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Moscow on the Pacific: The Missing Piece in the “Pivot” to Asia

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Observers who have discounted Russia's importance in the Asia-Pacific region in the two decades since the end of the Soviet Union have done so for substantial reasons. Unlike in the west and in the south, Russia lost no territory in the east, but its military and political weight dramatically decreased, while its economy, even after recovering from the Soviet collapse, could not keep pace with the Asian neighbors, and has also come to be overly dependent on oil and gas. Even so, largely ignoring Russia in the strategic calculus of the Asia-Pacific, as the United States does today, is short-sighted. Washington needs to begin paying more attention to Moscow as part of its Pacific strategy if it wants a more stable balance to emerge in the world's most important region.

RUSSIA THE EXCEPTION

America's strategic “pivot” to Asia, announced a year ago, has resulted in the United States' renewing its longstanding alliances with countries such as Japan, South Korea, and Australia, while reaching out to new important players in the region, including India, Indonesia, and even a former adversary, Vietnam. The increasingly complex and ever more crucial relationship with China stands at the heart of the initiative, and hardly a country across the vast region goes unmentioned as Washington maps its new strategy. The one exception is Russia, which was not mentioned once in Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton's seminal *Foreign Policy* essay, “America's Pacific Century.”

This omission is striking. Only a quarter century ago, the Soviet Union was America's main preoccupation in the Pacific as well as the Atlan-

tic. Forty years ago US diplomacy prided itself for having created a triangular relationship with Moscow and Beijing to better manage its principal adversary. Looking from America's West Coast, the Russian Federation, physically, is exactly where the Soviet Union once was. Unlike in Europe and Central Asia, Moscow has yielded no territory in the Pacific, not even the tiny islands of the Kuril chain that Tokyo claims as its own. The Russian Far East has not seriously tried to secede from mainland Russia. The Russian Pacific Fleet still retains its bases and its ballistic missile submarines.

To be sure, other things have changed. Moscow has drastically downsized its armed forces and defense production; it has pulled back troops from Mongolia and given up a naval facility it operated at Da Nang, in Vietnam. It has stopped subsidizing both nations and allowed them to develop their own independent strategies. At one point, Moscow was considering withdrawing its ballistic missile submarines from the Pacific altogether. Even more notably, Russia's industrial power has virtually collapsed, as its economy has become almost wholly dependent on natural resources such as oil and gas, metals, and timber. In the world's most dynamic economic region, Russia stands out as a backward periphery. Russia's Soviet-built infrastructure is crumbling. The population, small to begin with, is fast decreasing.

Seeing Russia's decline and China's rise, some Americans worried, briefly, about the prospect of a new axis built between Moscow and Beijing, this time under China's aegis. Not only have the two countries fully normalized relations after a 30-years-long cold war between them; they have also resolved a long-standing border dispute; increased their trade by a factor of 15 in so many years; and formed a regional group, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which has become a

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premier diplomatic forum for continental Asia. Russia has also helped upgrade China's conventional military might and is holding regular exercises with the People's Liberation Army and Navy. The Sino-Russian strategic partnership is reflected in the two countries' resentment of US global dominance and in their opposition to the use of force against sovereign states and forcible regime change engineered from abroad.

On closer examination, however, Russian-Chinese relations are nothing like an alliance. If this is an axis, it is one of convenience (as the title of a very good book by Bobo Lo suggests). Beijing does not really want to tie its hands by too close a bond with a weakened but huge neighbor. As for Moscow, it would be a supreme irony if, having rejected the option of bandwagoning with the United States, it would now accept being a junior partner to China. This is certainly not what Russia's leadership and elites have in mind. Conceivably, a certain amount of massive and very crude American pressure on both China and Russia simultaneously would bring the two governments closer together, but such obviously blundering policy can hardly be expected of any US administration.

Admittedly, nearly all projections show Russia continuing on a declining path: demographically in absolute terms; and in economic power, military potential, and soft power relative to other nations in the Asia-Pacific. Russia's hosting of the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in September is widely viewed as a case of misplaced vanity. President Vladimir Putin's decision to select Vladivostok, a Russian port city on the Sea of Japan, as the summit venue, only reminded diplomats around the Asia-Pacific of something they had nearly forgotten: that Russia, too, owns a piece of the Pacific shoreline. The summit itself, which President Barack Obama could not attend due to the US election campaign, did nothing to challenge the conclusion that most people in the US government had reached a long time ago: that Russia is not a significant actor in the Asia-Pacific.

This conclusion, however, is wrong. Here is why.

STILL A PLAYER

It is generally accepted in the United States that the global balance of power has shifted to the ad-

vantage of non-Western players, such as China. The United States, of course, is likely to remain the world's preeminent power for the next few decades, but it definitely requires a policy of geopolitical rebalancing to buttress its position. This is well understood when applied to US relations with a number of countries, from India and Indonesia to Mongolia and Vietnam. Of course, the Russia relationship was "reset" at the start of the Obama administration, but the omission of an outreach to Russia in America's Asia-Pacific strategy is hard to explain and harder still to justify.

In sheer geopolitical terms—landmass, natural resources, and military capabilities—Russia remains a major power in the region. It also sits in close proximity to several of the key countries in the Asia-Pacific. It has a 4,355 kilometer-long border with China and a short land frontier with North Korea, and is only separated by narrow straits from the United States and its principal ally, Japan. True, Russia no longer "hangs over" Northeast Asia, and has been so introverted recently as to have made others virtually forget about its existence.

Yet Russia, having consolidated itself following the Soviet breakup, is certainly a factor to keep in mind. Over time, it may well become an actor again, affecting the balance in the region.

In economic terms this impact is unlikely to be massive anytime soon. Russia may contribute significantly to energy security in the Asia-Pacific by boosting its oil and gas supplies to China, Japan, and South Korea. Most of the impact, however, will be diplomatic or strategic. Two of Russia's most important relationships are with the United States and China. Moscow already is being drawn into a careful balancing act between Washington and Beijing—a far cry from the cold war-era triangle, of course, but too important to ignore. Russia could also choose to play a more active role in two other quasi-triangles: one institutionalized as "RIC" (Russia, India, and China); the other potentially emerging, with China and Japan.

Moscow is definitely no candidate for any policy of "encircling" China. It values its current relationship with Beijing too much to put it at risk, and it is also unique among China's neighbors in not fearing it. The Chinese, too, value their strategic partnership with Moscow. They did not hurry to write Russia off amid the rubble of the Soviet Union. They have taken the view that it is likely to

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continue as a great power and should be handled with care. Although the Chinese may now have developed a measure of contempt for their erstwhile mentor, they still prefer to take no chances with it.

Russia is China's close partner on the global stage—from the United Nations Security Council to the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and in the regional contexts of Central Asia and the Korean Peninsula. Thus, as Chinese leaders develop their own policies, they seriously consider Moscow's position on a wide range of world issues. Any discussion of strategic stability issues, including nuclear offense, defense, and space capabilities, as well as cyber security, in which the United States might wish to involve China would only make sense if Russia also were fully engaged.

Even as the Obama administration has pivoted toward the Asia-Pacific region, so has the Kremlin, with Putin in the lead. Vladivostok's choice as the APEC summit venue was clearly a symbol; St. Petersburg and Moscow were the much more comfortable alternatives. Other steps are more substantive. Moscow has identified the development of the Russian Far East as a national priority, and created a special ministry, based in Khabarovsk, to promote it. This is not the most creative solution, surely, but the urgency of the need to spur development of the country's easternmost regions is correctly recognized. The Russian military, for its part, has staged its biggest post-cold war exercises (still too modest, by US standards) in the Far East. It will also deploy its newest vessels, French-built Mistral-class amphibious assault ships, in the Pacific.

A BETTER BALANCE

Given these facts, what should the United States aim to achieve?

At minimum, Washington should try to make sure that, whatever else happens in the Asia-Pacific in the foreseeable future, Russia does not land on the wrong side strategically, as far as the United States is concerned. An optimal objective would be effective partnership with Moscow on issues of mutual concern, from North Korea to Afghanistan. Such a partnership, of course, will not be solely on US terms, but this should not invalidate it. Ideally, should domestic Russian developments ultimately

lead to a radically improved business climate in the country, a convincing case could be made in favor of much closer and more productive economic ties between the two countries across the North Pacific.

Ideal conditions will not likely arise for some time, but there is no reason to remain passive even now. With Russia's accession this year to the World Trade Organization, new opportunities gradually will emerge. Putin is clearly looking for closer ties with major US energy companies, as a recent ExxonMobil-Rosneft deal suggests. The Kremlin's emphasis on economic revival of the Far East and Siberia, coupled with its stated objective of significantly improving Russia's standing in the World Bank's "Doing Business" index, raises expectations—however cautious one needs to be at this stage. At least in principle, the United States should consider the option of a North Pacific partnership with Russia to help it develop its easternmost territories. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand could also be invited to join.

To reach the minimum objective of a strategically non-adversarial Russia, Washington needs to do a deal with Moscow on missile defenses. Without doubt, this is a complex and difficult issue. However, if cooperative arrangements can be agreed on between the US/NATO missile defense system in Europe and Russia's own emerging system, this would amount to a de facto strategic reconciliation between the United States and Russia. Like Britain in the 1890s, Russia will cease to be a strategic rival to America. The importance of Moscow's accession to the security community that now covers North America, Europe, Australia, and Oceania can hardly be overestimated.

To construct a better balance in Northeast Asia, the United States could help Japan agree to a compromise solution to its territorial issue with Russia. Unlike in the cold war era, a continued dispute between Moscow and Tokyo no longer benefits the United States. By contrast, a Russo-Japanese relationship similar to the present Russo-German one would certainly serve America's strategic interest, as well as Japan's and Russia's.

Missile defense cooperation between the United States and Russia in Europe should find a parallel in the Asia-Pacific in strategic stability talks among the United States, China, and Russia. Moscow's inclusion in the conversation is unlikely to present Washington with a common front of the other two

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participants. More likely, it would help Beijing feel more comfortable broaching issues that until now it has been unwilling to tackle. Apart from reassuring China, Russia's participation would help the United States raise the kinds of issues, such as transparency for nuclear arsenals and their associated activities, that for decades have formed the bulk of strategic discussions between Washington and Moscow.

The United States should also encourage Russia to play a more active and independent role on the Korean Peninsula. The old idea of using the Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program to establish a security framework in Northeast Asia requires a forward-looking strategy and a careful distribution of roles. Moscow is not, and will not be, a central player in this context. But this would actually be an asset if it were to act as a facilitator that is relatively disinterested while maintaining decent relations with all other parties in the region.

Quite separate from that, the United States would do well to engage Russia in a multi-level, multi-purpose dialogue on the whole gamut of issues in the Pacific—from municipal governance and investment to university exchanges and technology cooperation. It would also do no harm if the US Pacific Command reached out to the Russian forces headquarters in the Far East for comparing regional strategic assessments and occasional joint exercises.

In sum, what the United States seeks to achieve through stronger ties with India and others, which is correct and should be pursued, can be accomplished even more effectively if the initiative includes a partnership with Russia. Of course, even more so than with India, the United States will have to deal with a country that is adamant about its strategic independence. This will be difficult, but it would also be, if done well, invaluable.

PUTIN THE PRAGMATIST

The one big question is, how realistic is all this?

To quite a few people in the United States, Putin, an authoritarian leader, is in the same company as Syria's Bashar al-Assad and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Even those who do not share such a stark view of the current Russian president believe that he is anti-American and opposed to US ideals, interests, principles, and policy goals—everything the United States stands for in the world. At the same time, a number of observers of Russia's political scene are asking whether Putin will be able

to serve out his six-year term, which only started in May.

Putin is certainly authoritarian, but rhetorical analogies are often treacherous. Russians have begun to wake up to the political environment in which they live, and the awakening will continue. There are more challenges than ever to Putin's rule, and these challenges will more likely intensify than disappear. Putin's policies of repressing opposition to his rule may well backfire. Still, Russia is unlikely to experience another revolution, both because the opposition is divided and because the vast majority of the people reject revolutionary methods. The country will undoubtedly change, but the change will probably take the form of a long and occasionally rough process rather than a single climactic event. As for Putin, he will probably serve out his term, though the amount of power he wields may diminish by the end of it.

Putin is definitely not a pro-America politician. He is very protective of Russia's sovereignty and independence. These views are widely shared within the country's political elite and society in general. Moscow, of course, cannot be expected to turn into an agent of US global strategy. It will insist not only on its interests, but also on adhering to traditional norms and principles of international behavior. Its own foreign policy will continue to be essentially conservative and status quo-oriented. Doing business successfully with Russia will constitute a challenge for the United States. Yet this challenge needs to be met.

Putin is, above all, a pragmatist. More clearly than any of his associates, he sees the need to shore up Russia's position east of the Urals as the country's most important geopolitical task. Russia is still a world power because of a long stretch of the Pacific coastline and what lies between the Pacific coast and the Urals: Siberia with its resources. Making full use of this potential is a passport to the future; failure to integrate the east would spell the demise of Russia as a major player. Putin understands, moreover, that he needs foreign partners to help him do the job. This is not inimical to US interests: A stronger Russia in the Pacific is certainly preferable to a weaker Russia there.

Putin will not do anything that would make China hostile, which again is just fine for the United States: No one should want a tense relationship between two neighboring nuclear powers in Asia. Such a prudent attitude does not mean, however, that Russia would accept a junior position vis-à-

vis China. Meanwhile, Putin is the only Russian leader who is capable of reaching a territorial compromise with Japan and making the Russian public accept it.

Putin sees the role of the United States in the Asia-Pacific differently from its role in the post-Soviet regions or in Europe, where NATO enlargement and missile defense have proved extremely contentious. In the Asia-Pacific, he sees the United States as a key balancer, not a potential threat.

Thus, for an American Pacific strategy squarely based on the national interest, Russia is potentially an important and valuable partner. Conversely, ignoring Russia in the Asia-Pacific harms US interests. Four decades ago, in a geopolitical master-

stroke, Washington constructed a triangular relationship with Beijing and Moscow, a relationship that helped America hold ground after the humiliation of the Vietnam War. Then, of course, the United States was engaged in an all-out struggle against an ideological and politico-military rival, the communist Soviet Union. Today, the United States faces a different kind of a challenge. It may fall victim to overextension. But just as possibly, it may succeed in rebalancing the global power equation by reaching out to its former rival and turning it into a geopolitical partner. The real issue is the capacity of America's political class to identify US foreign policy interests and act accordingly. ■