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# Russia in the Asia-Pacific: Less Than Meets the Eye

Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky,  
and Aleksandar Vladicic

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
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P: + 1 202 483 7600  
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## Summary

Much has been written about Russia's so-called pivot to the Asia-Pacific since its 2014 invasion of Ukraine and break with the West, but there is less to this supposed strategic shift than meets the eye. The country is and will remain a European—rather than an Asian—power by virtue of its history, strategic culture, demographics, and principal economic relationships.

### Russia's Partnership with China

The Asia-Pacific will remain important for Russia's foreign policy primarily because of its growing strategic partnership with China, a rapprochement that began not in 2014 but in 1989. Moscow's other economic, military, security, and diplomatic interests in the region are of much less importance, and it will subordinate these interests to the overriding priority of maintaining and strengthening its critical geopolitical relationship with Beijing.

The evolution of Russia's military posture in the Far East and its military capabilities in the Eastern Military District (MD) mirror the country's relatively modest interests and position in the region and the district's low prioritization compared with others west of the Urals. The size of the forces assigned to the Eastern MD has remained largely static; the scope and scale of their qualitative improvements have been modest; and they are postured mainly for strategic deterrence, domination of the airspace and seas around the disputed Kuril Islands, and defense of the land border with China. Although there has been a modest increase in its long-distance force-projection capabilities, Russia lacks the assets and infrastructure to sustain high-intensity conventional operations at long ranges in the region, and its forces are no match for U.S. air and naval forces, especially if combined with those of regional U.S. allies and partners. The presence of the Russian Navy in the Western Pacific remains quite modest as well.

### The Rest of Asia

Russia's relationships with other Asian countries take a back seat to Moscow's strategic partnership with Beijing.

*Russia's relations with Japan:* Russia's other critical relationship in the Asia-Pacific is with Japan. The most important feature of this relationship, however, is its unrealized potential, which underscores Moscow's heavy tilt toward China. Russia's trade, investment, and economic relations with Japan remain underdeveloped, and any significant improvement in political ties are hostage to the two countries' unresolved territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, the Russian-Chinese strategic

partnership, and Japan's alliance with the United States. The record of the Russian-Japanese relationship since the end of the Cold War is one of false starts, dashed hopes, and unrealistic expectations. The prospects for a breakthrough will remain bleak for the indefinite future.

*Russia's marginal role on the Korean Peninsula:* Russia's aspirations for a more significant role on the Korean Peninsula remain unfulfilled. Its relationship with North Korea involves mostly muddling through. Trade and investment links remain weak. Russia has been completely shut out of U.S.–North Korea diplomatic talks on denuclearization. Ties with South Korea have not fared much better: Seoul sees little benefit in forging closer relations with Moscow because only Beijing has the leverage to influence North Korean behavior. Russia generally follows China's lead on the Korean Peninsula primarily because North Korea is not a high priority. Because the region is of far less importance to Russia than it is to China, which possesses far more leverage over Pyongyang, Moscow is unlikely to allow any daylight to develop between their positions on North Korea.

*Russia's limited ties to Southeast Asia:* Moscow's more active engagement since the 2016 Russian summit with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as outreach to individual Southeast Asian countries, has yielded meager results. It has had some success in expanding arms sales, trade, and energy cooperation with several members of ASEAN, but its relations with the organization itself are largely devoid of substance. Bilateral ties with its most important partners in the region—Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar—have yet to reach their full potential.

Several factors explain why Russia punches below its weight in Southeast Asia: it is not a high priority for Russian foreign policy because Moscow has limited interests there, neither Russia nor ASEAN need each other that much, and Russia has prioritized its strategic partnership with China over expanding its influence in the region. As on the Korean Peninsula, Moscow has acknowledged Beijing's sphere of influence in the region, relegating itself to the role of a de facto junior partner. Russia therefore should not be seen as a truly independent actor in Southeast Asia.

### Implications for U.S. Policy in the Asia-Pacific

Russia's top priorities in the Asia-Pacific lie outside the Korean Peninsula and Southeast Asia, and it does not have much to offer when it comes to either. In both cases, Russia is content to serve as China's de facto junior partner and has tacitly accepted Chinese spheres of influence. Thus, all roads to gaining Moscow's support for or acquiescence to U.S. policies toward these regions run through Beijing.

*China:* The blossoming strategic partnership between Russia and China has raised concerns in the U.S. strategic community that it poses a grave threat to U.S. interests. Some analysts and officials seem to believe that a wedge strategy could weaken or break up their alignment. This is magical thinking: their partnership is rooted in the confluence of their domestic political, economic, and geopolitical interests; priorities; and threat perceptions. Equally important, Russia and China consider the United States their primary challenge, and it would take a fundamental revision of U.S. policy to change that perception. Good relations with Beijing are a strategic necessity for Moscow, and its leaders see no alternative to the partnership. Russia is a marginal actor in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific and thus is largely inconsequential to the regional competition between the United States and China. The main task for the United States is to develop a viable strategy tailored for its relations with both China and Russia.

*The Korean Peninsula:* Russia will pursue its goals on the Korean Peninsula in lockstep with China. Because it shares the United States' interest in denuclearizing North Korea, Moscow can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem if Washington is willing to show flexibility on the pace and scope of denuclearization and sanctions; alternatively, the Kremlin can be a spoiler, making it more difficult for Washington to achieve its preferred outcomes. Russia can be counted on to restrain belligerent North Korean behavior that risks a large-scale war on the peninsula and precipitates additional U.S. military deployments that it would find threatening. Should Moscow and Washington ever resume a high-level strategic dialogue, preventing the further growth of North Korean nuclear capabilities should be a high priority on the agenda. The U.S. strategy for dealing with Russia's approach to the Korean Peninsula should be one of co-optation rather than isolation.

*Southeast Asia:* Russia is likely to be of little geopolitical value to the United States in its efforts to balance against China in Southeast Asia, especially in the South China Sea. Moscow's main priority in the region is to avoid antagonizing China. Thus, any attempt by the United States to drive a wedge between the two countries over Southeast Asia is doomed to fail and would only further aggravate tensions in the U.S.-China relationship. In waging its great-power competition with Moscow, Washington does not need to be overly concerned about countering every move the latter makes to develop improved military and security cooperation with members of ASEAN because the U.S. military enjoys conventional superiority over Russian forces in the region.

The geopolitical geometry of great-power competition in the Asia-Pacific will not be triangular. China and the United States will be the main players in the contest for regional supremacy. Russia will be an interested but not terribly influential bystander—ready to take opportunistic advantage of openings created by U.S. mistakes and miscues. This does not mean that Washington should or can ignore Moscow. But it does mean that U.S. leaders, experts, analysts, and politicians should not obsess about Russia stealing a march on the United States and eroding its influence in the region.



## Introduction

Much has been written about Russia's pivot to the Asia-Pacific, especially in the aftermath of Moscow's break with the West caused by its 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea and undeclared war against Ukraine.<sup>1</sup> Most of this body of writing has been infused with a great deal of skepticism about the quality and durability of that geopolitical shift, considering Russia's economic weakness relative to the dynamism and growing importance the region has come to play in world trade, technological development, and, increasingly, geopolitics.<sup>2</sup> The conventional wisdom on the pivot has concluded—with a few notable dissenting voices—that the shift is essentially a declaratory gesture with little substance, motivated less by Russia's growing interests in Asia than by its break in relations with Europe and the deterioration of the U.S.-Russian relationship.

The conventional wisdom is right: Russia is and will remain a European—rather than an Asian—power by virtue of its history, strategic culture, demographics, and principal economic relationships. The Asia-Pacific will remain important for Russia's foreign policy, but almost exclusively as a function of two factors. First, there is the long-shared border with China and the complexity of the relationship with this neighbor and the great and growing strategic imbalance it involves. Second, there is the strategic competition with the United States, which—in the eyes of Kremlin decisionmakers—poses an existential threat to the Russian state. Both relationships are fraught with major challenges for Russia, but of the two, Moscow has chosen to see the one with China as the lesser threat. Other relationships in the Asia-Pacific—with the two Koreas, Southeast Asia, and even Japan—are of less importance for Russia and largely derivative of its relationships with China and the United States. The latter two are relationships of necessity, while the others are a matter of choice.

The first part of this paper considers Russia's Asia policy and the Asian pivot in the overall context of its foreign policy and its principal drivers, historically and post-1991. It then examines Russia's would-be détente with Japan that could be construed as an attempt at geopolitical balancing. The next sections examine Russia's role on the Korean Peninsula and relations with Southeast Asia. The paper concludes with an assessment of the implications of Russia's pivot for U.S. interests and policy recommendations.

## A European Power, Not an Asian One

To be properly understood, Russia's Asia policy and its peculiar, lopsided quality need to be considered in the context of the country's foreign policy overall and beyond the complementary nature of the Russian and Chinese economies and political systems.

Much has been written about the legacy of the Mongol invasion and its impact on the development of the Russian state, particularly in terms of the fear of what the late-nineteenth-century philosopher Vladimir Solovyov described as the “yellow peril” and deep-seated concerns about Russia's decline at a time in its history when it is facing again a far more powerful civilization in the East.<sup>3</sup> The legacy of the invasion is complex and multifaceted: the depiction of Mongols as brutal, ruthless invaders in Russian art has been counterbalanced by the emergence of Eurasianism as a prominent intellectual current in post-Soviet Russia, as well as by official statements comparing the influence of the Mongols favorably to European attitudes toward Russia.<sup>4</sup>

However, it is Europe, rather than Asia, that has been the chief preoccupation of Russian foreign policy for over 400 years. Notwithstanding the importance of that historical legacy and its enormous geographic footprint—over 70 percent of its territory—in Asia, Russia fundamentally is a European country, and its foreign policy and national security priorities are Eurocentric.<sup>5</sup> Some three-quarters of its people live in Europe, and the population of its vast Asian territory is declining.<sup>6</sup> Russia is, at best, a marginal and relatively new and inexperienced actor in the Asia-Pacific; culturally, politically, historically, and strategically, it is bound to remain a European, rather than an Asian or Eurasian, power. To further illustrate this point, more recently, Russia chose to close the border with China at the end of January due to fears about the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Revealingly, the Kremlin did not close its borders to travelers from Europe, where most of the infections came from, until the middle of March. Evidently, the authorities considered Europe, despite its large number of infections and slow response to the pandemic, much less of a threat than China.

Since the emergence of the modern Russian state and the rise of the Romanov dynasty, the country's principal foreign policy concerns have been in the European theater. After the turn of the seventeenth century, Russia waged a seemingly endless chain of wars with a succession of major European powers—Poland, Sweden, Turkey, France, the United Kingdom (UK), Austria, and Germany. Its two

greatest wars in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—against Napoleon’s France and Hitler’s Germany—are essential to Russia’s national narrative. After suffering tremendous losses and coming perilously close to crushing defeats, Russia emerged from both conflicts victorious and with its position as a great European power greatly enhanced. The narrative of the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany in World War II has become the key element of the official Russian national narrative of the Putin era. Tellingly, the campaign against Japan launched in August 1945 is largely bypassed in that narrative. The Soviet Union’s contribution to the defeat of Nazi Germany, according to the Kremlin, entitles Russia to a special role in the affairs of Europe and the world.<sup>7</sup> No such claim with respect to Asia has ever been made.

Russia’s push into Asia with the conquest of Siberia and the expansion of the empire to the Pacific gets relatively little attention in the country’s national narrative. It is treated largely as a sideshow undertaken by small bands of enterprising adventurers as opposed to the push into Europe, a task which engaged all instruments of national power.<sup>8</sup> Siberia was the distant frontier, the place of exile for criminals, and the unexplored, uncivilized part of the empire. Russia’s expansion into Central Asia in the nineteenth century is usually treated as a secondary theater, an extension of the competition with the UK—often called the Great Game.

Historically, the Russian terms for “Asia” and “Asians” were associated with perceptions of inferior culture and civilization, so the terms were often used derogatorily, whereas Europe was considered the land of superior culture and civilization for Russia to join and emulate.<sup>9</sup> The ruling classes of the empire intermarried with European aristocracy, and the Romanov dynasty was for generations part of the vast pan-European extended royal family. Tsar Nicholas II, the last Romanov ruler, and the UK’s King George V were first cousins.

During the Cold War, the Soviet Union’s foreign policy efforts were concentrated in Europe, where the military standoff between the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Warsaw Pact constituted the bloc’s principal national security concern. The Cold War’s other theaters—the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—were

derivative of the competition with the United States and its European allies. The decade-long invasion and occupation of Afghanistan starting in 1979 was also a byproduct of the Soviet Union's confrontation with the West, principally the United States, but also Western Europe.

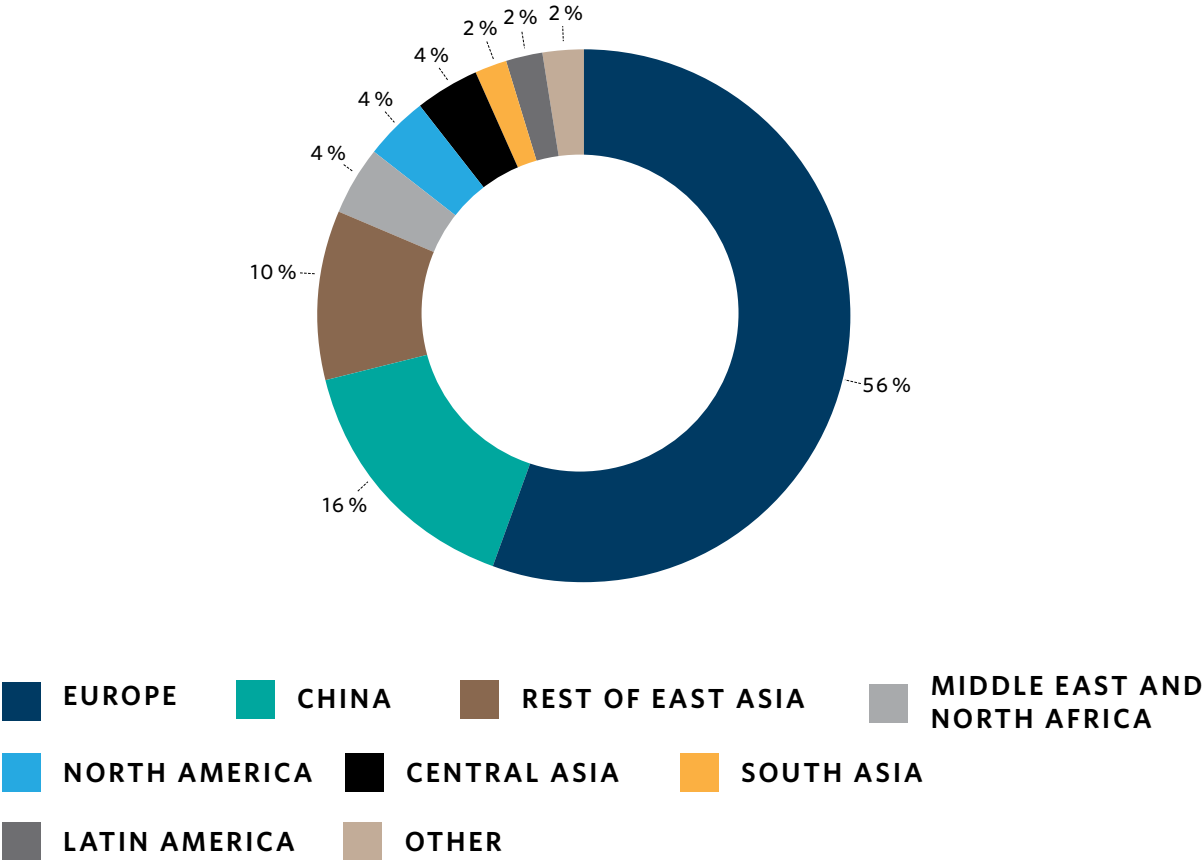
Nonetheless, the tense relationship with China during much of the Cold War was undoubtedly one of the Soviet Union's top foreign policy and national security concerns, consuming vast military and economic resources. But, even though it resulted in military clashes along their border, the rivalry with China never reached the scale and intensity of the competition with the United States; nor was Beijing viewed as the same existential threat represented by the United States and its NATO allies.<sup>10</sup> As the United States and China moved to normalize relations in the 1970s, the Sino-Soviet rivalry acquired an additional dimension, and the standoff with China turned into yet another theater for the Soviet Union in the Cold War with the West.

Elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific, the Soviet Union's reach was limited, with North Korea and Vietnam as its only client states. However, those relationships, too, were byproducts of the Soviet-U.S. Cold War rivalry. Other major regional actors—Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia—were firmly in the U.S. sphere of influence.

The end of the Cold War resulted in relatively few changes in the geographic priorities of Russia's foreign policy. The normalization of relations with China was a major breakthrough that relieved the country of the burden of having to secure the vast and heavily militarized border, but Moscow's relationships with the West remained by far the most important element of its foreign policy. The West had emerged dominant from the Cold War, and throughout the early post-Soviet period, Russian domestic reforms—economic and political—had the stated objective of making the country more like Western democratic capitalist societies. The West was the principal source of assistance and technical know-how for these reforms. Whereas Russia's relationship with China was also of great importance, it was not as important as ties to the West—for China itself was undergoing major reforms, some very similar to Russia's, and Beijing could not yet compare to the partnership with the West in terms of strategic and economic weight on the world stage.

Russia’s overall trade with European countries has remained considerably greater than that with Asia.<sup>11</sup> China has emerged as the country’s biggest individual trading partner, but Europe collectively remains a considerably greater destination for its exports and source of its imports than Asia, as figure 1 shows.<sup>12</sup> This is true despite the post-2014 Ukraine-related sanctions imposed on Russia by the EU and Russian countersanctions on EU goods.

FIGURE 1  
**Russia’s Total Trade Turnover by Region (2018)**



**SOURCE:** “Russian Federation Exports, Imports and Trade Balance by Country and Region 2018,” World Bank World Integrated Trade Solution, 2018, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/RUS/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>.

The importance of Europe and the United States for Russia was further underscored by the resumption of tensions between Moscow on the one hand and Washington and Brussels on the other hand not long after the end of the Cold War. The launch in the mid-1990s of NATO's eastward drive to admit new members among the countries of the former Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union marked the return of the Cold War-era geopolitical rivalry that continues to the present day and has become Russia's principal national security concern.

Control of its neighboring states has long been the top foreign policy priority for Russia, both as a matter of historical legacy and of its long-standing quest for strategic depth as a hedge against external enemies. If thought of in terms of concentric circles, the immediate periphery of Russia in Eastern Europe, the South Caucasus, and—to a somewhat lesser extent—Central Asia constitutes the innermost, critical security belt and top tier of Russia's diplomatic relationships. China, too, by virtue of its long border with Russia, is in that same category.<sup>13</sup>

Whereas the relationship between Russia and the West is dominated by the geopolitical competition for influence with the former Soviet states of Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, no such competition exists between Russia and China. In fact, with the exception of Central Asia, where they have made a concerted effort to manage relations constructively, their geopolitical interests do not overlap but rather complement each other. Eastern Europe, which constitutes the primary sphere of geopolitical interest for Russia, is of relatively little interest to China, and the reverse can be said about their respective interests in the Western Pacific. Central Asia is less important for Russia than Europe and less consequential for China than the Western Pacific. Together, thanks to geography, Russia and China are able to dominate both Eastern Europe and Central Asia to the exclusion of other powers, and in these regions they share the goal of maintaining stability and minimizing the influence of the United States and its European allies, which they view as a source of instability.

With its focus on securing a sphere of influence in Europe, a two-front competition—in Europe with NATO and in Asia with China—would have been too much of an economic, military, and diplomatic burden for Russia. Therefore, its partnership with China is a geopolitical necessity.

## A Pivot to China, Not to Asia

The year 2014 is often cited as a watershed in Russian foreign policy, when the Kremlin's gradually deteriorating relationship with the United States and Europe reached a breaking point following the annexation of Crimea and the start of the undeclared war against Ukraine.<sup>14</sup> In this narrative, after

multiple attempts to form a partnership with the West, the Kremlin effectively decided that its numerous differences with Europe and the United States, accentuated by its handling of the crisis in Ukraine, could not be overcome. In this way, Moscow announced its strategic reorientation toward Asia as the primary theater of its efforts on the world stage and source of partnerships.<sup>15</sup>

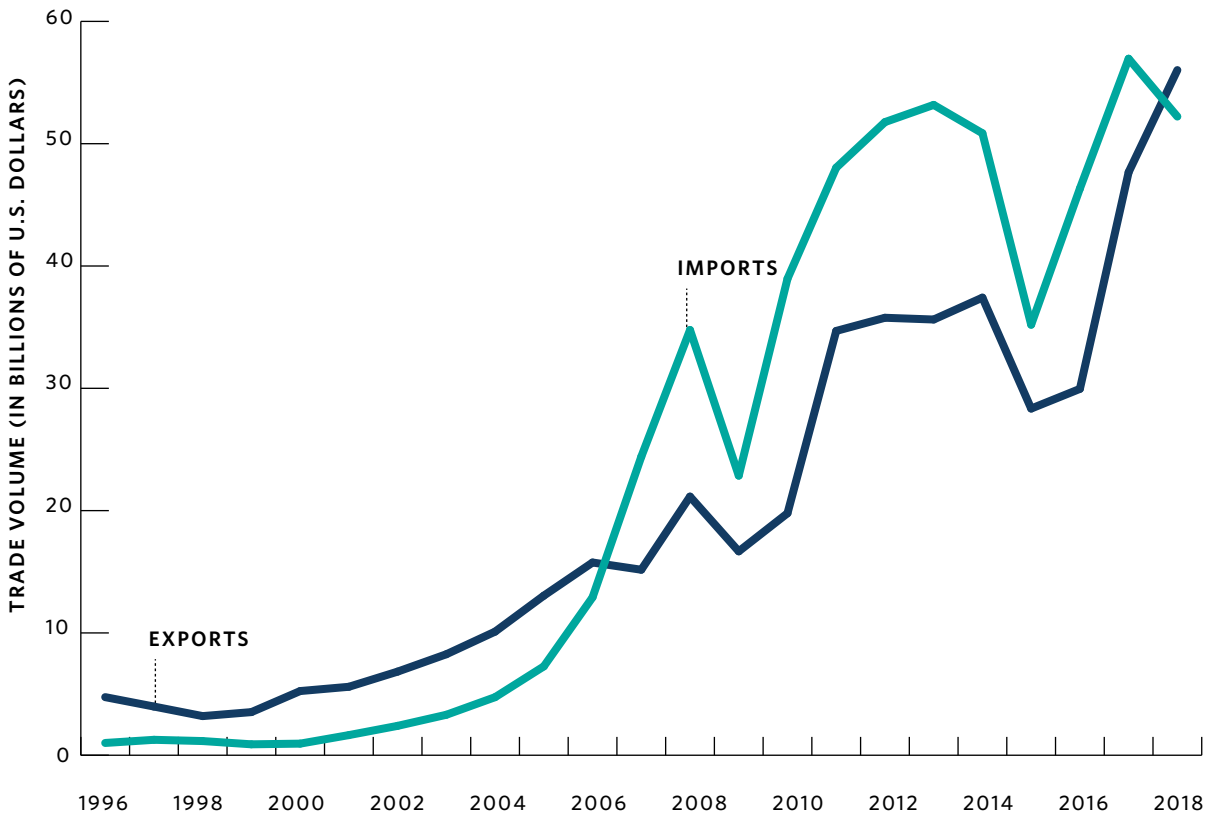
In reality, however, there was no tangible pivot in 2014 and no discernable reorientation of Russian foreign policy toward Asia. Russia has remained largely focused on relations with the West, whereas its relations with Asia have been focused almost exclusively on China. If a watershed did occur, it was in relations with the West, which deteriorated sharply and consequently emerged as an even more important problem on the Kremlin's agenda.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the rapprochement between Russia and China did not begin in 2014. Their relationship had already been steadily improving for over a quarter century, since former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev visited China in 1989, which marked an end to a quarter-century rift that had at times brought the two countries to the brink of war.<sup>16</sup> Gorbachev's trip was a major milestone that, along with improved relations with the West, enabled the Kremlin to focus on domestic challenges.

Throughout the 1990s, as they underwent domestic reforms, neither Russia nor China had an interest in rekindling their Cold War ideological disputes, which by that time had lost their relevance. The two countries had few, if any, incentives to engage in competition, let alone confrontation in a geographic theater that was secondary to their principal national goals of domestic reform and reconstruction. For China, the United States and the Asia-Pacific constituted the primary area of economic and geopolitical interest, whereas for Russia, the main areas of concern were the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union that formed its immediate periphery, Europe, and the United States. The latter two were an important source of financial support for Russia's struggling economy and thus the Kremlin deemed them to be high-priority relationships.

Sino-Russian relations continued to improve in the new century, as both countries ascended to greater prominence on the world stage.<sup>17</sup> Their economic and political trajectories were marked by a great deal of complementarity and proved mutually reinforcing. With China emerging as an industrial and manufacturing powerhouse, its economy displayed an ever-growing appetite for resources. This was a unique opportunity for Russia, with its vast stores of natural resources, to jumpstart its economic growth. As figure 2 shows, the volume of trade between the two countries grew from less than \$10 billion in the 1990s to nearly \$70 billion by 2010 and well over \$100 billion in 2018, with the stated goal of reaching \$200 billion in 2024.<sup>18</sup>

FIGURE 2  
**Russia's Trade With China**



**SOURCE:** "Russian Federation Imports From By Country and Region, in US\$ Thousand 2000-2018," World Bank World Integrated Trade Solution, 2018, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/RUS/StartYear/2000/EndYear/2018/TradeFlow/Import/Partner/ALL/Indicator/MPRT-TRD-VL>.

With China and Russia each locked into antagonistic trade and economic relations with the United States, the two partners have pursued policies intended to reduce Washington's role as the preeminent actor in global trade and finance as well as its ability to use its leading position as an economic weapon. Thus, in 2019, Beijing and Moscow agreed to increase the share of bilateral trade settled in their national currencies rather than in U.S. dollars.<sup>19</sup> In 2018, in what appeared to be a response to U.S. sanctions as well as a symbolic gesture, the Central Bank of Russia sold more than \$100 billion in U.S. holdings from its reserves and replaced them with euros and yuan.<sup>20</sup> The move proved costly as Russia is estimated to have lost \$8 billion as a result.<sup>21</sup>



Russian and Chinese leaders also share a similar approach to domestic politics. China never abandoned its authoritarian form of governance and one-party rule, while the presidency of Vladimir Putin saw Russia turn increasingly authoritarian after its experiment with democratic governance in the 1990s. For both countries, authoritarian domestic politics constitute a major source of friction in relations with the West. They consider criticism of their domestic political arrangements interference in their internal affairs, and they have found common cause in criticizing and opposing Western efforts to promote democratic governance in other countries as a form of political destabilization and a pretext for attempts at geopolitical expansion.

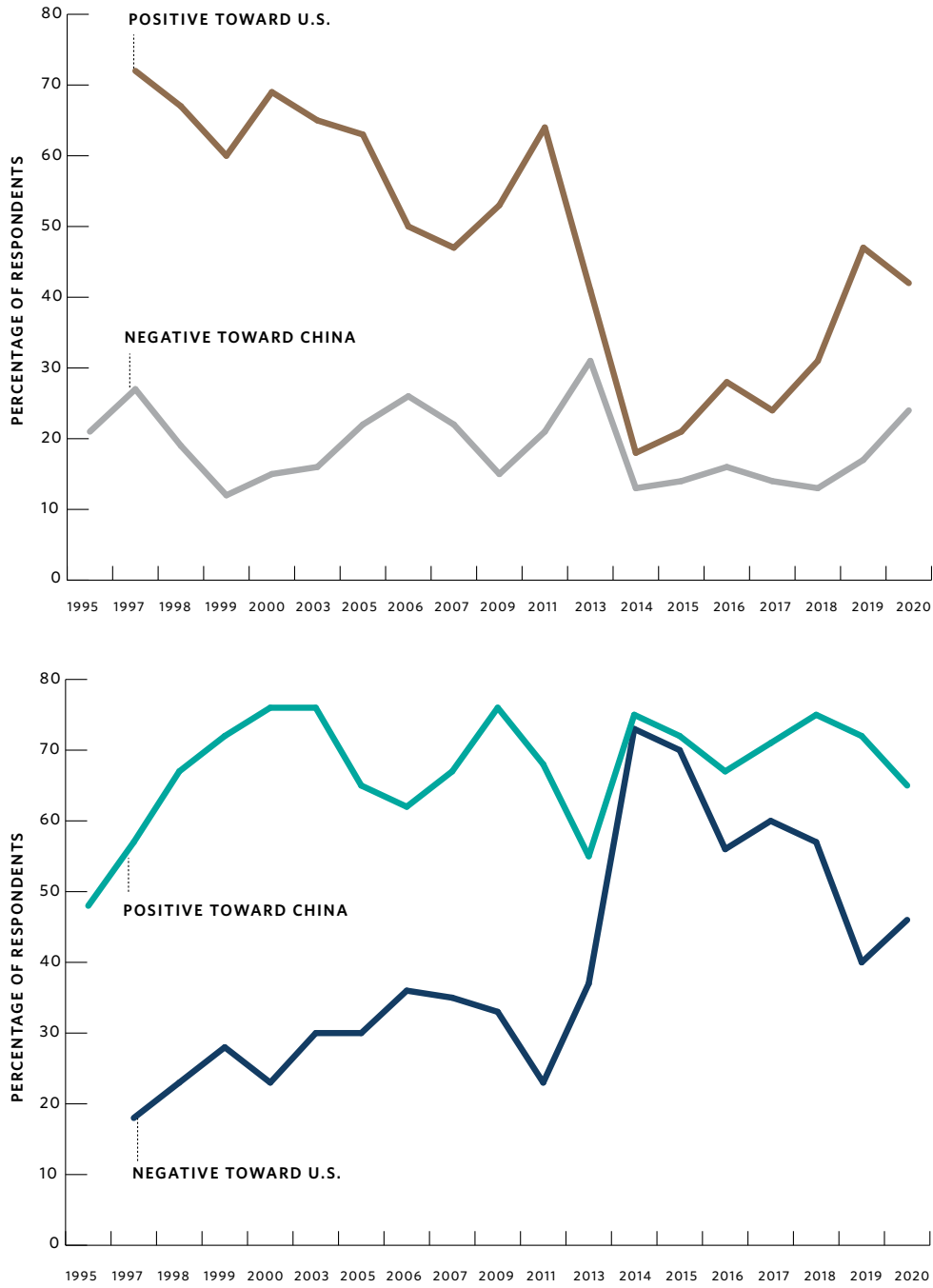
As figure 3 indicates, there appears to be a non-negligible correlation between the Russian public's attitudes toward China and the United States.<sup>22</sup> Positive public attitudes toward China have often coincided with negative attitudes toward the United States and vice versa. While foreign policy remains an elite issue in Russia, and public attitudes have only a limited impact at best on the direction of Russian foreign policy, the Kremlin has long been sensitive to public opinion as a legitimizing factor in its decisions, and on some occasions, the Russian public's views have apparently influenced its decisions.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to Russia's increasingly authoritarian domestic politics, geopolitics has emerged as a major source of friction with the West following the extension of membership in NATO and the European Union to countries that previously were part of the Soviet sphere of influence. This policy, viewed by the West as values-driven, has been viewed by Russia as a geopolitical move intended to expand the West's sphere of influence at its expense in countries and regions it still considers to be part of its special sphere of interests and influence.

With the United States spearheading NATO's eastward expansion and pursuing an activist policy with treaty allies and partners in the Western Pacific, Russia and China share an increasingly antagonistic relationship with the United States as their principal geopolitical rival. The growing friction between Russia and the West, which manifested itself in the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 over Georgia's pursuit of membership in NATO, has been accompanied by ever-closer political, economic, and geopolitical ties between Russia and China. In 2006, the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, and China) bloc was formed as a loose geopolitical association of non-Western rising powers, intended as a counterweight to the G8 (now G7) group of U.S.-led advanced Western democracies (and, until 2014, Russia).

The relationship between Russia and the West continued to deteriorate as Putin launched his third presidential term in 2012. In a highly symbolic gesture, he skipped the G8 meeting in the United States in May 2012, immediately after his inauguration, along with a bilateral meeting with then president Barack Obama.<sup>24</sup> The start of his term was marked by large-scale protests against what

FIGURE 3  
**Russian Attitudes Toward China and the United States**



**SOURCE:** “Levada Center, “[Russian]Attitude[s] Toward Countries [survey],” January 2020, <https://www.levada.ru/indikatory/otnoshenie-k-stranam>.

**NOTE:** Data for some years is unavailable.

many in Russia perceived as unfair elections and growing authoritarian governance. The protests were suppressed by forceful police intervention, and many members of the opposition were put on trial amid an official government onslaught on civil society. The suppression of the opposition and the legislative and administrative measures taken by the Russian government against nongovernmental and civil society organizations came under criticism from Washington and other Western capitals.<sup>25</sup>

Putin traveled to China in June 2012 for the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—a regional forum led jointly by Russia and China—and for bilateral meetings with Chinese leaders.<sup>26</sup> The visit resulted in an “enhanced strategic partnership” between the two countries.<sup>27</sup> The following year, Xi Jinping chose Moscow as the destination for his first foreign trip as China’s president.<sup>28</sup> Putin and Xi made a deliberate effort to put their personal imprimatur on the developing strategic partnership between their countries, embracing each other as “good friends”—a description that over the years graduated to “best friends.”<sup>29</sup> In 2013, Russia and China agreed to boost Russian pipeline oil deliveries to China and build a new spur line from the Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline.<sup>30</sup> In 2014, the two countries signed a thirty-year deal for \$400 billion to build a new pipeline for the delivery of Russian natural gas to China.<sup>31</sup>

In addition to their intensifying diplomatic and economic ties, Russia and China have steadily expanded their military ties. In October 2019, in an unprecedented sign of strategic cooperation, Putin announced that Russia was helping China develop its early-warning system against missile attacks.<sup>32</sup> Since the only potential source of attack against China for which such a system could be relevant is the United States, this sent a powerful message about the extent of the two countries’ cooperation in the defense and defense-industrial spheres, as well as about their shared assessment that the United States posed an existential threat to them.

But that was only the most recent sign of expanding defense cooperation. Russia and China have conducted bilateral drills and have participated in multilateral military exercises of increasing size and complexity.<sup>33</sup> Their security relationship has been complemented by robust trade in arms since the 1990s, with Russia’s defense industry relying on China as a critical buyer of its outputs at a time when the country’s own defense budgets could not sustain it.<sup>34</sup> With China developing and improving its own defense-industrial capabilities, its interest in Russian arms has somewhat faded, but it has remained an important customer for Russian defense manufacturers.

Moreover, Russian-Chinese defense-industrial cooperation has become more of a two-way street since 2014, when Western sanctions on Russia limited its industries, including in the defense sector, and its access to Western technology. Prior to that year, Russian defense industries had come to depend heavily on components imported from NATO countries and Ukraine.<sup>35</sup> In an effort to overcome Western sanctions and the end of defense-industrial cooperation with Ukraine, Russia has

pursued a program of domestic import substitution.<sup>36</sup> By most accounts, including statements of senior Russian officials, that program has been mostly a failure.<sup>37</sup>

To make up for this failure, Russian manufacturers have sought alternative sources of components and equipment, which is likely to increase the country's reliance on Chinese technology. Whereas the relatively low quality of Chinese-manufactured defense equipment has been an obstacle to increased defense-industrial cooperation, in the high-technology sector, including 5G, China is poised to expand its reach significantly into many different sectors of the Russian economy.<sup>38</sup>

By 2014—when Russia supposedly pivoted to Asia—the pattern of much-improved Russian-Chinese relations already was well-established. The watershed event that year was the drastic deterioration of Russia's relationship with Europe and the United States. This was the start of what some have described as a “new Cold War” with the West, but there was relatively little new about Russia's relationship with China, which by that time had already matured into a strategic partnership.<sup>39</sup> There was therefore no pivot. Moreover, by 2014, Russia's strategic partnership with China had developed, but Moscow had cultivated no such ties with other Asia-Pacific countries. This unbalanced Russian approach to the Asia-Pacific has intensified since then, and the relationship with China remains by far the most important, even dominant, priority on Russia's agenda in the region.

## Not an Asian Military Power

Russian forces in the Asia-Pacific are centered around its Eastern Military District (MD). They are postured mainly for strategic deterrence—for example, defending Russian ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and strategic bomber forces, dominating the airspace and seas around the disputed Kuril Islands, and safeguarding the land border with China. Although there has been a modest increase in its long-distance force-projection capabilities, Russia lacks the assets and infrastructure to sustain high-intensity conventional operations at long ranges and is no match for the air and naval forces of the United States, especially if combined with the forces of U.S. allies and partners in the region.

The quadrennial Vostok military exercises always generate a lot of headlines—some of them overly dramatic.<sup>40</sup> Although they are important to Russia for operational and symbolic reasons, they are intended to bolster its defensive positions in the region against potential attacks, however unlikely, from China, the United States, and Japan. They are also meant to guard against possible contingencies in the event that Moscow were to get embroiled in a conflict between China and a U.S.-led coalition.<sup>41</sup> Nonetheless, the main military threats to Russia are in the west, not the east, and the modest forces Russia has deployed in the Eastern MD reflect its low threat perceptions in the Asia-Pacific.

## Force Structure

Not surprisingly, the evolution of Russia's military posture in the Asia-Pacific and its military capabilities in the Eastern MD mirror the country's relatively modest interests and position in the region and the district's low priority relative to others west of the Urals. Historically, the modernization of Russian ground, air, and naval forces in the region has lagged considerably behind force improvements in and around what Russia sees as its sphere of privileged influence in the former Soviet Union. Overall, as table 1 shows, there has been little quantitative growth in the force structure of the Eastern MD over time.<sup>42</sup>

TABLE 1  
**The Eastern Military District's Forces (2011-2020)**

YEAR	SSM	Submarines	ASW	Naval Aviation Fighters	Air Force Fighters
2011	3	23	14	30	14
2012	3	21	14	0	44
2013	3	21	14	0	44
2014	3	21	14	0	44
2015	3	22	14	24	20
2016	3	24	14	12	20
2017	3	23	23	12	20
2018	4	23	23	12	20
2019	4	22	23	12	20
2020	4	19	23	12	20

**SSM:** surface-to-surface missile launchers

**Submarines:** strategic and tactical submarines

**ASW:** antisubmarine warfare

**Naval Aviation Fighters:** MiG-31/*Foxhound* variations

**Air Force Fighters:** MiG-31/*Foxhound*

**SOURCE:** "International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance* (London: IISS, 2011-2020), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/04597222.2020.1707966>.

Modernization has proceeded at a steady but unspectacular pace. Although there was a spike in the number of combat aircraft in the Eastern MD's order-of-battle early in the 2010s, this resulted from the repurposing of naval aviation fighter-attack aircraft. The MD's most significant acquisitions over the past ten years—such as the Iskander ballistic missile systems, the Su-35s, and the new generation of medium- and long-range air defense systems, including the S-400s—underscore the emphasis on replacing Soviet-era legacy weapons with more modern equipment and new technologies.

More importantly, the pattern of weapons acquisition in Siberia and the Far East over the past five years suggests that priority has been given to army formations responsible for defensive operations along the Sino-Russian border and the upgrading of anti-access/area-denial capabilities and infrastructure around the Kurils and Russia's SSBN bastions. The military, for example, has fortified the Kurils with the deployment of surface-to-ship missiles and Su-35 fighters as well as the construction of more air bases. But Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu's efforts to improve the maneuverability and reach of forces stationed in the Far East have been constrained by the Russian defense industry's declining output, the demands of military operations in Ukraine and Syria, and concerns over NATO's Four 30s readiness initiative.<sup>43</sup> As a result of these factors, the Eastern MD is assigned a much lower priority level within the Russian armed forces than the Western and Southern MDs, which remain the center of attention for Russia's military leadership.

## Operations

Over the past decade, the naval forces assigned to the Eastern MD have received the same treatment as the armed forces overall with improved training, exercises, and more and better equipment.<sup>44</sup> They have significantly intensified their combat training and operational activity, especially since 2012, when a noticeable qualitative leap took place and snap inspections of the combat readiness of units, army groups, and operational-strategic commands were introduced. The military placed a major emphasis on improving operational flexibility and maneuverability within and between different theaters. Military exercises in the region have also increased. Over the past decade, Russia has expanded the number of large-scale military drills it conducts around Japan as well as the frequency of incursions by its bombers into Japanese airspace.<sup>45</sup>

The Vostok exercises in 2010, 2014, and 2018 were the largest since the Cold War and involved forces from the Central and Eastern MDs. (Troops from China and Mongolia also participated in 2014 and 2018.)<sup>46</sup> Invariably attracting a lot of public attention and media headlines, these exercises are intended primarily to verify the combat readiness and mobilization capabilities of units in the Far

East and to signal that, as one military expert put it, while Russia may not be an Asian power, it remains a power in Asia.<sup>47</sup> This show of force has assumed greater significance now that a new shipping route may open in the Arctic between Europe and Asia as a result of the warming climate.

Annual Russian-Chinese military exercises—part of a broader effort to improve naval cooperation with China as called for in Russia’s 2015 Maritime Doctrine—have also captured headlines.<sup>48</sup> In recent years, the two countries have continued to expand military cooperation in areas such as combined exercises, technology, and high-level exchanges. The exercises are not structured, however, to strengthen combined war-fighting capabilities but rather to improve Russia’s ability to execute its missions in and around the Eastern MD in such areas as amphibious operations, air defense, and anti-submarine warfare. They also serve to improve strategic-level military-to-military communications with China. But, according to Michael Kofman, an expert on the Russian military, these exercises and other drills are not viewed as intended “to increase interoperability, or tactical level cooperation, so much as operational or strategic deconfliction.”<sup>49</sup>

While the scope and pace of Russian military activities in the region have increased over the past decade, it is important to see them in a broader context. Russia’s strategic orientation in the Far East is largely defensive. Its military establishment, like any other, has to plan and prepare for worst-case contingencies, which in this case would be principally a large-scale conventional conflict with China, the United States, Japan, or a U.S.-led coalition.<sup>50</sup> Any of these scenarios, however remote, would present formidable operational and logistical challenges because of the distance and lack of extensive transportation infrastructure to connect the Eastern MD to the rest of Russia and limits on the inter-theater mobility of wartime reinforcements from other military districts.

Many Russian military exercises are designed to help the military command test its new brigade-size military formations and joint command-and-control structures for fighting a large-scale war as well as test a national military mobilization system in which military and civilian authorities must work together in a “whole-of-government” effort.<sup>51</sup> The Eastern MD is unique. Unlike other Russian military districts, it must plan to fight alone—and for as long as possible—until reinforcements arrive from the Central MD; furthermore, it must carry out this task without the kind of robust infrastructure that is common in military districts west of the Urals. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Eastern MD is home to many self-sufficient ground-force formations and missile brigades.<sup>52</sup>

## Naval Capabilities

Russian naval forces in the Western Pacific have received new equipment, such as cruise missiles and more modern corvettes and patrol boats, to improve their combat capabilities.<sup>53</sup> But as table 2 illustrates, the Pacific fleet in the Far East still plays second fiddle to other fleets in areas that have

been assigned a higher geographic priority. It is, in effect, a small brown-water coastal navy. The fleet is configured for close-in defense missions to protect SSBN bases and the nearby waters in which they operate (for strategic deterrence), the maritime approaches to its major installations, the Arctic Sea, Russia’s exclusive economic zones, and nearby waters that contain a wealth of mineral resources. In other words, the focus of the Pacific Fleet is mainly on sea denial rather than sea control missions in open-ocean operations. Further, the small number of major surface combatants assigned to it precludes a significant forward-deployed peacetime naval presence beyond its immediate waters.

TABLE 2  
**The Russian Navy’s Equipment by Fleet in 2020**

	Northern Fleet	Baltic Fleet	Black Sea Fleet	Pacific Fleet	Caspian Flotilla	
Submarines	Strategic	7	0	0	4	0
	Tactical	18	1	7	15	0
Principal Surface Combatants	8	7	7	8	2	
Patrol and Coastal Combatants	16	29	37	27	9	
Mine Warfare	10	12	10	8	3	
Amphibious	7	13	10	9	9	
Naval Aviation Aircraft	117	48	38	32	0	

**SOURCE:** International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance* (London: IISS, 2020), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/04597222.2020.1707966>.

Russia’s 2015 Maritime Doctrine also makes clear that the Pacific Fleet serves important geopolitical purposes, including presenting Russia as a more influential actor in Asia and as an alternative to states in the region that remain wary of Chinese and U.S. hegemony.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the Maritime Doctrine states that the navy will try to avoid open conflict with China and the United States, as well as escalation of tensions in the South China Sea, and that its show-the-flag operations will take the form of small deployments that do not require massive blue-water capabilities—positions that underscore Russia’s priority of boosting its naval presence on its western and northern flanks.

In sum, the improvements in the force-projection capabilities of the Russian Navy in the Asia-Pacific are starting from a very low baseline and have registered only modest growth over the past decade—they require continued monitoring by the United States but should not be a cause for concern.



Moscow's improved anti-access/area-denial capabilities in and around the Eastern MD would only present problems if the U.S. military is planning to conduct large-scale conventional operations against Russia in its own backyard, which is hard to imagine under any circumstances.

## Russia's Japan Misfire

Aside from its partnership with China, Russia's other critical relationship in the Asia-Pacific is with Japan. The country has the potential to serve as a counterbalance to Russia's seemingly relentless tilt toward China in the region and more broadly on the world stage. It is the world's third-largest economy, a technological powerhouse, and a treaty ally of the United States.<sup>55</sup> Japan and Russia share a maritime border, have fought two wars in the twentieth century, and still have an unresolved territorial dispute.

The most important feature of the relationship between the two countries, however, is its unrealized potential, which puts in sharper focus the unbalanced nature of Russian diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific. Although the two countries' economic relationship is rich with opportunities—Russia is uniquely endowed with natural resources and Japan is a global manufacturing and technological powerhouse—these complementarities have remained largely unfulfilled. Bilateral trade has not exceeded \$30 billion annually, and in 2018 was only about \$20 billion.<sup>56</sup> Japanese investment in the Russian economy has been sluggish and focused largely on major energy projects. Keen to improve bilateral relations overall, the two governments have encouraged greater investment, but these overtures have been met with skepticism from a Japanese business community reluctant to commit funds to Russia's unwelcoming investing environment.<sup>57</sup>

The two countries' trade and economic relationship has long been a victim of geopolitics. The key obstacle has been the problem of the four Southern Kuril Islands occupied by the Soviet Union at the end of World War II, which were previously held by Japan. Successive Japanese governments have tried to reclaim them for over seventy years. The dispute over the islands, referred to in Japan as the Northern Territories, has stood in the way of the two countries concluding a peace treaty to finally put the legacy of World War II behind them.

The record of the Russian-Japanese relationship since the end of the Cold War is one of false starts, dashed hopes, and unrealized compromises on the fate of the islands that could have resulted in the full normalization of relations. Toward the end of the Soviet era and in the early post-Soviet era,

Russian diplomats dropped hints that a compromise would be acceptable to the new government, based on a vague formula dating back to 1956, when the two countries restored diplomatic relations and agreed in principle on the return of two of the four islands.<sup>58</sup> However, those hints remained unrealized, and the issue remains unresolved, standing in the way of better relations, despite repeated attempts by Japanese leaders to find a mutually acceptable solution.<sup>59</sup>

The most recent initiative to resolve the diplomatic problem of the Northern Territories has been pursued by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe who has made relations with Russia a major foreign policy priority throughout his term in office beginning in 2012.<sup>60</sup> Abe's personal diplomacy with Putin, including multiple visits to Russia and less frequent visits by Putin to Japan, has yet to produce results on this issue.<sup>61</sup> Abe's apparent but largely unstated geopolitical goal—to encourage a more balanced Russian policy in the Asia-Pacific at the expense of Russian-Chinese relations—has not been realized either, as Moscow continues on its trajectory of a near-exclusive partnership with Beijing.<sup>62</sup>

In one-sided fashion, Russia and Putin have been the obvious beneficiaries of Abe's diplomatic efforts. For Putin, engagement with Abe presented a welcome opportunity to chip away at the G7 leaders' efforts to isolate the Russian president following the annexation of Crimea. Abe's pursuit of better economic relations with Russia has enabled Putin to demonstrate that the Western sanctions imposed on Russia since 2014 are far from unanimous. His visits to Japan in 2016 and 2019 not only offered opportunities to reaffirm his standing as a major world leader but also served as a platform to make anti-American statements and throw jabs at the U.S.-Japanese alliance, making clear that the real target of Russian policy in the Asia-Pacific is the United States.<sup>63</sup>

The bleak prospects for a breakthrough in Russian-Japanese relations or even a modest rebalancing in Russian policy in the Asia-Pacific away from China have been underscored by the intensification of Russian-Chinese military cooperation, including joint air patrols, intrusions in Japanese airspace, and naval exercises in the South China Sea.<sup>64</sup> In addition to these high-profile military activities, the Russian Ministry of Defense has announced its plans to beef up its anti-access/area-denial capabilities on the Kuril Islands.<sup>65</sup>

To add insult to injury, official Russian rhetoric on the subject has even turned offensive. For example, in 2015, Dmitry Rogozin, then deputy prime minister in charge of defense issues, responded to Japanese protests against a visit to the Kurils by Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev by inviting Japanese officials to commit suicide.<sup>66</sup> During his second visit to the islands in 2019, Medvedev casually dismissed Japanese objections and territorial claims as groundless.<sup>67</sup>

There is little, if any, chance of Russia changing its stance on the Kurils and vis-à-vis Japan in general. A meaningful rapprochement with Tokyo would require significant territorial concessions from Russia—something that great powers do not do in the Kremlin's estimation. Moreover, those concessions would have to be made to a treaty ally of the United States, whose policies are viewed as an existential threat by the Kremlin.<sup>68</sup> In the charged zero-sum geopolitical environment of the U.S.-Russian-Chinese triangular relationship, a Russian concession to Japan (and therefore the United States) would come at the expense of its relationship with China, which the Kremlin has long prioritized as the essential partnership in light of the adversarial relationship the two maintain with Washington.

## China in the Lead on North Korea

In the early 2000s, there were high expectations that Russian–North Korean relations had a promising future. The two countries had historically close ties: North Korea was a major buyer of Russian arms, bilateral trade was growing, thousands of North Koreans were working in Russia, and ambitious plans were being drawn up to use the country as a trans-shipment point for Russian natural gas exports to South Korea and to connect the Russian Far East to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railroad.<sup>69</sup> Russia was opposed to North Korea acquiring nuclear weapons but believed that threats, sanctions, and efforts to isolate its regime would fail to alter the country's behavior.

Today, these expectations remain largely unfulfilled, and the relationship involves a great deal of muddling through. North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un may be able to arrange symbolically important summit meetings with Putin, but there have been few tangible results. Due to Moscow's own budget constraints, trade and investment links between the two countries remain weak, and Russia's ambitious schemes for the development of regional infrastructure never got off the drawing board. Moscow has declined to subsidize the North Korean economy or invest in Pyongyang's efforts to build infrastructure. Further, the two countries continue to spar over illegal North Korean fishing in Russian waters, and Pyongyang has been hurt economically by Moscow's expulsion of North Korean workers in compliance with UN Security Council sanctions enacted in 2017.

Russia's ties with South Korea have not fared much better. Russian designs for exporting liquefied natural gas to the country have foundered because of the poor investment climate in Russia and instability on the Korean Peninsula. More importantly, South Korea sees little benefit in forging closer relations with Russia, because only China has the leverage to influence North Korea's behavior.<sup>70</sup> When the government of President Moon Jae-in wants to cajole North Korea back to the

negotiating table, it turns to Washington and Beijing for support, not Moscow. At the same time, Russian–South Korean two-way trade in 2018 was a modest \$25 billion—only 7 percent of total Russian foreign trade.<sup>71</sup>

For most of the past twenty years, Russia has consistently pursued three outcomes with regard to North Korea: seeking denuclearization, preventing war on the Korean Peninsula, and preventing regime change. These goals are closely aligned with China’s preferred outcomes and priorities. However, since 2014, Moscow has pursued them within the broader context of its new strategic partnership with China, which has led to a major realignment of its approach to relations with North Korea. As one Russian expert on the country has observed, “Moscow seems to tacitly acknowledge the Korean Peninsula as China’s sphere of influence and generally follows Beijing’s lead in this region. North Korea is obviously not among the Kremlin’s top foreign policy priorities.”<sup>72</sup>

It is largely for these reasons that Russia has followed China’s lead in helping North Korea evade implementation of some UN Security Council sanctions (for example, ship-to-ship transfers of prohibited items) and since late 2019 has blocked the enactment of any new sanctions. As a result of this unified position, the two countries have severely undercut the United States’ campaign of maximum pressure. Short of a resumption of nuclear testing or unprovoked and highly provocative military actions by North Korea, Moscow and Beijing are unlikely to support new sanctions, even if Pyongyang resumes its testing of longer-range ballistic missiles. If U.S.–North Korean denuclearization negotiations resume, Russia and China would almost certainly back Pyongyang’s efforts to avoid immediate and complete denuclearization and an intrusive verification regime. They would instead favor capping and rolling back North Korea’s nuclear weapons program with minimal verification procedures as part of an incremental process of reciprocal North Korean and U.S. concessions.

Russia’s perspective and positions on the North Korean nuclear issue are not a function of the economic, military, or commercial opportunities it sees in North Korea and on the peninsula more broadly. Rather, they are driven by the Kremlin’s fear that a U.S. military conflict with North Korea could have highly destabilizing consequences on Russia’s borders; the desire for Russia to be seen as a major diplomatic player on the peninsula; and a desire to prevent further nuclear proliferation and a buildup of U.S. forces in the region that it would find threatening. Thus, in contrast to conflicts in the South China Sea where it is largely a bystander, as discussed below, when it comes to North Korea, Russia will press vigorously for a seat at the table, with veto power, over any resolution pursued by the United States and other parties to the conflict in order to support its claim to superpower status.

In addition to concerns about prestige and recognition as a global power, Russia has several more tangible interests at stake on the Korean Peninsula, which overlap with China's but are very different from those of the United States. Like their Chinese counterparts, Russian policymakers do not see North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles as a direct threat to their country's security; instead, they view them as Pyongyang's ultimate insurance policy against U.S.-engineered regime change. From Russia's perspective, North Korea's nuclear capability presents a threat only as a potential trigger for a crisis on the peninsula that would lead to a U.S.-North Korean confrontation or outright war and desperate actions by Pyongyang that would prompt a U.S. invasion to topple the Kim regime. Pressuring Pyongyang, as Moscow has repeatedly warned, is unlikely to deliver the results that Washington is trying to achieve and would only aggravate tensions—a position shared by Beijing that is unlikely to change absent a change in China's overall strategic direction. Any future improvement in U.S.-Russian relations would not prompt Moscow to alter its stance on the North Korean problem either.

As Russia looks to the future, it probably would prefer the status quo to other potential end states. It would be extremely wary, for example, of peaceful unification, which it believes would be accomplished on South Korea's terms and result in a significant expansion of U.S. influence and perhaps the deployment of U.S. troops closer to Russia's borders. In this case, too, there is a convergence between Russian and Chinese interests in preserving North Korea's status as a security buffer. In sum, because the Korean Peninsula is of far less importance to Russia than it is to China, and because Beijing possesses far more leverage over Pyongyang than Moscow does, Russia is unlikely to allow any daylight to develop between its position and China's stance on North Korea.

## Russia Missing In Action on Southeast Asia

Despite much of the fanfare surrounding its Asia-Pacific pivot, the results of Russia's more active engagement in Southeast Asia since 2016 have proven to be meager. The Kremlin has had some success in expanding arms sales, trade, and energy cooperation with several members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), but relations with the organization itself are largely devoid of substance, and bilateral relations with Moscow's most important regional partners—Vietnam, Indonesia, and Myanmar—have yet to reach their full potential.

Since the creation of a Russian-ASEAN dialogue in 1996, the region has not loomed large in the Kremlin's foreign policy, and Russia has been peripheral to ASEAN's pursuit of its regional agenda,

particularly the development of a security order based on multilateral cooperation among its member states and with outside powers.

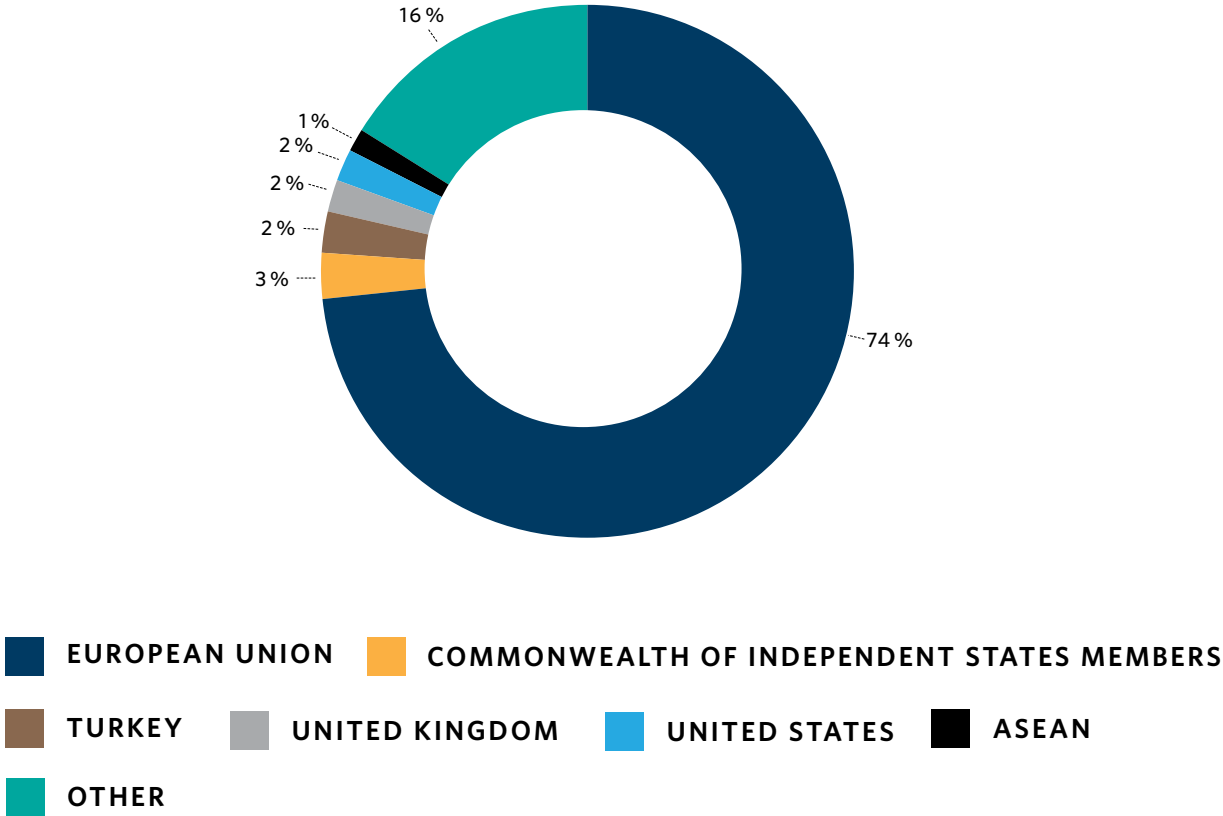
The Russia-ASEAN Summit held in Sochi on the Black Sea in 2016 generated expectations that the relationship would be put on a more positive trajectory. Leaders agreed in the Sochi Declaration on the goal of building a strategic partnership and an action plan to strengthen and deepen ties over the following five years, especially in terms of combating international terrorism, drug trafficking, and crime as well as expanding trade and commercial opportunities.<sup>73</sup> Putin spoke effusively about cementing Russian-ASEAN relations.<sup>74</sup> Moscow certainly had incentives to broaden and deepen its ties to the region, including finding new markets for energy and arms exports to offset the economic effects of Western sanctions, demonstrating that Russia could not be isolated, and leveraging the region's dynamism to help modernize its economy, especially in the Russian Far East. In fact, South-east Asia and the development of Russia's relations with ASEAN figured prominently in Russia's turn to the Asia-Pacific.

But the Sochi summit was not the inflection point in the relationship that some observers had pinned their hopes on two years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine and after the imposition of Western sanctions prompted the Kremlin to make its pivot to the Asia-Pacific. There was more symbolism than substance, and the "Spirit of Sochi" evaporated quickly. Tactically, the summit was a success. Russia was able to demonstrate that it was not isolated and that the countries of Southeast Asia were treating it like a great power. For its part, ASEAN exploited the opportunity to advance its aspirations for a central leadership role in developing a multilateral security architecture for the region.<sup>75</sup>

But six years after the invasion of Ukraine and four years after Sochi, Russia's relationship with ASEAN remains underdeveloped. It carries little weight within the organization, even though it has been more actively engaged at the political level and, in 2018, upgraded the relationship to the level of a strategic partnership.<sup>76</sup> Several stubborn realities have hindered the development of a more mature and productive relationship. Most fundamentally, institutional ties between Russia and ASEAN remain weak because neither side needs the other that much.

First, Southeast Asia is not a high priority for Russia, where it has no core interests. Russia sees itself as a European country and as a great power; it is, therefore, focused on its relations with Europe, China, and the United States and on preserving its dominant position in its near abroad. Even within the Asia-Pacific, Southeast Asia tends to take a backseat not only to China but also to North-east Asia and India. Reflecting this hierarchy of priorities and its marginal interests in the region,

FIGURE 4  
**Russia's Outward Direct Investment by Country/Bloc (2018)**



**SOURCE:** Bank of Russia, "External Sector Statistics," June 2020, [https://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/macro\\_itm/svs](https://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/macro_itm/svs).

Russia's expertise and institutional mechanisms for diplomatic and economic engagement are tilted heavily toward Eurasia and not the Asia-Pacific.<sup>77</sup> In addition, trade and economic relations with ASEAN have been slow to develop because Russia's political elite and business leaders are Eurocentric and fixated on the United States (see figure 4).<sup>78</sup> Moreover, though Russia's foreign policy leadership is intent on accelerating movement toward a multipolar world, it does not see ASEAN as a counterweight to U.S. power.

Second, the value proposition for Russia in the region is its strong strategic partnership with China, which it has prioritized over expanding its influence in Southeast Asia. Moscow derives substantial economic, diplomatic, and geopolitical benefits from this partnership.<sup>79</sup> Although Russian foreign policy officials have expressed growing interest in cultivating closer ties with ASEAN, Moscow is not

about to put these equities at risk to side with ASEAN countries on their territorial disputes with China or to join them and the United States in an effort to contain the expansion of Chinese influence in the region. The meager benefits Russia accrues from its relations with ASEAN reinforce this caution. For all intents and purposes, the Kremlin has acknowledged China's leading role in the region, and Beijing regards Southeast Asia as its sphere of influence.<sup>80</sup> In effect, Russian policy in Southeast Asia is hostage to Chinese behavior.

Third, notwithstanding a long record of lofty pronouncements about developing a strategic partnership, Russia's relationship with ASEAN has been hampered not only by its sensitivity to Chinese concerns but also by its ambivalent attitude toward the organization. Russia has made a clear calculation that its primary interests in the region—arms sales and expanded economic and energy ties—are best pursued through bilateral relationships rather than through ASEAN, which has a well-deserved reputation as a so-called talk shop that is incapable, for political and cultural reasons, of taking concerted collective action due to divisions among its members. This is as true of the organization itself as it is of its two premier offshoots, the ASEAN Regional Forum and the East Asian Summit.

Fifth, ASEAN recognizes that it cannot count on Russia to choose its relations with Southeast Asia over its partnership with China: the multilateral bloc realizes that it would not like the outcome if it tries to force Moscow to make a choice between the two. It is therefore not prepared to place a bet on Russia to check the growth of Chinese power or to restrain assertive Chinese behavior. Russia correctly sees ASEAN's efforts to build a new security architecture as another form of containing China, an objective that it does not share in Southeast Asia. In addition, while Moscow would like to see a more multilateral and muscular ASEAN balance against U.S. power in the region, it will not risk antagonizing China by aligning more closely with the organization.

Simply put, Russia sees ASEAN as neither an opportunity nor a threat to its core interests, and cultivating closer relations with the bloc ranks very low on its list of foreign policy priorities. Moscow's main goal is to raise its profile with the organization and, along with China, balance against U.S. power in the region. Unsurprisingly, therefore, there is a large gap between Russia's rhetorical commitment to developing a strategic relationship with ASEAN and realities on the ground; it could not be otherwise, as neither side sees great potential in their relationship, and both are resigned to the fact that progress toward more productive ties will be slow and incremental. Even though Russia would like to enable ASEAN to become a more effective counterbalance to U.S. dominance, it will not do so at the expense of its much more important relationship with China. In this sense, Russia is China's de facto junior partner in Southeast Asia and should not be seen as a truly independent regional actor. Over the next several years, the Kremlin will be preoccupied with more important and pressing challenges (such as Syria, Ukraine, relations with the United States, and dealing with the coronavirus pandemic).

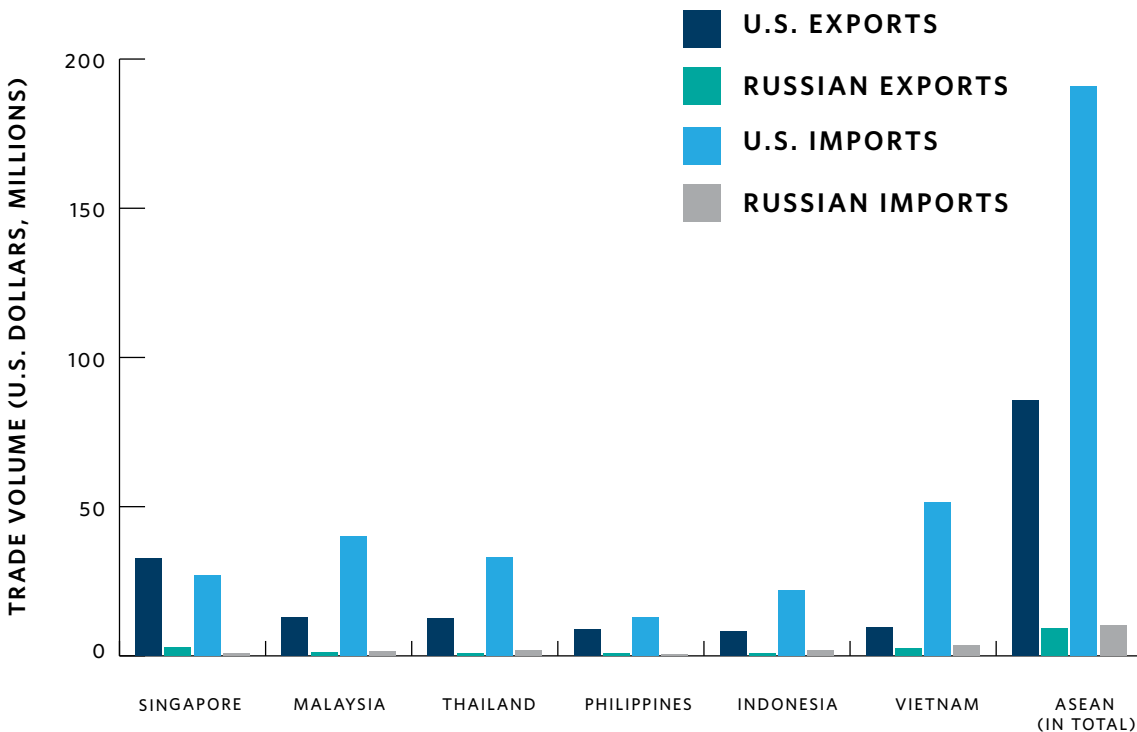


## Lackluster Bilateral Ties in Southeast Asia

Russia will continue to pursue its energy, trade, commercial, and military interests with individual members of ASEAN, but cooperation in these areas is likely to be limited not only by its strategic priorities but also by regional realities. Russia has exported arms, civilian nuclear technology, and hydrocarbons to Indonesia and Vietnam as well as invested in energy production ventures in these countries. But these deals have been relatively small and have failed to meet Russian expectations. Moreover, as Russia experts on Southeast Asia have noted, they do not provide a basis for a solid and sustained partnership.<sup>81</sup>

Figure 5 offers a more detailed look at two-way economic ties between Russia and ASEAN countries.<sup>82</sup> Trade between Russia and the bloc's members remains negligible. Between 2012 and 2018, Russian exports to and imports from these countries increased from \$15.6 billion to \$19.2 billion.<sup>83</sup> In 2018, two-way trade represented only 2 percent of Russian global exports and 4.3 percent of

FIGURE 5  
**Russian and U.S. Trade Turnover With Select ASEAN Members (2018)**



**SOURCE:** "Russian Federation Exports, Imports and Trade Balance by Country and Region 2018," World Bank World Integrated Trade Solution, 2018, <https://wits.worldbank.org/CountryProfile/en/Country/RUS/Year/2018/TradeFlow/EXPIMP>.

Russian global imports.<sup>84</sup> Vietnam is Russia’s best trading partner in the region, yet the total import-export dollar value of even their bilateral trade barely registers, and it is dwarfed by Vietnam’s bilateral trade with the China, the United States, and several other countries in the region.

The two-way flow of foreign direct investment (FDI) between Russia and ASEAN countries tells much the same story. In 2018, Russian FDI in ASEAN countries totaled \$9.2 billion, while the latter’s FDI in Russia amounted to around \$4.4 billion.<sup>85</sup> Further, any progress that ASEAN countries hope to make in modernizing and diversifying their economies will depend on inputs from non-Russian foreign investment and technology.

Russia is an important source of military hardware for ASEAN members (see table 3). Between 2000 and 2019, members of the regional bloc accounted for 9 percent of Russia’s global arms exports, which amounted to 27 percent of ASEAN arms imports.<sup>86</sup> Vietnam is Russia’s largest arms customer, purchasing over \$6 billion in new military equipment from it since 2005.<sup>87</sup> Between 2000 and 2016, it imported more than 80 percent of its arms from Russia.<sup>88</sup> Most of these acquisitions were comprised primarily of combat aircraft and associated weaponry, training aircraft, attack submarines, helicopters, and surface combatants. Indonesia, Malaysia, and Myanmar have also made purchases of major military assets, including combat aircraft, tanks, and heavy-lift transport helicopters.

TABLE 3  
**Arms Trade Between Russia and Select ASEAN Members**

	2000–2019	Approximate % of All Russian Arms Exports (2000–2019)	Russian % of Countries’ Total Arms Imports (2000–2019)
<b>Vietnam</b>	6515	5.4	84
<b>Myanmar</b>	1591	1.3	43
<b>Malaysia</b>	1298	1.1	27
<b>Indonesia</b>	1147	1.0	16
<b>Laos</b>	101	<0.1	44
<b>Thailand</b>	50	<0.1	1
<b>Listed ASEAN Members (total)</b>	10702	8.8	27

**SOURCE:** Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), “SIPRI Arms Transfer Database,” March 9, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

**NOTE:** Trend indicator value units are a unit of measurement popularized by SIPRI that reflects the military capabilities of arms transfers rather than their monetary value.

Over the past decade, Russia has signed a number of contracts with ASEAN countries for the exploration and production of oil and natural gas and refined products (see table 4). Vietnam and Indonesia are the primary destinations for its energy investments. Russia and Vietnam have signed several major contracts for joint ventures to explore, develop, and produce hydrocarbons; in recent years, their joint venture Vietsovpetro has generated annual revenues of nearly \$2 billion.<sup>89</sup> In 2017, Rosneft and Indonesia's Pertamina inked a major agreement to invest \$15 billion to develop a new oil refinery and petrochemical complex in East Java.<sup>90</sup> Once completed, the facility is expected to become a major regional hub for distribution of Siberian oil throughout Southeast Asia. Russia has also concluded agreements for smaller energy projects with Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, and Thailand.

TABLE 4  
**Russia's Mineral Product Exports to ASEAN**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Total Worth</b>	<b>Share of Russian Exports to Trading Partner</b>
<b>Singapore</b>	\$3.5 billion	90.5 %
<b>Malaysia</b>	\$605 million	67.8 %
<b>Thailand</b>	\$318 million	62.5 %
<b>Vietnam</b>	\$217 million	17.5 %
<b>Indonesia</b>	\$169 million	12.6 %
<b>Philippines</b>	\$114 million	37.8 %
<b>Myanmar</b>	\$7.5 million	10.3 %
<b>Cambodia</b>	\$140,000	2.9 %
<b>Laos</b>	\$30,000	0.5 %
<b>Brunei</b>	0	0
<b>ASEAN (total by average)</b>	\$4.9 billion	60.0 %

**SOURCE:** Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Russia," 2017, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/rus/#trade-products>.

**NOTE:** Mineral products include oil and gas as well as other mineral resources.

From Russia's perspective, expanded trade, energy, transportation, and investment relations were supposed to cement its new relationship with the members of ASEAN, but these ties have proven to be uneven. Since Russia and ASEAN upgraded their relationship from a dialogue to a strategic partnership in 2018, more agreements have been announced than implemented, and the progress that has been made is less impressive than meets the eye because—with exceptions like Vietnam and to a lesser extent Indonesia and Myanmar—Russia and ASEAN members started from a low baseline. The reality is that, in the five years since Russia and ASEAN concluded the Sochi Declaration, two-way, nonmilitary trade relations have been slow in developing.

Russian arms sales are the exception to this rule. They have increased substantially over the past fifteen years, largely as a result of three factors: a huge increase in ASEAN military expenditures, objections of ASEAN countries to human-rights conditions the United States attaches to its arms sales, and a desire to balance against China by developing improved ties with Russia. However, even though ASEAN members want to buy weapons and Russia wants to sell them, as one Russian expert on the region has noted, “Without meaningful economic or trade ties, no mutually beneficial relationship can develop.”<sup>91</sup> These ties have yet to materialize. Russia has not concluded a bilateral free trade agreement (FTA) with any member of ASEAN, while the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union has failed thus far to sign one with ASEAN and has concluded only two bilateral FTAs, with Vietnam and Singapore. Tellingly, Russia is not yet a member of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, a free trade agreement between the ten members of ASEAN and several other countries in the region.

Similarly, although Russia has seen ASEAN as a potentially lucrative market for its civilian nuclear power reactors, its expectations have yet to be fulfilled for several reasons. Some ASEAN countries, notably Indonesia and Malaysia, are energy producers and exporters, and they are thus competing for market share with Russia's energy firms. Second, regional demand for civilian nuclear power has been slow to develop—Vietnam is the only country in ASEAN that has purchased a civilian nuclear plant from Russia. As one energy expert has noted, given the high cost and safety concerns, “Nuclear power will not feature soon in ASEAN's energy mix for at least the next 20 years.”<sup>92</sup> Finally, while there is growing demand among ASEAN countries for renewable energy sources other than nuclear power, Russia appears to have very little interest in pushing wind, hydroelectric, and solar power technologies that would undercut its exports of oil and natural gas.

## Implications for U.S. Policy

These insights about Russian diplomatic strategy and foreign policy priorities in the Asia-Pacific have important implications for U.S. policymaking in the region.

### China

The shift from the Global War on Terrorism that dominated U.S. national security thinking and policy for the better part of two decades following the attacks of September 11, 2001, to great-power competition with Russia and, increasingly, China, has cast into a sharper relief the strategic partnership between Moscow and Beijing. The break between Russia and the West has underscored the two countries' diplomatic, economic, military, and geopolitical alignment. This shift has raised concerns in the U.S. strategic community that their emerging alliance poses a grave threat to U.S. interests.<sup>93</sup> Some analysts, including some who were involved in developing the United States' National Security Strategy, have argued for the adoption of a wedge strategy to prevent further Russian-Chinese alignment.<sup>94</sup> This is an unrealistic and impractical proposition for the following reasons:

- The strategic partnership between Russia and China is rooted in their domestic political, economic, and geopolitical complementarity and in the confluence of their interests and threat perceptions.
- Both countries consider the United States the primary challenger to their interests. It would take a fundamental revision of U.S. policy to change that perception.
- The partnership is reinforced by the personal commitments of the presidents of both countries.
- The partnership predates Russia's 2014 break with the West. It began with the country emerging from the Cold War greatly weakened and in need of a strategic realignment to concentrate on issues and regions at the top of its list of priorities.
- Russia remains a European rather than an Asian nation. Its key interests are at stake in Europe rather than in Asia. Good relations with China are a strategic necessity for Russia, as they enable Moscow to focus on its key interests elsewhere; and its leaders see no alternative to this close partnership, which is increasingly looking like an alliance.

Even if Washington successfully pulled off a divide-and-conquer strategy with respect to Russia and China, the consequences for the United States would likely be disappointing. Russia is not a major force either in the economic and technological competition between the United States and China or in the Asia-Pacific where the principal U.S.-Chinese geopolitical competition is unfolding. In the area of defense and military technology, China is increasingly a more powerful actor than Russia. Over time, defense cooperation between them is likely to be of diminishing value to China. In Europe and the Middle East and North Africa, where Russia has reemerged as an active player militarily and geopolitically, China is not yet a major factor, though it is in discussions with Iran about forming a strategic partnership. A less cooperative relationship between them would be unlikely to prove consequential for Russia's posture in these two regions.

Some aspects of the Russia-China partnership are potentially even beneficial for U.S. interests. For example, the complementarity of their two economies is a factor for stability in Eurasia, as it helps satisfy China's demand for resources and Russia's need to find a reliable market for its exports.

In addition, the key sources of tension between the United States and China, on the one hand, and between the United States and Russia, on the other, are mostly disconnected. They have little bearing on each other. Russia is a marginal actor in the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific and thus is largely inconsequential to the regional competition between the United States and China. The same can be said about China in Europe and the standoff between Russia and NATO.

In sum, the main task for the United States in dealing with these two countries is to develop a viable strategy for each. Their partnership has little bearing on U.S. interests and runs the risk of becoming a distraction from what matters most for the United States, which is deftly managing its two distinct relationships with China and Russia.

### The Korean Peninsula

The U.S. strategy for dealing with Russia's approach to the Korean Peninsula should be one of co-optation rather than isolation. Russia wants to be—and wants to be perceived as—a major player on the peninsula. This is a historic role that it has played and, in broad terms, it has been supportive of U.S. nonproliferation objectives in North Korea, though there are differences over approaches, tactics, and priorities. Should Moscow and Washington ever resume a high-level strategic dialogue, preventing the further growth of North Korean nuclear capabilities should be a high priority in their broader nonproliferation agenda.

Russia will pursue its goals on the Korean Peninsula in lockstep with China, and Beijing will want Moscow to have a voice at the table. Both countries can be counted on to restrain belligerent North Korean behavior that would risk a large-scale war or precipitate additional U.S. military deployments that both would find threatening, such as negotiations on regional missile defense arrangements or the reintroduction of U.S. tactical nuclear weapons on South Korean territory. Simply put, Russia can be part of the solution rather than part of the problem on the North Korea nuclear issue if the United States is willing to show flexibility on the issues of denuclearization and sanctions. Alternatively, along with Beijing, Moscow can be a spoiler, making it more difficult for Washington to achieve its preferred outcomes.

### Southeast Asia

When it comes to Russia's national security interests and pretensions to superpower status, there is not as much at stake in Southeast Asia as in Northeast Asia. Still, the United States faces the same geopolitical reality in both regions. The Kremlin will not allow any distance to develop between its positions and China's, barring a change in the trajectory of Chinese policies that is detrimental to Russian interests. Accordingly, Russia is likely to be of little geopolitical value to the United States in its efforts to balance against China in the region, especially in the South China Sea.

Moscow's main priority in Southeast Asia is to avoid antagonizing China over the disputes that roil the region. This posture is reflected in its endorsement of China's view that outside powers should not interfere in the territorial disputes over islands and maritime features in the South China Sea as well as in Russian-Chinese military exercises in the region. That said, Russia is a marginal actor at best in the South China Sea, and this is likely to remain the case for the indefinite future due to its limited interests there. Thus, any attempt by the United States to drive a wedge between China and Russia over Southeast Asia is doomed to fail and would only further aggravate tensions in the U.S.-China relationship.

In waging its great-power competition with Russia, the United States does not need to be overly concerned about countering every move Moscow makes to improve military and security cooperation with members of ASEAN. To be sure, Russia has enjoyed modest success in expanding its military presence in the region, concluding defense cooperation agreements with several countries that permit increased ship visits and logistics and operational support for Russian military operations as well as improved intelligence sharing. As a result of these arrangements, Russia's naval and air forces are able to sustain a higher operational tempo, and its military has improved capabilities to keep a closer eye on U.S. forces operating in the region.

Nonetheless, these enhancements need to be put into perspective. First, they have only marginally improved Russia's capacity for projecting military power in Southeast Asia, reflecting the overall deterioration of Russian forces in its Far Eastern MD. More importantly, Russia has not challenged the United States' two core interests in the region: ensuring freedom of navigation and maintaining the capability to project power there should China threaten the security of Taiwan. Russia has not interfered with freedom of navigation in the Western Pacific and would likely adopt a position of neutrality in any conflict between China and the United States over Taiwan. The bottom line is that U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific continue to enjoy overwhelming conventional military superiority over Russian forces.

Moreover, Russian inroads in the region notwithstanding, most members of ASEAN continue to value closer commercial and military relations with the United States, primarily because they want to diversify their relationships to maintain a posture of nonalignment, create more room to maneuver among the three great powers in the region, and hedge their bets against an expansionist China. Consequently, successful Russian efforts to expand trade, investment, nuclear-reactor and arms sales, energy exports, and infrastructure cooperation in the region should not be cause for U.S. alarm or even concern. These Russian overtures are likely to produce only modest results. Although the ASEAN market encompasses 600 million people, U.S. commercial and economic stakes in the region are modest—annual exports to ASEAN countries total roughly \$85 billion, or only 5.2 percent of all U.S. exports.<sup>95</sup> Russia is not a major source of capital or technology for Southeast Asian countries; its trade with ASEAN countries, as previously discussed, is minuscule, and the region is not a major destination for Russian energy exports. Vietnam's ties with Russia have not hampered the development of closer relations with the United States with expanded trade as well as social and diplomatic engagement. The same is true for Indonesia and Malaysia, the two other major regional powers.

## Continuity or Change?

The one-sided nature of Russia's policy in the Asia-Pacific and its embrace of China as a virtually exclusive partner on the world stage has sparked some controversy inside the country. Several academic and think-tank analysts have questioned the benefits and the wisdom of such a one-sided relationship since the so-called pivot of 2014.<sup>96</sup> While few, if any, challenge the necessity of good relations with Russia's ever-more powerful neighbor, some experts have pointed out that the partnership with China has delivered relatively little for Russia economically, diplomatically, or geopolitically.



The coronavirus pandemic has cast a shadow on the Russian-Chinese partnership. Anti-Chinese sentiments have long been present in parts of the Russian Far East and Siberia.<sup>97</sup> The spread of the virus from China to Russia has contributed to these feelings. In a rush to limit the pandemic, the Kremlin took steps targeting Chinese nationals in Russia, which prompted complaints from the Chinese authorities.<sup>98</sup> Russia closed its border with China in January—a move that China reciprocated in April to prevent the reverse spread of the virus from Russia.<sup>99</sup>

But these voices and incidents are highly unlikely to significantly change the relationship. Some analysts have even argued that Russia and China could become even closer as a result of the pandemic.<sup>100</sup> The prospect that China may have a more rapid and robust economic recovery indicates that Beijing could become an even more important market for Russian exports, while Europe—home to many of Russia's other principal trading partners—may lag behind. China's technological dominance, including in such spheres as 5G and artificial intelligence, which have great potential not only as engines of economic development but also of domestic societal control, are already proving highly attractive to the Kremlin as it looks ahead to years of slow economic growth, declining standards of living, and the possibility of popular unrest.

Moreover, Russia's partnership with China is a personal priority for Putin and is undoubtedly one of the great accomplishments of his two decades at the helm. A major adjustment, let alone a reversal of that relationship, would constitute an admission on the part of the Russian leader of a fundamental mistake in his foreign policy. With Putin poised to remain in office until at least 2036 and probably for the rest of his life, Russia's ever-closer partnership with China is here to stay.

Russia's top priorities in the Asia-Pacific lie beyond the Korean Peninsula and Southeast Asia, and Moscow does not have much to offer these potential partners. In both respects, Russia is content to serve as China's de facto junior partner. Thus, all roads the United States may pursue for gaining Moscow's support for or acquiescence to U.S. policies toward North Korea and in Southeast Asia run through Beijing. Because Russian and Chinese interests and priorities in both regions are highly convergent, any notion that the United States could drive a wedge between the two countries on these issues represents magical thinking.

The geopolitical geometry of great-power competition in the Asia-Pacific will not be triangular. China and the United States will be the main players in the contest for regional supremacy. Russia will be an interested but not terribly influential bystander, ready to take advantage of openings created by U.S. mistakes and miscues. This does not mean that Washington should or can ignore Moscow, but it does mean that U.S. leaders, experts, analysts, and politicians should not obsess about Russia stealing a march on the United States and eroding its influence in the region.

## About the Authors

**Eugene Rumer** is a senior fellow and the director of Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program. Prior to joining Carnegie, Rumer was the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the U.S. National Intelligence Council from 2010 to 2014. Earlier, he held research appointments at the National Defense University, the International Institute for Strategic Studies, and the RAND Corporation. He has also served on the National Security Council staff and at the State Department, taught at Georgetown University and the George Washington University, and published widely.

**Richard Sokolsky**, currently a nonresident senior fellow in Carnegie's Russia and Eurasia Program, worked in the State Department for six different administrations. During his tenure at State, he was the director of the arms control office from 1990 to 1997 and a member of the Secretary of State's Office of Policy Planning from 2005 to 2015. He has also been a senior fellow at Carnegie, the RAND Corporation, and the National Defense University. His writings have been published in numerous outlets.

**Aleksandar Vladicic** is a PhD student in the Department of Government at Cornell University. He was a 2019-2020 James C. Gaither Junior Fellow in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

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