

Putin's Strategic Framework for Northeast Asia

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This paper discusses the strategic framework for Russia's policies toward Northeast Asia, placing it in the context of Moscow's geopolitical repositioning after the Ukraine crisis and the ensuing confrontation with the United States, and the alienation from Europe. After 2014, the Ukraine crisis put an end to Russia's quarter-century-long attempt to integrate with the West and become part of a Greater Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community.¹ At the same time and in the same place (Ukraine), Russia's attempt to build a power center in the former Soviet space came to an end. Ukraine was not the cause of either failure, but it was the trigger of both. The conclusion was clear. Russia was not fit for integration into something that was bigger than Russia, and Russia was no longer capable of integrating former borderlands. Two-plus decades after the break-up of the former Soviet Union, Russia stood alone—but also free. Such was the end of a grand illusion linked to the West, and also the end of three centuries of empire-building.

It was also a beginning. Hemmed in the west, Russia did not pivot to China, as many inside and outside Russia thought. It actually pivoted to itself. Today's Russian borders follow, with few exceptions,² the boundaries of pre-Petrine Russia, circa 1650. Within these borders, the country is much more homogenous ethnically and culturally, with 80% of its population composed of ethnic Russians, and much more consolidated politically: in both cases of state collapse, after the Russian revolution of 1917 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the bulk of the territory that is now the Russian Federation never seceded from the central authority. In the 21st century, Russia is not a superpower, it is no longer an empire, and it is not ideology-driven.

Nor does it pretend to be part of Europe, politically. Mikhail Gorbachev's common European home³ with an in-built Russian section appears a long-forgotten illusion. Economic, political, and normative Europe is now embodied in the European Union. The Eurasia that used to denote the territories of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union and was thus synonymous with the Russian state is gone, its various parts gravitating to Europe or the Muslim world. The Russian Federation is just Russia—spread over 11 time zones, having borders with Norway and North Korea, but belonging to no bigger entity. It has failed to join the European family and dissolved its own Eurasian one. And Asia, of course, is no relation.

Russia's Geopolitical Repositioning

A fundamental geopolitical repositioning has occurred. For centuries, Russian rulers were fixated on the West—European great powers, and since 1945, the United States and its allies. Asia and “the East” were mostly an afterthought: they did not include serious competitors, except for Japan in the first part of the 20th century and China in its second half, but even these were secondary compared to, respectively, Germany and America. Russia's policies in Asia were usually a reflection of its competition with Western rivals: from the British Empire in the Great Game to the United States in the Cold War. After 2014, this changed, and Asia has risen among Russia's foreign policy priorities above the level of Europe and shares the top tier with America.

Today, the world as seen from Moscow looks as follows. Russia sits in the north of the great Eurasian landmass. It is not the mega-continent's central power, but it is probably the physically best connected one. To the west of Moscow, lie Europe, the Atlantic, and beyond it, the United States. To the east, there are China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, and the rest

of East and Southeast Asia. To the south, there are Central Asia and the South Caucasus, and beyond them one sees the Indian Subcontinent and the Middle East and North Africa. Global warming has recently endowed Russia with a fourth façade, heretofore frozen: the Arctic, which connects Russia's High North, Northern Europe, and North America. Thus, Russia is no longer seated facing the west, with its back permanently turned to the east. Instead, it sits in a swivel chair, practicing 360-degree vision.

This has happened not only due to the collapse of Moscow's relations with the West. Russians clearly recognize the growing economic importance of Asia, which has become the global workshop and commercial hub. China, Japan, India, and South Korea are among the world's leaders in terms of GDP. Russia's trade with Asia is not only growing nominally, but its share is also getting bigger. With the end of Russia's Soviet-era isolation, the fast growth of neighboring countries is also seen as a challenge to Russia's own regions, which are rich in natural resources, but are sparsely populated and underdeveloped. Moscow's current interest in developing ties with nations of the Asia-Pacific region can be traced back to Gorbachev's 1986 Vladivostok speech, but the real turn to the east occurred under President Vladimir Putin.

Under Putin, Vladivostok has not become Russia's capital,⁴ but it is Russia's Pacific gateway. After Russia joined the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation in 1998, it hosted APEC's summit there in 2012. Putin used the occasion to modernize the city's infrastructure. Since 2015, this infrastructure has been used for annual meetings of the Eastern Economic Forum, Russia's eastern version of the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum. At the EEF, Putin has already hosted the presidents of China and South Korea, the prime ministers of Japan and India, and the leaders of Malaysia and Mongolia. He also held a rare summit with the North Korean ruler there in 2019.

Putin's Grand Strategy

Russia faces an obvious need to strike the right balance between the western and eastern directions of its foreign policy. While three quarters of Russians live west of the Urals, the same portion of the country's territory, along with natural resources, is to the east of that mountain range. In fact, western ("European") and eastern ("Asiatic") Russia are ethnically and culturally very similar. Vladivostok, to all appearances, is as Russian as Kaliningrad. It is the neighborhoods that are strikingly different. Moscow's grand strategy is focused above all on keeping the vast country together, ensuring domestic connectivity by developing infrastructure and communications links, and making proper use of the various resources.

Since 2000, Putin's overall foreign policy strategy has been to return Russia to the ranks of great powers, which the country de facto left during the decade of its post-Soviet weakness. By "great power," the Kremlin means having a seat at the top table, and making sure that no major decisions, particularly of a global security nature, are taken without Moscow's participation. By the mid-2010s, this objective had been achieved. Russia pushed back forcefully against the prospect of NATO's enlargement in Georgia (2008) and Ukraine (2014), effectively checking the process; successfully intervened in Syria (2015) to become again a major outside player in the Middle East; and actively pursued its interests globally, from Libya to Venezuela to Africa. To back up its status, in the 2010s Russia carried out a military reform coupled with extensive weapons modernization.

The Kremlin is taking advantage of the change in the world order, away from U.S. dominance, to a more complex structure. Its official preference is for multipolarity, though Russians accept that the “poles,” or, to be more accurate, power centers, will vary in caliber. It fiercely defends its sovereignty and claims to be one of very few major countries around the world—alongside the United States, China, and possibly India—with a truly independent foreign policy. It largely subscribes to a realpolitik-based worldview that sees the national interest as the driver of foreign policy, and power balances as the basis of international relations. Putin has been on record many times describing international relations as a power play.

Moscow rejects the Western concept of a rules-based order as serving the interests of the United States and its allies, who, in its view, have appointed themselves drafters, implementors, and policemen of that supposedly universal order, and can change its rules at will. Instead, Russia champions traditional international law, which is a sum of agreements among states based on bilateral or multilateral bargaining. Russia is often described in the West as a disruptive power, while in its own eyes it is rather a conservative player seeking to stem or thwart the processes—from NATO’s expansion in Eastern Europe, to color revolutions in the post-Soviet space aimed at regime change, to the Arab Spring—which the Kremlin sees as destabilizing.

In 2016, the Kremlin came up with a notion of a Grand Eurasian partnership.⁵ The idea is to link a number of economic institutions and projects in Greater Eurasia, from the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to cooperation with ASEAN countries, and offer engagement to other players, from the European Union in the west to India in the south. At the present stage, this idea is still more philosophical than practical. “Harmonizing” the EEU and BRI—essentially making sure that neither party steps on the other’s toes - has allowed Russia to avoid simply joining the Chinese project as just another partner of Beijing, while preventing tensions between the Russian-led economic integration in Central Asia and China’s geo-economic expansionism. Against this background, the Grand Eurasian partnership appears to be Moscow’s rhetorical answer to Beijing’s equally strategically ambiguous, though much more substantive, BRI.

Russia, however, was far clearer—and much more negative—in its attitude about the Indo-Pacific concept advanced by the United States. In Moscow’s analysis, this concept targets China and seeks to contain it. There is no question of Russia being even neutral toward the U.S. concept of China’s containment. In Moscow’s analysis, Washington seeks to use the countries bordering on China—U.S. allies or partners from Japan to Vietnam to India, which have their own concerns related to China—as instruments of its own anti-Chinese policy. Yet, such a stance does not allow Moscow to differentiate between the very different substance of the Indo-Pacific debates in the United States, on the one hand, and in India or Japan, on the other.

What Moscow needs to do is to complement its geopolitical discussion, which is traditionally focused on land, with a maritime dimension. The vision of Greater Eurasia from Lisbon to Vladivostok to Jakarta needs to be expanded by a vision of the sea connections around the mega-continent, which is washed by the Atlantic in the west, the Indian Ocean in the south, the Pacific in the east, and the Arctic in the north. The melting of the Arctic ice not

only gives Russia a new façade, previously frozen, to interact with the world. It also allows it to think strategically in terms of the waterways, in large part along Russia's Arctic and Pacific coasts, linking Europe to East and South Asia. Russia is right not to rush to join other people's projects. But it needs to come up with a concept of its own—say, "Murmansk-Mumbai." It would let Russia engage all relevant players in Asia from Japan to Korea to China to ASEAN to India, and turn them into even closer partners.

Concepts aside, Russia's new foreign policy template is clearly observable in the Middle East and North Africa region. It promotes its national interests rather than carrying out any kind of mission, like the Soviet Union (communist revolution, proletarian internationalism) or the Russian Empire (pan-Slavism, *mission civilisatrice*). It maintains functioning contacts with all relevant players, including those which see each other as mortal enemies (Iran and Israel, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey and the Kurds). It is ready to team up with any counterpart, on an equal basis, to achieve jointly defined objectives. See, for instance, the numerous Lavrov-Kerry meetings on Syria in 2015-16, the Astana process with Iran and Turkey, and the various arrangements with Turkey on Syria and Libya. None of these engagements has been easy, and there have been more failures than successes, yet Moscow perseveres.

Russia's China Strategy

Russia's strategy for Northeast Asia has China at the center, but it should be seen as separate from the strategy regarding China proper. For Moscow's foreign policy, the importance of China now—certainly since the mid-2010s—equals that of the United States. Unlike the openly confrontational nature of Russo-American relations, the relationship with China has been thriving ever since it was normalized during Gorbachev's visit to Beijing in 1989. The salient feature of that relationship is that it has been getting closer even as Russia was going through a particularly difficult patch in its domestic evolution, coupled with a visible loss of international status, while China was on a steep rise, overtaking its former mentor-turned-adversary-turned-partner economically and technologically. The main secret of this uninterrupted improvement has been Beijing's smartness in treating Russia as a great power, despite its absolute, and then relative weakness.

Russia, for its part, dropped its former ideological and imperial habits, while remaining confident in its own security assured by its massive arsenal of nuclear weapons and more advanced military technology. This prevented Russia from becoming inordinately concerned over the rise of China's military might. In fact, since the early 1990s Russia has become a major source of military hardware and defense technology for the People's Liberation Army. After Sino-American competition turned into bitter rivalry in the second half of the 2010s, Russia's residual security concerns about China have been put to rest even more firmly. Under the present circumstances and for the foreseeable future, Beijing will definitely need Russia as a friend. This strengthens Moscow's hand in dealing with its powerful partner.

Fears of Chinese demographic expansion into the sparsely populated Russian Far East and Siberia, common in the 1990s, were dispelled by the reality of Chinese reluctance to move that far north. Instead, Russians discovered China first as a trading lifeline for eastern Russian regions, and later as a provider of not only manufactured goods but also of technology to the country as a whole. In the 2010s, China overtook Germany as Russia's number one

trading partner, including in technology transfer. Russia, in turn, discovered China as an energy market, beginning to supply oil to it in the 2000s, and gas—via the “Power of Siberia” pipeline—from 2019. This also helped the Russian energy sector’s diversification away from its historical reliance on the vast and lucrative, but also stagnant, European market.

Russia is not in the business of competing with China in economic terms. Its strategy is focused on maximizing the advantages it has—from natural resources, such as energy, fertile soil, fresh water, and clean air, to overland transportation links across northern Eurasia and the now opening sea lanes around it, to several technological niches where Russia is still ahead of China, such as defense or nuclear powerplants. Yet, Russia feels the challenge of Chinese 5G communications platforms coming to dominate the Russian market: the alternative, American or European platforms, is seen as a security risk. Development of Russia’s own technology is certainly a priority, but it will take time to bear fruit. Similarly, in the financial area, U.S. sanctions have undermined Russian confidence in the security of its dollar holdings,⁶ and Russians are looking to outside financial resources which would be free from U.S. pressure. The Chinese banking system (and the Chinese yuan) is one possibility.

Russian-Chinese relations are officially described as a strategic partnership. Over time, and particularly after the United States had identified both countries as strategic competitors and began practicing various forms of containment against them, this partnership has grown thicker. It can be called an entente, meaning a close alignment in worldviews and general foreign policy goals, leading to consultations at various levels and close coordination of practical policies. Yet, Russia and China do not intend to build an alliance, which would be unwieldy and lead to a net worsening of their relations with other countries. Their relationship is squarely based on national interests and does not include automatic commitments.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in China Russian officials suddenly became aware of the epidemiological and ecological hazards that come out of China, and of the non-transparent nature of the Chinese system. The Russian government acted promptly in February 2020 to close the border with the neighboring country, leaving many people stranded and disrupting some trade links. Chinese tourists in Moscow came under scrutiny from the city authorities, which provoked a protest from the Chinese embassy to Russia. At the same time, mindful of the need to keep the relationship with the giant neighbor friendly, the state-run Russian media extolled the resolute measures taken by the Chinese government to contain the spread of the disease, the self-sacrifice of Wuhan doctors, and the discipline of ordinary Chinese people.

Both Beijing and Moscow prefer to act independently, as great powers should. The motto of their relationship remains, never against each other, but not always with each other. This dynamic connotes combined reassurance—standing back to back and facing challenges from different environments, not fearing a stab in the back, but also keeping their hands free to deal with possibilities or problems on their own. Indeed, the strength of the Russia-China relationship can be measured not only by its achievements, but also equally by its resilience in the face of real differences between the two countries. Thus, many observers have been waiting for many years for a Sino-Russian clash of interests in Central Asia; they are still waiting. Meanwhile, Russia and China have managed to agree to

disagree on a number of issues, from the status of Crimea to the nine-dash-line in the South China Sea, from Russian weapons deliveries to India and Vietnam to Chinese dealings with Ukraine and Belarus.

Russia, China, and the United States do not form a triangle in the sense of two “angles” uniting against the third one. The United States, on the one hand, and China and Russia, on the other, frequently take opposite sides in the United Nations Security Council, but this is the result of their leaderships’ different worldviews and interests, not of bloc politics. Both Moscow and Beijing prefer to deal with Washington one on one. In the 1970s, Washington successfully used triangular relations to wean Beijing to its side against Moscow. Performing this feat again, now that it is Beijing, rather than Moscow, that is Washington’s principal rival, is impossible. Unlike Beijing fearing Moscow in the 1970s, Russia today does not see China as a threat, just the opposite: it cares a lot about the friendly and partner-like relations with its neighbor. By contrast, Moscow sees the United States as an unreliable partner.

The rapid intensification of Sino-American rivalry in the wake of the pandemic has put Moscow in an uncomfortable position. Russians have to balance between generally supporting their Chinese partners, e.g. on issues of sovereignty, and following them too closely thus suggesting dependence on them. Keeping an equilibrium with a powerful partner may turn out to be more difficult than standing up to a formidable adversary. Some Russian observers are coming to the conclusion that safe limits of rapprochement with China have already been reached.⁷

Looking ahead, the central thrust of Russia’s strategy is maintaining equilibrium in its relationship with the giant and growing power next door. This means creating and fostering mutual dependencies that would sustain an equal relationship between two unequal partners. Above all, Russia would seek to maintain its sovereignty and freedom of action while keeping the relationship genuinely friendly and productive. This will not be an easy task and the outcome will depend on Russia’s capacity for domestic economic and technological revival more than on any foreign policy moves.

Regional Strategy for Northeast Asia

Geographically, of course, Russia is a close neighbor of Northeast Asia. Beijing is less than 1,350 km from Vladivostok; Tokyo, just over 1,000 km; and Seoul, less than 750 km as the bird flies. Russia has generally good relations with all the neighboring countries: China, Japan, and the two Koreas. This is a stark contrast to the situation in Europe, where relations with several neighbors are plainly adversarial, and with several others, cool or testy.

True, in Asia and the Pacific, as in the Euro-Atlantic region, Russia faces the United States. Yet, since the end of the Cold War, Russia has been more relaxed about the U.S. military presence in the east than in the west, where Russia’s vital assets are located. Concerns began to be voiced with the U.S. 2002 withdrawal from the ABM Treaty and the development and deployment—in Alaska and California—of what Moscow sees as elements of the U.S. global missile defense system. Later, deployment of theater missile defenses, such as Aegis Ashore in Japan, that have capabilities against Russia’s eastern military district and its

Pacific Fleet, added to those worries. Recently, after the 2019 U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, the prospect of the United States deploying intermediate-range missiles in Japan or South Korea has further boosted Moscow's anxieties, particularly in the context of the U.S.-Russian confrontation.

That said, Russian concerns about the U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia are still much less pronounced than those over NATO's enlargement in Eastern Europe, which has brought the Western alliance virtually to the gates of St. Petersburg and reduced the distance between NATO bases and Moscow to a few hundred kilometers. Relations with China are solid, and the long border, a source of tension and a scene of armed clashes in the past, is now mutually recognized, peaceful, and demilitarized. There are no former Soviet republics in the region with claims against Russia. Relations with Mongolia, an ex-Soviet ally, are quiet and stable. Looking from the region at Russia, unlike in the Baltic States or Poland, no one in Northeast Asia fears Russia; and there are no unresolved conflicts with Russian involvement, as in Donbass, Abkhazia, or South Ossetia. The territorial issue with Japan mars the bilateral relationship, but also stimulates Tokyo to engage Moscow diplomatically.

Japan, a major advanced economy, is in principle one of the main external sources of Russian modernization. Ideally, it could play for Russia a role in Asia similar to that of Germany in Europe: a friendly developed power deeply engaged with the Russian economy. To turn this prospect into reality Russia and Japan needed to finally draw the line under World War II by signing a peace treaty and agreeing on the maritime border between the two. Prime Minister Abe Shinzo's determination to achieve this historic objective offered a distinct possibility of making this happen.

Over the past seven years, the two countries worked closely to achieve progress, and even a broad outline of a possible territorial settlement became visible. As Russo-Japanese negotiations continue, however, it is becoming clear that the U.S.-Russian confrontation is severely limiting the chance of an agreement. Apart from Tokyo's nominal solidarity with the other G7 nations on the issue of sanctions against Russia, Japan's Security Treaty with the United States, which had not been an issue since the end of the Cold War, is turning into a major stumbling block. Under these circumstances, Moscow's strategy toward Japan has to include new incentives for Tokyo to continue economic and technological engagement with Russia, while not yielding on the issue of sovereignty. This relates not only to the handover of any territory controlled by Russia, but also to the legal regime for the joint economic projects.

Amendments to the Russian Constitution passed in 2020 expressly forbid ceding any territory to foreign countries. This de facto closes the Japan border issue for Russia. In the absence of a peace treaty—which, anyway, would not be universally supported either in Russia (for giving away too much) or in Japan (for receiving too little)—Moscow could offer Tokyo further humanitarian privileges in the Kuril Islands, joint economic and ecological projects there, all under Russian law, as well as closer engagement in the Arctic. Above all, however, Moscow's main asset would be the very independence of its policy on Japan, distinctive from Beijing's course toward Tokyo.

Russia's strategy in Northeast Asia is essentially to continue developing its many bilateral relationships on the basis of what has been achieved: maintain and strengthen all-round relations with China, improve as much as possible the links with Japan as a source of

technology and investment, expand economic ties with South Korea while keeping communications lines open with the North, and re-engage economically and politically with Mongolia. At the same time, however, Moscow has to take into account the conflicts and rivalries in the region that affect its security and its interests.

The relatively benign situation for Russia in Northeast Asia, which emerged as a result of the end of the Cold War and the termination of the Sino-Soviet confrontation, sharply contrasts with relationships elsewhere in the region. The Korean Peninsula stands out as the last battlefield of the Cold War, which still has not found accommodation. Moreover, it has also become a source of nuclear danger, which threatens the region as a whole, including Russia's Far East. Russia has to take seriously the prospect of a war in Korea, which might have nuclear overtones. Such a war can be started either by Pyongyang or by Washington to preempt each other or may result from incidents between DPRK and ROK forces getting out of hand. Another possibility is major popular unrest leading to chaos in North Korea, or some major nuclear- or missile-related incident there.

Russia supports the principle of nuclear non-proliferation while also recognizing the realities on the ground. North Korea views its nuclear capability as the only security policy it can trust, and will not denuclearize. Russian support for the UN sanctions against the DPRK has always been lukewarm, a nod to political expedience. In Putin's own view, an isolated and cornered regime becomes more dangerous. Expelling North Korean workers or cutting off energy supplies to Pyongyang would not bring the regime to surrender its survival kit. The Russians prefer to advise the North Koreans to be more flexible, rather than to warn them darkly about the consequences of bad behavior. Moscow's policy in Korea is to help resolve the nuclear issue diplomatically, essentially through an arms control and confidence-building agreement between Washington and Pyongyang, which would be endorsed by all the countries in the region, including Russia. Moscow acknowledges that the Korean Peninsula is of much larger strategic importance to Beijing than to itself. Hence it does not try to take the lead in attempts to help the U.S. and DPRK come to terms with each other. While keeping a direct channel to the North Korean leadership, Russia coordinates its proposals with China, allowing Beijing to do the heavy lifting with Pyongyang. Moscow is ever watchful, lest Pyongyang play China off Russia, as has been its longstanding habit.

Russia has a stake in a lasting détente on the Korean Peninsula. It has long entertained aspirations to build a gas pipeline across the DPRK to the ROK, and modernize and launch a trans-Korean rail link, which would be connected to the Trans-Siberian railway across the common border between North Korea and Russia. Russia is interested in expanding trading, investment, and technological links to South Korea. It helps that to Koreans, south and north of the 38th parallel, today's Russia is a non-hegemonic power that, unlike China, is not poised to dominate the region and, unlike Japan, does not invoke bitter memories from the past. Yet, Russia is not shy to demonstrate its newly restored military might. In 2019, Russian and Chinese warplanes engaged in a joint patrol off South Korea. Seoul accused Russia of having violated its airspace, which Moscow denied. Given the pattern of Russian flights close to the Japanese territory, this should probably be viewed as a not too subtle warning to the ROK not to allow deployment of new U.S. weapons systems, such as INF missiles.

While the Korean situation raises immediate concerns in Russia, longer-term, the most significant security issue is the future of Sino-American relations. This most important bilateral relationship in the 21st century world is turning from competitive to adversarial. The result is mounting tensions and polarization across East Asia and the Western Pacific. Particularly worrisome is the long-term development of the situation over Taiwan. Beijing is determined to eventually bring back the island into the People's Republic de facto, while Taipei is leaning toward formally declaring Taiwan's independence from China, which could provoke war. Beijing's current military buildup is very much structured to solve the Taiwan issue by force, if need be. Should it come to that, a showdown between China and the United States is a certainty, and their military collision is at least a possibility.

Moscow has always—even in the worst days of the Sino-Soviet confrontation—recognized Taiwan as part of the PRC. This is true also of the other core interests usually cited by Beijing: Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang. Since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Moscow has maintained only a commercial representation in Taipei. However, a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait presents clear risks for Moscow. Russia's strategy would probably seek to avoid being drawn into a conflict between the world's two principal powers, while pleading for political dialogue and distancing itself from openly endorsing Beijing's specific actions. China's handling of Russia's actions in Crimea in 2014 presents Moscow with a possible template.⁸

While Russia's dispute with Japan over the South Kuril Islands is being handled diplomatically—even without finite result so far—the region's other maritime conflicts, such as one between China and Japan over the Diaoyutai/Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, could spark military confrontation, which might draw the United States in. Mindful of its interests related to Japan, Moscow will probably not follow Beijing's line on Tokyo over the disputed islands. Russia does not take a stance on the ownership in the East China Sea. It takes a similar approach to the Japanese-South Korean islands issue. Having decided to stay away in principle, Moscow prefers diplomatic solutions to the various territorial disputes to be negotiated by the parties directly involved, and opposes any outside—in reality, American or U.S.-led—intervention in those disputes. Should matters come to a head, Russia can be expected to preach restraint and negotiations, but it will not become involved in the issues which matter little to it.

Conclusion

Moscow's policies in Northeast Asia are based on geostrategic positioning that places the Russian Federation in the north of the great Eurasian continent and regards the rest of the continent as one vast neighborhood washed by four oceans. Russia in this setting is an independent large unit, not part of integrated Europe or Asia. Above all, Russia seeks equilibrium, which would allow it to function as a sovereign power with a continental, even global, outreach. Russia is essentially alone. It leads an economic union of several former Soviet states, but this union does not constitute a political bloc or a tight military alliance. The Kremlin leadership views international relations mainly through the prism of realpolitik. Russia behaves as a great power competing with other great powers for status and influence. The basis of this competition is the different national interests of the players.

In Northeast Asia, Russia faces several major players, including the two leading global powers of the 21st century, the United States and China. Russia takes great care to strengthen its close and friendly ties with China, whose power and ambitions Moscow acknowledges,

but which it does not currently see as a threat, and with which it has learned to amicably manage differences. At the same time, Moscow is fully aware of the need to maintain equilibrium in its relations with an economically and demographically much stronger neighbor. As long as China is prepared to treat Russia as a great power and desist from imposing itself on it, the Sino-Russian relationship has a good prospect of becoming even more productive and stabilizing.

As a result of the new Russian-American confrontation, the U.S. presence in Northeast Asia is a security issue to Russia again, particularly when it comes to missile defenses and potential INF deployments. These developments are deemed less critical to Russian national security than similar systems deployed in or designated for Europe, but they raise a different challenge: how to cooperate with China strategically to enhance Russia's security in Asia vis-à-vis the United States while avoiding being drawn into Sino-American military confrontation. This risk is also present, though to a lesser extent as far as Russia is concerned, in the Taiwan Strait, the East and South China seas. Only a hypothetical U.S. attack against *both* China and Russia is likely to push Moscow and Beijing to create an alliance against the United States.

Japan, for Russia, remains a potential economic opportunity, not a security threat—although as a U.S. ally it hosts American military forces with a capability of striking Russia. Moscow's strategy toward Tokyo is focused on getting as much investment and technology from the advanced and rich neighbor without giving too much away to it in a potential territorial adjustment. Russia's long-term interest lies in fully normalizing relations with Japan and turning the country into a major external source of Russia's domestic modernization, on a par with Germany in the west.

South Korea is another, albeit smaller modernization resource for Russia. Moscow's goal is to develop economic ties with Seoul, while hoping for a détente between South and North Korea, which could make Russian energy and transportation projects viable. With regard to the Korean nuclear problem, Moscow's approach is to help the principal antagonists, Washington and Pyongyang, reach an arms control and confidence-building accord that would ease tensions and install a degree of predictability on the Peninsula, while acknowledging some kind of crude deterrence power in the hands of Pyongyang.

With regard to other international disputes in the East and South China seas, Russia takes a neutral stance, doing nothing that would undermine its relations with China but not supporting Beijing's claims. Moscow calls for the countries directly involved to solve their differences peacefully, while strongly objecting against third powers, primarily the United States, interfering or intervening in those situations.

In sum, Russia, three decades after the downfall of the Soviet Union, has adjusted its foreign policy to the conditions of global order change. It is practicing the role of an influential global player that does not seek dominance but whose presence may make a difference. From its base in northern Eurasia, Russia reaches out to different parts of its vast Eurasian neighborhood. In Northeast Asia it is essentially a status quo power pursuing its economic and security interests and navigating carefully between its quasi-ally China and openly adversarial America.

Endnotes

- ¹ I deal at length with the causes of this crisis in Dmitri Trenin, *Russia's Breakout from the Post-Cold War Order: The Drivers of Putin's Course* (Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, December 2014).
- ² Kaliningrad, St. Petersburg and region, Crimea, the North Caucasus, Tuva, Maritime Territory (between the Amur and Ussuri rivers), Sakhalin, and some other territories.
- ³ Soviet leader Gorbachev put forth the idea of a common European home, to include the Soviet Union, in a speech to the Council of Europe in 1989.
- ⁴ This author mused, in a 2011 book, that if Peter the Great were alive today, he would again leave Moscow, but rather than going west, he would go east, and build his new capital where Vladivostok now stands. Dmitri Trenin, *Post-Imperium* (Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011).
- ⁵ Vladimir Putin's remarks at the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, June 16, 2016.
- ⁶ Speaking at the 2019 St. Petersburg Economic Forum, Vladimir Putin quipped: "We are not fleeing from the U.S. dollar; it is the dollar that is running away from us."
- ⁷ Alexander Lukin, "Pik minoval?" *Rossiia v Globalnoy Politike* 18, no. 3(103) May-June 2020: 222-233.
- ⁸ The focus of this paper on Northeast Asia leaves the South China Sea beyond its scope. However, Russia is even more likely to strike an ostensibly neutral stance on the disputes in that area.