POWER SHIFTS, 'REBALANCING' AND RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY IN THE ASIA PACIFIC

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Abstract

This paper critically evaluates the challenges and opportunities for Russia as the international security landscape is reshaped to focus on the rise of China and India as major actors in international politics. Certainly much has been written about the emergence of the Indo-Pacific region as a hub of global power in the 21st century. The US National Intelligence Council has itself noted the ‘unprecedented’ transfer of wealth and power from West to East. But within contemporary scholarship on the foreign policies of India and the PRC, the two nations most likely to shape international order from within the so-called ‘monsoon zone’, relatively little attention has been paid to the implications of this power shift for Russia. Indeed, for decision-makers in Moscow, a 21st century dominated by Asia poses both challenges and opportunities. On one hand, a rising China and India will continue to require reliable access to natural resources, and there is scope for Russia to extend its diplomatic influence in these two nations with a policy aimed at creating vulnerable overdependence. There are also common interests on norm redefinition in the form of an emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference. But on the other hand, Russia will have little to say in how the power dynamics of the Indo-Pacific play out. It will have to navigate a difficult path between upholding its national interests, acting as a ‘pivot’ state in the region, and avoiding being relegated to the status of a raw materials appendage.
Power shifts, ‘rebalancing’ and Russian foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific

In February 2012 Vladimir Putin published an essay entitled ‘Russia and the Changing World’ in Moskovskie Novosti,392 in which he reiterated several of the core catechisms that had come to define Russian foreign policy under his leadership. First, he chastised NATO for undermining global confidence with humanitarian crusades that reflected, in his view, ‘outright demagogy’. Second, he claimed the US had developed a different conception of security to other nations based on what he termed ‘an obsession’ with becoming completely invulnerable.393 But what was more interesting about Putin’s article, published just before the elections that would see him reinstated as Russia’s President, was the implication that Beijing and Moscow were now natural allies. Referring to China as a challenge with enormous potential for growth, Putin argued that the two nations had settled all their major political grievances and embarked on a genuinely pragmatic relationship characterised by unprecedented levels of trust. And while he also referred to Russia as an ‘inalienable and organic’ part of European civilisation, Putin made it clear that he saw the Asia-Pacific as the engine room of globalisation, where Russia had special interests, as well as another ‘privileged partnership’ in the form of its relationship with India.394

Since Putin’s article was published a number of commenters have speculated about a new Russian ‘tilt’ to Asia.395 But what are the implications of this power shift for Russian foreign policy? In this paper I examine the core strategic, geo-economic and normative transitions that are beginning to emerge from this reconfiguration. In doing so I make several observations. First, power in Asia is increasingly diffuse. This is unlike the process that accompanied the start of the Cold War, which was effectively the last major global power reorientation – if one accepts the view that the collapse of the USSR told us more about the

393 Putin, ‘Russia and the changing world’.
394 Putin, ‘Russia and the changing world’.
395 See for example Geoffrey Gresh, ‘Russia, China and stabilising South Asia’, Foreign Policy, March 12, 2012. Available at: http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/12/russia_china_and_stabilizing_south_asia.
globalisation of US power than the nature of bipolarity. Second, the prospect of US-China tension is looking increasingly path-dependant. This is not only because a number of potential flashpoints exist between the US and its allies, and China in Asia. More importantly it is due to the increasing expectation in Beijing that Asian actors should accept China as a regional leader, as well as the concomitant expectation by the US that its partners should burden-share by engaging in pre-balancing behaviour. Under such conditions economic interdependence is not a reliable barrier to competition or even conflict, especially as recent events in the South China Sea have demonstrated. Third, institutional structures that might mitigate security competition between great powers, are weakly defined in the key Northeast Asian and Central Asian theatres, where many major powers and their interests intersect. And finally, norms are already being redefined as result of a global focus on Asia. This will add to the menu for choice for states that are hesitant for whatever reason of adopting Western notions of political pluralism, human rights and democratic individualism.

For Russia the implications of this are mixed. A rising India and China will continue to require reliable access to natural resources, and there is scope for Moscow to extend its diplomatic influence over those two nations with a policy aimed at created vulnerable overdependence. There are also common interests on norm redefinition in the form of an emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference. Yet Russia will have little say in how the power dynamics of the Asia-Pacific play out. It will have to navigate a difficult path between upholding its national interests, and acting as a ‘pivot’ state in the region in order to avoid being trapped in one of two unpalatable positions. One of these is being relegated to the status of a raw materials appendage, as a junior partner in an alliance with China. The other is the possibility that Russia will be shut out of important roles in the region altogether, with neither economic nor military-strategic clout to use as leverage. Ultimately, Putin’s loosely-defined ‘Eurasian Union’ that respects principles of state sovereignty whilst focusing on trade is an attempt to sidestep these eventualities. Even so, I argue that Moscow’s ability to actively shape the region is likely to be diminished as international attention focuses increasingly on the emerging US-China rivalry. If Moscow is to realise its regional ambitions
it will need to skilfully use organisations such as the SCO, make a commitment to avoid isolation, and embrace a healthy dose of hedging.

Shift or Drift? The emerging power configuration in the Indo-Pacific

While there is plenty of writing focusing on the relative decline of the United States, it is instructive to recall that the US has been written off by scholars and analysts on numerous occasions in the past. Fears of a mismatch between American and Soviet power led to breathless pronunciations of bomber gaps and missile gaps, and the oil shocks of the 1970s in led many to assume that America's ability to exert dominance in its own sphere was both contingent on external forces and vulnerable to internal weakness. Soon after the Cold War ended, there were confident predictions of a unipolar 'moment' that would quickly give way to a multipolar world order. Such thinking was not limited to academics, as policy professionals in France, Russia and China all began to talk increasingly of the desirability of a multipolar world order in which their nations would (naturally) occupy privileged positions. Most recently, the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) certainly sent shocks through the US, with a decline in investor confidence that has only since 2011 started to be arrested, although the effect has been felt much more acutely in the European Union.

In spite of the return of declinism in scholarship about the US there remains a strong case to be made about the continuing dominance of America in contemporary global politics. On broader indices of power, the US maintains a massive lead over its nearest rivals. Its spending on armed forces will still leave the US with around 50% of total global military expenditure, even after the Pentagon absorbs much of the $1.2 trillion reduction planned

396 For a powerful analysis representative of this view, see Josef Joffe, 'The default power: the false prophecy of America's decline', Foreign Affairs, September/October 2009, pp. 34-8.
over 10 years by the Obama administration.\(^{398}\) In contrast, a modernising PRC, which has been increasing its defence budget annually by around 10% to a projected 2012 total of over $100 billion, still pales in comparison to the US total spending of around $1 trillion per year.\(^{399}\) The US is a leader in triadic patents, with approximately 30% of the global share (the combined 27 states of the EU and Japan have a similar level, with other countries accounting for only 12% of the global total).\(^{400}\)

It is therefore more accurate to refer not to a US decline, but a rise of potential peer competitors. Amongst the BRIC nations, three (Russia, India and China) have the potential to project power into the Asia-Pacific. Yet although it is an observer in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and adopted its ‘Look East’ policy in order to focus on developing relationships with other actors in the Asia-Pacific,\(^{401}\) India’s relationship with the PRC remains problematic. Both identify each other as threats to their security, and whereas the nuclear dyad between India and Pakistan attracts most of the scholarly attention, nuclear politics in South Asia are better understood as a triangle that also includes China. More recently Washington has begun to assiduously court India. It has done so first through the 2005 nuclear security agreement that gave New Delhi access to US nuclear technology (in spite of the fact that it has not acceded to the Non-Proliferation Treaty),\(^{402}\) and then through more overt security and defence assistance, especially in the realm of cooperation on missile defence technology.\(^{403}\)

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\(^{401}\) For a good overview, see Rajiv Sikri, ‘India’s “look East” policy’, *Asia-Pacific Review*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2009, pp. 131-145.

\(^{402}\) For details see Matthew Sussex, ‘The impotence of being earnest? Avoiding the pitfalls of “creative middle power diplomacy”’, *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 65, no. 5, 2011, pp. 545-563.

Thus a variety of new actors with increasing capabilities have sprung up to be variously courted or viewed with caution by the US. Amidst this diffusion of power, though, has also come a centralising dynamic: increasing competition particularly on the political and military levels between Beijing and Washington. This is exerting a significant degree of centrifugal pull on the regional security environment that has become stronger in the wake of the US ‘rebalance’, and the ongoing process of Chinese military modernisation.

**US-PRC competition: increasing path dependency**

Perhaps the most important litmus test of Sino-US relations will come when the loyalty of an Asian US ally is seriously tested. Regardless of what stance one takes on the issue, it has become customary in any analysis of US strategy in Asia to refer to the idea that the US performs an important stabilising role in the region. Yet this has actually been a topic of significant debate since the end of the Cold War. Writing in *Foreign Affairs* during 1995, for instance, Chalmers Johnson and E.B. Keehn the Pentagon’s ‘ossified’ strategy reflected the fact that US elites were not aware ‘how hollow their superpower pretensions’ were, and that East Asia power had shifted from the military to the economic sphere. They went on to argue that ‘Japan and China have a few years to consolidate their ascendancy before telling the Americans that they are no longer even marginally useful’.\(^\text{404}\)

In retrospect such views were at best precipitate, and at worst actually flawed in their understanding of the nature of power and alliance dynamics. If anything, the Asia-Pacific of 2012 is now much more about military clout than it was in the years immediately after the end of the Cold War. Moreover, the growing trend towards political and military-security competition between the US and the PRC seems increasingly path dependent. One of the reasons for this is that the US has now formally reoriented itself towards the region. This entails – at the very least – what Gerald Segal once referred to as ‘constrainment’: economic

\(^\text{404}\)Johnson and Keehn, p. 35.
engagement coupled to prudent military balancing in order to prevent China from becoming a threat to US interests.\footnote{Gerald Segal, ‘East Asia and the “constrainment” of China’, \textit{International Security}, vol. 20, no. 4, 1996, pp. 107-135.} The main consequence of the US ‘rebalance’ will be to deepen Chinese suspicions that Washington seeks to preclude Beijing from obtaining a sphere of influence in the region. Abortive proposals for a ‘League of Democracies’, or for the inclusion of India in a quadrilateral dialogue on security alongside Japan and Australia have served to deepen that suspicion. So too has the evident desire of the United States to court its former enemy Vietnam, to such an extent that the two are effectively now allies.\footnote{For more details see Mark Manyin, ‘U.S.-Vietnam Relations in 2011: Current Issues and Implications for U.S. Policy’, \textit{Congressional Research Service (CRS), Report for Congress}, May 12, 2012.}

Both China and the US have therefore embarked on traditional mechanisms to facilitate the emergence of a regional order favourable to them. China has focused most keenly on attempting to break out of what it perceives as a \textit{de facto} American strategy of containment. It has done so via its ‘string of pearls’ bases that dovetail with its development of a blue-water navy and aircraft carriers enabling it to project power into the Indian and Pacific Oceans. This is coupled to the Silk Road strategy that opens up overland access to key Middle Eastern energy trade routes via Burma. In response the US has its own string of pearls in its alliances with Japan, the ROK, Singapore and others. Indeed, at the September 2011 AUSMIN dialogue with the Australian government the US announced that it would increase its security presence near the southern edge of the Malacca Strait by stationing 2,500 Marines at a new base in Darwin.\footnote{Graeme Dobell, ‘The US military embraces Australia’, \textit{Lowy Interpreter}, September 11, 2011. Available at: http://www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2011/09/09/The-US-military-embraces-Australia.aspx.}

The political and economic spheres have also been arenas for competition. With the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) group increasingly losing traction in the region, China tried hard to keep the US out of the East Asia Summit by insisting that all members accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC). Given that the central pillar of the TAC...
commits signatories to non-intervention, there was speculation that the US would find such a condition too restrictive. However, Obama demonstrated that he was prepared to pay that price when the US signed the TAC in July 2009.\textsuperscript{408}

Such path dependency does nonetheless allow for some anomalies. The Taiwan Relations Act (TRA) is seen by all parties as an example of strategic ambiguity actually enhancing stability – with the US promising to aid Taiwan if it is invaded by China, but not to do so if Taiwan pushes for independence. No such ambiguity exists, though, in relation to US security allies. The standoff between the Philippines and China at Scarborough Shoal in April-May 2012 was indicative of the tendency for Beijing to increasingly flex its military muscles on an issue (sovereignty over the South China Sea) that previously it had been prepared to ignore for the sake of cooperation.\textsuperscript{409} The result of the crisis was to push Southeast Asian nations – many of which had toyed with the idea of ‘hedging’ between the US and China – back towards the US as a security guarantor.

\textit{Institutional architecture in the Asia-Pacific}

Much of the current enthusiasm for ‘architecture’ in the Asia-Pacific is perplexing. At its heart is a laudable goal: to streamline the myriad regional summits, arrangements and Track-II dialogues, few of which function effectively, while simultaneously ensuring seats at the table for key players. There is also no guarantee the institutional inertia plaguing the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) would not be replicated in a trade context by a Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), recently proposed by the Obama administration, or even that Russia, China and India would agree to take part in future.\textsuperscript{410} The notion of ‘architecture’ also

\textsuperscript{410} On the TPP, see Meredith Lewis, ‘The Trans-Pacific Partnership: new paradigm or wolf in sheep’s clothing?’, \textit{Boston College International and Comparative Law Review}, vol. 34, August 2011, pp. 1-27.
assumes that multilateralism is the preferred mode for cooperation in Asia, and that interdependence is its dominant condition. But while geo-economics has supplanted geopolitics in a variety of cases, actors do not think only of economics and trade in the formulation of their strategic policies. In fact, history shows that interdependence alone does not prevent conflict: to use the most famous example, World War One occurred at a high point of economic interdependence between European powers. One can add to this the observation that while the US and China may well need each other (with China seeking to ensure continued US consumption patterns for its goods, and the US wanting China to continue purchasing American Treasury bonds), there is nothing about interdependence to prevent politics from trumping economics.

China-Japan relations are particularly instructive here: whereas the two are important trading partners a combination of historical memory and geopolitical rivalry have created an especially poisonous political atmosphere between the two. Chinese nationalist demonstrations against Japanese businesses, repeated refusals by Tokyo to apologise for World War Two atrocities and visits by Prime Ministers to the Yasukuni war shrine have all exacerbated tensions in recent years. So too has the diplomatic incident that arose when the Chinese trawler Minjinyu 5179 collided repeatedly with Japanese coast guard vessels near the disputed Senkaku islands in September 2010.411

This situation is made more problematic by the fact that many regional actors are jockeying for position to have their grand institutional visions recognized, which – unsurprisingly – reflect their own national interests. The ASEAN group has been especially vocal in promoting its own experience of cooperation as the model for plurilateral cooperation in the East Asian space. Within ASEAN there remain disagreements about whether this should reflect open regionalism (in the case of Singapore) or a more exclusive ‘Asia for Asians’ (in the case of Malaysia). Other nations like Australia have proposed an ‘East Asian Community’ – as a kind

of broadened APEC that also encompassed India – which was instantly proclaimed ‘dead in the water’ by ASEAN. Many nations are also keen to take on the role of geopolitical pivot. Amongst other examples, this has taken the form of Indian arguments that it combines a democratic society with Asian cultural characteristics, tentative Japanese suggestions that it can act as a bridge between East and West (a mantle also claimed by the ROK).

The Asian Power shift and norm diffusion

In addition to a fluid institutional landscape and the increasingly structural nature of Sino-US competition, norms can also be expected to undergo some redefinition as a result of the reorientation of global power to the Asia-Pacific. Shortly after the end of the Cold War there was very little alternative to the Western notion of democratic individualism. Yet for some time now these views have been under threat. Russia has been one of the pioneers through its articulation under Putin of the principle of ‘sovereign democracy’ as an alternative to political pluralism.\(^{412}\) And ‘Asian Values’, previously derided in the West as a cop-out for non-democratic governments to avoid punishment for poor behaviour by embracing the relativist argument, have become much more widespread. It is instructive that while a variety of organisations, from ASEAN to the East Asia Summit and the SCO all pay lip service to the idea of democracy, they are much more resolute on the inviolability of state sovereignty.\(^{413}\)

Here it is noteworthy that the R2P has made its way into the normative legitimation strategies of states typically hostile to intervention. Russia famously invoked the R2P in its intervention in Georgia during the Five Day War of August 2008, and China has referred to a responsibility to protect its citizens in response to the ‘three evils’ of terrorism, separatism


and religious extremism. In this way the PRC has sought to justify its identification of at least fourteen separate ‘terrorist’ groups linked to Uighur separatists in the northern province of Xinxiang. By the same token, it is increasingly using Western human rights rhetoric to respond to criticism of the behaviour of its internal security forces when launching crackdowns on rebels. During the 2009 riots in Urumqi, for instance, Chinese government officials repeatedly refereed to the responsibility to maintain peace and order, and in preventing separatism from taking root. That China was doing so just four years after it refused to even send a representative to the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) meeting in Beijing speaks volumes about the extent to which it has embraced the idea of adapting human rights arguments for instrumental purposes.

It is therefore reasonable to expect that norms will continue to become more malleable in the future. Of course, this will depend to a large extent on internal factors. As has been well documented, China faces serious domestic challenges that could derail its rise should its economic growth be attenuated. These include environmental problems, a social security bubble of ageing urban-dwellers who moved from country areas to seek employment in cities (and as a result are denied government assistance), as well as a continued disconnect between affluent special economic zones and many of those in rural areas who live in poverty. India too must confront significant structural poverty, especially in the slums that surround its major cities. Should these challenges be overcome, though, it should not be surprising if many principles accepted in Western circles as embedded practice increasingly come under challenge as new norms are promoted in Asia, and old ones are reshaped to fit interests.

Implications for Russian foreign policy

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Having assessed the nature of the emerging security order in the Asia-Pacific, it remains to be seen how Russia will adapt to this changing environment. Will it be an engaged player in regional politics? Does it have the capacity to exercise regional leadership? Can it avoid many of the potential pitfalls that geography – not to mention its recent economic weakness relative to the PRC – may engender? Below I examine these questions in more detail. I find that there are significant opportunities for Russia to extend its influence into the region, but to realise them it must chart a relatively careful course in order to avoid either isolation, or relegation to the status of a second-tier actor in the twenty-first century.

Energy policy: encouraging vulnerable overdependence

Russian foreign policy has achieved significant success through the consolidation of control over much of the oil and gas supplies in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is certainly true that the Yeltsin years laid a good degree of the initial spadework for this, but it is equally the case that Russian domination over regional energy only really crystalized during the Presidencies of Putin and Medvedev. Once it had renationalized its energy sector, Russia moved swiftly to adopt rent-seeking practices over transportation of energy across its territory. Russia has also employed what has been termed the ‘tap weapon’ to punish recalcitrant states, as the gas wars with the Ukraine (and to a lesser extent Belarus) demonstrated in 2005 and 2008.

Both the Putin and Medvedev governments have already attempted to broaden European energy dependency Eastwards into Asia. For China, which faces the prospect of up to 70% dependence on the Middle East for energy supplies, source diversification by tapping Russian oil and gas markets makes sense. This is partly because it also helps to strengthen cooperation between the two nations, and partly because the PRC has been able to utilize its significant cash reserves to give it a stake in the assets it is purchasing, through infrastructure development and bilateral deals with a variety of regional producers. Japan, too, flirted with the idea of a pipeline consortium with Russia, but eventually decided to play
a waiting game. This is likely to change due to a number of factors. One of these is the fact that Japan’s heavy reliance on the Middle East relies on sea lanes being kept open at a time when its major rival (the PRC) is embarking on a major campaign to build new naval capabilities that can perform maritime area denial functions. A second consideration is that transit corridor are particularly narrow in the Gulf of Aden, which remains threatened by pirates, and in the Straits of Malacca, through with some 75% of Asia’s hydrocarbon imports must pass. Finally, the aftermath of the 2011 tsunami has produced increased domestic wariness about nuclear power, and the prospect of cooperation with Russia over liquid natural gas (LNG) supplies is once again on the agenda. For this to become a reality, the irredentist dispute between the two nations over the Kurile Islands/Northern Territories will require resolution. Even so, Russia remains well placed to add Japan to its list of clients in the future.

However, Russia’s dominance over energy supplies is not assured, in spite of the fact that it was quick to sign up a variety of Central Asian states to bilateral agreements that gave Moscow first refusal over oil and gas purchases. This is because the PRC has recently entered the marketplace as a significant player. In 2007 the Chinese company Sinopec negotiated an agreement with Kazakhstan to increase its stake in the company controlling the Aktobe oil fields from 60% to 85%. More recently, Chinese influence has been extended to encompass Russia itself. A major effect of the global financial crisis in 2009 was that Russian energy giants like Gazprom suddenly found themselves short of liquid assets, and in a risk-averse borrowing climate, credit was becoming more expensive to obtain. During that year, China initiated a series of bilateral ‘energy for loans’ arrangements. These gave it control over several Russian companies with licenses to develop oil and gas infrastructure in the Far East. The following year, China announced plans to ramp up its investment in Russia’s energy sector by $600% over ten years. By tying its own investments to massive injections of capital into the Russian economy for the development

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of the Far East, Beijing is effectively buying insurance that Moscow does not drift too far away from its orbit.

Institutional leadership in the new Asia-Pacific

Another area in which Russia can exercise leadership is by promoting itself as a hub for institutionalisation. Perhaps the most important of these in an Asian context is the SCO, as opposed to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) which spans much of the former Soviet space. Regardless of the rhetorical tone of many of its pronouncements, it is probably appropriate to characterise the purpose of the SCO as future-oriented, loosely organised, and yet potentially wide-ranging. The declaration by the original Five in 1996 represented the culmination of a lengthy process to resolve border disputes between China, Russia and the Central Asian states. In other words, it has acted as a vehicle for internal stability (and to an extent internal balancing) between its members. Prior to 9/11, the organisation shifted to consider a fundamental purpose in defeating terrorism and separatism. The formation of the Regional Antiterrorism Structure (or RATS) in 2004 was the result of this.\textsuperscript{419} This also had a normative component, in that it served to shore up preferences amongst all members for the strict adherence to principles of non-interference. It has assuaged Russian fears that China might seek to undermine it in the region, it is consistent with China’s Principles of Peaceful Development, and it has also helped mollify smaller Central Asian states concerned that they might be pressured to take actions that are not in their interests, and that they may even receive SCO assistance in the event of new ‘coloured’ revolutions.

The SCO is therefore partly a bilateral mechanism for diplomacy between Russia and China conducted at the multilateral level. However, the development of the Russia-China relationship under the umbrella of the SCO also reveals divergent agendas. Russia has seen the SCO primarily as a way to deepen security cooperation, emphasising the importance of

\textsuperscript{419} For details on RATS activities see its website: http://www.ecrats.com/en/.
joint military exercises. And initially resisted Beijing’s urgings to develop a common market, even though it was prepared to accept an ‘Energy Club’. But by signing on to joint development of the Far East it has committed itself to providing long-term supply to its Asian ally.\footnote{See Roy Maksutov, ‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Central Asian Perspective’ SIPRI Project Paper, August (2006), available at <www.sipri.org/contents/worldsec/Ruslan.SCO.pdf/download>}

At the conclusion to the Beijing Summit of the SCO in June 2012, Russia and China both voiced the belief that they were constructing a ‘new model’ for cooperation that would not evolve into an Asian NATO.\footnote{Tao Wenzhao, ‘SCO looks to next decade’, \textit{China Daily}, June 13, 2012. Available at: \url{http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2012-06/13/content_15497002.htm}.} In reaching that position, China had effectively succeeded in pushing the SCO towards becoming an economic organisation rather than a military-security one. The political significance of this cannot have been lost on Russia, especially with Central Asian nations increasingly following Beijing’s lead in preference to Moscow’s.\footnote{Stephen Blank, ‘Towards a new Chinese order in Asia’, p. 15.} China’s ability to choose where it invests amongst SCO members gives it direct influence over Russia itself as well as broader influence over the former Soviet space. This was made even clearer by the announcement (which came after the commencement ceremony of the 2012 SCO summit) by President Hu Jintao of $10 billion in loans to SCO members for joint infrastructure projects.\footnote{Lu Hui, ‘President Hu addresses large group meeting of SCO Beijing summit’, \textit{Xinhua}, June 7, 2012. Available at: \url{http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2012-06/07/c_131637201.htm}}

Even so, the pursuit of open-ended integration within the SCO helps Russia engage in multilateral processes while still retaining flexibility in its foreign and security policy decision-making. This is not engagement in multilateralism simply for the sake of it. Instead it enables what Evelyn Goh calls a ‘hedge’ posture.\footnote{Evelyn Goh, ‘Great powers and hierarchical order in Southeast Asia: analysing regional security strategies’, \textit{International Security}, vol. 32, no. 3, 2008, pp. 113-157.} In South East Asia a similar design has mediated great power contests via ‘omni-enmeshment’: accommodating larger powers in...
in institutional structures through regional security arrangements that are less binary than in simple concert-based systems. The consensus-based decision making of the SCO thus allows Russia and smaller Central Asian states to have a greater voice in regional security politics than a classic balance of power setup might afford.

Russia as a norm entrepreneur

If Eurocentric notions of norms and rights are to be no longer impregnable fortresses of prestige, it stands to reason that Russia has something to offer the Asia-Pacific as a leading advocate of goals similar to those articulated in the Bangkok Declaration and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Specifically these relate to non-interference in the affairs of other nations, and unwillingness to endorse active efforts at military intervention against leaders that are complicit in human rights abuses. Most recently, at the June 2012 SCO summit, Russia and China reaffirmed their joint opposition to any plans for intervention in Syria, just as they had been vocal in their condemnation of the French and British-led air campaign to assist Libyan rebels in their struggle against the Gaddafi regime.

However, Russia offers more to Asian elites uneasy at the prospect of endorsing wide-scale humanitarian interventions and violations of sovereignty. Through the notion of ‘sovereign democracy’ Russia offers a political manifesto that stops short of authoritarianism, but does not embrace political pluralism either. Whether it is termed ‘managed’ or ‘nationalist’ democracy, the concept is very similar in practice to many of the quasi-authoritarian states of ASEAN, not to mention China itself, which have repeatedly trumpeted their democratic credentials.

When Russia’s former President Dmitri Medvedev claimed at the Yaroslavl Global Policy Forum in September 2010 that Russia fully subscribed to the principles of democracy, Western elites were diplomatic (although firm) in pointing out many of the authoritarian tendencies surrounding contemporary Russian life. These included a list well known to observers of Russian politics: restrictions of press freedoms, threats against alternative media, killings of journalists, the domination of the Kremlin on state-controlled TV, special presidential appointees, rigged elections, and repression of opposition groups not endorsed by the government. But in Asia Medvedev’s comments received relative praise. Singapore’s Straits Times ran a feature on Russian political freedoms, and the Chinese Xinhua news agency called it ‘a policy of great vision’.

Russia has therefore largely abandoned its previous tactic of referring to its own uniqueness in the construction of post-Soviet democracy. And while it is premature to suggest that its own (fairly self-serving) justification for political organisation will become widespread, it is also incorrect to dismiss it out of hand, and it is dangerously hubristic to suggest that such ideas are out-dated historical artefacts. More to the point, Russia has already demonstrated a willingness to adapt Western notions of rights for its own purposes, as it did when Sergei Lavrov claimed in a 2008 interview with the BBC that Russia was exercising its responsibility to protect its citizens in the disputed regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. As attention focuses more closely on the Asia-Pacific, it is likely that transatlantic preferences and Sino-Russian preferences on rights and responsibilities of states will increasingly come into contestation. In this context, Russia’s adaptationalist approach to human rights norms, its emphasis on non-intervention, and its endorsement of managed democracy create important ideational precedents that have already found some degree of common ground with states in the region, many of which are US security allies.

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426 Charles Recknagel, ‘As Russia claims democracy, is it redefining the world?’, RFE/RL Newsline, December 27, 2010. Available at: http://www.rferl.org/content/russia_defining_democracy/2260775.html

Conclusions: rebalancing Russian foreign policy?

This paper has identified a number of arenas in which Russian interests stand to benefit from the Asia-Pacific power shift. These opportunities can be exploited in several specific ways that focus on areas of Russian strength. The first pertains to the strategic use of energy resources. It will doubtless be necessary for Moscow to make some concessions to China (which in fact it has already done) in order to ensure a steady stream of investment to develop infrastructure that can meet the future energy demands of its clients. This may also entail some flexibility over the CSTO space, particularly in Central Asia, which the PRC perceives as its own 'near abroad'.

Second, Russia is capable of playing a leading role in institutional design for the management of regional security problems. The SCO itself has largely been a vehicle for the mediation of Sino-Russian disputes rather than a traditional power-balancing instrument. Yet the nature of SCO decision-making – which focuses on building consensus amongst all participants while pursuing relatively loosely defined goals – may well prove appealing to Asian nations wary of the deep linkages and regulatory frameworks that are the hallmark of many Western institutions. Indeed, the SCO’s emphasis on respect for each member’s sovereignty seems to fit neatly into the Asian model of multilateralism: less concerned with democratic processes than with outcomes; prepared to accept incrementalism over rapid change; and with a focus on pragmatic cooperation over principled positions on moral and ethical questions.

As an extension of its approach to institutions and cooperation, Russia has the opportunity to exercise leadership in the redefinition of norms in the Asia-Pacific geopolitical space. It has already found the PRC and India willing accomplices, and sees itself as a power that can play a role as an alternative to the West in the mediation of disputes, as well as a norm entrepreneur for a semi-authoritarian and semi-democratic politics. Similar political structures are common in Asia: in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and other nations where
the priority of government is to foster order and development, rather than democracy for its own sake.

That said it is unlikely that Russia will be a dominant actor in the new Asia-Pacific. This is for the simple reason that it lacks the capacity to project power effectively beyond its own immediate geostrategic environment. Under these circumstances Russia’s most appropriate course of action is to act as a ‘pivot’ state, pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy that can adapt to new opportunities, resist becoming entangled in long-term strategic partnerships, and forge profitable relationships with both East and West. The good news for Russian policymakers is that very little needs to be done to help bring this about: in many ways the doctrine of multipolarism neatly sums up such a role for Russia. A ‘rebalance’ for Russia is therefore not necessary, nor is any attempt to do so likely to result in anything particularly new in the form of economic agreements or realignments. The less positive news, though, is that Russia’s ability to shape the regional environment is likely to be significantly curtailed as the centrifugal pull of the PRC and the US – as well as their developing rivalry – draws the focus of regional and extra-regional actors alike.
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