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Russia, China, ASEAN, and Asian Security

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STEPHEN BLANK, AUG 4 2011

Russian spokesmen believe that Russia's situation in Asia is visibly improving.[i] Unlike 2010 when Moscow believed that the Korean peninsula stood on the brink of war, Russia sees progress there and its growing acceptance in North and Southeast Asia as a major regional if not international actor.[ii] Simultaneously every official statement on Russo-Chinese relations from Moscow or Beijing reiterates that relations have never been better and postulates a virtual identity of interests between the two governments regarding Asian security.

To be sure much congruence exists in Russo-Chinese views of Asian issues, particularly when it comes to opposing US interests and values there. In fact, Russo-Chinese closeness cannot be questioned. Thus in 2008 Marcin Kaczmarek wrote that,

The scale of cooperation between Russia and China is reflected in the extensive infrastructure of dialogue between the two states. Regular contacts are maintained at nearly all levels of central Authority. Political dialogue takes place within an extensive framework for bilateral consultations, including meetings of Heads of State held several times a year (at least once a year on a bilateral basis, and also during several multilateral meetings); meetings of prime ministers and foreign ministers; consultations on strategic stability (at the level of deputy foreign ministers); consultations on military cooperation (at the level of defense ministers); and consultations on security issues (between national security advisors since 2005).[iii]

Yet on closer examination this marriage is less intimate than it looks. For example, in 2010 Russia and China jointly issued a call for a new security order in Asia based on "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation." According to their joint proposal for this new order, this Sino-Russian proposal for a new security order in Asia is based on "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation." All states would respect each other's sovereignty (i.e. no criticism of their domestic politics) integrity (i.e. support for Russian and Chinese postures on outstanding territorial issues, the Kurile Islands, the Senkakus, Taiwan, and possibly even China's claims on the Spratly Islands), non-alliance principles, equal and transparent security frameworks, equal and indivisible security, etc.[iv] Moreover, the joint proposal resembles Russia's equally self-serving, anti-American, and Anti-NATO proposal for a European Security treaty of 2009-10 that has gone nowhere fast since being announced.[v] Moscow even applies the same rhetoric to this proposal that it does for its European Security Treaty draft. Speaking at the IISS Shangri-La conference in Singapore in 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said that,

Russian-Chinese proposals are aimed at helping the countries of the region to realize that security is indivisible and at abandoning attempts to strengthen one's security at the expense of others. New regional security architecture should be based on the universal principles of international law, non-aligned approaches, confidence and openness, with due regard to the diversity of the APR and an emerging polycentric balance of forces.[vi]

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Russia, China, ASEAN, and Asian Security

Written by Stephen Blank

anti-American purpose of this gambit is overt. For example the 2007 strategy paper of the Russian National Committee of the Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific (CSCAP) stated that,

The Asian part of Asia-Pacific is the world's key lead range for working out a model of political development which is viewed here not as Westernization, but a special way of development based on a synthesis of democratic forms of government and autochthonic political culture.[ix]

However, at the same time Russia is attempting to have its cake and eat it by characteristically crude and even naïve (only in that it thinks nobody grasps the game Moscow is playing) attempts to double-cross the US and China. Thus Russia also seeks India's assent to this formulation, and even covertly solicits Japan's endorsement of this proposal even as it humiliates Japan over the Kurile Islands, a sure sign of both its endemic desire to play both sides against the middle and of its fundamentally anti-liberal and anti-American orientation.[x] And its efforts to solicit Japan clearly relate to its fears of China's rising power. Earlier in 2007 after China launched an anti-satellite weapon, Russian diplomats approached Japan and raised concerns about China after claiming to have reassessed relations with Japan in a security context.[xi] Russia is also simultaneously trying to inveigle South Korean and Chinese companies to invest in the Kuriles in order to compromise them both with Japan and force Japan to yield to Russia.[xii] More recently it hinted that Japanese firms could invest there in an effort to induce Japanese acceptance of the status quo.[xiii]

Moscow may have several motives in mind. As a former Indian Ambassador to Turkey and now a commentator, M. K. Bhadrakumar, writes, Russian provocations against Japan and support for China's stance in its territorial disputes with Japan please China and shows Moscow's support for it even as Russia seeks Japanese investment and lessened tensions.

Moscow showed up Japanese foreign policy as being in disarray and that with its economy in deep stagnation, Tokyo is too weak to do anything other than complain. Russia asserted its status as an Asian power, but Moscow also signaled to Beijing that the potential surge in its NATO ties by no means comes at the expense of Sino-Russian strategic partnership. A Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman called the Russian-Japanese row a "bilateral issue" (ie, Washington should stay clear of it) which should be solved through "a friendly dialogue." Moscow has strengthened Beijing's hand in any upcoming negotiations with Japan over the East China Sea. The Global Times daily quoted a Chinese scholar as saying: "Japan cannot afford to have tensions with China and Russia at the same time. It's time for Japanese politicians to reflect on their diplomacy and sort out a solution."

At the same time since the vagueness of the proposal benefits only Russia and China and squarely denounces the US alliance system in Asia, while greatly resembling Moscow's European Security Treaty draft it reveals just how shallow, ethnocentric, and self-serving Russia's concept of Asian, if not global, multipolarity truly is.[xiv]

Meanwhile Moscow, to nobody's surprise, is playing the same game in Southeast Asia with ASEAN members as shown recently at the ASEAN Ministerial Summit. Russia's standing in Southeast Asia has also grown recently due to its ability to sell Southeast Asian governments arms, prospect for energy and assist Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and the Philippines to build energy infrastructure, develop collaborative projects involving innovative technologies, and improve people to people contacts. But perhaps by far the most important success is the enhancement of the institutional basis of Russia's relationship with ASEAN to the point where Russia has become a dialogue partner for ASEAN, as observed at the Bali Ministerial Summit in July 2011.[xv] These policy trends have clearly improved relationships between Russia and both individual members of ASEAN and the organization as a whole.

The arms sales and energy projects are clearly the priorities on a bilateral basis in Russian policy here. But they too reflect Moscow's desire to have its cake and eat it in regard to China. Indeed, Vietnam was Moscow's biggest customer for weapons in 2009. ASEAN states fear that the systems sold to China could be used against them, e.g. in the South China Seas over the contested Spratly Islands. This places Moscow in the position of selling arms to both sides in potential conflicts, a problem it faces in even greater degree in the Middle East but a habitual dilemma facing Moscow. Indeed, Russian arms sales to Myanmar and presumably its nuclear cooperation with that state as

Russia, China, ASEAN, and Asian Security

Written by Stephen Blank

well have raised anxieties in other neighboring countries leading them to buy more weapons. Nevertheless Moscow denies responsibility for any regional arms race even though the evidence tends to suggest a regional action-reaction pattern.[xvi]

But beyond that point Russian arms sales in Southeast Asia raise other questions that we have seen elsewhere. As in Iran's case Russian officials claim that if they did not sell arms, others would, depriving them of access. While this may be true, those sales' prominence in Russian ties to Southeast Asia underscore the weakness of economic ties and the non-competitiveness of Russia as an economic actor here. For example, Russia was not invited to join the East Asia Summit and Singapore rejected Moscow's proposal to regularize its relations with ASEAN through regular summits on the grounds that Russian economic relations with ASEAN were insubstantial.[xvii] Lastly we again find in Southeast Asia the possibility for arms sales deals to corrupt not only individuals but also the overall Russian policy process. In Myanmar, for example, Moscow's penetration of the local arms market was reportedly effected not by the state or its arms seller, Rosoboroneksport (ROE), but by Russia's intelligence agencies, giving rise to questions of whether or not the government has complete control over its arms sales to Myanmar, as ROE and the Ministry of Defense should conduct those.

The same phenomenon is visible regarding energy. During the recent rising tension over Chinese efforts to declare the South China Sea a core interest and a kind of Mare Nostrum (our sea) Russia openly sided with Vietnam. Deputy Foreign Minister Andrei Denisov gave economic reasons for supporting Vietnam. Not surprisingly Chinese media reports denounced this action as "unrighteous" and warned Russia that it is consciously preferring cooperation with "ill-doers" over China with whom it professes an identity of interests. The Chinese media also stressed that Russo-Vietnamese military and energy cooperation allows Vietnam to extend its energy exploration into contested areas. Vietnam depends on this cooperation with Russia, so in some sense Russia is culpable. It also correctly accused Russia of seeking a return to Cam Ranh Bay.[xviii] Indeed, quite recently Russia announced its interest in returning to a naval base there, a step probably connected to joint Russo-Vietnamese energy projects off Vietnam's coast, and as a means of checking China.[xix]

Conclusions

The compromise at the recent Bali ASEAN ministerial Summit among ASEAN members, China, and the US averted further tensions for now. But the recurring nature of Chinese efforts to encroach upon ASEAN in the South China Sea and extend its sway over Southeast Asia means that this calm will not last very long. Southeast Asia and the South China Sea are now clearly major theaters of rivalry between the US and China. ASEAN's members are squarely in the middle of this rivalry and seek to leverage any and all assistance from major powers that they can get, e.g. India, as well as Russia. Meanwhile Russia is clearly and naively trying to run a bluff on China, which will probably only provoke Chinese and Asian mistrust despite the mutual professions of an identity of interest with China. China's rising power eclipses that of Russia and it is converting the Russian Far East into its economic rear.[xx] Nonetheless bandwagoning with China against the US and simultaneously covertly trying to restrain China will be the dominating motifs of Russia's Asian policy in Northeast and Southeast Asia. Southeast Asia, once again, is a cockpit of major international rivalries. The test of its continuing progress in developing progressive approaches to security like ASEAN will be its ability to navigate through those shoals which are only likely to deepen in the foreseeable future.

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Russia, China, ASEAN, and Asian Security

Written by Stephen Blank

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Russia, China, ASEAN, and Asian Security

Written by Stephen Blank

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