



Will Russia's Pivot to Asia Last?

December 2019

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Abstract: Will the Russian Federation's current "turn to the East" have lasting significance? After the annexation of Crimea and the escalated confrontation with the West, Vladimir Putin's government declared it was turning to the East by cultivating ties both with the People's Republic of China and other governments. Russia has "turned to the East" repeatedly throughout its history, from the tsarist era to the present day. In the past, geopolitical and economic factors have hindered Russia's Asian Pivots and caused the Kremlin to turn back toward Europe.

The close relationship between the Russian Federation and People's Republic of China is at its "highest level in all its centuries-long history," Russian President Vladimir Putin declared in 2014, right after annexing Crimea.¹ Just as Tsar Nicholas II's pivot toward Asia after the Crimean War of 1853-1856 ruined relations with United Kingdom and France, Putin launched his own "Asian Pivot" after annexing Crimea in 2014. In response to the Kremlin's war on Ukraine, the West slapped economic sanctions on Russia and kicked it out of The Group of Seven (G7) in 2014. Locked out of the West, Russia insisted that this did not matter: Europe was the old world, while Asia was the future. Having torn up ties with former partners in Europe, Putin set out to prove he could find new friends in Asia. The past five years have seen a flurry of Russian activity in Asia: holding conferences, signing contracts, and issuing joint communiques at a speed that would have been hard to imagine a decade ago.

The new trend is not only the level of Russian activity in Asia, but the Kremlin's choice of partners. Moscow has trumpeted its improving relations with Beijing at every opportunity, and Chinese leaders have reciprocated, going out of their way to make Russia feel like an equal power. "Russia is the country that I have visited the most times," Chinese Communist Party Chairman Xi Jinping noted recently, "and

¹ "China and Russia: Best Frenemies," *The Economist*, May 24, 2014, <https://www.economist.com/node/21602695/all-comments?page=5>.

Putin is my best friend.”² An overstatement, perhaps, but the closer ties are real. They are finally getting noticed by outsiders. Though China-Russia relations have been improving for decades—2019 marked half a century since the two countries last went to war—American analysts and policymakers long downplayed the importance of the Moscow-Beijing relationship, usually on the grounds that the two sides will struggle to cooperate given their acrimonious history.

Now, however, for the first time since the days of Mao Zedong and Nikita Khrushchev, American policymakers are worrying about an alignment between Russia and China. Just several years ago, the overwhelming consensus in Washington was that a Russian-China axis did not provide much to worry about. But international politics can shift rapidly, and the United States’ relations with both Moscow and Beijing have deteriorated sharply. Each country sees the United States as its primary rival, and each therefore has a strong reason to collaborate.

In the United States, meanwhile, consensus opinion rapidly has turned away from the notion that Russia and China are inherent rivals and toward the idea that, combined, they represent a dangerous challenge to the United States. Leading American policymakers regularly list China and Russia as the two countries with which the United States is preparing for a new era of great power competition. Experts in Washington increasingly perceive the two powers as an axis of authoritarianism seeking to degrade U.S. power.³ The future of the Russia-China relationship now is widely believed to be a key factor in shaping the future of the global order.

Most discussion of the future of the Russia-China relationship sees the main question as whether the two countries’ relationship remains cooperative, or whether it turns again to destructive competition, as it has so often in the past. Yet, there is another way of looking at this question. To what extent will Russia continue to try to play a role in Asian politics? What priority will it place on the region? What level of resources will it be willing to expend? What focus will its leaders place on Asia? Most American analysts perceive the reemergence of Russia-China competition as the greatest risk to the relationship. Recent history, however, suggests another outcome, perhaps more plausible: that Russia simply stops devoting attention to Asia. How likely is such an outcome? And what would the ramifications be?

Russia’s Asian Turn and U.S. Foreign Policy

One vision of Asia’s future was on display in September 2016 when the Russian destroyers *Admiral Vinogradov* and *Admiral Tributs* sailed into the South China Sea for joint maneuvers with the Chinese navy. Among the drills: anti-submarine warfare, air defense, and landing amphibious troops on an enemy-held island.⁴ Amid

² “The Junior Partner,” *The Economist*, July 25, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2019/07/25/how-vladimir-putins-embrace-of-china-weakens-russia>.

³ Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter, eds., “Axis of Authoritarians,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, Oct 4, 2018, <https://www.nbr.org/publication/axis-of-authoritarians-implications-of-china-russia-cooperation/>.

⁴ Franz-Stefan Gady, “Russia to Send Anti-Submarine Warfare Destroyers to South China Sea,” *The Diplomat*, Aug 31, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/08/russia-to-send-anti-submarine-warfare-destroyers-to-south-china-sea/>.

the contested rocks and atolls of the South China Sea, the message was easy to read. For the first time since the South China Sea emerged on the international agenda, Russia is leaning toward China in Beijing's territorial disputes. What was previously a disagreement between China and all its neighbors now sees Eurasia's two great powers aligned against the United States and its allies.

Why does the durability of Russia's current pivot to Asia matter? Given Russia's policy preferences today, nearly any expansion of the Kremlin's influence in Asia works against U.S. interests. Moscow's friendliness with China is the most visible manifestation of this problem, giving Beijing a free pass on its expansionist agenda in Asia and its desire to rewrite the region's rules in its interest. But Russia's increased attention to Asian affairs also has ramifications for U.S. relations with Japan, Republic of Korea, and other countries in the region.

Start with China, the nuclear-armed great power that sits along Russia's southern border. Russia and China have clashed repeatedly over the course of their modern history. In the 1850s, Russia sent troops into the Amur River Valley and seized much of the Pacific Coast from China. In 1900, Russia intervened during China's Boxer Rebellion, sending troops to occupy Beijing and much of Manchuria. In 1929, Russia used its army to assert its rights to a railroad running through northern China. Most recently, in 1969, the two powers clashed along their border in northern China and Central Asia. Russia also has been a regular participant in China's internal conflicts, repeatedly occupying China's northern and western borderlands and supporting various rebel groups or claimants for power in Beijing. There is little reason, in other words, to think that peace and friendship is the natural state of relations between Russia and China. It certainly has not been always friendly in history.

Despite the Kremlin's regular professions of friendship with Beijing, even top Russian government leaders often express concern about the future of the relationship. One focal point of worry is the Russian Far East, a sparsely populated, resource-rich region north of China.⁵ In the nineteenth century, one Russian general worried that Russia was like a comet, with a European core and a "horrifying Asiatic tail, stretching . . . to Vladivostok."⁶ That description remains true today, at least by some metrics.

Russian and foreign analysts alike often highlight emigration out of the Russian Far East, particularly among the ethnic Russian part of the population, as a potential security risk. The inflow of labor migrants, particularly from China, often is presented as a part of a potential Chinese threat to Russian sovereignty over the Russian Far East—and thus a source of conflict with China. However, the reality of Chinese migration into Siberia and the Far East is far less significant than popular

They returned earlier this year; see, Ben Westcott and Brad Lendon, "Russian Warships Arrive in the Philippines amid Rising Tension in the South China Sea," *CNN*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/08/asia/russia-philippines-south-china-sea-intl/index.html>.

⁵ An excellent analysis of the region's role is Rensselaer Lee and Artyom Lukin, *Russia's Far East: New Dynamics in Asia Pacific and Beyond* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2015).

⁶ Alex Marshall, *The Russian General Staff and Asia, 1860-1917* (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 68.

perception suggests, particularly as Chinese wages rise.⁷ Concerns about Moscow's control over the Russian Far East are not limited to the demographic sphere. Economics and trade are seen both by some Russian leaders and by many scholars as an area in which China's growing influence might threaten Russian sovereignty. Yet, the development of ever-closer economic ties between China and the Russian Far East need not inevitably undermine Moscow's hold on the region. After all, Russia has little choice but to sell resources abroad if the Russian Far East is to be economically viable. As long as Russia keeps supplying resources, what reason does China have to complain? The Power of Siberia pipeline, which will ship gas from Russia to China, is likely to solidify this trading relationship.

Though Russia-China disagreement over the Russian Far East is far from inevitable, many prominent Russians worry nevertheless. In 2017, for example, longtime Putin confidant and Secretary of the Security Council Nikolai Patrushev suggested that demographic change in the region might have geopolitical consequences.⁸ Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, meanwhile, has warned that “unless we speed up our efforts [in economic development of the region], we can lose everything.”⁹ Comments such as these suggest that, despite the Russian government's official line that China and Russia have an ever-deepening partnership—and despite that the demographic data does not support the thesis that Chinese are overrunning the Far East—some in Moscow remain concerned about the long-term ramifications.

A second potential challenge to Russia-China collaboration is growing Chinese geopolitical power, which could threaten Russian interests in Asia more broadly. Moscow has global reasons for wanting cooperation with Beijing—above all, the desire to limit U.S. power—but not all the two countries' regional aims overlap.¹⁰ China has no interest in Russia improving ties with Japan, for example. Central Asia, too, is a region of potential disagreements: Russia long has been the dominant power in the area, but China is playing an ever-larger role.¹¹ Russia's relationship with the Republic of India and Socialist Republic of Vietnam, two countries to which it sells advanced weaponry, contradicts China's interest in having neighbors with weak militaries. Yet, Russia sells arms to these countries not primarily to balance China, but to make money

⁷ Harley Balzer and Maria Repnikova, “Migration between China and Russia,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 26 (2010), pp. 1-37.

⁸ Pavel Aptekar, “Trudovye migranty pugaiut Nikolaia Patrusheva [Migrant workers scare Nikolai Patrushev],” *Vedomosti*, Aug 9, 2017, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/opinion/articles/2017/08/10/728735-trudovie-migranti-patrusheva>.

⁹ Stephen Blank, “Russian Writers on the Decline of Russia in the Far East and the Rise of China,” Jamestown Foundation, no date, <https://jamestown.org/program/stephen-blank-russian-writers-on-the-decline-of-russia-in-the-far-east-and-the-rise-of-china/>.

¹⁰ Younkyoo Kim and Stephen Blank, “Rethinking Russo-Chinese Relations in Asia: Beyond Russia's Chinese Dilemma,” *China: An International Journal*, vol. 11, no. 3 (Dec. 2013), pp. 136-148.

¹¹ Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Paul Stronski, “U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia 3.0,” Jan. 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_259_Central_Asia_Final.pdf.

for its military-industrial complex. Because the United States has a sanctions regime that targets countries that purchase Russian weapons, the Kremlin's arms sales to India and Vietnam probably cause as many complications in these countries' relationships with Washington as they do in their relationships with Beijing.

Underneath the press releases celebrating Sino-Russian cooperation, some of Russia's more interesting foreign policy analysts have identified complexities in their country's ties with China. For example, Dmitry Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, has noted the Kremlin's shift from bullishness on Sino-Russian ties in the immediate aftermath of the Ukraine war, toward a position that emphasizes "Greater Eurasia"—not only China—in Russian foreign policy. The unstated logic of this shift is that Chinese-Russian ties have proven less beneficial to Russia's international position than initially expected and that Moscow does not want to be too reliant on Beijing.¹² Similarly, Russian analyst Alexander Gabuev has emphasized both Russia's weak understanding of China and the limits of Beijing's ability or willingness to help Russia achieve its goals.¹³

Despite these areas of potential disagreement, there are many reasons to expect Chinese-Russian cooperation to continue for the foreseeable future. Both countries perceive U.S. primacy as a foreign policy threat. They can be expected to cooperate on confronting the United States even amid disagreements in other, less important spheres.¹⁴ Ideologically, like China, the Kremlin is committed not only to turning a blind eye to the worst abuses, but also to creating a safe space for authoritarianism. Russia's internet censorship regime is still less strict than China's, but both Beijing and Moscow actively seek to inculcate international norms in favor of a censored internet.¹⁵ Agreement on issues such as these is likely to provide a durable basis for relations over the coming years.

Russian foreign policy in Asia is not only relevant to U.S. policymakers where it intersects with China. Russia's relations with South Korea and Japan are in some ways more worrisome to the United States, given Moscow's interest in degrading U.S. alliances in Asia, which it sees as a threat. In Korea, for example, Russia knows that it has little overlap with America's interests on the peninsula, and focuses its efforts not on confronting the Democratic People's Republic of Korea's violation of United

¹² Dmitry Trenin, "Russia's Evolving Grand Eurasia Strategy: Will it Work?" July 20, 2017, <http://carnegie.ru/2017/07/20/russia-s-evolving-grand-eurasia-strategy-will-it-work-pub-71588>.

¹³ Alexander Gabuev, "Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations after the Ukraine Crisis," June 29, 2016, <http://carnegie.ru/2016/06/29/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-ukraine-crisis-pub-63953>.

¹⁴ Richard Weitz, *China-Russia Security Relations: Strategic Parallelism without Partnership or Passion* (Strategic Studies Institute, 2014); Gilbert Rozman, *The Sino-Russian Challenge to the World Order: National Identities, Bilateral Relations, and East versus West in the 2010s* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ Lincoln Pigman, "Reining in the Runet: The Kremlin's Struggle to Control Cyberspace," Foreign Policy Research Institute, Nov. 8, 2018, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2018/11/reining-in-the-runet-the-kremlins-struggle-to-control-cyberspace/>.

Nations resolutions, but on undermining the U.S.-South Korea alliance. Russia is more concerned by South Korea's missile defenses than by North Korea's nuclear weapons. Though it occasionally votes at the United Nations in favor of sanctions on Pyongyang, Moscow repeatedly has violated these sanctions by allowing trade and labor flows with North Korea to continue.¹⁶ Taking advantage of longstanding territorial disputes between South Korea and Japan, in July 2019, Russian and Chinese bombers jointly flew over disputed islands, inspiring a complaint from both Seoul and Tokyo. Shortly thereafter, spurred by Russia's testing of these disputed boundaries, tensions between Japan and South Korea increased, and have caused a small trade war between the two countries, as Japan restricts exports of materials Korea needs to produce semiconductors. This makes U.S. efforts to forge unity among its Asian allies more difficult.

In its relations with Tokyo, meanwhile, Moscow repeatedly has dangled the prospect of a resolution of the two countries' territorial dispute over four islands north of Japan. Tokyo has placed substantial emphasis on improving relations with Russia. Japan sees China as a long-term threat to its security, and hopes that Russia can be peeled away from what Tokyo sees as dangerously close ties with Beijing. In early 2016, as that year's G7 chair, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe called for reengagement with Russia, telling Western journalists that "appropriate dialogue with President Putin is very important."¹⁷ Abe has regularly met with Putin even as Washington sought to isolate him.

Despite Abe's willingness to hold summits with Putin, the two countries appear no closer to resolving their dispute over the status of the Kurile Islands, which Russia gained control of after World War II. Japan claims sovereignty over the four islands closest to its territory, and has tied its relations with Russia to Moscow's willingness to do a deal over the islands. Though some Russian analysts have urged compromise, Putin, who sees himself as the "collector of Russian lands," has proven unwilling to offer more territory.¹⁸ Russia's line on the island dispute has, if anything, hardened in recent years.¹⁹

Russian scholars often blame the United States for their country's poor relationship with Japan, pointing toward U.S. efforts to boost Japanese missile defense

¹⁶ Bertil Lintner, "As Sanctions Loom, Russia Keeps North Korea at Work," *Asia Times*, May 10, 2019, <https://www.asiatimes.com/2019/05/article/as-sanctions-loom-russia-keeps-north-korea-at-work/>.

¹⁷ Lionel Barber and Robin Harding, "Japan's Abe Calls for Putin to be Brought in from the Cold," *Financial Times*, Jan. 17, 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/988d04c2-bcd3-11e5-846f-79b0e3d20eaf>.

¹⁸ Yuval Weber and Dmitry Trenin, "Russia's Pacific Future: Solving the South Kuril Islands Dispute," Carnegie Moscow Center, Dec. 11, 2012, <http://carnegie.ru/2012/12/11/russia-s-pacific-future-solving-south-kuril-islands-dispute-pub-50325>.

¹⁹ James Brown, "Not Even Two? New Developments in the Territorial Dispute between Russia and Japan," *Asia Pacific Journal* 13, no. 38.2 (Sept. 21, 2015), <http://apjif.org/-James-Brown/4378/article.pdf>.

systems and to the broader U.S.-Japan alliance.²⁰ But Russia's main aim is not to resolve the territorial question, but to drive a wedge into the U.S.-Japan alliance. Hence, Moscow's focus on U.S.-Japan military cooperation, hoping to convince Japan to scale down its military ties with Washington.²¹

Given Russia's growing role in Asia and its strategy of subverting U.S. power in the region, some American analysts have urged cutting a deal with the Kremlin over Europe, which advocates hope might undermine the growing Sino-Russian entente and open space for cooperation in Asia.²² It is not implausible that treating Russia like a great power and offering it a sphere of influence in Europe could induce the Kremlin to cooperate somewhat in Asia, but will Russia continue to devote energy toward playing a major role in Asian politics? Putin is, after all, far from the first Russian leader to declare that his country's future lies in Asia, or that it will be a major Asian power. Most of these previous efforts were short-lived as the Kremlin lacked the ability to focus on Asia over a sustained period and as it was distracted by internal troubles or by more important foreign policy matters in Europe.

Russia's Asian Pivot in Historical Perspective

In analyzing Putin's policy toward Asia, is it even fair to talk about Russia "turning" to Asia? Can a country pivot to a region it is geographically already part of? Geography makes Russia part of the region we call Asia, but nearly every other metric places Russia in a different category. Russians continue to debate whether their country is part of Europe, or whether they should want it to be, but very few Russians would describe their country as Asian, for several reasons. First, nearly three-quarters of Russia's population lives in the Western part of the country, in a belt of land along the border with Europe.²³ Second, Russians have considered their culture part of European culture, broadly conceived. Third, most of Russian trade has been with Europe, and the European Union remains Russia's biggest trading partner today by far. Fourth, Russian leaders have been deeply interlinked with Europe via their careers, marriages, and ideas. Putin—who spent some of his formative years working in Germany, speaks fluent German, and one of his daughters lived in the Netherlands—fits this pattern perfectly.

Russia lacks such deep links with any Asian country. Over the past century and half, Russian leaders have perceived asserting Russian influence in Asia as either

²⁰ Chris Miller, "Japan-Russia Relations: The View from Moscow," German Marshall Fund of the United States, April 3, 2017, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/japan%E2%80%93russia-relations-view-moscow>.

²¹ Stephen Blank, "Russo-Japanese Relations from a Regional Perspective," *International Journal of Korean Reunification Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2017), pp. 21-51.

²² Graham T. Allison and Dimitri K. Simes, "A Sino-Russia Entente Again Threatens America," *Wall Street Journal*, Jan. 29, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-sino-russian-entente-again-threatens-america-11548806978>.

²³ "Численность постоянного населения в среднем за год [Chislennost' postoyannogo naseleniya v srednem za god, Average resident population per year]," Russian Federal State Statistics Service, June 18, 2019, <https://showdata.gks.ru/report/278930/#>.

an opportunity or a necessity. They have reemphasized their country's role in the region, pouring resources and energy into building relationships and expanding influence in Asia. Each time, they loudly proclaimed that Russia was a Eurasian and an Asian power, not confined only to Europe. Relatively few of these turns to the East amounted to much. Nearly all disappointed expectations. Some were outright failures. Most sputtered out relatively quickly. The biggest challenge was in sustaining interest. Russia has no difficulty focusing on its Western border because its key interests lie there: security, economic, and political.

Russia's first Asian Pivot was in the early nineteenth century. Russians arrived on the Pacific Ocean several hundred years ago, but the country made its first claim to geopolitical power in the Pacific during the early decades of the 1800s. At the time, the North Pacific Ocean was contested by competing empires: the Spanish had yet to lose their hold on North and South America's Pacific Coast, the British were increasingly sending ships into the region, and the newly independent United States was charging across the North American continent. Russia, too, had interests, including a string of settlements along the coast of Alaska, an outpost in California, a fort in Hawaii, and a sense that it had just as good a shot as any power at establishing dominance in the area, and potentially even opening rich trade routes to China and Japan. For a few years, Russia poured resources into the North Pacific, hoping to outcompete its rivals. It soon became clear that Russia could not muster the naval forces in the Pacific needed to compete with Britain or United States, given that Russia's nearest substantial port with shipbuilding capabilities, St. Petersburg, was on the opposite side of the world. Unable to keep up, Tsar Alexander I eventually lost interest and pulled back, abandoning Russia's Hawaiian forts, winding down its presence in California, and eventually selling Alaska to the United States.

It took several decades after the push into the Pacific for Russia to return its focus on the region. The next area of focus was the Amur River basin, which now marks the border between Russia and China. Russia repeatedly fought over the territory—first with China, then Japan, then China again—which was one of the few areas in the Russian Far East with an environment capable of sustaining significant settlements. Not unlike the United States' expansion across its Western territories, Russia sought to improve communications and strengthen economic ties between its heartland and its Pacific frontier. Russia seized the Amur from China in the late 1850s in the hopes of accomplishing something similar. After grabbing territory, it emerged that Russia had no plan or ability to make use of the land. Despite promises that the region would serve as Russia's window to Asia, it remained a backwater for decades.

Several decades later, the country tried again. Count Sergei Witte, who served as a leading Russian minister and eventually prime minister throughout the latter nineteenth and early twentieth century, advocated a policy of building Russia's strength in Asia via trade and settlement. He built the Trans-Siberian Railroad to support both efforts, with the support or acquiescence of the other great powers, and with funding from European capital. This effort ended not with a lack of interest, but with a catastrophe. Witte intended the Trans-Siberian Railway to enable trade expansion, but it also inflated the imperial dreams of some of the tsar's more imaginative courtiers. Soon a new, aggressively expansionist group came to dominate Russian foreign policy in Asia. Assembling around aristocrat Alexander Bezobrazov, a close adviser to the

tsar, these officials pushed Russia to annex new territory even at risk of war with Japan, which felt threatened by Russian expansion into what Tokyo perceived as its sphere of influence in Korea and Manchuria. When the two powers went to war in 1904, Japan dealt Russia a terrible defeat, sinking most of the Russian fleet and sending Russia hurtling toward revolution at home. From 1905 to the collapse of the tsarist government in 1917, Russia retreated from most of its former Asian gains and tried to rebuild its strength.

After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, however, Russia's leaders again turned East, this time with the goal of inciting revolution. After watching communist revolutions fail in Germany and Hungary, Russia's Bolsheviks decided that "the East" was fertile ground for international revolution. The Soviets funded both Mao Zedong's Chinese Communist Party and its arch rival, the Kuomintang, even though the latter was a nationalist, anti-imperialist group rather than a communist party. Joseph Stalin focused intensively on Chinese matters, especially in the mid-1920s, trying to micromanage the Chinese revolution. His efforts were for naught. Rather than supporting the development of communism in China, China's government under Chiang Kai-shek slaughtered and suppressed the country's nascent communist movement, forcing Stalin to cut his losses and retreat from China for nearly two decades.

After World War II, the Soviet Union seemed to have a strong, if not dominant, position in Asia. True, the U.S. Navy had demonstrated it could deploy industrial might across the Pacific via its island-hopping campaign, but World War II had demonstrated Soviet military might, too. Japan, Moscow's main rival in Asia, was disarmed. Just after the war ended, in 1949, Mao's communists seized power in China, bringing a significant portion of Asia's territory and population under the control of communist governments. Stalin sought to take advantage of his position of strength on the Pacific with a new Asian Pivot, giving the nod for Kim Il-sung's forces to invade U.S.-backed South Korea. This move proved a colossal strategic error. Though the war itself was fought to a standstill, it inspired the rearmament of Japan and the establishment of a permanent U.S. military presence on the Asian mainland. Meanwhile, by the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union was beginning to fall out with China. By the late 1960s, the two countries' armies clashed not far from where Soviet and Japanese armies had fought in 1939. What seemed like a Soviet advantage in Asia was squandered. The improvement in U.S.-Chinese ties in the 1970s left Moscow almost completely isolated in Asia.

When Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985 promising to restart Soviet diplomacy, he looked immediately to Asia, giving a major speech in Vladivostok signaling his desire for better relations with Asian powers. Improved ties with China, Japan, and South Korea quickly followed. Gorbachev's advisors spoke of this Asian Pivot as if it would revolutionize Soviet diplomacy. Though it resolved several long-running disputes, by 1995, Russia was as irrelevant in Asia as it had been a decade earlier as the Soviet Union's economic collapse meant that its Asian reorientation had little practical substance.

Putin is not, in other words, the first Russian leader to declare he is pivoting toward Asia. From the founding of Vladivostok to the Russo-Japanese War and from

the Korean War to the Sino-Soviet split, Russian leaders since the mid-nineteenth century have advanced expansive diplomatic visions for Asia, most of which, as previously noted, have sputtered out and some of which have exploded catastrophically. What factors shaped the efficacy of Russia's diplomatic initiatives in Asia? And what factors have driven Russia to change course? Understanding the forces that shaped past Russian diplomacy in Asia can shed light on the durability of Putin's Asian Pivot today.

Economic Risks to Russia's Asian Pivots

Russia's past Asian Pivots often have been sparked by promises of rich Asian markets. The first Russian fur trappers to arrive in Alaska envisioned shipping their furs to the southern Chinese port of Guangzhou. The conquest of the Amur River along the Pacific Coast was justified on the grounds that the river could become "Russia's Mississippi," an artery of trade and commerce.²⁴ The Trans-Siberian Railway's supporters made similar arguments: that the investment in what was then the world's longest railway would be worthwhile because of the access it would provide to Asia's millions of consumers.

These promises of Asian riches, in the past, have proven to be great risks to Russia's Asian Pivots because they have often disappointed. Russia always has traded with Asia, but this commerce rarely has brought the benefits that boosters promised. One challenge for Russia is that trade with Asia has been costly and complicated, given the distances involved, requiring massive investments that often failed to recoup their costs. The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway, for example, was mired in decades of debates about whether it was worth the price, especially given that trade flows disappointed. The infrastructure that Russia is currently building to ship natural gas to Asia faces similar questions about its long-run economic viability.

In the past, recognition that Russia had overestimated the economic benefits of devoting attention to Asia often led to a reassessment of the country's Asian role. At the same time, Russia's diplomatic ventures in the Pacific usually were not accompanied by a strong economic foundation. In the run-up to the Russo-Japanese War, for example, Russia's political ambitions far outstripped its economic capabilities. Russia's efforts to bolster its military power in the Pacific during the 1960s through 1980s undermined its economy by devoting too many resources to the defense sector, causing Soviet power to decline. Later, during *perestroika*, Gorbachev's efforts to establish better relations with Asian powers was thwarted by the Soviet economic collapse, which reduced the scope for trade.

Does Russia's current pivot to Asia rest on stronger economic foundations? Russia has found a large market for oil and gas in China, but Beijing has many other potential energy suppliers, so it will not be reliant on Russia. Russia has failed to make much of its proximity to Japan or South Korea, two economic powerhouses. And though Beijing has provided a market in their place, this also presents risks to Russia, especially if China's economy slows sharply, as it plausibly could. Given the grandiosity

²⁴ Mark Bassin, *Imperial Visions: Nationalist Imagination and Geographical Expansion in the Russian Far East, 1840-1865* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

of the economic promises often made regarding Russia's Asian Pivot, the reality is likely to disappoint.

Start with the Asian markets besides China. The story of Russian economic ties with Japan and South Korea is one of disappointment. Since the 1980s, Russia has hoped for investment and trade with both countries, but has gotten relatively little of either. Despite the geographic proximity of these countries, each receives less than four percent of Russia's exports. Russia sells roughly as much to the Republic of Belarus as it does to Japan. True, Russia and Belarus have much shared history and a common border, but Belarus has nine million people. Japan has 127 million, and the Japanese are far richer. As for other Asian countries, none makes up more than a tiny portion of Russia's trade, and few provide much investment.

Nor is it clear that there is much scope for growth, especially outside of energy. Russia's investment in liquified natural gas (LNG) will make it possible to sell more to some Asian markets, and existing liquified natural gas infrastructure in Sakhalin Island supplies Japan with gas. Indeed, Japanese gas consumption looks set to increase as Japan weans itself from nuclear power. Gas is relatively clean and does not risk nuclear meltdown, so it will fill some of this generating capacity.²⁵ But investing in liquification is expensive, especially at a time when pipelines already can transport Russian gas to Europe. Australia, Qatar, and the United States continue to bring more liquified natural gas online, driving down prices. Thus, even though Asian demand for gas will grow, new supply will keep a lid on prices.

Asia's largest economy, China, provides more substantial prospects for growth. No country has been more important for Russian economic development over the past two decades than China. Russia's southern neighbor voraciously consumes not only oil and gas, but also the minerals that Russia produces in abundance. Chinese consumption explains a significant proportion of commodity price growth over the past quarter century. Though China's growth has helped Russia by driving up world commodity prices, direct trade between Eurasia's two giants remains surprisingly small and one-sided. China only accounts for about 11 percent of Russian exports. By contrast, half of Russian sales abroad go to Europe. While Europe's trade with Russia is more balanced—half of Russia's imports come from Europe—Russo-Chinese trade remains marked by significant imbalances. A full 20 percent of Russian imports come from China—twice as much in percentage terms as Russia exports to China. Russia is likely to increase exports to China as the Power of Siberia gas pipeline comes online, but given the high cost of this pipeline, and the fact that Russia is believed to have offered a sizeable discount on the price of gas sold via the pipeline (the official numbers are not public), it is not clear how much Russia is profiting from the gas trade with China.

²⁵ A useful survey is James Henderson, "Energy Relations Between Russia and China: Playing Chess with the Dragon," Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, Aug. 2016, <https://www.oxfordenergy.org/wpcms/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Energy-Relations-between-Russia-and-China-Playing-Chess-with-the-Dragon-WPM-67.pdf>

More substantial, though, is the risk to Russia that China's economy slows down. Having expanded rapidly for the past four decades, all economists agree that China cannot continue growing at past rates. The key question is whether it grows at currently projected rates, or whether it faces a more rapid slowdown. Over the past two decades, China's voracious demand for commodities, such as aluminum, nickel, oil, and gas, has benefited Russian producers. Yet, China has spent several trillion dollars on infrastructure in recent years, so its capacity to build new roads, railways, and apartment blocks is diminishing. As China's construction boom subsides, so, too, will its need for metals. Its oil demand is also unlikely to grow at past rates. It would be ironic if, just as Russia declares it is pivoting to Asia, China's economy slowed, dragging down the price of the raw materials that still constitute Russia's primary exports.

Even if Chinese commodity consumption growth slows, some Russian policymakers hope that China can be induced to invest some of its newfound wealth in Russian companies, thereby boosting Russian growth. Thus far, however, Chinese investment in Russia has disappointed the Kremlin's expectations. Outside of major deals in the energy sector, Chinese investors are staying away largely for the same reasons that warming ties between Japan and Russia have not unlocked significant Japanese capital inflows: foreign firms doubt they can make money in Russia given the business climate. Russia, meanwhile, is growing frustrated that its attempts to work with Chinese political-economic initiatives, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), have not produced major new inflows of Chinese money. In sum, therefore, the economic foundations of Russia's Asian Pivot today look weak. If China's economy slows faster than expected, they will look weaker still. Historically, the deflating of excessive optimism about economic benefits often has caused Russia to call a halt to its Asian Pivots and to reduce the attention it devotes to the region.

Geopolitical Risks to Russia's Asian Pivots

A second challenge to the durability of Russia's Asian Pivot is geopolitical. Will Russia's foreign policy goals and geopolitical position continue to support an Asian Pivot? Historically, geopolitical shifts have started and ended Russia's periods of focus on Asia. Russia's first major push into the Pacific, around the time it founded its Alaskan colonies, was driven by a perception that global imperial conflict in the region was increasing. Similarly, Russia's decision in the 1850s to seize the Amur River Valley was driven by fear that the British and French were carving up China and that Russia had to get there first. The construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway a decade later and Russia's expansion into Manchuria and Korea were motivated by similar factors.

Russia's focus on Asia today, however, is driven by a different set of geopolitical factors. The key dynamic is not Asian weakness, but rather Russian weakness in Europe. Today, Russia has locked itself out of Europe by its annexation of Crimea and its war on Ukraine. The Kremlin's only European partners are third-tier autocrats like Hungary's Viktor Orbán or Belarus' Aleksandr Lukashenko. It has been ejected from powerful forums such as the G8 and is ostracized for its foreign

policy. Hence, Russia turned toward Asia—a policy that the Kremlin had dabbled with in the years before 2014, but which accelerated as relations with the West deteriorated.

This is not the first time a clash with the West has driven a turn toward the East. The first Crimean War, from 1853-1856, when Russia squared off against Britain and France, inspired a similar Asian turn, leading Russia to seize the Amur River Valley. So, too, did the division of Europe after the early Cold War, when the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Marshall Plan blocked the Soviet Union from expanding its influence in West Germany, France, Britain, and Italy, and inspired Stalin to test his luck in Asia instead by launching the Korean War. As these past episodes suggest, conflicts with the West are a weak basis for a durable Asian Pivot.

There is little reason to expect that Russia's current focus on Asia will end in a disaster along the lines of Tsarist Russia's defeat in the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, or even in a quagmire such as the Korean War. Yet, there are other risks to Russia's Asian Pivot, including a change to one of the political factors that has underlain the Kremlin's turn toward Asia. One such factor has been a desire to create a safe space for authoritarian rule. Today, Russia promotes its partnership with China in part on the grounds that both countries share a set of political ideals, including opposition to democracy and human rights promotion. Both countries feel threatened by demands for change to their domestic political systems, and believe that the international order should bolster existing regimes, regardless of their political tint. Given these shared beliefs, the two countries have cooperated to oppose recognition of universal rights and norms in international organizations; to share internet censorship technology; and to support the extradition of political dissidents across Eurasia.

This cooperation fits a historical pattern: after the Crimean War of 1853-1856, in which Russia faced off against more liberal powers, some Russians emphasized the similarities between the personal rule of the tsar and what they perceived to be the more autocratic politics of other Asian countries. Likewise, the ideological bond of communism linked Soviet Russia with allies in North Korea and China during the early Cold War. Ideology rarely has proven enough to attract Russia to devote attention to Asia on its own, but it has often been a useful glue in holding together partnerships with allies in Asia.

Will the glue of ideological similarity continue to hold Russia's attention on its relationship with Beijing and other Central Asian autocrats? Perhaps, but historically, though Russian governments generally have been less democratic than those in Western Europe, Russia has swung back and forth between periods of relative liberalism and authoritarianism. Putin has presided over a crackdown, but his successor could well tack in the other direction. Similarly, while Xi has consolidated power and abolished term limits, it is difficult to predict the course of Chinese politics over the next several decades. There remains a real possibility that the two countries' authoritarian alignment does not persist, in which case the ideological foundations of Russia's Asian Pivot would be shaky.

The bigger risk to Russia's Asian Pivot is if, over time, Russia decides to improve ties with Europe, undermining the main purpose of its turn toward Asia. This

might seem counterintuitive. Better ties with Europe would free up some of the immense resources that Russia currently devotes to confrontation, whether via military spending, the cost of sanctions, or the other expenses of its ambitious foreign policy. Indeed, Russia's periods of diplomatic success in Asia have often come at times not of confrontation with Europe, but rather when it had stronger partnerships in Europe than in Asia. For example, in the late nineteenth century, Russia succeeded in building the Trans-Siberian Railway and solidifying its position in Siberia thanks to stable relations with Europe's great powers, as well as large amounts of French capital, which funded the railroad.

Many of Russia's past Asian Pivots, especially those intended to spite the West, foundered after ties with the West improved and the turn toward the East lost its purpose. Consider, for example, Vladimir Lenin and Stalin's efforts to spark communist revolutions in Asia in the 1920s. In the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks brought the communist revolution to Asia to undermine Western imperial holdings there. By the mid-1920s, however, as the prospect of an immediate war with the capitalist powers declined, so, too, did the Soviet Union's need to spend energy on revolutionary efforts in Asia. Combined with the reality that the Asian revolution was not succeeding as planned, Stalin decided to pull back, all but abandoning the Chinese Communists for the remainder of the 1920s and most of the 1930s.

Could such a reversal in Russian policy toward Asia occur today? It is difficult to foresee a shift in Russian relations with the West, but such shifts always are hard to predict, even when they are only a year or two away. The most dangerous assumption one can make in forecasting is of linear development, especially in relation to political systems that historically have proven inclined to revolts and revolutions. China appears likely to remain on its current course of foreign and domestic politics for some time. With Russia, it is harder to be confident. Leadership transitions in Russia always are fraught with uncertainty and often are accompanied by foreign policy shifts. The death of Tsar Nicholas I brought a new diplomacy that ended the Crimean War. The ascendance of Tsar Nicholas II heralded a more aggressive policy in East Asia that led to the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War. In the Soviet period, the deaths of Stalin, the removal of Khrushchev, and the appointment of Gorbachev all had major ramifications for foreign policy. No one in Russia can say what will happen after Putin leaves the Kremlin. Indeed, no one knows what will happen when his current term as president ends in 2024. All that can be said with confidence is that a variety of future foreign policies are possible. A decision to reduce confrontation with the West would reduce the impetus to continue to devote outsized attention on Asia.

Russia's Focus on Asia is not Inevitable

Around the turn of the twentieth century, Prince Ukhtomsky, a confidant of Tsar Nicholas II, insisted that Russia has "always belonged" to Asia. "We have lived its life and felt its interests," he wrote.²⁶ In a geographic sense, Ukhtomsky was right, of course, but the persistence of geography has not prevented a long series of whiplash-

²⁶ Sanjay Kumar Pandey, "Asia in the Debate on Russian Identity," *International Studies*, vol. 4, no. 44 (2007), p. 326.

inducing pivots to and from Asia, from friendship to rivalry with Asia's great powers, and from periods in which Russia focused its energies on Asia to periods in which it all but ignored its Eastern neighbors.

Listening to the Kremlin today, it is easy to think that the current shift is inevitable. Surely, Asia's rising economy makes an increased focus on the region inescapable? Far from it. All of Russia's past Asian Pivots have been accompanied by promises of inevitability that later proved overstated. Russia's seizure of its far eastern territory in the 1850s was accompanied by promises that the region would attract "all the goods of the South and the East," from California, Canton, and "even India" and that it would become "one of the greatest commercial arteries of the world."²⁷ In fact, it remained a backwater. In the final years of the 1880s, when Count Witte advised Tsar Alexander III to build a railroad across Siberia, he, too, alluded to the inevitability of Asia's economic growth and of Russia's participation in the region's trade. Russia would "extend its trade to all parts of the world," he promised, and even "establish colonies." Its "proximity to Asia," including the 460 million people then living in China, Japan, and Korea, was an immeasurable opportunity, he promised, but his efforts at expansion incurred more costs than they brought benefits.²⁸

As recently as 40 years ago, Gorbachev, the final leader of the Soviet Union, perceived similar opportunities in Asia. He explained to the Politburo in April 1986 that "the development of civilization is moving in that direction. We are also moving, in Siberia, in the Soviet Far East. So, there is an objective interest in questions about Asia-Pacific Cooperation. . . . The Asian-Pacific region is one of our most important orientations." He continued: "The Soviet Union is a European and at the same time an Asian country, so it is closer to Asian problems." Asia, for its part, "is an enormous continent, where dozens of new governments have entered the arena. They are searching for their path. How those processes turn out, especially in the big countries . . . will define the fate of the world." In sum, Gorbachev said, his government must grasp that "everything is in movement on this continent," he concluded. "Civilization is moving toward the Pacific Ocean."²⁹ Civilization may have been moving toward Asia in the late 1980s, but the Soviet Union was not. Will Russia's Asian Pivot today be any different?



²⁷ Mark Bassin, "Russia's Mississippi," pp. 15, 92, 185.

²⁸ Sergei Witte, "Po povody natsionalizma [About nationalism]," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, volume 1, book 2, part 1, pp. 41, 42, 46, 67; and Witte, *Memoirs*, p. 41.

²⁹ "Na politburo," 3 April 1986, "O mezhdunarodnyi situatsii [About the international situation]," *Otvechaya na Vyzov Vremeni* (Moscow: Ves Mir, 2010), pp. 796-797.