrability, and distanced itself equally from Russia, Ukraine, and Western countries.

Economic ties between Russia and ASEAN countries will certainly resent the "draconian sanctions" in place by the West and this will leave little space for furthering cooperation (Korolev, 2022). Nevertheless, as Viktor Sumsy suggest, most ASEAN countries will not refrain to buy cheaper hydrocarbons nor to engage in trade with Russia if it happens to be beneficial. Much will depend on Russia's ability to adapt to partners and its necessities considering new conditions. Indonesia and Vietnam seem to be the most prospective partners, but the list should not be reduced to them. For instance, Malaysia could partially compensate for the current losses in the field of high-tech products.

In bilateral terms, practically all Southeast Asian countries have maintained stable and cordial diplomatic ties with Russia and have not ceded to the pressure of Western countries to isolate Russia. It should be noted the important role that Indonesia has played in this matter. In late June 2022, President Widodo embarked on a landmark visit to Europe, including visits to Kiev and Moscow and sustaining meetings with his counterparts Zelensky and Putin. As noted by a Russian specialist, "Indonesia, for the first time in modern history, entered the European and global arena beyond the historical borders of its sphere of influence, reclaiming its role as a global intermediary" (Kuklin, 2022). Indeed, the country archipelago became the first Southeast Asian state attempting

to impact global events through multilateralism. Indonesia attempted to speak to the wider world and specially the West representing Southeast Asian countries and demonstrating the state of “realpolitik” in the region (Chongkittavorn, 2022).

The visit of President Widodo attempted to prove the country's ability to chair the G20 and not further destabilise the world economy but “recover together”. Indeed, the armed conflict in Ukraine coincided with the “ASEAN year” as Indonesia and Thailand took over the chairmanship of key global and regional organisations, the G20 and APEC respectively. As Russian scholar Ekaterina Koldunova points out, despite big pressure from the United States and the European Union, Southeast Asian countries rejected calls to exclude Russia from ASEAN-centred format. According to her, for ASEAN multilateral institutions the organisation of the summits comprised an endurance test (Personal Communication 30 September 2022). President Putin decided not to attend any of the summits. For Russian scholars Timofey Bordachev and Vasily Kashin, whilst it was desirable in political terms Putin attending the summit in Indonesia, the “fate” of Russia-Southeast Asia ties and the G20 would be decided not in Bali but in Ukraine (Bordachev, 2022). In the end and despite all complexities, the three summits were successfully hosted by Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand with the participation of the Russian Federation.

According to Viktor Sumsky, many in Southeast Asia would lose if Russia, who is seen as at the forefront in the struggle for a multipolar world, completely failed in Ukraine and weakened. Notwithstanding Western sanctions and political pressure, ASEAN countries have signalled their interest in Russia to become involved in regional affairs. Nevertheless, the current model of interactions between Russia and Southeast Asian countries seems to be exhausted and has been unable to evolve into an actual strategic partnership. Arguably, there are three features that may turn vital in this endeavour: (a) the development/engagement of Asiatic Russia; (b) being a viable option for hedging between the US and China; (c) a shift in the attitudes of the Russian elites towards Asia.

(a) *Asiatic Russia*. Arguably, one of the intrinsic reasons for Russia to be perceived as a distant partner in Southeast Asia is that Siberia, and particularly the RFE, is still viewed by these countries as a Russian territory in Asia, but not as Russia per se. The mere existence of Asiatic Russia is not sufficient basis for Russia to be recognised as an Asian power. Ergo, Asiatic Russia may play a crucial role in Russia's shift towards closer relations with Asian countries.

In this sense, physical connectivity comprises one of the main obstacles hindering further economic cooperation, particularly due to “the poor level of transport infrastructure in the Russian Far East and its insufficient integration into the logistic network of the Asia-Pacific region” (Kanaev; Korolev, 2019). The situation was tested a few months after Russia's military campaign in Ukraine: as European companies refused to work with Russian cargo, Saint Petersburg and other Russia's ports in the Baltic were largely “blocked”. Consequently, it was expected that flows could be redirected to Asiatic Russia through Vladivostok and Vostochny ports.

Indeed, there is an increasing demand for transport corridors to the Russian Far East. The main question, however, is how border and port infrastructure in the region can handle the recent workload increase that could lead to an even greater growth of export-import flows (EastRussia(a), 2022). News emerged about ports in Primorskiy Krai overloaded by cargo and long waiting lines for freight to be transported through the Trans-Siberian Railway (Primamedia, 2022). The situation in Russian far eastern ports became critical by Summer 2022 and ports such as Vladivostok and Vostochny started working to the limit. According to specialists, cargo ships arriving to the RFE had to wait in average ten days to be unloaded as they were working at full capacity due to lack of infrastructure and personnel.

As a matter of fact, the new economic reality opens up new chances for RFE to become a larger hub of Russia with countries of East Asia. Nevertheless, the turn of the majority of logistics chains to the Far East has led to a significant shortage of transportation capacity in the region (Bashkatova, 2022). Thus, it is essential for Russia to enlarge and modernise current transportation infrastructure in the RFE, particularly the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Baikal-Amur Mainline (BAM) and to clear up bottlenecks at customs checkpoints. As per Russian officials: “Western markets have closed for Russia, only the eastern ports remain. Therefore, building infrastructure for Russia’s turn to the East is an important task for the country. It is extremely costly, but in the near future it should become a priority for the country” (EastRussia(b), 2022). According to Deputy Prime Minister for the Development of the Far East Yuri Trutnev, the shortage of work power of the Trans-Siberian Railway and BAM comprises about 40 percent of the current demand. In 2022, the demand for transportation would be around 258 million tons, currently both railways can transport about 150-160 million tons. Thus, the volume of non-transported cargo could reach 100 million tons (Bashkatova, 2022).

It is imperative for Russia to pay utmost attention to improve Asiatic Russia-Southeast Asia connectivity and develop air and maritime communications linking the region with the Russian Far East and ease dependency on Japanese and South Korean transport companies (Lukshin, 2021). The absence of direct flights embodies Russia-ASEAN weak connectivity. It should be noted that in October 2022 Russia launched a direct flight to Laos from Vladivostok, linking the RFE the capital Vientiane. At the same time, the FESCO transport group launched a regular sea line FESCO VIETNAM DIRECT LINE (FVDL) on the route Vladivostok – Haiphong (Vietnam) – Ho Chi Minh City (Vietnam) – Ningbo (China) – Vladivostok. This should constitute one big first step in the region’s integration process. (EastRussia(b), 2022).

(b) Viable option for hedging. As Russia and China declare a “partnership with no limits”, an important question rapidly arises: to what extent Russia’s relations with Southeast Asian countries can be limited/affected by close relations with China?

Southeast Asia’s quest for multipolarity is not unambiguous; it consists of many vectors and despite the clear presence of certain anti-West sentiments, it would be fallacious to argue that they comprise the main

element. Arguably, the current hedging strategy of the region is more China-related. According to the latest survey *The State of Southeast Asia 2022* (Seah, 2022), China is notoriously seen by Southeast Asian elites as the most influential economic and political power in the region, 59 and 41 percent respectively. Incidentally, 64 percent of the respondents claimed to be “worried about China’s growing regional economic influence”. Concern is particularly pronounced within the respondents from Vietnam (86 percent). Conversely, Indonesia and Cambodia appear to be the least concerned over China’s economic influence. By the same token, 49 percent of the regional elites in Southeast Asia “distrust” China whereas 54 percent “trust” the United States. Finally, when asked, “if ASEAN was forced to align itself with one of the two strategic rivals, which should it choose?” 61 percent of the respondents replied they would choose the US whereas 39 named China. Vietnamese elites decisively choose the United States (77 percent) whereas regional elites in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia are somewhat equally divided. Finally, 73 percent of the respondents fear that ASEAN is becoming an arena of major power competition and its member states may become major power proxies. For Vietnam and Cambodia, this concern ranks at the top at 90.4 and 84.3% respectively.

Certainly, there is a consistent trend in the region’s anxiety over China’s growing influence. Nevertheless, for the regional elites Russia does not appear to be one of the most viable third parties to hedge against the US-China strategic rivalry (Skosyrev, 2022). In this matter, the EU and Japan seem to be the elites’ first choices and not Russia; for ASEAN countries, Russia’s pivot to Asia signifies primarily Russia siding with China. Ergo, if there is no effort from the Russian side to build simultaneously ties with other regional powers, this could negatively impact Russia’s position as a neutral and strategic player in the region. Russia should avoid being perceived as a pure declarative power and most importantly an independent actor in relation to China. In this sense, one of the most prospective partners is the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

It has to be emphasised that such a partnership with Vietnam should be not conceived as an alternative to Russia’s partnership with China but together as diversification of ties in the East so to prevent relations with China “to become those of vassal and suzerain” (Lokshin, 2021). Vietnam remains the closest and more stable partner for Russia. At the same time, Vietnam position as a middle power becomes more precarious as it attempts to hedge the growing Russia-China and the US antagonism. As Ekaterina Koldunova underlines, among all ASEAN countries Vietnam faces the biggest foreign policy dilemma. On the one hand, Vietnam endures tremendous pressure for the US and its allies to curtail ties with Russia. On the other hand, as the antagonism between the United States and China continue to grow, Vietnamese bamboo diplomacy seems to be gradually losing manoeuvrability. “As a result, [Vietnam] it is walking a tightrope between the superpowers. But as their rivalry gets more intense, Vietnam’s tightrope will get thinner. There will likely be a time when the tightrope becomes too thin to walk” (Vuving, 2022).

Vietnamese scholars verily believe that Russia's military operation in Ukraine could set a bad precedent if similar incidents were to occur in Southeast Asia, particularly in the context of the growing antagonism between China and the United States. Vietnam remains "friendly neutral" to Russia's actions in Ukraine and whilst Vietnamese political elites sympathise with the victims in Ukraine, they certainly blame NATO for provoking this conflict. Still, many in Vietnam fear China could at some point take similar actions in the South China Sea (Personal Communication, Hanoi, April 2023).

Russia could become a power balance in the region by supporting regional order amidst the growing antagonism between China and the United States. Ergo, Russia should reconceptualise Russia-China-Vietnam relations and in general Russia-China-Southeast Asia relations. A reinvigorated partnership with Vietnam and a strategic partnership with Indonesia would help Russia to cement its image as a reliable partner and as an effective power balance.

(c) *Attitudes of Russian elites.* One of the main impediments to significantly improve ties with Southeast Asia is the Eurocentric worldview of the Russian elites. In the aftermath of the merger of Crimea with Russia in 2014, Russian China-specialist Vladimir Portyakov disputed the idea of Russia's reorienting itself to Asia. According to him, most of the Russian elites were mostly pro-Western, including Dmitri Medvedev and all vice-prime ministers. In the words of Portyakov: they were "classical liberals", whose heart and soul aware not in Asia but in Europe" (Personal Communication, 20 April 2016). Indeed, among the Russian intellectual elite, the majority belongs to those people who are still European oriented. Specially the liberal part of the society, which is the core of the economic group of the Russian government and Russia experts, and they are still very influential, and prior to the military conflict in Ukraine they still asserted that Russia should collaborate primary with Europe. To what extent have hostilities in Ukraine and the hybrid war between Russia and the West altered this?

Dmitri Trenin, long-time director of the Carnegie Moscow Endowment for Peace, argues that "long gone are the days when Moscow could straddle the divide between the West and the non-West" (2022). Consistently, Trenin calls for the preferment of non-Western embassy posting over the Western ones. According to the Russian scholar: "Above all, [Russia] it needs to give priority to relations with non-Western countries over de facto frozen ties with the West. Being an ambassador to Indonesia should be more prestigious than an ambassadorship in Rome" (Trenin, 2022).

In the same manner, Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs and Research Director of the Valdai Discussion Club, argues that "Russia faces a totally unprecedented existential challenge". Consequently, Russia must attract the non-Western world not on an ideological basis but in more practical matters and benefits from interactions. For this endeavour, Lukyanov considers that "one prerequisite is necessary. Understand that all this is not a way to beat the West, but the only guarantee of Russia's adaptation to the changed

circumstances for its survival. What we are used to will not be any longer” (Lukyanov, 2022).

Before the war, there had been much ambiguity over Russia’s turn to Asia. For the last decade, the East has been “mostly a function of the interaction between Russia and the West” (Narozhna, 2021). In other words, relations with Asia were not an end in itself, but a geopolitical bargaining tool. Plausibly, Russian elites mostly saw the conflict with the West as an interval before a new future rapprochement. Russia has now severed consciously ties with the West, however. It seems imperative for the Russian elites to follow a strategic and congruent approach to Southeast Asia. Arguably, success on this endeavour will hinge more on will than on capabilities.

Strategic shifts of unprecedented proportions are unfolding in global affairs. Russia’s military intervention in Ukraine has transformed the political and economic landscape for the country. Most of Russian analysts/civil servants interviewed for this work appear to be certain that Western countries attempt to torpedo multilateral structures created in the last two decades and exclude Russia from global decision-making processes. In this sense, there is an ostensible complementarity between Russia’s and Southeast Asia’s interests and possibilities. ASEAN countries appear to be as one of the best natural partners of Russia as it promotes multilateralism and multipolarity that Russia favours.

At the G20 Summit in Bali, the Russian delegation headed by Foreign Minister Lavrov was welcomed at the airport with a banner depicting an “updated” map of Russia, including the four provinces Russia had incorporated in late September (Rentv, 2022). Southeast Asian countries have made a few polite nods in the direction of Russia, but they are not in rush for cooperation. Several ASEAN countries have slyly and subtly expressed Russia they understand the reasons behind its military operation, and they have signaled their readiness to explore new economic opportunities. Ultimately, Russia has first to determine to what extent it is serious on its “reorientation” to Asia and what it expects from it, and whether it is ready to recalibrate substantially its relationship with Southeast Asia.

CONCLUSIONS

Russia’s self-perception of being a great power in a multipolar world plays a central and defining role in Russia’s foreign policy. As noted by Tsygankov (2020), greatpowerness is associated “not only with independent foreign policy and national security, but also with the opportunities and influence that only a few states in the world have”. It is to be seen whether Russia can influence regional dynamics in Southeast Asia. Prior to the armed conflict in Ukraine, relations with East Asia were not an end in itself for Russia but means to counter the West. There was no comprehensive vision in Russia for its relations with Asia in general and Southeast Asia in particular. Additionally, Russia’s Asian strategy was Sino-centric. New patterns of cooperation comprise the condition of possibility for Russia to substantially move closer to Southeast Asia. Inasmuch as no reconceptualisation of the Russia-Southeast relations is

articulated by Moscow and framed on current realities, it seems implausible to change prior trends.

Russia-Southeast Asia relations show that despite evident achievements in various spheres, Russia still lacks political and economic strength in the region to carry a proactive agenda. Arguably, one of the main reasons is due to the low level of interactions between Asiatic Russia and Southeast Asia. It is paradoxical that Russia conceives of itself as a Euro-Pacific power but most channels of interactions between Russia and Southeast Asia does not occur in Asia-Pacific but via Moscow. As to enhance economic and political ties with ASEAN countries, Russia should strive to build relations as a federation, avoiding relations to be triangulated. It is crucial to have the active involvement of Asiatic Russia and particularly the RFE.

Certainly, Russia's partnership with China acted as a strategic cushion for the country's leadership to launch the military operation in Ukraine. At the same time, warm relations with long-term allies in Asia such as India and Vietnam reinforced Russia's decision to make such a dangerous move and take the risks of being cut-off financially from the West. In this sense, relations not only with China but with other Asian middle and small powers is crucial for Russia's development in the upcoming years. Undoubtedly, Southeast Asia appears to be one of the most prospective regions for cooperation. Additionally, Russia-Southeast Asia ties could reinforce their mutual aspirations to forge a multipolar world and hedge the growing antagonism between the United States and China, which plausibly will exacerbate in the foreseeable future.

One of the challenges Russia faces in engaging Asia, is that Russia is in Asia but not of Asia. Russia should avoid being perceived as a pure declarative power and most importantly an independent actor in relation to China. Therefore, Russia should strive to follow a middle course in Southeast Asia: hedge the antagonism seeking opportunities but limiting the trend towards US-China bipolarity. This also points Russia towards new understanding with other states in the region that are hedging, one a well-known partner – Vietnam – but also those that are less recognised, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand.

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