

Understanding the Intricacies Between Southeast Asia and Russia

Abstract

Over the past thirty years, the Russian Federation has continuously made efforts to tighten its ties with the Southeast Asian region. Yet, Russia has made rather insignificant progress in the region when compared to powers like China and the U.S. This article seeks to examine the ASEAN-Russia relationship in terms of its historical relation, cultural relation, political and security relation and economic and trade relation. From these areas of cooperation, it can be observed that Russia has remained a peripheral player in the region. Despite this, Russia has an increasingly important role in countering the geostrategic influence of China and the U.S. The article moves on to analyzing Russia's role in the region, particularly how it attempts to achieve its foreign policy goals amidst the power rivalry between China and the U.S. Finally, the paper looks at how Southeast Asian countries have a growing interest in tightening its connections with Russia, for both economic and security reasons in light of the China-U.S. struggle for power, ASEAN's economic future and the novel COVID-19.

Keywords: Russia, ASEAN, Southeast Asia, Foreign Policy, Culture, History, Economy

Introduction

In the year of 1967, five Southeast Asian countries, namely Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand formed an alliance to promote stability in the region amidst the polarized atmosphere of the Cold War [1]. This alliance is formally known as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam subsequently joined the Association [2]. The ten member states of ASEAN have a population of 622 million people with a combined GDP of USD \$2.6 trillion as of 2014, ranking the seventh largest economy in the world [3].

Russia's relation with the regional bloc dates back to 1994, when it became a founding member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), soon after which it was formally admitted as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner in 1996 [4]. Despite this, Russia has been comparatively unsuccessful in leveraging its political and economic influence in Southeast Asia, lagging behind the U.S. and China [5]. Since the 2000s, Russia has been paying more attention to deepening relations with countries in the Southeast Asian region. This is because it is believed that closer relations with ASEAN states would help reduce the risks of Russia becoming increasingly and overly dependent on China, while Russia can also show the West that it is still a great power in the international order, which should be taken seriously [6].

Aims

This paper seeks to examine Southeast Asia's relations with Russia in different spheres, illustrating how Russia is the peripheral player compared to other countries like China, Japan, South Korea and the U.S. It then seeks to explore the role of Russia in the region, looking at how Moscow is pursuing her set of priorities amidst the competition for geostrategic influence and the power rivalry between the U.S. and China in the region. Lastly, it concludes with an explanation of why Southeast Asian countries have a growing interest in improving ties with Russia for both economic and security reasons.

Research Methodology

This research paper aims to examine the relations between Southeast Asian countries and Russia. The current research is a qualitative piece, based primarily upon secondary sources. These include books, journal articles, commentaries, analysis and news articles on the topic by scholars and political commentators. This paper analyses and synthesizes existing

academic research and political commentaries on the topic, in order to summarize the nature of the relations of the blocs and what the future holds for such cooperative relations. The paper also draws its references from some of ASEAN's official documents as primary sources, as starting points for the ASEAN-Russia cooperation.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

Literature Review

A substantial number of publications have been devoted to analysing the relations between Russia and the Southeast Asian region.

Books

Hong, Mark, Amy Lugg, and Victor Sumsy. ASEAN-Russia: Foundations and Future Prospects. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012.

The book on the ASEAN-Russia relations is a dedication to the fifteenth anniversary of the Russia-ASEAN Dialogue Partnership. It seeks to explore ASEAN-Russia relations in the past, to address its current state and to look into the future. This is a co-edited book contributed by various writers, carefully divided into sections to explore the different areas and perspectives of the partnership. It ranges from discussing the nature of the ASEAN-Russia cooperation, the geopolitics in the region, the bilateral relations between the ASEAN members and Russia, to the economic and business cooperation and efforts on cultural and educational coordination. The book is a comprehensive and recent one that offers detailed analysis and insights, allowing readers to assess the benefits and the limitations of the relations between Southeast Asian countries and Russia.

Chufrin Gennadiï Illarionovich., and Mark Hong. Russia-ASEAN Relations: New Directions. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007.

This topical book is divided into three chapters, with eleven articles providing insights into Russia-ASEAN relations, encompassing economic cooperation, non-economic cooperation and energy issues. The work sees ASEAN as having a central role of the relations in the region. It also provides useful insights regarding the energy interdependence of the region, as illustrated by Russia's contribution to energy and gas cooperation in East Asia. On the other hand, the role of China in the region is closely scrutinized, with a thorough examination and analysis on the impact of its rise in power on the regional dynamics.

Journal Articles

Buszynski, Leszek. "Russia and Southeast Asia: A New Relationship." Contemporary Southeast Asia 28, no. 2 (2006): 276–96.

The journal article by Buszynski published in 2006 puts the relationship between Russia and Southeast Asia into perspective by starting off with an introduction into the impact and remnants of Soviet Union's legacy on Russia, and how this hindered the development of a trusting and strong regional relationship. It then moves on to discussing President Putin's early efforts in fostering Russia-ASEAN cooperation, in terms of the political and the economic sphere. Nonetheless, this article is not the most recent publication, meaning that it fails to examine the topic in light of the ongoing power struggle between the U.S. and China in the region. Much of the dynamics in the region has changed due to the rise of China and as a result of Russia's position towards the Chinese government.

Gorenburg, Dmitry, and Paul Schwartz. "Russia's Strategy in Southeast Asia." PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo no. 578 (2019): 1-6.

The journal article is a rather new addition to the scholarly analysis of the topic. Apart from discussing the relations between Russia and Southeast Asia in general, the article also examines the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis and how this reshapes Russia's foreign policy priorities towards Southeast Asia. It then comments on Russia's limited ability in stabilizing the region due to its Sino-centric focus. The work ingeniously summarizes the recent changes in the geopolitics between the major powers in the region and provides an outlook of Russia's engagement in the region in the near future.

Kapoor, Nivedita. "Russia's Relations in Southeast Asia since 2014: Continuity and Change." ORF Occasional Paper (2020).

This paper has a particular focus on the development of Russia-Southeast Asia relations post 2014. The overarching theme of the research is to study the developments of political, economic and security regional cooperation as Russia's relation with the West sours over the recent years. It provides an in-depth assessment of Russia's strategies and policies, looking at its strengths and areas of improvement in light of these geopolitical changes.

Gvosdev, Nikolas. (2016) With Putin's ASEAN Outreach, Russia Sets Sights on Southeast Asia. World Politics Review (2016).

This paper analyses the strategic steps taken by Russia especially since President Vladimir Putin came at the helm of its affairs. The paper discusses the extent of involvement that the country has chosen to perform, its developing relations with

Southeast Asia, and implications for the geopolitical future of the Russian Federation in the region. The paper further discusses the importance of engaging in statecraft with the other dominant player in the region, People's Republic of China.

Southeast Asia's Relations with Russia

This section focuses on examining the relations between Southeast Asia and Russia, in terms of historical and cultural relations, political and security relations, and economic and trade relations. Russia's cooperation with the region remains more rhetorical than empirical, with 'limited military projection, trade or investment' [5]. Russia, comparing to other partnering countries, is merely a peripheral player in the region.

Historical and Cultural Relations

The Soviet Union Period

There were varying levels of interest on part of Southeast Asia in Soviet foreign policy during the Bolshevik Revolution. The earlier contacts were made with Indonesia and Vietnam, mostly due to other countries' non-participation in the communist regime [7]. In particular, Vietnam, during the Vietnam War between 1955 to 1975, had to turn to the communist bloc because of an alignment in ideology and the Soviet Union's economic and military assistance [8]. Cambodia, on the other hand, had built relations with the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, as its colonizer, France, was an ally to the U.S. Therefore, the addition of Vietnam and Cambodia in ASEAN created favourable conditions for Russia to pursue its foreign policy towards the region. Moscow has gradually provided consistent and substantial assistance to many states in the region, forming and developing friendly relations with Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines and Brunei [9].

Collapse of the USSR

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 marked a modernization phase for Russia [10]. Despite the seemingly positive observations mentioned above, Russia's foreign policy under president Yelstin in the 1990s was in fact very much tilted towards the West, since the Russian reformers perceived establishing closer ties with the West as the best way to achieve its aims [10]. To be more specific, leaders of the new Russian democracy regarded the West as a 'vital source of aid' due to its technical expertise and financial capabilities, which can

also help guard against nationalist forces [10]. Although officials of the Russian Foreign Ministry did not expressly state a lack of interest in fostering relations with the Asian region, Russia's Western connection is emphasized, with a reiteration of its desire to improve relations with the West and to make Russia a good citizen of the Western community [11]. Instead of treating Southeast Asia as a top priority, Russia's major aim in the early 1990s was to be accepted into the Western bloc as an equal partner [10]. This explains why Russia has a 'long-distance catch-up' with China and the U.S., who have spent much more time and political capital in creating personal connections with leaders of the regional association, while Russia remains a peripheral player that failed to recognize the Southeast Asian importance as a region, at least in the past [12].

Official Cooperation with ASEAN

The ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership could be traced back to July 1991, when the Deputy Prime Minister attended the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting [13]. Russia acquired its official status as a full-fledged Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1996, soon after a fundamental shift to an ideology-free strategy [9]. Russia was one of the first non-ASEAN countries to accede to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation back in 2004 [14]. These form the basis of the political relations between the region and Russia till date. Much of the ASEAN-Russia cooperation has been guided by the Joint Declaration of the Heads of States/government of the Member Countries of ASEAN and the Head of State of the Russian Federation on Progressive and Comprehensive Partnership signed at the first ASEAN-Russia Summit in 2005, which aims to strengthen and promote cooperation in a wide range of areas including political and security, economic and development cooperation [15]. What's more, to mark the 20th anniversary of the Dialogue Partnership, ASEAN and Russia held a Commemorative Summit in 2016, resulting in the adoption of the Sochi Declaration. The agreement further charts out the future direction of the cooperation [13]. More recently in 2018, during the third ASEAN-Russian Federation Summit, the ASEAN-Russia relation was successfully elevated to a Strategic Partnership [13]

These relations should not be vaunted. The official ASEAN-Russia relations have only produced three high profile summits in over two decades [5]. President Putin's past unwillingness to and lack of enthusiasm in developing personal connections and meeting with ASEAN leaders in person carries a lot of weight, which certainly speaks for the minimal and insignificant developments in the region. Also, ASEAN's interest in establishing dialogue

relations with Russia lies in ensuring regional peace and stability in the post-Cold War era, more as a strategic move, instead of being genuinely attracted to a cooperative partnership for development or trade purposes [4].

Cultural Relations

In relation to socio-cultural relations, the Agreement on Cultural Cooperation was signed in 2010, with the aims of promoting and developing cooperation and exchanges in various fields of arts including music, theatre, museums, cultural heritage, visual arts, film, folk-crafts, circus and so on [13]. The promotion of people-to-people contact is also emphasized, resulting in the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of the ASEAN Centre in Moscow in 2009. The ASEAN Centre at the Moscow State University of International Relations has undertaken activities in developing people-to-people ties, academic, youth and cultural exchanges [13].

Moreover, 2016 was designated as the ASEAN-Russian Year of Culture, during which the first ministerial meeting on culture between ASEAN and the Russian Federation was held at Sochi. This initiative serves to deal with the inadequate people-to-people contacts, which are arguably the weakest component of the ASEAN-Russia partnership [6]. The meeting recognizes the richness and diversity of cultures and traditions of both the ASEAN member states and the Russian Federation. The two parties have also agreed to facilitate contacts in the field of folk culture and folk-crafts through mutually arranged exhibitions, festivals, traditional festivities and folk group performances. The growth of tourist traffic is also deemed to play a vital role in fostering people-to-people contact [16].

Political and Security Relations

Nature of ASEAN-Russia Political Relations

A common view that national security cannot be safeguarded at the expense of others is shared between ASEAN and Russia. In particular, they both support the central role of the United Nations, uphold the principle of multilateralism and seek to maintain a multipolar international order [14]. Thus, it is not surprising that the ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership is based on 'mutual respect and benefit, equality, non-interference in domestic affairs, as well as common responsibility to promote peace, stability, security, prosperity, sustainable development and social progress' in the region [14].

ASEAN and Russia continue to deepen political and security cooperation through Russia's active participation in various ASEAN-led regional mechanisms including the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), East Asia Summit (EAS), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) Plus One with the Russian Federation, the ASEAN Plus Russia Senior Officials Meeting on Transnational Crime (SOMTC+ Russia) Consultations as well as the ASEAN-Russia Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (JWG on CTTC) [13].

Despite having established relations with almost all the ASEAN countries, Russia, did not possess the adequate resources to cater to these relationships in the 1990s. Southeast Asia was not a priority for Russia at that time owing to the turmoil within the former Soviet Union. It was only in 2005 that Russia held the first summit with ASEAN as a bloc, and the second one in 2010 [17], although it was meant to take place annually.

The President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, around the time of the 2012 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (APEC) summit in Vladivostok, wrote about a new era of their relationship with the Asia-Pacific region as "We view this dynamic region as the most important factor for the successful future of the whole country, as well as the development of Siberia and the far east," adding that Russia was an "intrinsic part of the Asian-Pacific region." [18].

In the same year, President Putin had released Russia's foreign policy priorities, which listed the Asia Pacific region as the third important priority (after the Commonwealth of Independent States and the European Union) and called for deepening Russia's role in the East Asia Summit (an annual ASEAN-led forum of 18 countries in the Asia-Pacific attached to the bloc's second biannual summit), as well as strengthening the Russia-ASEAN Dialogue. For the fulfilment of these, Vietnam and India were made the strategic partners owing to their historical relationships with Russia.

Further, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, Sergey Lavrov wrote: "Our unconditional priority is to continue promoting the formation of the Greater Eurasian Partnership, a broad integration framework stretching from the Atlantic to the Pacific and involving the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Shanghai

Cooperation Organization (SCO), the ASEAN and all other countries of the Eurasian continent, including the EU countries.” [19].

Reasons for Political Cooperation

To begin with, Russia’s accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2004 reflects strongly its commitment to promoting regional peace and stability [13]. Russia’s Foreign Policy Concept in 2016 states that establishing a long-term dialogue partnership with ASEAN is a priority objective [5]. In Russia’s point of view, Southeast Asia’s attractiveness lies in its importance and uprising in the global economy, alongside its relatively minor political cohesion [20]. In light of the competition in the region, it is both necessary and beneficial for Russia to join hands with ASEAN members, so as to build a complete, cooperative and equal security structure in the region [21].

Moreover, Russia sees the potential in the Southeast Asian region for arms and energy supplies [22]. Russia has been successful with the establishment of a close security relationship with Vietnam, its Cold War ally [23]. With Laos signing a memorandum of cooperation for the Russian Federation to build nuclear power plants in the country, Moscow’s effort to transform itself into the ‘battery’ of Southeast Asia has become evident [12].

On the other hand, with China being more assertive in the region, a number of ASEAN states have `Beijing has been taking an aggressive stance on the maritime disputes over the South China Sea, the U.S. has become a less reliable partner attributable to uncertainties of its domestic politics [12]. It has become ideal for ASEAN member states to develop a closer relationship with Russia for them to manoeuvre in the region.

Vietnam as the Gateway to the Region

Owing to the long-standing and solid foundation of the relationship since the Cold War years, there exists a high level of trust between Russia and Vietnam [24]. Such a close relation leads Vietnam to consider Russia as one of its most important foreign partners, meaning that Vietnam has chosen Russia as its key defence equipment supplier [24]. To put this into context, Vietnam ranks the fourth-largest purchaser of Russian weaponry [12]. On the other hand, the relationship with Vietnam aligns with Russia’s pivot to Asia, in which Vietnam acts as a key to Russia’s extension of its foothold in the region [24]. Russia’s continuous efforts

and willingness to sell advanced weapons to Vietnam has led to new arms contracts and deals with Myanmar, Malaysia and Indonesia [12].

However, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the relations of Russia with the Asia Pacific region had weakened. By 2000s when Russia was ready to reassert itself, the geopolitical situation of the region had changed immensely. Vietnam, which had been a cold war enemy of China and USA had re-established ties with them in 1991 and 1995 respectively.

In 2002, the Russian naval base at Cam Ranh Bay, a very important base during the Cold War, had to be vacated as Vietnam refused to renew the lease for the same. This was in furtherance of Vietnam's "three-no" policy post Cold war, of no alliances, no foreign bases and no conspiring with a country to attack another. Vietnam has been standing by this policy and reaffirmed it in 2016 when Russia showed interest in re-establishing the base at Cam Ranh Bay. Russia had various plans of conducting military exercises with Philippines, which, however, could not materialise either [25].

However, Vietnam has retained a large fraction of its links with Russia. Russia is more engaged with Hanoi than with any of the other Southeast Asian Country's capital. Vietnam was also the first to have entered into a free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2015.

Russia also has been a perpetual and the primary arm's supplier of Vietnam. Almost 74% of the total weapon imports by Vietnam was supplied by Russia between 2015 and 2019 [26]. However, the dominance of Russia in the military procurement of Vietnam has now become doubtful since USA lifted its embargo on arms against Vietnam in 2016. The growing and deepening relations of USA and Vietnam could lead to side-lining of Russia yet again, now, in terms of arms supply.

Bilateral rather than Multilateral

Despite the notable collaborations, it is observed that the Russian President tends to skip summits and appears to be keener towards developing relations with ASEAN member states bilaterally [23]. This indicates that the promotion of regional integration may not be as easy as it appears. The reality is, Russia's key goals of promoting economic connections and increasing weapons sales are 'best served through bilateral means rather than regional ties' [23]. In particular, Russia's bilateral ties with Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam have been

developing over the past two decades, in the fields of weapon sales, aviation, even venturing into areas like energy, terrorism, disaster relief. Russia has also been developing its military cooperation with the Philippines, so as to create a foundation for Moscow's influence over the region [27].

Economic and Trade Relations

Regional Economic Cooperation

ASEAN-Russia economic cooperation has been tightened through regular dialogue and engagement via platforms like the Senior Economic Officials Meeting (SEOM)-Russia Consultations and the ASEAN Economic Ministers (AEM)-Russia Consultations [13]. In fact, the total trade between ASEAN and Russia amounted to USD \$19.8 billion in 2018 [13]. Another significant development was Vietnam's signing to the Free Trade Agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, which will act as an important bridge for Russia to connect with other ASEAN nations economically [28]. In relation to tourism, the number of visitor-arrivals from Russia to ASEAN has seen a significant increase by 20%, to 1.8 million in 2016 [13].

Yet, a less impressive picture is revealed when one compares the figures with other trading partners in the world. The yearly total remains a small fraction of China's USD \$366 billion and the U.S.'s USD \$212 billion trade turnover with ASEAN countries [12]. As far as foreign direct investment (FDI) is concerned, there is considerably less contribution than other sources in the region and reverse FDI remains even weaker [22]. As of 2016, Russia's investment in the region amounted to USD \$698 million, a miniscule figure in comparison with the European Union's USD \$58 billions of investment. Regardless of its ambitions in foreign policy, Russia has been classified as a 'middle power' in the region [29].

The Energy Industry and Military Technology

Russia has heavily relied on its energy industry and arms exports to build its partnerships across the world, including Southeast Asia [30]. According to a Chatham House Report in 2017, 'Asia is by far the most important export market for Russian arms' [31]. Blessed with vast amounts of natural gas and oil, Russia sees the Asian market as a good opportunity to divert from its traditional European market [32]. In exploiting regional frustrations with the U.S., Russia has restored relations with Vietnam and placed itself in the position of a major

arms supplier to three ASEAN countries by offering pricing advantages and counter-deals [33]. For instance, with relations going cool between Thailand and the U.S. since a military coup in 2014, Russia is able to utilize this opportunity, to present itself as an alternative and a more forthcoming provider of goods and services [12].

However, another problem in the economic sphere is that much of the economic relationship is centred around arms equipment and energy resources, without having broad and comprehensive business linkages [12]. As countries in the Southeast Asian region has been able to maintain diversified sources of import in both the energy and arms sector, Russia made up only 0.5% of ASEAN's total trade in goods in 2017 [30]. Thus, though Russia can be a niche provider of goods including advanced military technology, nuclear power stations and space technology, there is a slim chance that it can become a major player in the economic life of Southeast Asia [12]. The sad truth is that the deals between ASEAN countries and Russia are merely viewed as 'add-ons' to the existing processes that connect ASEAN to other major powers in the world economy, namely North America, Europe and China [12]. If ASEAN countries were to make a choice, it is rather clear that no single ASEAN state would agree to any arrangement with Russia that might compromise its existing and developing trading ties with the larger, more prominent players. Simply put, Vietnam, being the only ASEAN member state to have signed the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union, regards its Trans-Pacific Partnership deal with the U.S. as having more importance for the future development of its national economy [12].

Furthermore, there are reservations towards Russia's promise of energy supply for ASEAN. ASEAN countries like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei are energy producers and exporters themselves. This implies that there is less of a need for ASEAN states to rely on the imports of energy resources from Russia. More importantly, the notion of having nuclear power as a substitute for fossil fuels and other renewable energy is not particularly persuasive in ASEAN, especially after the 2011 Fukushima incident in Japan. A programme director at the Energy Research Institute of Nanyang Technological University, accurately points out that 'nuclear power will not feature soon in ASEAN's energy mix for at least the next 20 years', given the high cost and safety concerns [31].

It should be noted that Russia has attempted to diversify its cooperation away from the military sector to other sectors. Russia's cooperation with Indonesia involves the building of new railways in Kalimantan. Quietly emerging as the principal investor, Russia's efforts

directly competes with Indonesia's traditional economic investors like China and Japan [34]. Its impact is amplified with the fact that Indonesia is the biggest country in the region. Russia has taken a strategic move in Southeast Asia by offering a non-China-led economic investment on the one hand, while still supplying non-U.S. led military equipment on the other.

Reasons for Economic Cooperation

Traditionally, Russian businesses have paid far more attention to European and Asian markets that are near to its borders [35]. However, there are pressing concerns for Russia. Russia has been falling out with the West, its long-time policy focus, during the 2010s. The Russian government has become increasingly concerned and anxious about its overdependence on the European market [12]. Russia has to make an effort in developing a long-term strategic vision of ASEAN-Russia relations, particularly in the economic sphere, in order to duly respond to its domestic economic needs. There exists an urgency for Russia to diversify its economic and business partnerships [36]. It is high time that Russia diversified economic relations with the rising East, staying away from the economically stagnant Europe [37].

On the other hand, Russia is aware of its current excessive dependence on China, meaning that it needs to foster other ties in Asia to maintain some leverage [38]. Although Japan was a possible option for diversification, the likelihood of having close ties with Japan is low given the U.S.'s power and weight in shaping Japan's foreign policy. Nationally, the growth prospects of the domestic economy of Japan is limited. The combination of these factors further strengthens the appeal, and in fact, the necessity, to establish cooperative relationships with Southeast Asian economies.

There are also incentives for ASEAN to further establish economic ties with Russia. Energy resources are becoming more and more needed in the Southeast Asian region because of the speedy economic development happening in the region. President Vladimir Putin argues that Russia can satisfy ASEAN's increasing electricity needs by supplying energy on a long-term basis, coupled with new-generation nuclear power plant projects [31].

Role of Russia in the Region amidst Power Rivalry between the U.S. and China in Southeast Asia

Threats to Russia and the Belief of ASEAN's Centrality

From a realist perspective, it is obvious that the rise of China in its economic and military capabilities and the U.S.'s 'Rebalancing Strategy' in Asia would be perceived as threats to Russia's security and economy [21]. In the long run, Russia has to be cautious about China's possible intentions in claiming Russia's territories in the far east, amplified by its rapidly improving military capabilities [39]. With the ongoing rivalry over regional and global domination between the U.S. and China, Russia and ASEAN would become mere losers amidst growing contradictions and conflicts between the two major powers [40]. Russia's presence remains critical to ASEAN for equity of ASEAN countries, China and the U.S. [41]. Specifically, a greater degree of influence in the Southeast Asian region can help Moscow to balance its junior partner role under China and to inhibit U.S.'s expansion beyond its traditional allies and partners in the region [23].

In addition, Russia believes in ASEAN's centrality. What this means is that creating a security structure in the region from scratch is unrealistic in the eyes of Russia, and it can only be based on coordination with existing international organizations in the region [37]. There is also a significant alignment between Russia's and ASEAN's views on regional security, especially with Russia's support for multipolarity and the principle of non-intervention in the region [23]. Without being a security threat to any of the ASEAN states, Russia has the ability to portray itself as a neutral power and an honest broker for mediating the continuous disputes in the region. Strengthening its ties with ASEAN and the ASEAN-led multilateralism in general can help Russia maintain the balance of powers, while reassuring major powers in the region [21].

However, it remains unclear whether Russia can really leverage its power to convince ASEAN countries to side with it. There are narratives about ASEAN's divisions into opposing pro-U.S. and pro-China camps [21]. On the one hand, Thailand and the Philippines have been security allies with the U.S. for so long. States like Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Brunei are also considered strategic partners with the U.S. On the other hand, it is believed that Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos side with China owing to their territorial proximity and China's utilization of its soft power in those countries. This makes it challenging for Russia to influence ASEAN members to support Russia, both in the regional plane and the international plane.

Ukraine Crisis

Russia was traditionally overdependent on European markets and investments. When Russia's image in the West was heavily compromised post the Ukrainian crises, Russia's relations with Asia became critical. Yet, it should also be reiterated that this is so only after the Ukraine crisis in 2014, after which Western sanctions were imposed on Russia [37]. Alongside plunging oil prices and structural problems, Russia was in an economic predicament [6]. Hence, Moscow has restarted its turn to the East Policy through initiating dialogue relations with ASEAN, in the hope of rebalancing its power [42] and resetting its focus. Only by looking eastward for new markets can Russia make up for its losses under the ban of Western sanctions [12]. This is also a great opportunity for Russia to finally diversify its trade ties away from Europe to the rising East.

Russia's Passivity

With all the talks of Russia being a mediator in the region, its ability to maintain the stability in the region is still seriously limited, that it can merely hope that no serious conflict would break out in the region [23]. In case of conflicts, Russia would be forced to choose between China and other involving countries. It remains likely that Russia would choose China over other states, to the detriment of its relations with Southeast Asian states that are still in the state of development. Such a decision would push Southeast Asian actors to look increasingly to the U.S. government for security ties [23].

Russia's Lean towards China

Russia's lean towards China can be attributed to the fact that Beijing remained neutral towards Russia's actions in Crimea and Ukraine, thus making it the most obvious country to turn to [37]. It is no coincidence that the governments of Russia and China share a common distrust and distaste for a Western-dominated international order [39]. While Russia, in reducing its reliance on the European Market, develops important energy exports to China, it only arrived at the ninth place among China's trading partners in 2016. The U.S. is of much greater importance than Russia is to China. In fact, the geopolitical dominance of China in the region creates an imbalance in the relationship of the two countries, reducing Russia to the status of a junior partner [39]. Moreover, the joint naval exercises in the South China Sea between China and Russia has led to concerns in Vietnam and Indonesia about how reliable and effective Russia is as a regional counterweight [23].

South China Sea Dispute

The South China Sea Dispute is one of the most evident disputes between China and the U.S. concerning the Southeast Asian region. China claims almost all of the South China Sea, which is sharply contested by Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam. On the other hand, the U.S. is trying to woo ASEAN by affirming its support to them by standing in opposition against China, alleging actions of the Chinese government to be unlawful. This forces ASEAN member states to take sides [43]. As a result, there is a shift in Russia's priorities, as Moscow prioritizes the maintenance of a balanced relation with regional organizations like ASEAN, to act as a counterweight to the U.S.'s influence [44].

In reality, Russia has steered clear of and avoided taking stances on China's aggressive activities in the South China Sea [36]. Commentators have put forward the idea that President Putin failed to attend the East Asian Summit in 2012 as a result of its wish to avoid taking sides on such controversial regional issues [27]. Moscow's limited ability to intervene also lies in the fact that it lacks the hard power and the necessary military capacities to stop China's aggressive conduct in the South China Sea. While abstaining from making an unequivocal choice between Washington and Beijing avoids polarization of forces in the region [40], this, again, illustrates Russia's limited ability and ineffectiveness in maintaining the stability of the region.

Southeast Asia's Growing Interest in Improving Ties with Russia

Countering the Major Powers

Russia continues to play an important role in Southeast Asia owing to the fact that ASEAN members do not have to fear about security threats from Russia, who, unlike China, has no territorial claims in the region and has avoided taking sides in regional disputes [12]. Its views on regional security, including its support for multipolarity and non-intervention, align well with the states in Southeast Asia, which further strengthens its role as a stabilizer. In spite of relatively weak economic and security ties, Russia remains an attractive partner for ASEAN members [23]. The presence of Russia as an alternative also aids Southeast Asian countries in avoiding over-dependence on one state, at the same time creating an atmosphere of interdependence in the region to minimize the chances of conflict [30].

Energy Resources

Whereas ASEAN countries are currently acting as exporters in the energy industry, it is foreseeable that domestic production in the region would peak in the coming years, increasing their need for energy resources. Malaysia has already started importing natural gases. When the internal supplies of ASEAN states become insufficient in sustaining its consumption levels, having Russia as a business partner and exporter of natural resources would help stabilize the economic development in the region. In the words of Ivashentsov [45], 'ASEAN members in their totality will become a major importer of energy resources' from Russia in the near future. The benefits of forming an energy partnership are multifaceted. Apart from the obvious guarantee of stable economic development in the region, it also serves to reduce confrontations between different state parties, since the struggle for resources is often a common basis for territorial disputes in Asia [45]. Therefore, securing ties with Russia is advantageous for Southeast Asian countries, both in terms of economic and security.

Further Trading Opportunities

Russia's unique geographical location should not be overlooked. Its stretch in two continents would provide countries of Southeast Asia with opportunities to export goods to European markets and to increase imports from Europe [41]. Furthermore, in light of increasing concerns about the impact of climate change, the opening up of a northern shipping route by

Russia allows ASEAN members to be less reliant on shipping through the Malacca Straits [27]. This, in turn, presents valuable opportunities for an increased manufacturing cargo traffic between Asia and the West [10], opening up new business prospects.

COVID-19

The outbreak of COVID-19 has taught nations that globalization makes the security, economic development and wellbeing of neighbouring nations more interconnected than ever [46]. An eight-page joint statement was adopted between Russia and ASEAN, stating clearly their collective willingness in solving the current problems as strategic partners [47]. Only with a firm commitment to undertake collective actions to address the consequences of the pandemic can the region successfully overcome the aftermath of the pandemic.

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Conclusion

The ASEAN-Russia relation began with Russia's lacking enthusiasm. This situation remained for a while, gradually making Russia a peripheral player in the region. However, things have changed as Russia faces sanctions from Western countries post its annexation of Crimea. This has led to a renavigation of Russia's foreign policy, shifting from a Western focus towards the Asian and Southeast-Asian markets. Moreover, the geopolitical dynamics in the Southeast Asian region has also been constantly changing ever since the U.S. and China go into a power rivalry. What this means is that Russia is becoming an increasingly critical partner and ally for ASEAN countries to counter the influence of the U.S.'s and China's territorial expansion. Although Russia has a long way to go regarding its cooperation with ASEAN states, its ties with ASEAN countries are likely to strengthen in the near future, since Southeast Asian countries have a growing interest in improving its ties with Russia in light of the geopolitical changes in the region.

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