



Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies

EMERGING INSIGHTS

Russia and the Indo-Pacific Security Concept

Neil Melvin



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This publication was funded by the Russia Strategic Initiative, US European Command, Stuttgart Germany. Opinions, arguments, viewpoints, and conclusions expressed in this work do not represent those of RSI, US EUCOM, the Department of Defense, or the US Government. This publication is cleared for public release.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past decade, Russia's efforts to pivot to Asia have gathered force as relations with the West have deteriorated. While the focus of this engagement has been on the Asia-Pacific and its existing regional architecture (ASEAN), China has emerged as by far Russia's most important partner. The China-Russia relationship increasingly involves key areas of cooperation and convergence, notably on policies designed to oppose the US. Russia has, however, developed a wider regional policy with key Asian states (notably including India), in part to prevent an over-reliance on China. The rise of the Indo-Pacific regional concept represents a challenge to Russia's established position in Asia.

In this Emerging Insights paper, Russia's opposition to the Indo-Pacific concept is mapped and the implications of the concept for its policy of regional balancing are examined through a consideration of Russia's evolving ties to China, India and Japan. Russia's efforts to counter the IP concept are analysed. The paper argues that the rise of the Indo-Pacific concept and, in particular, the consolidation of a regional security order around the Quad, is forcing Russia to readjust its regional policies and to seek an ever-more elusive regional balance in its relations with Asian countries.

INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-2010s, the concept of an 'Indo-Pacific' region has emerged in geopolitical discourse.¹ The development of the regional security concept is seen as a result of globalisation, which has fostered economic, political and security connectivity between and across the Pacific and Indian Oceans.² The concept of the Indo-Pacific is often ill-defined and contested, potentially encompassing a vast geographic area from East Africa to the west coast of the US. While there are diverging definitions of the extent of the Indo-Pacific region, there is a consensus that its core area extends from India to Southeast Asia and Japan. The concept focuses on the littoral territories and maritime spaces of the eastern Indian Ocean, the South China Seas and western Pacific Ocean.³

The Indo-Pacific concept has become the basis for strategic planning and action by the US and many of its allies and partners, mainly as a result of the rise of China as a regional and, increasingly, global security actor. The creation of the Quad format (the US, Australia, India and Japan) in response to China's rise has begun to reshape regional security relations.⁴ A key moment came in November 2017, when then President Donald Trump presented his vision of a 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', cementing the Indo-Pacific concept as the framework for US strategy toward Asia.⁵

The Indo-Pacific concept is, however, openly opposed by Russia. Russian officials have expressed scepticism about claims by the US and its allies and partners that the Indo-Pacific concept is aimed at promoting a 'free and open' region on the basis of economic development, connectivity and a strengthening of the Rules Based Order. Rather, Russia argues that the Indo-Pacific concept is designed primarily as a security containment strategy for China and as an effort to promote a two-bloc system in Asia, analogous to developments in Europe during the Cold War when the Soviet Union and the US led opposing security groups.

-
1. Felix Heiduk and Gudrun Wacker, 'From Asia-Pacific to Indo-Pacific: Significance, Implementation and Challenges', SWP Research Paper 9, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, July 2020.
 2. Udayan Das, 'What Is the Indo-Pacific?', *The Diplomat*, 13 July 2019; Rory Medcalf, *Indo-Pacific Empire: China, America and the Contest for the World's Pivotal Region* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), chapters 5–8; Ash Rossiter and Brendon J Cannon (eds), *Conflict and Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: New Geopolitical Realities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020).
 3. Wada Haruko, 'The "Indo-Pacific" Concept: Geographical Adjustments and Their Implications', RSIS Working Paper 326, S Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 16 March 2020.
 4. Cleo Paskal, *Indo-Pacific Strategies, Perceptions and Partnerships: The View from Seven Countries* (London: Chatham House, 2021).
 5. Patrick M Cronin, 'Trump's Post-Pivot Strategy', *The Diplomat*, 11 November 2017.

This paper aims to answer three questions about Russia's response to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept: Why does Russia oppose the Indo-Pacific concept? What is the Russian critique of the concept? How is the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a distinct regional space affecting Russia's foreign and security policies?

The paper is organised into three sections.⁶ The first outlines Russia's recent initiatives to enhance its Asia policy. It argues that Russia's Asia pivot has been a key element of Moscow's effort to reposition itself internationally in response to the deterioration of relations with the US and Europe. In the second section, Russia's critique of the Indo-Pacific concept is explored, including its opposition to the Quad security format. It notes that the emergence of an integrated security order led by the US and its allies across the Pacific and Indian Oceans is viewed by Russia as a strategic challenge to its policies in Asia, and thus its wider international position. The third section considers the evolution of Russia's regional policies, focusing on how the rise of the Indo-Pacific strategy by the US and its allies is challenging and reshaping Russia's relations with three countries central to its position in Asia: China; India; and Japan. The conclusion argues that Russia's foreign policy in the region is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain in the context of the coalescence of a distinct US-led alliance in the Indo-Pacific.

THE RISING SIGNIFICANCE OF ASIA FOR RUSSIA

Historically, Russian strategic culture has been defined by its relationship with Europe, which has been the key geographic theatre for national security policies and the main source of insecurity.⁷ Ties to the countries of the Pacific and Indian Oceans have largely occupied a subordinate position in Russia's foreign and security policy. For much of the 20th century Russian and then Soviet authorities viewed Asia primarily as a source of threat, although a new positive regional focus began to take shape from the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev.⁸ Gorbachev began a shift in Moscow's strategic thinking whereby relations with the Asia-Pacific region came to be seen as a means to revive the Russian Far East and Siberia.⁹ China became a priority, not

-
6. This is the first of a series of research papers assessing the impact of the rise of the Indo-Pacific regional concept on Russia's foreign and security policies as part of the 'Russia Navigating the Indo-Pacific' project, which is supported by Russia Strategic Initiative (RSI). The conclusions in this paper reflect an analysis of key Russian foreign and security policy documents and official statements, interviews with subject matter experts, and a review of the secondary literature on Russia's Asia policies and emerging Indo-Pacific security dynamics.
 7. Eugene Rumer and Richard Sokolsky, 'Etched in Stone: Russian Strategic Culture and the Future of Transatlantic Security', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2020, pp. 3–9.
 8. Donald S Zagoria, 'Soviet Policy in East Asia: A New Beginning?', *Foreign Affairs* (Vol. 68, No. 1, 1989), pp. 120–38.
 9. Ramesh Chandra Thakur and Carlyle A Thayer (eds), *The Soviet Union as an Asian-Pacific Power: Implications of Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok Initiative*

least to resolve the tense border dispute that brought the Soviet Union and China close to war in the late 1960s.¹⁰ Efforts were also made to improve ties with Japan over territorial disputes in Russia's Far East.¹¹ Russia's focus on the Asia-Pacific region was further developed by Russian Foreign Minister Evgeniy Primakov in the mid-1990s and the regional diplomacy of President Vladimir Putin from 2000.¹²

By the early 2010s, Asia-Pacific countries were viewed as an important source of economic growth and Moscow was developing a broad approach based on cooperation with the region.¹³ In 2012, Putin indicated Russia would implement a 'pivot to Asia' focused on the Asia-Pacific region with the aim of promoting a modernisation of the economy.¹⁴ Given Russia's relatively modest economic ties and weak regional security influence, the new vector in Russian policy primarily indicated a desire by Moscow to be a part of an increasingly multipolar world in which the importance of Asia, and notably China, was growing.

Equally, the 'pivot' aimed to rebalance Russia's difficult ties with Europe and the US. From 2014, the crisis in relations between Russia and the West following Russia's move to annex Crimea and its role in the Donbas conflict accelerated Moscow's effort to shift away from its previous Euro-Atlantic focus, giving increased weight to the symbolism of Asia in Russia's foreign and security policy.¹⁵

Russia's regional policy was based on three interlinking policy ambitions: the economic development of the Russian Far East; Eurasian integration through a revival of links with former Soviet republics; and forging a closer political alignment with key Asian countries.¹⁶ However, China has emerged as the central focus of Russia's foreign and security policy pivot to Asia, especially as Western sanctions led to Russia looking to reorient its economy away from Europe.

(Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), chapters 2–7.

10. Neville Maxwell, 'How the Sino-Russian Boundary Conflict Was Finally Settled', *Critical Asian Studies* (Vol. 39, No. 2, July 2007), pp. 229–53.
11. Dmitri Trenin, 'The End of Eurasia: Russia on the Border Between Geopolitics and Globalization', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003, pp. 213–19.
12. Alexander Lukin, 'Russia's Approach to Security Architecture in the Asia Pacific', in Ron Huisken (ed.), 'CSCAP Regional Security Outlook 2020', Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific, 1 January 2019, pp. 23–24.
13. Bobo Lo and Fiona Hill, 'Putin's Pivot: Why Russia Is Looking East', Brookings Institution, 31 July 2013.
14. Vladimir Putin, 'Russia and the Changing World', *RT*, 27 February 2012, <<https://www.rt.com/russia/official-word/putin-russia-changing-world-263/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
15. Zachary Keck, 'Russia Accelerates Asia Pivot', *The Diplomat*, 18 April 2014.
16. Alexander Gabuev, 'A "Soft Alliance"? Russia-China Relations After the Ukraine Crisis', Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations, February 2015.

The strong US focus on countering China during the Trump administration reinforced the Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment, which had been steadily emerging since the end of the Cold War.

In this context, Russia-China relations have undergone a qualitative change and moved beyond the previous 'axis of convenience' to a growing 'asymmetrical interdependence', in which Russia is the junior partner in terms of economic strength but is treated politically as a sovereign equal by China.¹⁷ The strong US focus on countering China during the Trump administration reinforced the Sino-Russian geopolitical alignment, which had been steadily emerging since the end of the Cold War.

Although China is the central pillar of the pivot to Asia policy, Russia has also sought to foster other regional political, and to a lesser degree, economic relationships, notably with Japan. Russia's engagement with Japan has been focused on the bilateral issue of the territorial dispute over the Kuril Islands, but carries a much wider strategic significance. The bilateral negotiations with Japan were intended to demonstrate to Beijing that Moscow has other potential partners in Asia and, thereby, to provide Russia with a means to offset China's growing position in East Asia.¹⁸ The Russo-Japan relationship was also viewed in Moscow as a means to weaken the US alliance with Japan, notably in regard to Japan's application of Western sanctions.

Russia's effort to strengthen its engagement in Asia has been informed by a regional approach that has sought to respond to the emerging China-US rivalry and Moscow's interest in engaging with a broad range of states. In developing its regional approach, Russia has sought to broaden its policies beyond the longstanding reliance on military power to exert influence by investing in diplomacy and promoting economic ties. Against this background, Russia has engaged more with the existing regional architecture of the Asia-Pacific, notably ASEAN and the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum.¹⁹ Building ties with regional institutions has been an important part of efforts by Russia to promote multilateralism and, thereby, to help constrain regional powers, and to promote multipolarity.²⁰

Russia has been a full ASEAN dialogue partner since 1996, although official ASEAN-Russia summits have taken place only four times. From 2014, the previously neglected relations with ASEAN have become a focus for Russian regional foreign policy.²¹ Russia has also highlighted the security dimensions

-
17. Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2008); Alexander Gabuev, 'Friends with Benefits? Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 June 2016, p. 29.
 18. Joshua Walker and Hidetoshi Azuma, 'Shinzo Abe's Unfinished Deal with Russia', *War on the Rocks*, 11 September 2020.
 19. Mission of the Russian Federation to ASEAN, 'ASEAN-Russia Dialogue Partnership Overview', <https://asean.mid.ru/en_GB/dialogue-partnership#:~:text=The%20ASEAN%2DRussia%20Dialogue%20Partnership,in%20the%20Asia%2DPacific%20region>, accessed 3 May 2021.
 20. Natasha Kuhrt, 'Russia and Asia-Pacific: From "Competing" to "Complementary" Regionalisms?', *Politics* (Vol. 34, No. 2, 2014), pp. 138–39, 144–46.
 21. Nivedita Kapoor, 'Russia's Relations in Southeast Asia since 2014: Continuity and Change', ORF Occasional Paper No. 267, Observer Research Foundation, 20 August 2020.

of its partnership with ASEAN through its involvement in the ADMM-Plus platform (a meeting of ASEAN defence ministers with dialogue partners) and the ASEAN Regional Forum.

While Russia has sought to develop its ties to ASEAN and has highlighted its participation in high-level regional summits, the core of Russia's strategy for engaging with Southeast Asia has been through bilateral trade diplomacy and security partnerships with individual countries.²² In developing these ties, Indonesia has gained a prominent position, while expanding arms sales with Myanmar have been important for the Russian defence industry.²³ Building on close ties from the Cold War, Vietnam has also been a target for Russian diplomacy, while efforts by Russian energy companies to develop offshore resources in the South China Sea in areas claimed by Vietnam and China have brought tensions with Beijing.²⁴

Although Russia has highlighted its pivot to the Asia-Pacific as the core of its eastern policy, Russia has long maintained a far wider engagement across Asia, notably with India. India is a vital partner for the Russian defence industry, and the two countries work together on nuclear energy, space, and science and technology cooperation.²⁵ Russia and India have also forged a relationship around support for a multipolar world order built on the principle of state sovereignty to promote a global governance and security architecture that is not dominated by the US. Russia has used its veto power in the UN to block resolutions critical of Indian actions in Kashmir, while India has appeared to endorse tacitly the Russian annexation of Crimea.²⁶ In Russia, the partnership with India is seen as a means to build a relationship that can help to balance against both the US and China.²⁷

Moscow has supported a variety of multilateral institutions in the region, particularly those organisations where Russia plays a leading role – the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Russia-India-China group (RIC) and the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa). The emergence of this multilateral architecture has been guided by Russia's vision of a shift away from a US-dominated global order to a 'polycentric system of international

22. Nicholas Trickett, 'Russia and the Rest: Putin's East Asia Summit Visit', *The Diplomat*, 22 November 2018.

23. Dmitry Gorenburg and Paul Schwartz, 'Russia's Relations with Southeast Asia', *Russie.Nei.Reports* 26, IFRI, March 2019, pp. 21–37.

24. Bennett Murray, 'Vietnam's Strange Ally in its Fight With China', *Foreign Policy*, 1 August 2019.

25. Aleksei Zakharov, 'Friends in Need: Whither the Russia-India Strategic Partnership?', *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 116, IFRI, October 2019, pp. 19–32.

26. Zachary Keck, 'India Backs Russia's "Legitimate Interests" in Ukraine', *The Diplomat*, 8 March 2014.

27. Alexei Kupriyanov and Alexander Korolev, 'The Eurasian Chord and the Oceanic Ring: Russia and India as the Third Force in a New World Order', *Valdai Club*, 11 September 2019.

relations' based on the values of sovereignty and non-interference, which is anchored by Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council.²⁸

The emergence of this diverse set of institutions has provided Russia with mechanisms to pursue its foreign policy goals, especially in Asia: to push back against Western influence; to thwart Western efforts to isolate Russia diplomatically, and economically, through sanctions; to navigate relations in a more competitive international landscape; and to assist Russia in managing its ties with a rising China, particularly in Russia's own backyard.²⁹ These institutions have also provided a means for Russia to engage other key Asian powers as part of balancing policies – between India and Pakistan, for example.

Russia's focus on Asia has been integral to its wider strategic thinking about the country's post-Soviet role in the world. In response to the failure of its wider European vision, which dominated Moscow's foreign and security policy in the 1990s, Moscow has embraced the idea that Russia is a great power at the centre of a distinct Eurasian region.³⁰ This concept provided a basis for the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) as a regional organisation to reinforce Russia's interests in the region.

Faced with the need to link Eurasia to a rising Asia, Russian strategic thinkers proposed the idea of 'Greater Eurasia' as a basis for Russia and Chinese partnership.³¹ The concept was quickly adopted by Russia's political leadership in the form of the 'Greater Eurasian Partnership', which offers a Russian-led vision of Eurasian integration, in cooperation with China, and helps to shift the focus of Russia's development from its European territories and beyond the previous focus on the Russian Far East and China to a wider engagement with Asia.³²

Putin has argued that the Greater Eurasia Partnership provides a platform to engage with countries that are already sympathetic to Russia, including Vietnam, Iran, India, Pakistan and Singapore, and to build trading relations

28. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation', 18 February 2013, <https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/122186>, 3 May 2021.

29. Paul Stronski and Richard Sokolsky, 'Multipolarity in Practice: Understanding Russia's Engagement with Regional Institutions', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 January 2020.

30. Seçkin Köstem, 'Russia's Search for a Greater Eurasia: Origins, Promises, and Prospects', Kennan Cable No. 40, Wilson Center and Kennan Institute, February 2019, pp. 3–4.

31. Sergei Karaganov et al., 'Toward the Great Ocean – 5: From the Turn to the East to Greater Eurasia', Valdai Discussion Club, September 2017, p. 24.

32. David Lewis, 'Strategic Culture and Russia's "Pivot to the East": Russia, China, and "Greater Eurasia"', Marshall Center, July 2019.

between the EEU, ASEAN, the Belt and Road Initiative and the SCO.³³ Russia has also signalled an ambition to be a stronger military power in parts of Asia, notably the Indian Ocean – as highlighted in the 2015–2020 Maritime Doctrine.³⁴

Russia's increasing engagement with Asia and key bilateral ties with China have provided new economic opportunities and helped to soften the impact of US and European sanctions. Most significantly, however, the focus on Asia has allowed Moscow to claim that it is pivoting away from its historical ties to Europe as part of the rise of a new global multipolar world in which Asia is increasingly the key arena – even if the magnitude of Russia's shift to Asia has often fallen short of official claims.³⁵

THE INDO-PACIFIC CHALLENGE TO RUSSIA

The rise of a US-led coalition of states organised around the Indo-Pacific regional concept, with security cooperation embodied in the Quad security dialogue, constitutes a challenge to Russia's efforts to carve a new international position for itself in Asia. These developments threaten four of Russia's keys goals: to build diverse regional partnerships beyond China, notably with Quad members India and Japan; to promote multipolarity in Asia with Russia as an important independent actor; to link Russian-led Eurasian integration processes to Asia and Asian regional organisations, including through multilateral institutions where Russia has strong influence; and to diversify into Asia to balance the deterioration of ties with the US and Europe. As a result, Russia has increasingly looked to challenge and push back against the Indo-Pacific concept.³⁶

33. RIA Novosti, 'Putin: evraziiskoe partnerstvo dolzhno izmenit politicheskii landschaft kontinenta' ['Putin: Eurasian Partnership Should Change the Political Landscape of the Continent'], 14 May 2017, <<http://1prime.ru/News/20170514/827449765.html>>, accessed 3 May 2021.

34. Russian Maritime Studies Institute, 'Maritime Doctrine of the Russian Federation 2015', translated by Anna Davis, pp. 29–30, <https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/Maritime%20Doctrine%20TransENGrus_FINAL.pdf?sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=fqZgUUVRVRRKmSFNMOj%2FNaRNawUoRdhvPFJj7%2FpAkM%3D>, accessed 3 May 2021.

35. Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky and Aleksandar Vladicic, 'Russia in the Asia-Pacific: Less Than Meets the Eye', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 3 September 2020.

36. While the main regional threat identified in the US Indo-Pacific concept is China, Russia is presented as a rising challenge. The 2018 US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific argued that 'Russia will remain a marginal player relative to the United States, China, and India'. See Trump White House, 'US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific', February 2018, p. 2, <<https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf>>, accessed 3 May 2021. By the time of the publication of the 2019 Indo-Pacific Strategy Report, however, Russia is characterised as a 'revitalized malign actor' in the

In 2019, Putin sought to dismiss the Indo-Pacific concept, arguing that Russia does not support the creation of new power blocs – as occurred in the Euro-Atlantic area after the Second World War.³⁷ Russia has advanced these views through active regional diplomacy, notably through regional formats like the SCO.³⁸

The most frequent and comprehensive criticism of the Indo-Pacific concept has been voiced by Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. Speaking at the Raisina Dialogue in January 2020, Lavrov argued that the world is becoming multipolar and that Russia has been supporting the emergence of international institutions that reflect this new balance of power – the SCO, BRICS, RIC and the G20.³⁹ These arrangements, Lavrov argued, are built on the core principles of the UN – the sovereign equality of states, non-interference in internal matters, respect for territorial integrity, and the peaceful resolution of disputes.⁴⁰

In contrast, the Indo-Pacific concept, Lavrov argues, is designed to exclude China, not to unify the region. Implicit in Lavrov's statement is the idea that the Indo-Pacific agenda is not just about limiting China, but rather is part of a wider US shift towards containing the world's two pre-eminent land powers of Russia and China.⁴¹

region due to its growing national outreach and military modernisation and its desire to strengthen its regional influence. See US Department of Defense, 'Indo-Pacific Strategy Report', 1 June 2019, p. 11, <<https://media.defense.gov/2019/Jul/01/2002152311/-1/-1/1/DEPARTMENT-OF-DEFENSE-INDO-PACIFIC-STRATEGY-REPORT-2019.PDF>>, accessed 3 May 2021. In 2021, the US argued that Russia was seeking to assert itself in the Indo-Pacific, including through the developing Russia–China regional partnership. See 'Statement of Admiral Philip S Davidson, US Navy Commander, US Indo-Pacific Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on US Indo-Pacific Command Posture', 9 March 2021, pp. 31, 37–38, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Davidson_03-09-21.pdf>, accessed 3 May 2021.

37. Kremlin.ru, 'Meeting of the Valdai Club', 3 October 2019, <<http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/61719>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
38. Suman Sharma, 'Russia Raises Concerns Behind Intent of Indo-Pacific, Calls for Dialogue', *Siasat Daily*, 14 November 2020, <<https://www.siasat.com/russia-raises-concerns-behind-intent-of-indo-pacific-calls-for-dialogue-2022582/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
39. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at a Plenary Session of the Raisina Dialogue International Conference, New Delhi', 15 January 2020, <https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3994885>, accessed 3 May 2021.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Timofei Bordachev et al., 'The Rise of Rimland: The New Political Geography and Strategic Culture', Valdai Club, June 2018.

The Russian government, thus, views the Indo-Pacific concept as an effort at the 'reconfiguring of the existing structures' and a move away from ASEAN-centred consensus-seeking forms of interaction, to the formation of divisive power blocs, which displace the shared Eurasian continent.⁴² Indeed, Russia places considerable emphasis on the regional centrality of ASEAN, reflecting its efforts to anchor its regional ties in the organisation, even though its influence in Southeast Asia is relatively modest.⁴³

Speaking in July 2019, Lavrov indicated that Moscow is opposed to dividing Southeast Asia into blocs, as Russia argues is envisaged in the Indo-Pacific Strategy and especially with the creation of the Quad.⁴⁴ Then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev noted in November 2019 that the 'Indo-Pacific strategies undermine the core role played by ASEAN'.⁴⁵ In 2021, Lavrov re-emphasised the need to retain ASEAN's regional centrality in the face of the challenge of the Indo-Pacific idea.⁴⁶

The Quad format may consolidate a new regional security order with the US at its core and India and Japan as members. The Quad excludes both Russia and China and bypasses the existing regional architecture (ASEAN) through which Moscow has sought to strengthen its regional role. In response to the first Quad summit in March 2021, Russia increased the tempo of its regional diplomacy, with Lavrov visiting China, South Korea, India and Pakistan in close succession.⁴⁷ Speaking in New Delhi in April 2021, Lavrov indicated that Russia opposed the emergence of an 'Asian NATO', alluding to the development of the Quad as a military alliance.⁴⁸

42. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Questions at a Plenary Session of the Raisina Dialogue International Conference, New Delhi'.

43. Joshua Bernard B Espeña, 'Putin's Power and Russian Foreign Policy in ASEAN', *EastAsianForum*, 14 August 2020.

44. TASS, 'Russia Opposed to Dividing Southeast Asia into Blocs, Says Top Diplomat', 30 July 2019.

45. TASS, 'Russia Considers US Indo-Pacific Region Concept Challenge for ASEAN – PM', 3 November 2019.

46. Sergei Lavrov, 'ASEAN dolzhna sokhranit' tsentral'niiu rol v razvitii sotrydnichestva v regione' ['ASEAN Should Retain the Central Role in the Development of Cooperation in the Region'], TASS, 23 March 2021, <<https://tass.ru/politika/10972045>>, accessed 3 May 2021.

47. Anita Inder Singh, 'Russia's Asia Diplomacy', *The Interpreter*, 16 April 2021.

48. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Statement and Answers to Media Questions at a Joint News Conference Following Talks With Minister of External Affairs of India Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, New Delhi', 6 April 2021, <https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/ckNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4665966?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_ckNonkJE02Bw&_101_INSTANCE_ckNonkJE02Bw_languageId=en_GB>, accessed 3 May 2021; Anirban Bhaumik, 'Russia Subtly Nudges India to Stay Away From any US-Led Move to Turn Quad into a NATO-Like Military Alliance for Asia', *Deccan Herald*, 6 April 2021, <<https://www.deccanherald.com/national/russia-subtly->

Russia has sought to frame the Indo-Pacific idea as an artificially imposed concept.⁴⁹ Lavrov argues that it is not a natural integration project like the existing regional ones and is geographically ill-defined and divisive. Lavrov noted in 2020 that the US's Indo-Pacific strategy is destructive as it is geared to divide the countries of the region into 'interest groups' and the Indian Ocean should not be 'a cockpit of rivalry'.⁵⁰

Russia's strong criticism of the Indo-Pacific concept, and in particular the Quad security format, reflects Moscow's concerns that its ambition to pivot to Asia will be weakened and, potentially, undermined by the coalescence of a new Indo-Pacific regional order around the US and its allies. Statements by Russian officials suggest that the Indo-Pacific concept could shift Asia's economic and security future towards the maritime and littoral areas of the Pacific and India Oceans, rather than into the heartlands of Eurasia, where Moscow has a central role. This strategy would lead to the reorientation of the key regional middle powers, notably India and the ASEAN countries, towards the US and risk confining Russia to a marginal regional role.⁵¹

RUSSIA'S EVOLVING REGIONAL APPROACH

While Russia has responded critically to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific concept, beyond its diplomatic rhetoric Moscow's regional relations are increasingly shaped in response to the framework.⁵² Crucially, the coalescence of groups of states around the Indo-Pacific concept, and in particular in the Quad, is putting pressure on Russia's established regional positions, notably its effort to balance with China through its ties with India and Japan, and other key regional actors like ASEAN.

Russia is, as a result, being forced to navigate between the fast-evolving positions of the three countries which are central to Moscow's efforts to promote its vision of being a key power in Greater Eurasia and Asia: China; India; and Japan.

nudges-india-to-stay-away-from-any-us-led-move-to-turn-quad-into-a-nato-like-military-alliance-for-asia-971197.html>, accessed 3 May 2021.

49. Sergey Lavrov, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions During the Russia-Vietnam Conference of the Valdai Discussion Club', 26 February 2019, <<https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-remarks/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
50. TASS, 'US's Indo-Pacific Strategy Destructive for That Region – Lavrov', 13 January 2020.
51. Anton Tsvetov, 'Indo-Tikhookeanskii front: zachem na geopoliticheskoi karte poiavilsia novyi region i chto eto sulit Rossii?' ['The Indo-Pacific Front: Why Has a New Region Appeared on the Geopolitical Map and What Does This Herald for Russia?'], Carnegie Moscow Center, 22 March 2018, <<https://carnegie.ru/commentary/75706>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
52. Aleksei Zakharov, 'While Criticizing the Indo-Pacific, Russia Steps up its Presence', Observer Research Foundation, 6 February 2020.

RUSSIA AND CHINA

Russia's key Asian geopolitical challenge is to maintain an equilibrium with China as a partner. With the rise of the US-led Indo-Pacific security agenda, there is growing pressure on Russia to consider a Sino-Russian strategic alliance.⁵³ At the same time, while countering the US remains the central focus of Russia's regional foreign and security policy, the Russian leadership aims to avoid being forced into an institutionalised relationship with China where it would be much the weaker of the two. For Moscow, cooperation with China can be deepened, but it should not be done in ways that limit Russia's autonomy.

Russia's pivot to Asia policy has hinged on strengthening ties with China as part of a long-term bilateral rapprochement. From 2013 to 2019, China's share in Russia's foreign trade increased from 10.5% to 16.7% and continued to rise to 18.3% in 2020 despite the coronavirus pandemic.⁵⁴ Russia has moved diplomatically closer to Beijing, notably in multilateral forums. The relationship has further expanded since 2019, when the pair agreed to pursue a 'comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era'.⁵⁵ China is increasingly seen in a positive light by the Russian population.⁵⁶

Against the backdrop of the emergence of the Quad, Russia and China have upgraded their military ties.⁵⁷ Russia and China have expanded cooperation on military exercises, leading to the suggestion that the two may be moving to military cooperation in key areas of the Indo-Pacific region.⁵⁸ Putin has indicated that Russia would not rule out forming a military alliance with China in the future.⁵⁹

Despite the rapprochement, overall bilateral economic relations remain strongly skewed in China's favour and China is not reliant on Russia economically. Russian exports are largely confined to energy and raw materials, with exports of Russian agricultural products notably increasing, and China remains a key arms market for Russia. In contrast, China exports to

53. *Reuters*, 'West Concerned by Closer Russia-China Ties, Top NATO General Says', 3 February 2021.

54. Alexander Gabuev, 'As Russia and China Draw Closer, Europe Watches With Foreboding', Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 March 2021.

55. *Xinhua*, 'A New Era for China-Russia Relationship in 2019', 28 December 2019, <<https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201912/28/WS5e06c51ea310cf3e3558138b.html>>, accessed 3 May 2021.

56. Dimitri Simes, 'China Wins High Marks from Russians', *Nikkei Asia*, 19 March 2021.

57. Vassily Kashin, 'Tacit Alliance: Russia and China Take Military Partnership to New Level', Carnegie Moscow Center, 22 October 2019.

58. Oriana Skylar Mastro, 'Russia and China Team up on the Indian Ocean', *The Interpreter*, 16 December 2020.

59. Vladimir Isachenkov, 'Putin: Russia-China Military Alliance Can't Be Ruled Out', *AP*, 22 October 2020.

Russia a wide variety of manufactured and technologically advanced goods.⁶⁰ Indeed, China's presence in Russia's economy is increasing in key sectors like telecoms, heavy machinery and finance.⁶¹ Chinese direct investment in Russia has, however, been limited and focused on natural resources projects, particularly the strategic energy partnership.⁶² This creates a significant economic imbalance in the relationship.

There are clear interests for China and Russia to strengthen elements of their partnership.⁶³ However, the focus of the bilateral relationship is primarily against perceived threats from the US, rather than reflective of deepening economic cooperation or political alignment. Russian support for Chinese interests in the Indo-Pacific has, therefore, been constrained. Instead of directly supporting China's territorial claims in the South China Sea, Russia has called for the resolution of the boundary disputes through diplomacy and on the basis of international law. At the same time, Russia has maintained ties to Japan and India to balance China's regional rise, and stepped up engagement with the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam — countries with territorial disputes and sovereignty claims with China.

The rapprochement with China has been crucial for Russia's claim of a pivot to Asia and to endure Western sanctions. China will, therefore, remain Russia's most important regional relationship. For Russia, the China partnership offers a key counterweight to the US and Moscow is keen to signal a united front with China, especially in response to US actions against both of them.⁶⁴ Thus, visiting China in March 2021, immediately following an acrimonious US–China meeting, Lavrov indicated that bilateral relations were the best they had ever been.⁶⁵ Lavrov further sought to highlight the close coordination and communication between Russia and China, and announced a set of joint initiatives designed to weaken US global financial strength.

At the same time, Russia wants to avoid getting caught in the China–US confrontation in Asia and be left with little option but to accept the junior

-
- 60. Jonathan Hillman, 'China and Russia: Economic Unequals', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 15 July 2020.
 - 61. Gabuev, 'As Russia and China Draw Closer, Europe Watches With Foreboding'.
 - 62. Erica Downs et al., 'The Emerging Russia–Asia Energy Nexus', NBR Special Report 74, National Bureau of Asian Research, December 2018.
 - 63. Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, 'Navigating the Deepening Russia–China Partnership', CNAS, 14 January 2021.
 - 64. Eleanor Albert, 'China and Russia Show Solidarity at Meeting of Foreign Ministers', *The Diplomat*, 24 March 2021.
 - 65. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Interview with Chinese Media, Moscow', 22 March 2021, <https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/4646592>, accessed 3 May 2021; Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Andrew Osborn, 'Russia's Top Diplomat Starts China Visit With Call to Reduce U.S. Dollar Use', *Reuters*, 22 March 2021.

partner role in a Sino-centric power bloc.⁶⁶ Despite speculation about an alliance, China has indicated that it is not ready to move away from its established position of non-alignment.⁶⁷ While China remains key to Russia's position in Asia, the bilateral relationship also includes areas of tension and suspicions.⁶⁸

This suggests that a 'flexible strategic partnership' will be Moscow's goal for the bilateral relationship, rather than a formal alliance.⁶⁹ For this reason, Russia is committed to retaining a variety of Asian partnerships.⁷⁰ The growing pressure on the India-Russia relationship – as a result of efforts by the US and its allies to engage Delhi – is thus threatening to unsettle Russia's Asia policy.

RUSSIA AND INDIA

The rise of China as a regional actor, the growing Russia-China partnership and increasing tensions between China and India, including the border skirmishes of 2020, are placing a strain on Russia-India relations. At the same time, growing US support for the Quad and for a wider relationship with Delhi are offering India alternatives to its previous reliance on Russia. Thus, while for Russia the future relationship with China represents a major strategic question, maintaining the 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership' with India is Russia's leading regional diplomatic challenge.⁷¹

In order to prevent Russia moving closer to China, Delhi has been keen to pull Moscow into the region by linking Russian interests to the Indo-Pacific framework, which India argues is an open and inclusive idea in which economic and trade relations are key. Thus, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited Russia's Far East in 2019 and announced the 'Act Far East' policy, declaring that 'the Far East will become a confluence of the Eurasian Union on one side and the open, free, and inclusive Indo-Pacific on the other'.⁷²

While for Russia the future relationship with China represents a major strategic question, maintaining the 'Special and Privileged Strategic Partnership' with India is Russia's leading regional diplomatic challenge

66. Dmitri Trenin, 'How Russia Can Maintain Equilibrium in the Post-Pandemic Bipolar World', Carnegie Moscow Center, 1 May 2020.

67. Minnie Chan, 'China-Russia Ties: "No Plans for Military Alliance" to Take on US', *South China Morning Post*, 2 March 2021.

68. Elizabeth Buchanan, 'There's No (New) China-Russia Alliance', *The Strategist*, 26 June 2020.

69. Zhao Huasheng, 'Should China and Russia Form an Alliance?', Russia International Affairs Council, 12 January 2021.

70. Alexander Gabuev, 'Is Putin Really Considering a Military Alliance with China?', *Moscow Times*, 2 December 2020.

71. Nivedita Kapoor and Nandan Unnikrishnan, 'India, Russia and the Indo-Pacific', Valdai Club, 15 January 2020.

72. Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 'Translation of Prime Minister's Speech at Plenary Session of 5th Eastern Economic Forum', 5 September 2019, <https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/31798/Translation_of_Prime_Ministers_speech_in_Plenary_Session_of_5th_Eastern_Economic_Forum_September_05_2019>, accessed 3 May 2021.

Subsequently, India has sought to develop new shipping routes and energy projects, and to promote a trilateral format involving Japan designed to bring Russia economically within an Indo-Pacific framework.⁷³

In February 2021, India's foreign secretary, Harsh Shringla, visited Moscow to reaffirm the importance of the bilateral relationship and to re-emphasise the opportunity for Russia to work through the Indo-Pacific framework.⁷⁴ In Moscow, the Foreign Secretary noted that 'no discussion on the relationship between Indian and Russia can be complete without the mention of the Indo-Pacific ... We would like to work more closely with Russia on taking forward the cooperation in the region, in particular along with our friends from the ASEAN, South East Asia and under organisations like the ASEAN regional forum and the East Asia summit'.⁷⁵

India's support for the Indo-Pacific concept is an especially difficult issue as the Russian government wants to avoid endorsing a concept that is seen as antagonistic towards China. In response to these pressures, and following the China-India clashes of 2020, Russia has sought to readjust its role to present itself as an independent mediator between the two countries, notably through the multilateral formats of the SCO, BRICS and the RIC, including defusing Sino-Indian border tensions to establish the 'Moscow Agreement' along the Line of Actual Control.⁷⁶

-
73. Nivedita Kapoor and Gayathri Iyer, 'East Meets East: An Assessment of the Proposed Chennai-Vladivostok Maritime Corridor', Observer Research Foundation, 7 December 2020; Dmitri Simes, 'India Seeks Economic Energy in Russian Far East, Countering China', *Nikkei Asia*, 22 February 2021; *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, 'Rossiia, Indii i Iaponiia opredelili prioritnye proekty na Dal'nem Vostoke' ['Russia, India and Japan Have Identified Priority Projects in the Far East'], 10 February 2021, <<https://rg.ru/2021/02/10/rossiia-indii-i-iaponiia-opredelili-prioritnye-proekty-na-dalnem-vostoke.html>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
 74. *The Print*, 'Foreign Secretary Harsh Shringla Arrives in Russia for Two-Day Visit', 17 February 2021, <<https://theprint.in/diplomacy/foreign-secretary-harsh-shringla-arrives-in-russia-for-two-day-visit/606444/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
 75. *Indian Express*, 'India Would Like to Work More Closely With Russia on Taking Forward Co-Op in Indo-Pacific: Shringla', 18 February 2021, <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-would-like-to-work-more-closely-with-russia-on-taking-forward-co-op-in-indo-pacific-shringla-7193541/>>, accessed 3 May 2021; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'India Pitches for Widening Russia Ties in Three Geo-Political Theatres', *Economic Times*, 18 February 2021, <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-pitches-for-widening-russia-ties-in-three-geo-political-theatres/articleshow/81076032.cms>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
 76. Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, 'We Are Doing Utmost to Establish Peace and Tranquillity Between India and China: Russia', *Economic Times*, 18 January 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/we-are-doing-utmost-to-establish-peace-and-tranquillity-between-india-and-china-russia/articleshow/80333585.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst>, accessed 3 May 2021; Nayanima Basu, "'Moscow Agreement' – Jaishankar & Wang Yi Road Map for Ladakh Peace

Nevertheless, while both Russia and India are committed to retaining close ties, tensions are increasing. Russia has been particularly concerned about India's growing engagement in the Quad. In November 2020, Lavrov attacked the Quad format, indicating that Western countries were putting pressure on India through the Indo-Pacific concept and the Quad, to make India play 'anti-China games'.⁷⁷ He further alleged that the US is pressuring India to weaken military and technical cooperation with Russia to undermine their partnership and privileged relations.

Russia subsequently sought to mollify India. In late 2020, Russia's ambassador to India indicated that Moscow supports India's vision for the Indo-Pacific, even while criticising the Quad for dividing the region, in contrast to the 'unifying agenda' that Russia is offering.⁷⁸ In early 2021, Lavrov described India as a 'very close, very strategic, very special and very privileged partner'.⁷⁹ Equally, India has sought to calm Russian concerns, briefing Moscow ahead of Quad meetings.⁸⁰

Moscow and Delhi continue to share key interests and both sides want to avoid a rift. India is ultimately reliant on continuing Russia's arms supplies for its security, although it is diversifying its suppliers, and facing pressure from the US to move away from Russian weapons.⁸¹

The India–Russia bilateral relationship remains, however, narrow and top down, despite efforts to broaden it through business and people-to-people efforts. Growing concerns about China, and uncertainty about Moscow's commitment

Gets a Name', *The Print*, 25 February 2021, <<https://theprint.in/diplomacy/moscow-agreement-jaishankar-wang-yi-road-map-for-ladakh-peace-gets-a-name/611906/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.

77. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 'Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks at the General Meeting of the Russian International Affairs Council, Moscow', 8 December 2020, <https://www.mid.ru/en/posledniye_dobavleniye/-/asset_publisher/MCZ7HQuMdqBY/content/id/4470074>, accessed 3 May 2021.
78. *Indian Express*, 'Quad Would Be Detrimental to Inclusive Dialogue: Russia', 21 December 2020, <<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/quad-russia-china-quadrilateral-coalition-japan-us-australia-7113520/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
79. *NDTV*, 'US Indo-Pacific Region Strategy Won't Affect Our Partnership With India: Russia', 19 January 2021, <<https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/russian-foreign-minister-sergey-lavrov-says-us-indo-pacific-region-strategy-will-not-affect-our-partnership-with-india-2354446>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
80. Anirban Bhaumik, 'India Tries to Allay Russia's Concerns Over Its Indo-Pacific Vision Ahead of "Quad" Ministerial Meet with US, Japan, Australia', *Deccan Herald*, 18 February 2021, <<https://www.deccanherald.com/national/india-tries-to-allay-russia-s-concerns-over-its-indo-pacific-vision-ahead-of-quad-ministerial-meet-with-us-japan-australia-952583.html>>, accessed 4 May 2021.
81. Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 'International Arms Transfers Level Off After Years of Sharp Growth; Middle Eastern Arms Imports Grow Most, Says SIPRI', 15 March 2021; Aditi Shah and Nigam Prusty, 'U.S. Defense Secretary Urges India to Avoid Buying Russian Equipment', *Reuters*, 20 March 2021.

to Delhi over Beijing, are leading India to move closer to the Quad countries, and to seek other relationships. This suggests that while Russia and India are actively seeking to manage their relationship – notably with the creation in April 2021 of a 2 plus 2 (defence and foreign ministers) format meeting⁸² to guide bilateral ties – there is a widening divergence of interests.⁸³

RUSSIA AND JAPAN

Together with India, relations with Japan have been an important element of Russia's effort to promote a stronger position in Asia as an independent power and to give substance to the claim of a pivot to the region. From 2012, Japan and Russia made a substantial effort to forge a new relationship, led by the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and endorsed by Putin.

The core of the initiative was focused on an attempt at a resolution of the long-running territorial dispute over the Russian-controlled Kuril Islands, known in Japan as the Northern Territories. In fact, the engagement was aimed at forging a wider Russia–Japan relationship within the context of Eurasia and Asia-Pacific geopolitics. Abe's Russia initiative was part of an effort to develop wider opportunities for manoeuvre on key issues within the strategic relationship with Washington. Russia viewed the initiative as an opportunity to engage a key US ally at a time when Moscow faced growing international isolation.

Despite the considerable efforts expended, the initiative failed to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough in the first part of the decade, and from 2016 a new approach to cooperation was employed with economic interdependence promoted as a means to create the conditions for achieving a political breakthrough.⁸⁴ As China's rise increasingly affected regional dynamics, balancing Beijing became a more prominent motivation for the bilateral dialogue.⁸⁵

Within the dialogue, emphasis was placed on economic development and opportunities in Siberia and the Russian Far East.⁸⁶ When broad trade and economic relations failed to develop, energy investments, which had already been raised in 2013, were increased with the aim of lessening Russia's reliance on sales to China.⁸⁷

The initiative to kindle a new Russia–Japan relationship did provide some limited assistance to Moscow's efforts to curtail the West's efforts to isolate Russia.

82. Ken Moriyasu and Wajahat Khan, 'India and Russia Agree on 2-plus-2, in Diplomatic Balancing Act', *Nikkei Asia*, 29 April 2021.

83. Alexei Zakharov, 'Is it Time for Damage Control in India–Russia Ties?', Observer Research Foundation, 7 March 2021.

84. Maria Shagina, 'Sanctions in Japan–Russia Economic Relations: Impact and Adaption', Institute for Security and Development Policy, Focus Asia, June 2019.

85. Michito Tsuruoka, 'Resetting Japan–Russia Relations', *The Diplomat*, 7 October 2020.

86. Joshua W Walker and Hidetoshi Azuma, 'Japan's Plan to Bring the United States and Russia Together', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 May 2016.

87. Jane Nakano, 'Japan to Invest in the Latest Russian LNG Project', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 12 July 2019.

Thus, while Japan introduced sanctions following the annexation of Crimea in 2014, their design meant they had little practical impact on Japan's ability to conduct business with Russia. Further, Abe declined to join other countries that expelled Russian intelligence officers in retaliation for the attempted murder of Sergei Skripal in Salisbury in 2018.⁸⁸ Japanese business engagement was, however, significantly curtailed by US sanctions on Russia and the generally poor business climate in Russia.⁸⁹

Despite Japan's diplomatic and economic efforts, Moscow did not offer significant concessions on the territorial issue. Indeed, the two sides ultimately saw the negotiations in different terms, with Japan viewing discussions as aimed at the settlement of the territorial dispute, while Russia considered the negotiations about building comprehensive trust as a prelude to the resolution of the Kuril Islands issue.⁹⁰

When Abe left office after eight years of intensive efforts to build a new relationship with Russia, little had been achieved.⁹¹ Indeed, in 2020, the year Abe stepped down, Russia passed constitutional amendments to prevent territorial concessions.⁹² Putin has appeared to confirm that the changes rule out any prospect of the return of the Kuril Islands.⁹³

The attempt to build a new Japan–Russia relationship also failed to achieve the wider strategic goals. Over the decade, Russia moved closer to China. Despite Japan's initiative to cultivate relations with Russia during this period, in July 2019 the first Sino-Russian military air patrol over the Sea of Japan took place, suggesting that Japan's efforts have done little to reverse the trend toward deepening Sino-Russian cooperation.⁹⁴

While the decade-long effort in Russia–Japan rapprochement largely failed, and indeed the regional political and military context of the bilateral relationship worsened, Russia and Japan remain committed to retaining a dialogue. In the first phone call following Abe's departure, Japan's new prime minister, Yoshihide Suga, and Putin underscored the need to continue negotiations.⁹⁵ Although

88. Cory Baird, 'Japan Keeps Reaction Low-Key as Nations Join Forces in Expelling Russian Diplomats After U.K. Poisoning', *Japan Times*, 27 March 2018.

89. Zhuoran Li, 'The Challenges and Opportunities of Japan-Russia Economic Relations', *The Diplomat*, 20 February 2021.

90. Taisuk Abiru, 'Japan-Russia Relations in the Post-Abe Era', Carnegie Moscow Center, 18 March 2021.

91. Nikola Mikovic, 'Why Russia Will Not Return the Kuril Islands to Japan', *The Interpreter*, 17 November 2020.

92. James D J Brown, 'Russia's Revised Constitution Shows Putin Is No Friend of Japan', *RUSI Commentary*, 6 July 2020.

93. TASS, 'Russia Seeks to Develop Ties With Japan, But Only in the Framework of Constitution – Putin', 14 February 2021.

94. *Reuters*, 'Japan Scrambles Fighters to Intercept Russian and Chinese Planes', 23 July 2020.

95. *Kyodo News*, 'Suga, Putin Agree to Promote Territorial Talks Based on 1956 Accord', 29 September 2020, <<https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/09/>>

there may be less personal warmth in the bilateral relationship following Abe's departure, both Japan and Russia have an interest in keeping the dialogue open as part of wider balancing strategies, notably in regard to China.⁹⁶

Despite the Russia–Japan diplomatic dialogue, regional tensions are growing between the two countries. Russia is undertaking a broad modernisation of its military forces in the Pacific and strengthening its capability for regional force projection. This includes advanced cruise missiles enabling Russia to execute long-range strikes against land targets, a modernisation of air defences, and increased deployments to the Kuril Islands.⁹⁷ At the same time, as a leading advocate of the Indo-Pacific regional concept and Quad member, Japan is at the heart of efforts to build a new security architecture in the region, including the development of its own new military capabilities.⁹⁸ The emerging regional arms race is creating strains in the Russia–Japan relationship with, for example, Moscow signalling that it is ready to retaliate if the US deploys a new generation of missiles to Japan.⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

The importance of Asia has grown steadily in Moscow's foreign and security policies since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia's pivot to Asia has simultaneously been a means to diminish the negative impact of Western sanctions and an opportunity to engage with a rising region.

The consolidation of a coalition of countries around the Indo-Pacific concept, and in particular the growing institutionalisation of the Quad as a regional security actor, constitutes a challenge to leading parts of Russia's Asia policy, and in particular to the balance of its key regional partnerships: China; India; and Japan. The embrace by the US of the Indo-Pacific concept and its support for

c535beea66e1-breaking-news-japans-suga-holds-1st-phone-talks-with-russias-putin.html>, accessed 3 May 2021.

96. Michito Tsuruoka, 'Japan–Russia Reality Check: From Abe to Suga', Carnegie Moscow Center, 17 March 2021.
97. Dave Makichuk, 'Russia's Kalibr Missile Puts US on the Back-Heel', *Asia Times*, 12 March 2021; Julian Ryall, 'Japan Cries Foul as Russia Moves Missiles into Kuril Islands', *South China Morning Post*, 3 December 2020; Anton Lavrov, '"Triumph" na ostrovakh: usilena zenitnaia zashchita Sakhalina i Kuril' ["Triumph" on the Islands: The Air Defences on Sakhalin and the Kuriles Have Been Strengthened]', *Izvestiia [Herald]*, 14 March 2021, <<https://iz.ru/1136302/anton-lavrov/triumf-na-ostrovakh-usilena-zenitnaia-zashchita-sakhalina-i-kuril>>, accessed 3 May 2021.
98. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific', <https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html>, accessed 5 May 2021; Junnosuke Kobara and Ken Moriyasu, 'Japan Will Turn to Quad in "New Cold War": Defense Ministry Think Tank', *Nikkei Asia*, 27 March 2021, <<https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Japan-will-turn-to-Quad-in-new-Cold-War-Defense-Ministry-think-tank>>, accessed 5 May 2021.
99. TASS, 'Russia to Retaliate, if US Brings Intermediate-Range Missiles to Asia-Pacific – Diplomat', 12 March 2021.

the Quad is especially troubling for Russia since it will pull key regional countries closer to Washington and undercut Russia's ability to operate as an independent regional actor. Russia's relationship with India faces particular challenges.¹⁰⁰

Russia believes that an Asia configured around the Indo-Pacific concept will mean that the 21st century will be defined by a focus on the littoral areas and maritime spaces of Asia, relegating Eurasia – and Russia at the region's core – to a marginal position. In this context, Russia is concerned that the emergence of a two-bloc regional order would require it to choose a side. While a further deepening of the bilateral relationship with China offers a partial means to offset the rise of Indo-Pacific alliances and groupings, entering a strategic alliance would consign Russia to a subordinate status and alienate it further from other regional partners.

Faced with the challenge of the Indo-Pacific concept, Russia has elected to double-down on its existing regional approach: securing a long-term niche presence in strategically important areas and renewing its support for the established Asia-Pacific regional concept and the existing regional multilateral architecture.¹⁰¹ At the same time, to counter the rise of the Indo-Pacific agenda, Russia has deployed a variety of policy responses:

- **Intensified regional diplomacy.** Senior Russian officials, notably the foreign minister, have undertaken a series of regional visits to shore up bilateral relations and push back against the concept of the Indo-Pacific (and especially the Quad) and to reaffirm the centrality of existing regional frameworks, especially ASEAN.
- **Regional mediation.** With rising conflict between Russia's two leading regional partners – China and India – Moscow has endeavoured to use multilateral formats, such as the BRICS, the SCO and the RIC, to reduce tensions and position Moscow as an independent actor, maintaining good relations with both sides.¹⁰²
- **Diversification of relations.** With pressure on its established partnerships, and anxious to avoid over-reliance on China, Russia has sought to build a wider network of partnerships, targeting Pakistan, Myanmar, Laos and Sri Lanka.
- **Compartmentalised relations.** Faced with the need to broaden ties across difficult sub-regional security environments, Russia has sought to decouple its bilateral ties from regional issues, especially regional conflicts and notably the India–Pakistan conflict. Thus, following visits by Lavrov to Delhi and Islamabad in April 2021, Russia diplomats stated that: 'We have independent relations with India and Pakistan and other countries, while ties with both are based on their own merits'.¹⁰³

100. Rajesh Rajagopalan, 'India, Russia Less Useful to Each Other Now. Disagreements Will Only Grow', *The Print*, <<https://theprint.in/opinion/india-russia-less-useful-to-each-other-now-disagreements-will-only-grow/621264/>>, accessed 3 May 2021.

101. Bobo Lo, 'Once More with Feeling: Russia and the Asia-Pacific', Lowy Institute, 20 August 2019, pp. 3–5.

102. Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, 'Growing Russia-India-China Tensions: Splits in the RIC Strategic Triangle?', Observer Research Foundation, 18 March 2021.

103. Rezaul H Laskar, 'Russia Shares Independent Ties with India, Pakistan: Diplomats', *Hindustan Times*, 15 April 2021, <<https://www.hindustantimes.com>.

- **Raising its military profile.** While a relatively minor regional military actor, except in north-east Asia, Russia has sought to strengthen its regional military presence through participation in military exercises, including with China, regular naval deployments in the region and the announcement of the construction of a new base in Sudan.¹⁰⁴

Despite these efforts, Russia's abilities to resist the Indo-Pacific concept are limited. Although Russia has made much of its pivot to Asia and wider regional role, there has not been a breakthrough in ties with Asian countries, with the exception of China. Russia's trading links to the region have remained narrow – largely confined to energy and the arms trade.¹⁰⁵ Russia has relatively small regional security and military capabilities and important limitations on its ability to project power beyond north-east Asia.

With limited leverage to slow the rise of a US-led regional security bloc and to balance China, Russia is increasingly forced into maintaining an ever finer balance with its diversity of partners.¹⁰⁶ Russia is seeking an elusive equilibrium in its regional ties through simultaneously deepening its relationship with China, retaining close links to India as a pivotal regional power, and trying to sustain its difficult but important relations with Japan, while also navigating the complex sub-regional relations of Southeast and South Asia.

With the Indo-Pacific initiative placing pressure on Russia's regional ties, Moscow is having to accept a growing diversification of relations.¹⁰⁷ Key Russian regional partners are also seeking to pull Moscow into their 'economic' Indo-Pacific strategies (for example, India and Japan are coordinating initiatives to develop transport and business ties across the region with the Russian Far East) to help to balance China, presenting Moscow with a strategic dilemma of how to respond positively to the Indo-Pacific concept without antagonising Beijing. At the same time, the growing China-US confrontation is undermining the structural conditions for Russia's broad dialogue approach. Together, these developments suggest that Moscow will find it increasingly difficult to achieve its regional and international strategic goals in Asia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Neil Melvin is Director of International Security Studies at RUSI.

com/india-news/russia-has-independent-ties-with-india-and-pakistan-say-top-russian-diplomats-101618390305310.html>, accessed 3 May 2021.

104. Alexey Muraviev, 'Russia Wants to Be a Power to Be Reckoned with in the Indian Ocean', *The Interpreter*, 15 March 2021.

105. Maria Shagina, 'Russia's Pivot to Asia: Between Rhetoric and Substance', *Orbis* (Vol. 64, No. 3, 2020), pp. 453–55.

106. Vassily Kashin, 'Can Russia and Japan Contribute to Indo-Pacific Stability?', Carnegie Moscow Center, 19 March 2021.

107. Fedor Lukyanov, 'Diversifikatsiia bez paniki' ['Diversification Without Panic'], *Rossiskaya Gazeta*, 16 March 2021, <<https://rg.ru/2021/03/16/lukianov-rossiia-ne-dolzha-delat-vybor-mezhdu-kitaem-i-indiej.html>>, accessed 3 May 2021.

About RUSI

The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) is the world's oldest and the UK's leading defence and security think tank. Its mission is to inform, influence and enhance public debate on a safer and more stable world. RUSI is a research-led institute, producing independent, practical and innovative analysis to address today's complex challenges.

Since its foundation in 1831, RUSI has relied on its members to support its activities. Together with revenue from research, publications and conferences, RUSI has sustained its political independence for 190 years.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution.

Published in 2021 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639).



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution – Non-Commercial – No-Derivatives 4.0 International Licence. For more information, see <<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>>.

Royal United Services Institute
for Defence and Security Studies
Whitehall
London SW1A 2ET
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7747 2600
www.rusi.org

RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639)