Bobo LO

The Return: Russia and the Security Landscape of Northeast Asia

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Author

Bobo Lo is an Associate Research Fellow with the Russia/NIS Center at the French Institute of International Relations (Ifri). Previously, he was Director of the China and Russia Programs at the Centre for European Reform; Head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at Chatham House, and Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow. He is also a Non-Resident Fellow with the Lowy Institute, Sydney, Australia. He writes extensively on Russian foreign policy. His most recent book, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*, was published by Penguin Random House for the Lowy Institute in April 2017. His *Russia and the New World Disorder* (Brookings and Chatham House, 2015) was described by *The Economist* as "the best attempt yet to explain Russia's unhappy relationship with the rest of the world". He holds a PhD from the University of Melbourne and a MA from Oxford University. Recent publications include:

- "Greater Eurasia: The Emperor's New Clothes or an Idea whose Time Has Come?", *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 27, July 2019.
- "*Chutzpah* and Realism: Vladimir Putin and the Making of Russian Foreign Policy", *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 108, June 2018.

Abstract

Northeast Asia has emerged as a critical theater of Russian foreign policy in recent years. Moscow's historical Westerncentrism is giving way to a new awareness about the vital importance of the region. The "turn to the East" now has genuine substance and impetus. Yet Russian policy is a work in progress, more opportunistic than strategic. The security landscape is complex and fluid, and Moscow has struggled to manage its contradictions.

In many respects, the fundamentals have barely changed: the Kremlin's focus on undermining US strategic dominance; an abiding faith in the balance of power; and the reliance on traditional strengths such as military might, geopolitical reach, and the energy sector. Crucially, Moscow views Northeast Asia through a globalist lens; the region matters principally because of its wider implications for international order and governance.

Looking ahead, Russian policy will be shaped by developments beyond its control: how committed the United States is to its alliance network in the Asia-Pacific; whether China's rise is sustained, and in what form; and how the security situation on the Korean peninsula unfolds. But one constant will remain amidst the uncertainties: Russia is back as a serious player in Northeast Asia, and its engagement—and ambition—will only grow.

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Introduction

Russian policy toward Northeast Asia presents a curious paradox. On the one hand, the Kremlin is more serious about engagement with the Asia-Pacific than it has been since Soviet times. The "turn to the East" (*povorot na vostok*) is no longer simply a slogan, but has acquired real substance. There is now a genuine appreciation that the Asia-Pacific is emerging as the epicenter of global geopolitics and economic growth, and nowhere more so than in Northeast Asia.

On the other hand, this region, which encompasses China, Japan, North and South Korea, and the Russian Far East (RFE) still represents something of a backwater of Russian foreign policy. True, the Sino-Russian "comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era"[1] has become the cornerstone of Vladimir Putin's approach to international affairs. But this is a global relationship that already some time ago transcended the bounds of Northeast Asia. Tellingly, differences between Moscow and Washington, although significant, have lacked the intensity that has characterized US-Russian animus in other parts of the world.

Yet perhaps the disjunction between the immense significance of Northeast Asia and Moscow's comparative neglect is not such a mystery. One ready explanation is distance. Northeast Asia lies several thousand kilometers away from Russia's main centers of political power, economic development, and cultural tradition. While the Russian Far East is of key strategic importance, for a Moscow-centered elite it lacks the physical, intellectual, and emotional immediacy of European Russia or Ukraine.[2]

Another, related reason for the low profile of Northeast Asia in Russian foreign policy is unfamiliarity. The Kremlin's commitment to the Asia-Pacific is a very recent phenomenon. During the 1990s, President Boris Yeltsin reached out to China (in particular) and Japan, but Russian foreign policy remained overwhelmingly Westerncentric. Even under Vladimir Putin, Moscow has not had an Asia policy so much as a China-plus policy in Asia.[3] The phrase "turn to the East" only entered into

1. "China, Russia Agree to Upgrade Relations for New Era", *Xinhuanet*, 6 June 2019, www.xinhuanet.com.
2. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, "Rediscovering the Identity. Toward the Great Ocean—6: People, History, Ideology, Education", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 11 September 2018, p. 7.
3. B. Lo, *A Wary Embrace: What the China-Russia Relationship Means for the World*, Melbourne, Penguin Random House Australia, 2017, pp. 58-61. Russians have little time for the construct, "Indo-

common usage from 2011,[4] and at least initially there was little substance to it. This reflected not just a lack of interest among policy circles in Moscow, but also Russia's limited military and economic capabilities in Northeast Asia. The Kremlin appeared to accept that there was little point striving to assert Russian influence there, especially given the dominating presence of the United States and China.

Moscow's somewhat casual approach to this part of the world has also been a function of the region's relative stability until now. Despite the alarms provoked by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's (DPRK) nuclear weapons program, intensifying US-China strategic rivalry, and the existence of several long-running territorial disputes, the overall security situation has remained strangely calm. There have been no wars, unlike in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. There have been no seizures of territory.[5] There have been strident warnings of potential conflict, and the US government's National Security Strategy (NSS), National Defense Strategy (NDS), and Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) all emphasize the threat posed by DPRK nuclearization.[6] Nevertheless, the *history* of Northeast Asia has been remarkably peaceful since the end of the Korean war more than six decades ago.

The combination of distance, unfamiliarity, Russian weakness, and relative regional stability help explain why it is difficult to identify an overarching purpose in Moscow's approach toward Northeast Asia. There is a general "vision" embodied in the feeling that Russia should be actively involved in this most important of regions if it is to realize its destiny as a resurgent global power.[7] There are key relationships, above all the

Pacific", much favored by Western policymakers, but viewed in Beijing and Moscow as synonymous with containment of China—see B. Lo, "Once More With Feeling: Russia and the Asia-Pacific", Lowy Institute Analysis, 20 August 2019, www.lowyinstitute.org.

4. The expression, "Turn to the East", entered the discourse around 2010. See F. Lukyanov, "Turn to the East", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 15 February 2010, http://old.svop.ru. The first major public document on the subject was produced by the Russian National Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific (CSCAP): "Going East: Russia's Asia-Pacific Strategy", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 25 December 2010, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru. The subsequent popularity of the term may have been in response to the deterioration of Russia-West relations from 2011-12. But another plausible explanation is that it was a reaction to the 2008 global financial crisis, which simultaneously highlighted the failings of the West and the resilience of China.

5. China's acquisition and militarization of the Spratley and Paracel islands in the South China Sea falls well outside the scope of Northeast Asia.

6. "National Security Strategy of the United States of America", White House, December 2017, www.whitehouse.gov; "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America", US Department of Defense, 2018, https://dod.defense.gov; "Nuclear Posture Review", US Department of Defense, February 2018, https://media.defense.gov.

7. As Dmitri Trenin puts it, "Russia seeks a status that is equal to that of any other major world power". See D. Trenin, "Russia's Changing Identity: In Search of a Role in the 21st Century", Carnegie Moscow Center, 18 July 2019, https://carnegie.ru.

partnership with China. There are individual policies, for example in response to missile defense deployments in the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan. And then there are opportunistic responses to events, such as Putin's belated summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in April 2019, which came shortly after the failed meeting between US President Donald Trump and Kim in Hanoi.[8] However, these various components scarcely amount to a cohesive strategy.

But all this could be about to change. Against the background of growing confrontation between the United States and China, many of the relative certitudes that have hitherto characterized the security situation in Northeast Asia are giving way to new realities and anxieties. Today, there is growing talk of a Sino-Russian "authoritarian alliance".[9] The United States' alliance network in Northeast Asia is visibly fraying, partly as a result of Trump's nakedly transactional approach toward it,[10] but also because America's two most important regional allies, Japan and the ROK, are at loggerheads.[11] Meanwhile, Kim Jong-un has fast forwarded the development of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program.[12] And Russia itself may be abandoning its previous caution, emboldened by a sense of strategic convergence with China, and fueled by a spirit of grievance with the United States and Europe.

8. The Hanoi summit between Trump and Kim (27-28 February 2019) ended early due to irreconcilable differences over the timing and scale of sanctions relief in exchange for DPRK denuclearization. The Putin-Kim summit took place in Vladivostok less than two months later on 25 April. Originally, the Kremlin had expected Kim to attend the 70th anniversary of Victory Day in 2015, but the DPRK leader did not come for reasons that remain unclear. See "Kremlin: North Korea's Kim Jong Un Will Not Attend Victory Day Parade", *Moscow Times*, 30 April 2015, www.themoscowtimes.com.

9. See, for example, Richard Ellings and Robert Sutter (eds), *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation*, National Bureau of Asian Research, October 2018.

10. L. Seligman and R. Kramer, "Trump Asks Tokyo to Quadruple Payments for US Troops in Japan", *Foreign Policy*, 15 November 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com

11. "Japan-South Korea Ties 'Worst in Five Decades' as US Leaves Alliance Untended", *Washington Post*, 9 February 2019, www.washingtonpost.com. The reasons for the deterioration of relations are many and complex, but they include outstanding issues arising from the Japanese occupation of Korea in the Second World War and, in particular, the mistreatment of Korean "comfort women". Although Tokyo had thought this matter settled following the 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations, the administration of Moon Jae-in has sought to revisit the issue of reparations. The dispute escalated in the course of 2019 with Japan removing the ROK from the "white list" of its most favored trading partners, and Seoul retaliating by withdrawing from the General Security of Military Information Agreement (GSOMIA), a trilateral intelligence-sharing arrangement with the United States. The tensions have been exacerbated by increasingly vitriolic nationalist sentiments on both sides, although at the time of writing (February 2020) Seoul had temporarily suspended its withdrawal from the GSOMIA.

12. Since Kim succeeded his father Kim Jong-il as Supreme Leader in 2011, the DPRK's nuclear weapons program has been transformed. In 2017, the DPRK tested its first Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) and a thermonuclear device (hydrogen bomb)—See "North Korea", Nuclear Threat Initiative, www.nti.org.

This essay sets out to explain the drivers of Russian policy toward Northeast Asia, and the implications for regional and global security. The picture that emerges is mixed, comprising many disparate and sometimes contradictory elements. Russia's approach reflects a range of threat perceptions and strategic assessments. It combines "offense", such as active attempts at power projection, and "defense"—reflexive responses to perceived threats. It encompasses security, geopolitical, and geoeconomic goals. It employs a variety of instruments. It aspires to be "strategic" and visionary, yet remains a fragmented and opportunistic enterprise. Nevertheless, amidst all this untidiness, one core theme has emerged: Russia is back as a serious, if still secondary, actor in the security landscape of Northeast Asia. And its involvement is only set to grow over the next few years.

Russian Objectives in Northeast Asia

The Kremlin acts on the assumption that, in a dynamic and increasingly unpredictable security environment, flexibility is the most important quality of decision-making. At the same time, as in other areas of Russian foreign policy, strategic culture and atavistic instincts shape Moscow's approach to Northeast Asia. This is reflected in its essential objectives, which include:

- **Undermining US strategic dominance**, both because it is regarded as unhealthy and even immoral, and because it hinders the pursuit of concrete Russian interests. Moscow's perspective is globalist. Geopolitical shifts in Northeast Asia are seen as having far larger consequences. The Kremlin is not just targeting American primacy in the immediate region, but US *global* leadership and the norms and institutions of the liberal world order.
- **Geopolitical balancing**. While the Kremlin's immediate imperative is to counterbalance American power in Northeast Asia, it has no interest in seeing a hegemonic succession from the United States to China. Instead, it seeks a strategic equilibrium in which there is no dominant power. Moscow's broader vision of a multipolar world is as pertinent in Northeast Asia as it is in the wider Asia-Pacific region.[13]
- **Projecting Russian power and influence**. Establishing Russia as a global actor has been at the heart of Putin's foreign policy in recent years.[14] And whereas Moscow was once content to maintain a discreet profile in Northeast Asia, today there is a new confidence and assertiveness in promoting Russian interests. To this purpose, it is pursuing several tracks: beefing up its military presence and activities in the region; promoting Russia as a strategic energy supplier; and raising its diplomatic profile, most notably in relation to the Korean peninsula.
- **Reaffirming national sovereignty**. One of the signature themes of

13. "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 30 November 2016, www.mid.ru.
14. D. Trenin, "20 Years of Vladimir Putin: How Russian Foreign Policy Has Changed", *Moscow Times*, 27 August 2019, www.themoscowtimes.com.

Putin's foreign policy has been the vigorous assertion of state-led nationalism in its various dimensions. The most conspicuous example of this in Northeast Asia is the Kremlin's hardening stance on the territorial dispute with Japan. But it is also evident in the insistence on Russian sovereignty over most of the Arctic; the emphasis on the nation-state as the primary actor in international relations; and the regime's robust opposition to Western liberalism.

- **Managing nuclearization**. With the DPRK's nuclear weapons program seemingly a *fait accompli*, the challenge now is to navigate a fast-changing security environment as safely as possible. For Moscow, this entails seeking a larger regional accommodation through a multilateral security framework, in which Russia would play a leading role.
- **Alleviating direct security concerns**. Although the DPRK nuclear issue has received most attention, Moscow is no less concerned by the deployment of US missile defense systems in the ROK and Japan. Another source of anxiety is the condition of the Russian Far East, whose lack of population and backward development raise questions about its long-term future.
- **Reputational dividends**. The Kremlin faces a twin challenge: to portray Russia as a good regional citizen, in contrast to its poor reputation in much of the West; and to demonstrate that it is an influential player that should be treated with respect. The tensions in Russian policymaking are especially apparent here, as Moscow juggles its public commitment to multilateralism against its great power instincts.

The Elements of Moscow's Approach Toward Security in Northeast Asia

Undermining US strategic dominance

Such is the depth of the crisis in US-Russia relations that many in the West have come to believe that the principal *raison d'être* of Putin's foreign policy is to challenge, undermine, and confront Washington at virtually every opportunity. This mindset is said to reflect a deeper strategic culture within Russia, one that sees the Western powers as fundamentally hostile.[15]

But for much of the post-Cold War period, this has not been true of Moscow's attitude toward the American security presence in Northeast Asia. Generally speaking, Russian policymakers have tended to view this as a necessary "evil", the best practical guarantee of regional stability. The United States has channeled Japanese ambitions, kept the South and North Koreans in check, and ensured that the Chinese leadership has prioritized domestic growth and economic cooperation over foreign adventures. Moscow has from time to time criticized the US alliance network in Northeast Asia as "anachronistic", but given the lack of viable alternative arrangements there has been little serious suggestion that it should be dismantled.[16]

Today, a very different situation pertains. Undermining the US strategic presence, and in particular its alliance network, has become a core objective of Russian policy in Northeast Asia. The reasons for this change of approach extend well beyond an allegedly visceral loathing of America.

The most immediate driver is the sense that the US presence has not only outlived its usefulness, but become a destabilizing factor in the region. With US-Russia relations at their lowest ebb since the early 1980s, the concentration of American military power on Russia's eastern doorstep has exacerbated a sense of threat in Moscow. The main concern here is not

15. See, for example, K. Giles, *Moscow Rules: What Drives Russia to Confront the West*, Chatham House/Brookings, 2019, p. 165.
16. Author's conversations with Russian policymakers and commentators since the 1990s.

directly physical—endangering Russia's territorial integrity (the sparsely populated RFE)—but rather doubts about the future of strategic parity, particularly following the US decision to withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019.[17] It is indicative that Moscow's opposition to the deployment of THAAD (Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense) and Aegis Ashore missile defense systems in South Korea and Japan, respectively, has become much more vociferous lately.[18]

The Kremlin's militancy vis-à-vis Washington is also motivated by opportunism. Although the United States is seen as posing an increased threat to Russian interests, it is at the same time severely weakened. The alliance network with Japan and the ROK is in serious difficulty, as Trump publicly questions its value to the United States.[19] The quarrel between Tokyo and Seoul shows no sign of a satisfactory resolution. China's rise continued unabated, as Xi Jinping pursues an increasingly globalist foreign policy. And the Sino-Russian partnership is thriving.

In any event, there is a consensus in Moscow that the strategic picture in Northeast Asia (and the wider Asia-Pacific) has changed irrevocably. To place one's trust in the United States as the regional "stabilizer" is no longer appropriate. There is diminishing evidence that Washington is up to the job, or is even willing to try. Others must step in, including Russia, to accelerate the transition from an anachronistic, US-centered security system to a more collective model of relations better suited to meet the demands of the 21st century.[20]

Moscow's new-found inclination to challenge US dominance in Northeast Asia indicates a larger confidence in the overall prospects for Russian foreign policy. Part of this stems from buoyant assessments of the partnership with China, but it also derives considerable encouragement from recent Russian successes overseas, especially in the Middle East. Russia is now a much more assured as well as capable actor compared to just a few years ago,[21] while the opposite is seen to be true of the United

17. See Putin's response at the Q&A following his address at the 2019 Eastern Economic Forum, "Plenary Session of the Eastern Economic Forum", President of Russia, 5 September 2019, http://en.kremlin.ru.

18. US missile defense batteries were installed in Seongju in 2017 in the face of considerable Chinese, Russian, and local South Korean opposition. The Japanese government has yet to determine the site of the proposed Aegis Ashore system, which is not expected to be operational until 2025. See A. Panda, "Japanese defense minister tours Aegis Ashore test site in Hawaii", *The Diplomat*, 15 January 2020, https://thediplomat.com.

19. See A. Lukin, "Russian commentary on South Korea in 2019", Asan Forum, 31 December 2019, www.theasanforum.org.

20. S. Karaganov, T. Bordachev, *Rediscovering the Identity*", *op. cit*, p. 22. See also A. Kortunov, "Who Will Build the New World Order?", Russian International Affairs Council, 6 June 2019, https://russiancouncil.ru.

21. D. Trenin, "20 Years of Vladimir Putin: How Russian Foreign Policy Has Changed", *op. cit*.

States and its allies in Europe and Asia. The case for a bolder response to the US strategic presence in Northeast Asia has therefore become compelling.

Geopolitical balancing

Contemporary Russian strategic culture remains true to the spirit of 19th century realpolitik with its emphasis on the balance of power. Notwithstanding Moscow's schadenfreude at American discomfiture and exultation at the "shift in global power to the East",[22] it has no desire to see Beijing replace Washington as hegemon—a feeling reinforced by enduring uncertainties about China's long-term ambitions.

Accordingly, Putin has pursued a dual-track approach aimed at preserving the geopolitical equilibrium in Northeast Asia. At one level, Russia has gone down the path of regional multilateralism: seeking to make common cause with other parties to develop a security framework along the lines of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), only more effective.[23] In reality, though, such an arrangement remains a vague aspiration, somewhat reminiscent of then President Dmitry Medvedev's vain efforts to establish a new European security architecture a decade ago.[24]

Far more influential in terms of practical policy has been the attempt to mitigate Russia's growing dependence on China by diversifying its relations in Asia. The motivation here is not, as some suspect, mistrust of Beijing, but natural strategic caution. It is in the Russian tradition to avoid over-committing to one partner, however healthy their relationship may be.[25] So while Putin speaks in glowing terms of his personal rapport with Xi, and of the flourishing Sino-Russian partnership, he has also stepped up engagement with Asian countries—and leaders—across the board, including in Northeast Asia.[26]

22. S. Karaganov and D. Suslov, "A New World Order: A View from Russia", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 October 2018, https://eng.globalaffairs.ru.
23. Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept calls for "an inclusive, open, transparent, and equitable collective security and cooperation architecture in [the] Asia Pacific", see "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, www.mid.ru.
24. For background on the Medvedev proposals, see B. Lo, "Medvedev and the New European Security Architecture", Centre for European Reform (CER), *Policy Brief*, July 2009, www.cer.eu.
25. As D. Trenin rightly observes, "[t]he key and absolutely indispensable element of Russia's status has been independence." He notes, further, that "[n]ational independence implies a sovereign foreign policy." See D. Trenin, "Russia's Changing Identity", *op. cit.*
26. B. Lo, "Once More with Feeling: Russia and the Asia-Pacific", *Lowy Institute*, 20 August 2019, www.lowyinstitute.org.

It is important at this point to note the tension between Beijing's aspirations of regional leadership and Moscow's "multipolar" vision for the Asia-Pacific.[27] Thus far, this has had limited impact on Sino-Russian cooperation; both sides are preoccupied with more urgent and tangible concerns, above all their deteriorating relations with the United States. But the divergence in Russian and Chinese perspectives on the shape of regional order and governance matters in the longer term. It underlines that, for all the talk about an emerging authoritarian alliance, Moscow and Beijing are separate actors with their own particular perspectives and interests. Sometimes these intersect, but not always. Which is why Putin has sought to retain strategic flexibility.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Any balancing approach entails major trade-offs and choices. How does Moscow square prioritization of the Sino-Russian partnership with the quest for strategic flexibility? How to continue using their partnership as a force multiplier for Russian influence around the world while minimizing the collateral costs on other important relationships in Asia? In the Middle East, Moscow has been remarkably successful in prosecuting its interests while still managing to preserve a positive dynamic with all countries in the region. But in the Asia-Pacific, and Northeast Asia in particular, the challenges are even more complex and daunting. The stronger the bonds are with Beijing, the harder it is to convince others that Russia is an independent, strategically autonomous actor. For example, Moscow prides itself on taking an even-handed position on the Korean question, and to relations with Seoul and Pyongyang. Yet the credibility of this approach is suffering as Russia sides increasingly with China in, effectively, supporting North Korea's right to be a de facto nuclear weapons state (see below).[28]

The joint Russian-Chinese air patrol that flew near the Dokdo/Takeshima islands in July 2019 highlighted some of the issues—and the Kremlin's true priorities.[29] It showcased the close military

27. See B. Lo, *A Wary Embrace*, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-88.

28. The tensions are just as present on issues where Russia has no direct stake in the outcome, such as the territorial dispute between Tokyo and Beijing over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. Although Moscow has always maintained a neutral stance on the dispute, this does not preclude it from exercising leverage for other purposes. As a recent RIAC report has noted, "even the theoretical possibility of Moscow and Beijing forming a bloc on territorial disputes in [the] East China Sea is alarming for Japan"—See V. Nelidov *et al.*, "Russia-Japan Relations: New Stage of Development", *Working Paper* No. 50, *RIAC*, March 2019, https://russiancouncil.ru, p 11, p 13.

29. Two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers and two Chinese H-6 bombers conducted a joint air patrol in the vicinity of the islands. The South Korean air force fired several rounds of warning shots, while the Japanese issued a diplomatic protest. Seoul and Tokyo then argued with each other about whose airspace had been violated. (The islands are the subject of a long-running territorial dispute between them.) See "Joint Russian-Chinese patrol heightens tension in Korean peninsula", *Reuters*, 24 July 2019, www.theguardian.com.

cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, itself a function of a very public political convergence. It revealed that the Russian government was scarcely troubled by South Korean and Japanese sensitivities, and indeed saw an opportunity to play on tensions and weaknesses within the US alliance network in Northeast Asia. And it demonstrated the limits of Putin's efforts at regional balancing—and the reality that the Kremlin attaches far greater importance to working with China to counterbalance US global power than it does to hedging against China's rise in Asia.

Projecting Russian power and influence

It is customary in the West to portray Russia as a spoiler in international relations. Too weak to prosecute a positive agenda of its own, it is said to maximize its influence chiefly by preying on the shortcomings of others.[30] Even in Syria, widely regarded as Putin's greatest foreign policy success, Russia has operated less on the basis of a predetermined strategy than in response to American hesitation and European weakness.[31] (Though this has scarcely prevented it from seizing the initiative both on the battlefield and in the diplomatic arena.)

However, in the past few years there has been a shift in Moscow's mindset. The failings of the West have become "systematized" in Russian political consciousness—no longer seen as aberrations, but a new normal. This perception has encouraged Moscow to believe much more in its capacity to project real power and influence around the world, including in the Asia-Pacific. This is not to say that Russian self-confidence is as high as in Eastern Europe or the Middle East. But even in Northeast Asia, Moscow's former caution is starting to give way to a "can-do" attitude that goes beyond short-term opportunism.

We see this in Russia's growing involvement in the Korean question, highlighted by the Putin-Kim summit in April 2019, and the Sino-Russian push for a "freeze-for-freeze"—halting of the DPRK's nuclear build-up in return for an indefinite suspension of US-ROK military exercises. It is reflected in the increasing frequency and scale of military exercises with China ("Joint Sea", "Aerospace Security"),[32] and, most recently, in their

30. In the wake of Moscow's annexation of Crimea, US President Barack Obama declared that "Russia is a regional power that is threatening some of its immediate neighbors—not out of strength, but out of weakness." See S. Wilson, "Obama Dismissed Russia as 'Regional Power' Acting out of Weakness", *Washington Post*, 25 March 2014, www.washingtonpost.com.

31. See N. Kozhanov, "Russian Policy Across the Middle East: Motivations and Methods", Chatham House, 21 February 2018, www.chathamhouse.org, p. 6.

32. "Joint Sea" describes the series of naval exercises Russia and China have been conducting since 2012. The most recent took place in the Yellow Sea and East China from 29 April to 4 May 2019. Most of the exercises have been in Asian waters—Sea of Japan, East China Sea, Sea of

joint air patrol over the Japanese/South Korean ADIZ (Air Defense Identification Zone) last July.[33] Elsewhere, Moscow is extending its long-range air patrols and overflights; building up its military facilities in the South Kurile islands/Northern Territories; expanding its influence into Mongolia;[34] and hawking Russian arms throughout the Asia-Pacific.[35]

Nor is the projection of Russian power and influence limited to traditional areas of security engagement. Policymakers in Moscow are bullish about the potential for Russia to become the strategic energy provider to Northeast Asia. In no other area does opportunity appear so well matched by capacity. Far more than in the military sphere, Moscow is able to project serious power—not in the sense of exercising crude leverage as a self-styled "energy superpower" (a nonsensical notion), but in promoting Russia as a vital contributor to Asian economic development. Regional demand for fossil fuels is set to rise substantially in coming decades, and Russia is uniquely placed to meet this.[36] Importantly, too, Moscow is committed to diversifying both its customer base and sources of foreign investment, looking beyond China to Japan, South Korea, India, and the Arabian Gulf.[37] The prospects look especially promising for Novatek's LNG (liquefied natural gas) projects on the Yamal and Gydan peninsulas in the Arctic. Yamal LNG is on stream, and Novatek's LNG-2 project is expected to commence production by the middle of the decade.[38]

Okhotsk, South China Sea—but there have also been joint drills in the Mediterranean (11-21 May 2015) and the Baltic Sea (21-28 July 2017). For further details, see M. Paul, "Partnership on the High Seas: China and Russia's Joint Naval Manoeuvres", SWP, June 2019, www.swp-berlin.org.

"Aerospace Security" refers to the two countries' joint computer-simulated missile defense exercises. See A. Kowalewski, "Chinese-Russian Defense and Security Ties: Countering US Encirclement", *China Brief*, Vol. 18, No. 9, The Jamestown Foundation, 31 May 2018, https://jamestown.org.

33. See note 29 above.

34. "Russia, Mongolia sign new treaty to bring partnership to 'whole new level'", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 3 September 2019, www.rferl.org.

35. Russia has sold the S-400 anti-air missile system to China and India, and the Su-35 multipurpose fighter to China, Vietnam, and Indonesia. See A. Kruglov, "Business Booming for Russia's Arms Traders", *Asia Times*, 22 April 2019, www.asiatimes.com.

36. Chinese gas import demand, for example, is expected to rise from 91 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2017 to anywhere between 170 and 340 bcm by 2030. See J. Henderson, "Russia's gas pivot to Asia: another false dawn or ready for lift-off?", Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, November 2018, p. 8, https://www.oxfordenergy.org

37. The Japanese companies, Mitsui and Mitsubishi, have been long-time partners in the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas project, while India's ONGC (Oil and Natural Gas Cooperation) holds a significant stake in the Vankor oil and gas field.

38. See J. Henderson, "Russia's Gas Pivot to Asia", p. 16. Equity ownership in the Yamal LNG project is divided between Novatek (50.1 percent), CNPC (China National Petroleum Corporation—20 percent), Total (20 percent), and the Silk Road Fund (9.9 percent). Chinese banks have also provided some USD 12 billion in loans and project financing. Equity ownership for the Arctic LNG-2 project has yet to be decided, but Novatek has already signed preliminary cooperation agreements with JOGMEC

Although the means of projecting Russian power and influence are disparate, they all point to a new mood of optimism in Moscow. They also reflect shifting realities in the region and beyond: Russia's expanding military capabilities in the Western Pacific;[39] the growth of the Sino-Russian partnership; the self-inflicted disruption of the US alliance network in Asia as well as Europe; the confusion and divisions of Western decision-making; the opening-up of Arctic resources and waterways as a result of the polar ice-melt; and heightened security anxieties in Northeast Asia and the Asia-Pacific more broadly. There is a long way to travel, and many obstacles to overcome, but what was once a nebulous ambition to position Russia as a serious player in East Asia is developing real momentum.

Reaffirming national sovereignty

Russia's growing assertiveness reflects a strong sense of sovereign entitlement. In Northeast Asia, this is exemplified by its increasingly tough stance on the territorial dispute with Japan over the South Kuriles/Northern Territories. While Putin has offered to concede Shikotan and the Habomais as per the so-called "Khrushchev formula" of 1956, the price he seeks to extract in return is very high—and getting higher. In addition to a peace treaty formally ending the Second World War, he is pushing for Japanese acknowledgment that *all* the islands (including Shikotan and the Habomais) are, and have always been, sovereign Russian territory; demanding the non-deployment of the Aegis Ashore missile defense system; increasing the pressure on Tokyo to downsize its alliance with the United States; and seeking major Japanese investment into the islands.[40]

Moscow's acute sensitivities on questions of sovereignty are also evident in its wariness toward foreign involvement in the development of the Russian Far East. In his public pronouncements Putin has been very welcoming. His address at the 2019 Eastern Economic Forum was a lengthy advertisement about the business opportunities available in the

(Japanese Oil, Gas and Metals National Cooperation), KOGAS (Korea Gas Corporation), and Saudi Aramco, while there is also strong interest from India and Qatar.

39. According to one source, Russian air force units in East Asia received 300 upgraded aircraft during the period 2013-2018, while the Pacific Fleet is to receive 70 new warships by 2026. See A. Muraviev, "Russia Is a Rising Military Power in the Asia-Pacific, and Australia Needs to Take It Seriously", *The Conversation*, 30 October 2019, http://theconversation.com.

40. J. Brown, "Abe's Russia Policy: All Cultivation and No Fruit", *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2019, p. 154. See also Putin's remarks at the 2019 Eastern Economic Forum, "Plenary Session of the Eastern Economic Forum", *op. cit.*

RFE.[41] But in practice there has always existed a tension between Moscow's desire for foreign investment, and its inability (or reluctance) to create the conditions—transparency, rule of law, viable infrastructure—that might attract substantial commercial interest.[42]The result is that the RFE has not been economically integrated into Northeast Asia. Its natural resources reach Asian markets, and it is dependent on consumer imports from its neighbours, but the RFE itself remains an economic backwater.[43] All this highlights that in Russia, far more than most countries, security concerns (however loosely defined) almost invariably trump economic requirements.

A security-minded defensiveness likewise permeates Moscow's approach to the Arctic. Although physically and historically the Arctic falls well beyond the purview of Northeast Asia, it has become an increasingly significant area of Sino-Russian interaction. China's description of itself as a "near-Arctic state" has provoked some concern in Moscow that it may seek in time to challenge Russian sovereignty.[44] To date, Beijing has focused almost entirely on financing and developing LNG cooperation with Russia on the Yamal and Gydan peninsulas, and opening up the Northern Sea Route (NSR) for commercial navigation. But in the longer term there is potential for trouble; the Chinese view that the Arctic belongs to "humanity" in general (like Antarctica) is diametrically opposed to Moscow's position that these waters belong to Russia alone.[45] Given the rate at which the Arctic polar ice-cap is melting, such contradictions could play out sooner than expected.

Finally, it should be noted that affirming Russian national sovereignty in Northeast Asia is not limited to protecting physical borders. It is also an idea, or rather set of ideas. In the first instance, it reflects an abiding belief in the nation-state as the essential building-block of international relations. Putin unequivocally opposes the Western-led construct of a universal, rules-based liberal order—and liberalism itself.[46] More ambitiously, he

41. *Ibid*.
42. A. Gabuev, "Why Foreign Investors Steer Clear of Russia's Far East", *Carnegie Moscow Center*, 9 September 2019, https://carnegie.ru.
43. J. Pepe, "The 'Eastern Polygon' of the Trans-Siberian rail line: a critical factor for assessing Russia's strategy toward Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific", *Asia Europe Journal*, May 2019
44. P. Gudev, "Arkticheskie ambitsii Podnebesnoj" [The Arctic Ambitions of the Heavenly Kingdom], *Rossiia v global'noj politike*, 14 September 2018, https://globalaffairs.ru.
45. The Conclusion of the Chinese government's 2018 White Paper on Arctic Policy states: "The future of the Arctic concerns the interests of the Arctic States, the wellbeing of non-Arctic States and that of humanity as a whole. The governance of the Arctic requires the participation and contribution of all stakeholders." See "China's Arctic Policy", The State Council of the People's Republic of China, January 2018, www.gov.cn.
46. See Putin's notorious interview with the *Financial Times* in the margins of the Osaka G8 summit: "Vladimir Putin Says Liberalism Has 'Become Obsolete'", *Financial Times*, 28 June 2019, www.ft.com.

seeks to posit an alternative normative consensus in the world, based loosely on the principle of "each to their own" in a nation's domestic affairs. The presence of several authoritarian regimes in Northeast Asia—Russia, China, the DPRK—strengthens the resistance against liberal universalism, and bolsters the domestic and international legitimacy of the Putin regime (and its actions). For the Kremlin, such an outcome is security-enhancing in the most visceral sense.

Managing nuclearization

It may seem odd that addressing the threat of DPRK nuclearization should rank fairly low among Moscow's objectives in Northeast Asia. Yet closer examination of Russian policy reveals that this is more logical than it looks. In the first place, Moscow does not view the DPRK's nuclear weapons program as a direct threat to Russia.[47] In the event of conflict, there is no risk that Pyongyang would deploy its missiles against Russian targets; it would be far more likely to strike at Seoul, Tokyo, and even US targets. Any collateral damage would also be relatively limited. Although the RFE comprises more than a third of the territory of the Russian Federation, it has a population of just over six million people (out of a total 146 million). Russia's main centers of political and economic power, and urban concentrations, would be spared the worst.

This is not to say, of course, that the Kremlin welcomes the nuclearization of the DPRK. In addition to its destabilizing impact on regional security, this devalues one of Russia's few claims to be a global power. With each expansion of the nuclear "club", the less exclusive it becomes.[48] Then there is the constant worry about the leakage of nuclear weapons technology to other actors. Nevertheless, Moscow recognizes the DPRK's nuclear arsenal as an inescapable reality, and regards the US goal of "complete, verifiable, and irreversible" denuclearization as entirely unrealistic.[49] Its main priority instead is to stabilize the regional security and strategic environment, and forestall a US escalation that could set off a spiraling conflict. Even if the latter were avoided, continuing tensions

47. As Artyom Lukin has remarked in relation to the Vladivostok summit: "Putin signaled that he is a player in the North Korea game, but his stakes in the game are probably not as high as those of other players." See A. Lukin, "The Putin and Kim Rendezvous in Vladivostok: A Drive-By Summit", *38 North*, 2 May 2019, www.38north.org.
48. *ibid*.
49. A. Gabuev, "Bad Cop, Mediator or Spoiler: Russia's Role on the Korean Peninsula", Carnegie Moscow Center, 24 April 2019, https://carnegie.ru. See also A. Lankov, "Strategic Stability in the Twenty-First Century: The North Korean Nuclear Threat", Carnegie Moscow Center, 23 November 2018, https://carnegie.ru.

would give Washington a compelling reason to maintain a large military presence in Northeast Asia.[50]

Consistent with this perspective, Moscow believes that the best course is for all parties to work toward a larger multilateral accommodation and security framework, rather than try to achieve the impossible: reverse the DPRK's nuclear program. The challenge is how to translate this somewhat abstract purpose into concrete policy.

The first step became clear some time ago, with the ostensibly Sino-Russian (but actually made-in-Beijing) "double freeze" proposal: a halt in the further development of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program in exchange for the suspension of US-ROK military exercises. This quid pro quo would entail endorsement of North Korea's nuclear weapons status, since any suspension would not apply to existing facilities and capabilities. The Kim regime would hold on to its nuclear gains of the past few years.[51] Moreover, "freeze-for-freeze" would almost certainly be the precursor to a larger bargain, one that would favor North Korean, Chinese, and Russian interests over those of the United States, Japan, and South Korea. Thus, the price for continued suspension of DPRK nuclear weapons development would most probably include a peace treaty formally ending the Korean war, comprehensive security guarantees for the Kim regime, substantial economic assistance to North Korea, and the suspension or cancellation of US missile defense deployments in South Korea and Japan.[52]

The Russian government understands that such a one-sided deal will not come about anytime soon. But importantly it can live with the status quo—one that consolidates the DPRK's de facto nuclear status; exacerbates doubts about Washington's commitment to its security alliances with Tokyo and Seoul; plays on Trump's eagerness to conclude an eye-catching deal with Kim; and opens the way to an increasingly prominent role for Russia. Moscow thinks that time is on its side. It bears no direct responsibility for the current impasse, yet benefits from it. In the meantime, the Kremlin continues to promote the return of the suspended Six-Party talks, a process that, for all its limitations, nevertheless formalized Russia's status within the group of decision-making powers on

50. *ibid*.

51. One idea circulating in Moscow is that of "nuclear emancipation": the DPRK would be recognized as a nuclear weapons power, but of a lesser order. See A. Barannikova, "What Russia Thinks About North Korea's Nuclear Weapons", *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 24 April 2019, https://thebulletin.org.

52. In this spirit, the Korea specialist and former Russian MFA official Georgy Toloraya calls for a shift from CVID (comprehensive, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization) to CRID (conditional, reciprocal, and incremental denuclearization)—"From CVID to CRID: A Russian Perspective", *38 North*, 26 December 2018, www.38north.org.

the Korean question.[53] Revival of the Six-Party format would bring closer Moscow's longer-term aim of a broader, multilateral accommodation in Northeast Asia.[54]

The importance of the Korean nuclear question to Moscow is ultimately more about geopolitics than hard security. Its resolution or stabilization matters above all because it would lead to a reduction of American influence; facilitate the emergence of a more "multipolar" strategic environment; and enhance Russia's prospects of asserting itself as a sovereign (rather than merely China-compliant) actor in the Asia-Pacific. Conversely, aggravation of the security situation on the Korean peninsula would generate all kinds of adverse consequences for Moscow: guaranteeing the retention of large numbers of American troops in Northeast Asia; strengthening the US alliance network; and potentially sidelining Russia in a region where it is significantly outmatched by both the United States and China.

Alleviating direct security concerns

Moscow's view of the security landscape in Northeast Asia is sanguine for the most part. It tends to see the region more as a source of strategic opportunities than of threats. Fears of Chinese irredentism and demographic "invasion", which were strong in the 1990s, have largely subsided. Although Japan continues to push for the recovery of the South Kuriles/Northern Territories, it is committed to achieving this through diplomatic means. The current South Korean government of President Moon Jae-in is perhaps the most sympathetic toward Russia in the history of the relationship.[55] And while the United States remains hostile toward Russia, these days policy-makers in Washington see China as posing a considerably greater threat to American interests, especially in Asia.

Despite all this, the Kremlin loses few opportunities to talk up the threats facing Russia. In particular, it has highlighted the dangers arising from the installation of the THAAD system in South Korea, and intended deployment of the Aegis Ashore system in Japan. According to Putin, such measures threaten strategic stability, and demand an "appropriate"

53. The Six-Party process began in 2003. It involved several rounds of talks over the next few years, but collapsed in 2009 after the DPRK withdrew following a UN Security Council resolution criticizing it for conducting a (failed) satellite test.

54. "Kremlin: Six-Party Talks the Only Efficient Way to Tackle North Korea", *Reuters*, 24 April 2019, www.reuters.com.

55. Seoul's "New Northern Policy" envisages expanded cooperation with Russia (and other regional states) in a number of areas, including energy, infrastructure, fisheries, and agriculture. More concretely, bilateral trade grew by 29 percent in 2018. See A. Rinna, "Decrypting the Russia-South Korea Relationship", East Asia Forum, 13 June 2019, www.eastasiaforum.org.

response from Russia.[56] In fact, this controversy has little to do with supposed Russian vulnerabilities in Northeast Asia, but serves as a convenient rationalization of Moscow's actions. It legitimizes Sino-Russian cooperation in countering missile defense and, more recently, in the development of early warning systems.[57] It makes it more likely that Beijing will actively support Russia in opposing NATO missile defense deployments in Europe, which are of far greater concern to Moscow. And it "justifies" Russia's own military build-up in Northeast Asia: the building of infrastructure on the South Kuriles; increased air patrols along the western Pacific;[58] and the strengthening of the Pacific Fleet. The bogey of missile defense is useful, too, in accentuating the moral contrast between a US-led alliance that stands accused of various forms of escalation and a Russia that has hitherto exercised strategic restraint in Northeast Asia.

By emphasizing the threat posed by missile deployment, albeit in two regions separated by several thousand kilometers, Russia can continue to enjoy the wider, force multiplier, benefits of a tight relationship with China. Yet so far Moscow has been careful not to overplay its hand. A policy of relative restraint serves its interests well. It retains flexibility by not over-committing to a Beijing-led agenda. It keeps open the possibility of leveraging an eventual deal with Tokyo over the disputed islands in return for non-deployment of Aegis Ashore. And in general an approach based on the notion that "the threat is worse than the execution" has the advantage of being both cheaper and safer.

Gaining reputational dividends

Exercising restraint also dovetails with the Kremlin's ongoing efforts to portray Russia as a constructive player and all-round good international citizen. This purpose has become more salient as the regional environment has become more fluid and unpredictable. Trump's open contempt for the

56. At the 2019 Eastern Economic Forum, Putin pointedly remarked that Russia had two large naval bases in Vladivostok, and a nuclear submarine base in Kamchatka: "This is a very serious business. And we certainly cannot turn a blind eye to [the deployment of missile defense systems in Japan and South Korea]". See "Plenary Session of the Eastern Economic Forum", *op. cit.*

57. It is unclear at this stage how far Russia will assist China in developing its missile early warning capabilities. As Dmitri Trenin points out, such cooperation may actually contribute to strategic stability in the region since it could introduce a measure of predictability and confidence. However, it is the symbolism of closer Sino-Russian military partnership that is of prime concern to policy-makers in Washington. See D. Trenin, "How Cozy Is Russia and China's Military Relationship?", Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 November 2019, https://carnegie.ru.

58. For example, on 15 February 2019 four Tu-95s and four Su-35s flew two separate missions in international waters off Japan. The flights marked the largest presence of Russian military planes near Japan since Moscow resumed long-range patrols in 2014. See F.-S. Gady, "Japan Scrambles Fighters to Intercept 4 Strategic Bombers and 4 Fighter Jets", *The Diplomat*, 16 February 2019, https://thediplomat.com.

notion of a "rules-based international order" has enabled Russia to portray itself in a more favorable light. Similarly, China's rise (and ever more globalist foreign policy) has provoked a blow-back from a growing number of countries: not just the United States, but also EU member-states (including France) and leading Asian regional powers, such as India, Japan, and Australia.[59]

Paradoxically, Russia's relatively low profile in the Asia-Pacific and Northeast Asia has worked to its advantage. Unlike in Europe or the post-Soviet space, it has not behaved as a self-entitled great power. Its record is fairly "clean", even if this is principally due to a lack of capacity. Nonetheless, this has meant that the countries of the region, authoritarian and democratic alike, are more inclined to work with Russia than against it. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's persistent efforts to engage the Kremlin[60] reflect Tokyo's apprehension about Chinese power. But they also point to an underlying conviction that Putin's Russia is a pragmatic actor with which it can do business.[61] It is no coincidence that, despite the general worsening of Russia-West relations and the hardening of the Russian position on the territorial dispute, official contacts between Tokyo and Moscow have actually expanded in recent years. In addition to Putin's state visit to Japan in December 2016 and the 2+2 framework of the two countries' foreign and defense ministers, there have also been meetings between the respective heads of the National Security Council/Secretariat and Chiefs of (Defense) Staff.[62] A peace treaty may still be a distant prospect, but there has at least been a partial normalization of relations.

Moscow is not much interested in a good international reputation for its own sake, but only if it can be converted into tangible influence. Thus, its advocacy of a multilateral security regime in Northeast Asia is not motivated by an intrinsic desire for stability, but implicitly recognizes that

59. The main rationale behind President Macron's push to achieve a rapprochement with Russia is to find a way of counterbalancing or mitigating China's rising power. Foreshadowing a world that would center on "two main focal points: the United States and China", Macron has argued that "pushing Russia away from Europe [would be] a major strategic error, because we are either pushing it toward isolation, which heightens tensions, or toward other great powers such as China, which would not at all be in our interest." See "Ambassadors' Conference—Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic", Ambassade de France en Lettonie, 27 August 2019, https://lv.ambafrance.org.

60. Abe has met Putin on more than 25 occasions, almost as often as Xi has.

61. The 2019 RIAC report on Russia-Japan relations notes that "Japan does not see Russia as a military adversary and does not consider its military potential as a threat to national security. The 'threat from the north' idea was removed from Tokyo's military concept in the early 1990s ... The current military concept ... mainly focuses on the military threats emanating from China and North Korea." See V. Nelidov *et al.*, "Russia-Japan Relations: New Stage of Development", *op. cit*, p. 11.

62. *East Asian Strategic Review 2019*, National Institute for Defense Studies, Japan, pp. 145-47.

a regional order co-managed by several powers represents the best possible geopolitical outcome for Russia—and certainly far more promising than either a US-dominated system or a China-America bipolarity. Putin's multilateral outreach is consistent with, and indeed serves, the self-interested aim of projecting Russian power.

Yet convincing others that Russia is a good multilateralist is not easy, not least because it runs against the great power instincts of the Putin elite. The fall-out from the joint Russia-China air patrol in July 2019 highlighted the problem. On that occasion, Moscow decided there was greater advantage to be gained through a high-profile demonstration of Sino-Russian power (and convergence) than in playing the part of solid regional citizen.[63] Such contradictions between traditional geopolitical calculus on the one hand, and enlightened multilateralism on the other, are likely to recur more frequently in an increasingly fraught security context.

63. It is striking that Putin himself has started to refer to the relationship as one between allies: "This is an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership." See "Vladimir Putin Spoke at the Final Plenary Session of the 16th Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club", President of Russia, 3 October 2019, http://en.kremlin.ru. Beijing, though, remains averse to describing ties with Moscow in such terms.

The Evolution of Russian Policy

The profile of Northeast Asia in Russian foreign policy has risen considerably in the last few years. In part, this is a natural reaction to the crisis in relations with the West following Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the subsequent imposition of Western sanctions on Russia. Under the pressure of circumstances, and the fear of diplomatic isolation, the Russian elite has modified its historical Westerncentrism.

However, it would be wrong to see Moscow's "turn to the East" as simply a by-product of the souring of relations with the West, which might have been avoided if only the latter had been more sensitive to Russian security and geopolitical concerns. The reality is that the Asia-Pacific, and Northeast Asia in particular, was already emerging as the epicenter of global politics and economic growth over a decade ago. The 2008 financial crash highlighted a transformation that was well under way.

It has taken Russian policy-makers some time to grasp the implications of this transformation. For all the rhetoric about a shift in global power away from the West, they acted as if very little had in fact changed. Russian foreign policy continued to focus on the United States as the global "hegemon", while economic and cultural ties with Europe prospered. To be sure, the Sino-Russian partnership went from strength to strength, but Northeast Asia *as a region* figured only intermittently in the ruling elite's horizons.

Today, a new consciousness is apparent, both about the importance of Northeast Asia in regional and global affairs, and the strategic opportunities opening up for Russia. Far from losing its appeal, "old-fashioned" power projection is back. Viewed from Moscow, the world is reverting to great power geopolitics following a brief, post-modern interlude characterized by "soft power" and the illusion of positive-sum outcomes.[64] This perception is reinforced by the conviction that Russia's comparative advantages lie precisely in the traditional virtues of military power and geopolitical reach.[65]

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64. See, for example, S. Karaganov and D. Suslov, "A New World Order: A View from Russia", *op. cit*.
65. *ibid*.

That said, the Kremlin's default mode still leans toward the conservative. There is an implicit acknowledgment that Russia does not yet have the means to play a leading role in the region. It can influence events to some degree, but aiming for something more ambitious runs the risk of embarrassing failure or, worse still, setting it directly against the United States or even China in some scenarios. Putin has shown little inclination to take such a chance.

Russia's approach toward Northeast Asia reflects these contradictions and pressures. It does not form a cohesive or coherent strategy, but is very much a work in progress, exemplifying former Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping's phrase, "crossing the river while feeling the stones."[66] It is imbued with a spirit of experimentation and cautious improvisation: probing for openings, remaining flexible as to means, and taking advantage of opportunities as they arise. But in the process it has absorbed at least one essential truth: Russia's long-term future depends on a much more substantial and effective engagement with the region.

66. Although Deng was talking about Chinese economic reform, his phrase is no less apposite in describing Moscow's approach toward Northeast Asia.

Outlook

Looking ahead, the question is not whether Russia will sustain its heightened interest in Northeast Asia. In light of developments in the region, and Russia's own strategic circumstances, that is a given. What is much more uncertain are the specifics of Moscow's approach over the next few years.

To a large extent, the future course of Russian policy is out of its hands. Moscow's responses will inevitably be dictated by events and factors beyond its control: how committed the United States is to its alliance network in the Asia-Pacific; whether China's rise is sustained, and in what form; how the security situation on the Korean peninsula unfolds; and whether Japan remilitarizes and moves toward strategic autonomy. Russia will have some input in all these areas, but it is unlikely to exert a primary influence.

Nevertheless, we can expect a significant expansion of Russian political, economic, and military activity in Northeast Asia. The surge in interest over the past few years is not an aberration, but rather a harbinger of growing Russian involvement throughout the Asia-Pacific. Crucially, though, Moscow will try to work with other players, rather than strike out alone. Today, its partner of choice is China, but Putin is clearly aiming to expand Russia's options and spread the geopolitical and geoeconomic risk—as indeed he must if it is to become a genuinely sovereign actor in the region.

The state of Russia's major relationships will have a decisive impact on its decision-making. If the Sino-Russian partnership continues to develop healthily, Kremlin self-confidence may manifest itself in more assertive behavior. We have already seen examples of this in recent times: joint military exercises, air patrols, and diplomatic initiatives such as the 2019 Putin-Kim summit in Vladivostok. Conversely, any emerging tensions between Moscow and Beijing—say, in Central Asia or in the Arctic—would have a crimping effect on Russian actions.

With the Sino-Russian partnership seemingly set fair, the most uncertain variables are likely to be America's relationships with China and Russia. If the dynamic between Washington and Beijing continues to deteriorate, as it shows every sign of doing, then the temptation for Moscow to mix in troubled waters could prove irresistible—whether as a

self-styled mediator, geopolitical swing power, or "pragmatic" supporter of Beijing in the hope of obtaining Chinese quid pro quo in Europe and the Middle East. But if the United States and China reach some sort of strategic understanding, then Russia will probably adhere to a more conservative, temporizing approach.

The most interesting scenario is if a rapprochement takes place between Washington and Moscow. This could conceivably occur if Trump is elected for a second presidential term in November 2020. Although American hopes that Putin can be peeled away from Xi are unrealistic, a Trump-Putin personal bargain could radically change the geopolitical calculus in Northeast Asia. For one thing, Trump 2.0 might feel even less constrained than before in running down the US alliance network in the region, thereby obviating the need for Moscow (or Beijing) to do any heavy lifting. The American strategic presence would erode naturally, as it has in parts of the Middle East. Equally, Japan and the ROK might step up their efforts to engage with Moscow, as a hedge against Chinese power and US unreliability. Russia would be well-placed to exploit these insecurities.

Such speculations raise the question of where the Kremlin's end-point lies. What would be the optimal security and geopolitical outcomes for Russia in Northeast Asia? It seems improbable that Putin (or a successor) will attempt to restore its Soviet-era strength in the region, largely because of a lack of capacity. But neither will Moscow be content just to make up the numbers; its sense of "great power-ness" (*derzhavnost'*) will not permit such modesty, even if the time is not ripe to translate aspiration into action. It is also hard to see Russia reconciling itself to the position of junior partner in a Sino-Russian condominium.[67] For this is not only a matter of national pride, but also of prudence. As noted earlier, Russia has always avoided depending on one country, however strong their relationship might appear. There is no reason, or evidence, to suppose that Putin will abandon this habit, particularly given Beijing's transparent ambitions of regional leadership and the sometimes difficult history of the bilateral relationship.[68]

Russia's approach toward security in Northeast Asia will retain several abiding features of its broader foreign policy: strategic ambition, but tailored to local conditions; improvisation and tactical opportunism; and flexibility of means. The very fluidity and uncertainty of the regional

67. As Trenin warns, "in the long run, Russia needs to balance its relationship with its giant and fast-growing neighbor, so as to protect its own sovereignty and avoid becoming a mere sidekick"—see D. Trenin, "How Cozy Is Russia and China's Military Relationship?", *op. cit.*
68. The lessons of the collapse of the Sino-Soviet "unbreakable friendship", and the subsequent freeze in relations lasting nearly three decades, still resonate strongly on both sides.

environment puts a premium on adaptability. Such an environment suits the Putin regime. Free from the burden of expectations and historical determinism, it can respond flexibly. In sharp contrast to the United States or China, there is little pressure on Russia to deliver. And it benefits from the fact that most countries in the region are either favorably disposed toward it or, at worst, see it as a lesser threat than at least one of the "Big Two". Over the next few years, Putin can be expected to nurse these advantages as Russia's role and influence in Northeast Asia steadily expands.