

# The Russo-U.S. National Identity Gap and the Indo-Pacific in 2021

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The start of the Biden administration demonstrated how far Russo-U.S. relations had sunk. On the heels of the massive cyber-hacking of U.S. government files, attributed to Russia, hearings for Biden's appointees showcased harsh accusations. These were compounded by the arrest of Aleksey Navalny on his return to Moscow from convalescence in Germany after a near fatal poisoning in Russia, arousing severe rebukes in the U.S. Meanwhile, Russian officials and news sources attacked Biden personally as senile or a figurehead, a flawed U.S. system of democracy as a farce and dysfunctional,<sup>1</sup> and U.S. plotting through Navalny as aimed at taking down Putin. Mutual accusations intensified in mid-March 2021 when Biden responded to a query whether he considered Putin a killer by saying, "I do," which reverberated in sharp retorts by Putin and from many in Russia.<sup>2</sup> In late April, as Russia massed troops on Ukraine's border, Biden placed new sanctions on Russia, and Russian language grew even more threatening, relations had sunk even further. If there was no direct focus on the Indo-Pacific in such vitriolic exchanges, that can be seen elsewhere, especially in a further tilt toward China in a reputed "strategic triangle."

The Indo-Pacific is where relations between Moscow and Washington have the most potential, spared of the quandaries of NATO expansion and Soviet nostalgia over a sphere of influence or Middle East intrigues leading to shifting alliances.<sup>3</sup> Many in Washington thought that a win-win scenario could be achieved if Moscow accepted integration into a dynamic region, a balance of power welcoming Beijing's rise but preventing it from domination, the denuclearization and stabilization of Pyongyang, and breakthroughs in bilateral relations with Tokyo and Seoul. All of these objectives appeared consistent with Russian aspirations in the early 1990s, but they were thwarted by the national identity that was being reconstructed in the following quarter century, especially under Vladimir Putin from the mid-2000s.<sup>4</sup> Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific proved to be a casualty of Russian thinking toward the United States, most of all, but also toward China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and India. The Russo-U.S. identity gap has widened further in 2021. As Dmitry Medvedev wrote on January 16, the relations of Moscow and Beijing with the new U.S. administration are likely to remain extremely cold after years in which the trajectory of relations between Washington and Moscow had already been heading steadfastly downhill.<sup>5</sup>

Russo-U.S. bilateral relations and conflicting agendas in Europe and the Middle East draw avid interest, but the Indo-Pacific appears to be an inconsequential factor in their sharp rivalry. Nor do their differences in this region appear to have much significance for the development of the area, where China casts a broad shadow and U.S. alliances and partnerships are being renewed. To argue to the contrary leads one down several possible pathways: 1) this is the one promising arena for rebuilding relations; 2) Russia has a special role to play, distinct from China's, due to its ties to India, North Korea, or ASEAN; 3) continued strengthening of Sino-Russian ties adds an element of concern for U.S. policies in the Indo-Pacific; or 4) Russia's animus toward the U.S. may find an unexpected outlet in this region. Whichever pathway is explored, it is important to grasp how Russians perceive this region and its various sub-regions, while keeping in mind the context of the broader clash of national identities severely affecting the Russo-U.S. relationship.

In this chapter, I offer an overview of the Russo-U.S. identity gap, turn to Russian thinking about the Biden administration, review Russian national identity, focus on aspects of Sino-Russian ties and their identity gap, subsequently shift to how Russians have viewed other parts of Asia of late, and conclude with an assessment of the prospects for Russo-U.S. relations in the region.

## The Russo-U.S. National Identity Gap

The mutual demonization of Moscow and Washington is made easier by the legacy of the Cold War. Putin has long accused the U.S. of a “Cold War” mentality, and lately one could read,

The long-forgotten spirit of McCarthyism is again felt in the air...We expect it is highly likely that the United States will consistently pursue an anti-Russian policy. In recent years, the trajectory of relations between Washington and Moscow has been steadily going downhill, no matter who was at the helm in the White House... Biden has not yet said anything positive about Russia. On the contrary, his rhetoric has always been openly unfriendly, harsh, even aggressive. He has repeatedly stated that ‘Russia is the biggest threat to the United States in terms of undermining our security and alliances.’<sup>6</sup>

Russians have showcased and tried to polarize an identity gap over the past two decades, capitalizing on a legacy of distrust of the U.S. nurtured by Soviet leaders. Returning to full control of the levers of power in 2012, Putin doubled down on attacks against the United States. This was already in full swing before he took the irreversible, explosive steps of seizing Crimea and then sending armed forces and surrogates into the eastern part of Ukraine to dismember the country further in 2014. Russian intervention in the 2016 U.S. elections cast a further shadow on bilateral ties despite success in helping Donald Trump win and satisfaction that he personally never criticized Putin. A downward spiral in relations preceded Biden’s win.

The year 2021 is an interesting time to scrutinize a clash in national identities, which flared in the 2010s. One set of possible factors is: a reduction of Russian self-confidence in light of rising economic stress, a shift in the Trump factor through replacement by Biden, rising concerns in both countries about China as Sino-Russian relations hit some snags and U.S. ties to China turn downward, and a sense of substantial change in both the world geopolitical and geo-economic environment in the pandemic era. Some Russian publications offered hints that perceptions of China were shifting, in part due to signs of Chinese arrogance, as the balance in the strategic triangle required adjustment, albeit without focus yet on identity gaps. On Central Asia, fear of China’s security and political role without consultations with Russia was palpable, as seen in the case of a new leader in Kirghizia and of a new military base in Tajikistan.<sup>7</sup> Other clashing factors are: Putin doubling down on his hostility to the United States, following Russia’s successful penetration of government and private company networks in a massive cyber-crime; a negative response

to Biden after losing Trump's warmth to Putin; renewed awareness that Russia needs close ties to China more than before; and a new cold war atmosphere prioritizing the strategic triangle. This second set of factors predominates, given new force by the recent impact of the Navalny factor. Russians are disappointed that China is less hostile to the U.S. and is seeking common ground.<sup>8</sup>

In the 2010s, under Putin, the Russian side boosted the national identity gap with the U.S. far more than many on the outside recognized. A one-sided obsession, it has recently become two-sided. Washington has reluctantly awakened to the national identity gap with Moscow. Through the 1990s, despite chagrin at Russian problems with democracy and a market economy, hope was rampant that the demise of the socialist bloc and the Soviet Union had removed the sort of antagonisms associated with the polarization between the "free world" and "communism." If Yeltsin was stumbling away from democracy and regional hot spots were exposing differences in national interests, these were not cause for demonizing Russia or reasons to expect that the U.S. would be demonized. Russia was seen as too inconsequential to arouse talk of a national identity gap, let alone a revival of the earlier gap. Few focused on the thrust of Russian rhetoric not only of dissatisfaction with the U.S.-led international order but also of revival of Soviet-era narratives. Even after Putin in the 2000s changed Russia's course, sharply widening the gap with the U.S., there was still hope that the end of George W. Bush's aggressive era, ignoring Russia on such issues as the Iraq War, and the signs of "reset" under Obama and Medvedev, would narrow that gap. Yet it widened sharply with Putin's return to the presidency, his aggression in Ukraine, and the impact of Russian intervention in the presidential elections. With Trump out, it grew clearer.

The essence of the national identity gap at the beginning of the 2020s is: a revival of ideology as if the U.S. is driven by the same obsessions as in the age of anti-communism and Russia is back to similar totalitarianism and expansionism as in the Cold War; a return of history as if 1989-91 is of little consequence and divisions over the meaning of 1945 and the Korean War matter most; a clash of civilizations, as Russians insist that they are distinct from the West and traditional in the face of radical "modernist" values tearing the U.S. asunder; a clash of social systems, one top-down centered on state authority and the other in free-fall proving democracy's flaws in its rampant individualism; and opposite views of the world from sovereignty backed by great power spheres of influence to a liberal international order spreading its values with increased zeal. The Russian side is clearer on the details, having visualized this identity gap longer and more fully. If Putin is understood to be the architect of policies that risk relations with the U.S. and censorship prevents open criticism of Putin's positions in all but obscure publications, there is no prospect of a debate about the United States, unlike the recent intense debate on Russia policy in the U.S.

## The Biden Administration and Russia

Angela Stent argued that every American president since the end of the Cold War has anticipated improving relations with Russia, starting with a foreign policy priority for which cooperation was important—whether democratization, anti-terrorism, or non-proliferation.<sup>9</sup> Biden's priorities are viewed in Russia as—even more than earlier U.S.

leaders—having no role for such engagement. As Dmitri Trenin later observed, Biden will challenge Russia both domestically and geopolitically.<sup>10</sup> Boosting alliances, calling for a summit of democracies, and calling out Russia for a large number of violations of international norms, Biden brought the Russo-U.S. identity gap into the forefront on the U.S. side after Trump had suggested that he and Putin were sympatico.

On December 22, 2020, President-elect Joe Biden spoke of his outrage over the penetration of U.S. computer systems on an unprecedented scale, which he blamed on Russia, contrasting the seriousness of his intended response to Trump's refusal once again to hold Putin to account. Biden in a debate even used the phrase "Putin's puppy,"<sup>11</sup> referring to Trump. The pent-up anger over Russian interference in the 2016 election and subsequent misdeeds was poised to erupt once Trump left office. Russia has reclaimed the mantle of "Cold War enemy," despite the absence of "communist" in its image. It is perceived as authoritarian, anti-American, expansionist, and hostile to overtures that could promote peace and stability. Worse than before, it is also viewed as a direct threat to the democratic system of the United States, now using novel "sharp power."

Bill Burns, former ambassador to Russia and new director of the CIA, has prioritized "attacks emanating from Moscow" in his recent statements while also noting the challenge China poses. In the Trump era he repeatedly accused Moscow of aggressive behavior and seeking influence at the expense of the American-led order and at odds with Western values and institutions. In the Russian response to his nomination, he is treated as the epitome of anti-Russia hysteria and someone more inclined to reconciliation with China, as if it could adapt to a U.S.-led order.<sup>12</sup> He is one prominent figure identified in Moscow as implacably, emotionally antagonistic to Russia. In such imagery, the U.S. is not pursuing its national interests but convulsed with hostile intent.

On January 14, Yulia Sokolchuk charged that containing Russia is the cornerstone of Biden's foreign policy,<sup>13</sup> saying that the confrontation appears, over the long term, more irreconcilable than that between the U.S. and China. She finds hawks treating Russia as the weak link in the triangle with China and subject to pressure that will break it, given its growing asymmetry with China. Biden's policies could lead to further escalation of pressure, since the Democrats perceive Russia not only as a geopolitical, but also as an ideological enemy. The nature of the clash will change, e.g., with sanctions over the "Navalny case," she forewarns. Moreover, Biden's push to consolidate the West could lead to more sanctions' coordination. Thus, a "dangerous effect of the consolidation of the West could be the promotion of the ideas of democracy, human rights, and the fight against illiberal regimes," becoming common ground for rapprochement between the U.S. and the EU on sanctions. There will be significant risks for the foreign economic dynamics of Russia's relations with third countries, warns Sokolchuk. Similarly, Russia's leaders view Biden as more threatening to Russia because he stands for and will lead the democratic world in spreading the values Russians regard as threatening their country and others whose fate is linked.

In a January 21 Moscow roundtable, it was argued that Russia will be used as the "image of common enemy by the Joe Biden Administration in order to evade criticism." They added that the anti-Russian position will also be used to consolidate the Western world.<sup>14</sup> One speaker said, "In my opinion, the US entered a certain period of instability and crisis...Of

course, an image of an enemy will be found in order to evade criticism. Actually, this image has already been found - Russia.” Another speaker asserted that

The liberal international order has attempted to recast the former capitalist-communist divide with a liberal-authoritarian divide. However, the ideological incompatibility between American liberalism and Russian conservatism is less convincing. For example, McFaul cautions against Putin’s nefarious conservative ideology committed to ‘Christian, traditional family values’ that threatens the liberal international order...The new ideological divide nonetheless advances neo-McCarthyism in the West...McFaul cautions against what he refers to as ‘Putin’s ideological project’ as a threat to the liberal international order. Yet he is reluctant to recognize that the liberal international order is an American ideological project for the post-Cold War era.

Furthermore, “The Biden administration will plant its vision of globalization based on the ideology of neoconservatism.” This is “neoglobalism” in place of Trump’s “de-globalization,” one source concluded.<sup>15</sup> Fortright in calling Russia’s response to globalization an “extreme ideological foreign policy and search for external enemies” was Sergei Trush in an article published in late 2020, which is unusual in doubting the Sino-Russian bond.<sup>16</sup> Only by opening a clear identity gap with China will Russia’s need for the U.S. come into view. Yet this outlier stands in contrast to the mainstream narrative that Russia has no identity clash with China and Russia must reciprocate the United States by demonizing it as the ideological enemy. Such polarizing images were seen in the Trump era, but the arrival of the Biden administration opened the door to their fulsome expression. The identity divide now was personalized, while the human rights focus on Aleksey Navalny accompanied by more assertive U.S. rhetoric and new sanctions on Russian officials raised the stakes. Absent Russian optimism, the U.S. had no hope.

In March 2021 a report was released on a newly compiled trove of historical documents, which rebut “Russia’s false narrative about NATO through the words of Russia’s own top officials and experts.” In an age of widespread disinformation and malign revisionism, the collection provides an accurate account of the NATO-Russia relationship, it was asserted. The report observes that a consistent Russian tactic has been to entice the United States into recognizing Russia as “a privileged co-decision-maker in the process of creating a post-Cold War security order in Europe.” This would mean a Kremlin veto over the future of much of Europe. It is said that Putin’s reply to NATO’s outreach has been a destabilizing pattern of escalating aggression toward the West. “Putin chose to follow a revanchist agenda of cyberattacks, election interference, energy embargoes, assassinations abroad, military provocations, aggression in Syria and Libya, and the invasion and occupation of territories in Ukraine and Georgia.”<sup>17</sup> This is the sort of narrative that informs the Biden administration’s response to Putin’s distorted narrative.

## Russian National Identity

Russia has struggled to locate itself as an autonomous world power and civilization since early in the 1990s. Yeltsin led in the search for the “Russian idea,” Putin proclaimed Russia’s “Eurasian identity,” and, continuously, the legacy of the Soviet Union has permeated the quest for identity distinctive from the West or a common European community. In the

Soviet era, Moscow strove to adhere to socialist orthodoxy as defined by the 1950s and to contrast its belief system to that of the United States and the capitalist world, often caricatured for both their capitalist and their imperialist evils. It also found a different target in Maoist China for distorting the socialist legacy and breaking with the Soviet bloc.<sup>18</sup> Eschewing a resurgent China as a target and doubling down on the contrast with the West in the 2010s, Putin has made national identity a primary concern.

Prior to Putin's consolidation of power in the mid-2000s, there was much hand-wringing about the absence of a "national idea" and the loss of cohesion in ideology since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Three steps proved essential to overcoming such malaise: 1) reconnection with the Soviet legacy; 2) separation from the "Western" identity; and 3) mobilization around symbols of national identity, as Crimea became after its annexation in 2014. Doubling down on attributes of Soviet identity, such as statism and the cult of an unchecked leader, invoked nostalgia over the Soviet legacy. Defining the West as a threat to both national interests and the distinctive Russian civilization created the desired separation from the "other." Territorial issues proved ideal for mobilizing on behalf of a reconstructed national identity, but so too did "spheres of influence."

Putin reconstructed Russian national identity around five pillars: an ideology of Russocentrism with elements of socialism and anti-westernism redolent of the Soviet era; pride in overlapping histories of Tsarist and Soviet achievements from Peter the Great's "modernization" to Stalin's victory in WWII; insistence on a unique and superior civilization; glorification of the state and a cult of Putin; and aggressive opposition to the liberal international order while favoring some sort of multipolarity and regional spheres of influence, including a Eurasian framework. Treated as dimensions of an intensifying national identity, they combined into a coherent worldview.<sup>19</sup>

The crux of Russian national identity at the beginning of the 2020s is: a strategic triangle power (no more superpowers exist, and only Russia ranks with the U.S. and China); a defender of values deemed traditional (in contrast to the West, which has lost its way with political correctness on family and religion, and to China, whose values are largely left undefined but are not considered appealing to others); and a champion of realism in defense of sovereignty opposed to spreading values from the West or humanitarian intervention. Ideally, Moscow would like to be the pivot of a strategic triangle, wooed by Washington and Beijing, but neither of those centers shows an inclination to grant it such importance or even to credit it as a civilizational core. This leaves the option of picking sides and pushing more aggressively against the target to confirm its salience. China was dismissed as a possible target by the end of the 1990s, after some, especially in the Russian Far East, had used alarmist language against a "yellow peril" and China had responded harshly.<sup>20</sup> Few have dared to criticize China visibly and directly over the ensuing two decades.

Moscow has borrowed some of the playbook of the Cold War to demonize the United States. If leaders change in the U.S. that is of no real consequence. If the U.S. seeks again to "reset" ties, no meaningful policy change can occur. U.S. alliances and policies worldwide are inherently bad, including in the Indo-Pacific region. If U.S. allies and partners tried to narrow the gap between Russia and the U.S.—as has been sought by Japan, South Korea,

India, and others—Russians see no room for this. As during the Cold War, the gap between the leading powers is unbridgeable, and the U.S. side is totally responsible. Well before Chinese were prone to recognize a New Cold War, Russians had, dismissing any “win-win” scenario ahead.

Russians have revived Soviet rhetoric, insisting on the superiority of a tradition of community over individualism run rampant in the West. Rather than rooting claims of communalism in communist collectivities, they are now anchored in Russian Orthodoxy, which embodies the values of pre-revolutionary Russia, although serfdom is no more praised than are collective farms. Sketchy as the evidence is for how communities function in Russia, the focus turns to the extremism of individual freedom in the U.S., glorifying selfishness with no obligation to society. The Trump era provided grist for extreme allegations of what is wrong in the United States.

Sergey Karaganov warns that the one-sided stress on finding fault with the West is defensive, while Russia needs clarity about its own identity. “We do not have a positive ideology for ourselves, no new Russian idea. But without such ideas all great powers collapse or cease to be great.” Yet Karaganov is intent on showcasing an ideological divide, insisting that the U.S. is waging a propaganda war against Russia as well as China, as it strives to fill the ideological vacuum in the world amid the ongoing failure of “democratic liberalism.” It is Russia that must respond since China is limited by a “specific culture,” which is “difficult to ‘read’ by most other civilizations.” Furthermore, “Russia stands for those who are ‘nationalists,’ or ‘conservatives,’ or ‘normal.’ They call for the preservation of peoples’ and countries’ sovereignty, national identity, and protection of national interests and culture.” Rejecting the claims that the other side stands for freedom, they argue it is insistent on imposing its ideology at the expense of other peoples’ own histories and traditions. Their model of society is atomized, destroying the family and social cohesion as well as religion. In contrast to Soviet writings in the early Cold War that embraced progressive ideals, such as the emancipation of women, more recent writings herald Russian conservatism and religious beliefs. Karaganov equates liberating the world from the Western “neoliberal yoke” with the historic mission of saving the world from the Mongols, Napoleon, and Hitler.<sup>21</sup> Again, the messianic thrust of Soviet ideology can be detected in such strong appeals to save the world.

## Russian Perceptions of Asia and National Identity Gaps

### Sino-Russian Relations

If the primary context is the national identity divide between Russia and the United States, the context second in significance is the Sino-Russian relationship and how China’s national identity matters. Along with the keyword “Eurasia” permeating Russian thinking, another assumption, if often left implicit, is the notion of “the strategic triangle.” This is especially present in the Indo-Pacific region, where China’s presence is paramount for Russia. The result is more quadrangular approaches to Russia’s connections to other countries than triangular ones, whether to Japan, the Korean Peninsula, Vietnam, or even India. National identity gaps are expressed bilaterally, but that does not obviate the perception that they

are influenced by third or fourth countries. When it is convenient to omit China and pretend that only the triangle with the United States is involved, this assumption hardly obscures the fact that China's shadow remains strong in nearby countries.

One challenge in the 1990s was to turn attention from the identity gap with China to that with the U.S. For a quarter century, China had represented socialism unreformed, and hostility toward the Soviet Union at its most irrational. Despite the fact that in the second half of the 1980s China's image first had transformed into socialism greatly reformed, with hostility much reduced, and then to reenforced authoritarianism when more reform was needed, Russians were too focused on the West to refocus on the identity gap with China. As China acquired greater significance as the key partner, it failed to draw the sort of attention seen in the 1950s as the ideological little brother, or over the next quarter century in the Sino-Soviet split as the ideological traitor. The relationship from the 1990s was viewed as just a function of pragmatic realism. It "remains by far the most important, even dominant, priority on Russia's agenda in the region,"<sup>22</sup> but not an identity target.

China and Russia each have demonized the United States since the Obama administration. They have insisted that the U.S. is not only pursuing its national interests in some sort of great power competition but is also driven by a distorted identity sometimes called a "Cold War mentality." In the case of Russia, the demonization is more unvarnished, whether of Obama's administration or of the U.S. under Trump with nary a mention of his responsibility. In the case of China, identity in the United States is similarly denigrated, but identity is not presumed to override U.S. national interests to the same extent, leaving more room for cutting a deal. Comparing the Russo-U.S. and Sino-U.S. national identity gaps has implications for U.S. foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific area. The difference can be seen in the way they use "sharp power" against the United States,<sup>23</sup> and in the reception given to the Biden administration with China holding the door open for a win-win outcome, while Russia holds out no hope as it warns that the New Cold War will only intensify.

Insistence that Russia is not part of the West and is distinct from Europe focuses attention on what is called a "Eurasian" identity. It is much less clear how Russian identity relates to Asia than to Europe. Little is said about any sort of regional identity or community in Asia. Silence greets those who would search for comparisons of Russian and Chinese national identities or even of the legacies of traditional communism, which once drew them close. There have been attempts to group Russia and China under one overarching umbrella, usually leaving vague the other countries so treated, as in "Greater Eurasia" or a "Grand Eurasian Partnership." While the various actors are assumed to be part of different civilizations and to proceed strictly in accord with their distinct national interests, the overlap in some identity elements is often presumed.

Unlike the West, China is not regarded as a threat to Russian civilization. Reviving the label "communism," however would have posed that danger. Keeping Chinese identity at bay was made easier by claiming that Russia has a Eurasian identity—neither European nor Asian but sweeping in regional scope. Even when Russia was weakened and isolated at the end of 2020, it strove to keep this identity alive through a virtual congress on Greater Eurasia.<sup>24</sup> This rang hollow against the signs of weakening integration and growing dependence on China. Russia also kept its distance from the Sinocentric BRI initiative.<sup>25</sup> After all, China demands a degree of control and use of its own labor not consistent with

Russian insistence on autonomy (and 80 percent of the workers must be from Russia). Thus, plans since 2009 to achieve harmonious development of the Russian Far East and Northeast China, and since 2015 to dock the Eurasian Economic Community and part of BRI (the Silk Road Economic Belt) have had little real success. It has even been difficult to cross the border in one's own car or to agree on visa-free travel, long due to Russian restrictions, but lately, even before the pandemic, owing to Chinese tightening of internal controls over people and provincial autonomy. In one late 2020 enumeration, only four major projects had been built by China in the Russian Far East, while some 70 other proposals of Chinese business remain under discussion. For BRI, Harbin is the main city in the 2019-21 plan for cooperation in an economic corridor with Russia and Mongolia. Russia is just a periphery.

In a January 2021 report on Sino-Russian relations, Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman argue that in nearly every dimension of their relationship ties have increased, although the two remain divided over what this means. They write, "the impact of Russia-China alignment is likely to be far greater than the sum of its parts, putting U.S. interests at risk globally," especially in the defense and democracy and human rights domains.

They have gone on the offensive to undermine democracy and universal rights as the foundation of the current liberal order, and are learning from each other how to increase the efficacy of their tactics. Already, Russia and China are popularizing authoritarian governance, exporting their best practices, watering down human rights norms, backing each other up to defend strategic interests in multilateral forums, creating norms around cyber and internet sovereignty, and bolstering illiberal leaders and helping them stay in power.<sup>26</sup>

As many concentrate on the polarization between the U.S. and China, we must not neglect a similar Russo-U.S. divide. Putin's "Turn to the East" does not mean an end to distrust with China, but insistence that, largely in coordination, Russia can make its weight felt in the Asia-Pacific region, where China welcomes complementary moves to undermine the U.S. presence. Putin's decision to lean to China and oppose the U.S. stridently is rooted not in a threat that the U.S. will use force against Russia but a fear that U.S. support for democracy and human rights will embolden sympathetic constituencies within Russia and ultimately weaken his grip on power. Kendall-Taylor and Shullman argue that "Much of the recent acceleration of Russia-China relations stems from the countries' increasingly shared vision of a less democratic world more hospitable to the continued rule of each country's authoritarian regime and its expanding global interests. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent occupation of Ukraine drove Russia toward a China increasingly concerned about Western efforts to foment 'color revolutions.'" They have found

common cause in undermining liberal democratic norms and institutions, weakening cohesion among democratic allies and partners, and reducing U.S. global influence...Both Beijing and Moscow view eliminating the normative underpinnings of the international system, specifically liberal democracy and universal human rights, as critical to gaining a greater voice in global governance and, in China's case, smoothing its path to true great-power status under CCP leadership.

Russian attitudes toward the Indo-Pacific region need to be appraised in the light of Russia's growing desperation to ride further on China's coattails.

In March 2021 China gave greater prominence to forging close ties with Russia. At the press conference of the National People's Congress, after Wang Yi took the first question from the TASS correspondent, he said, "China and Russia standing together will remain a pillar of world peace and stability. The more unstable the world is, the greater the need for carrying forward China-Russia cooperation. China and Russia should be each other's strategic support, development opportunity, and global partner. This is both an experience gained from history and an imperative under the current circumstances." He added, "We will set an example of strategic mutual trust, by firmly supporting each other in upholding core and major interests, jointly opposing 'colour revolution' and countering disinformation, and safeguarding national sovereignty and political security."<sup>27</sup> Just days later, TASS reported that Alexey Maslov, director of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, proposed an alliance of sorts anyway. He cautioned the Chinese side that the Biden Administration will step up pressure on China "in several main areas" and is hell-bent on preventing it from entering the high-tech sphere, especially with European partners, and implementing the "Made in China 2025" strategy. Maslov added, "The US is trying to surround Russia and China with groups of conflicts. It is trying to impose a new global control system through conflict management. And so far, Russia and China are in the position of defending or justifying themselves. In my opinion, a joint Russian-Chinese concept is a very important step to stabilise the world right now." Meeting with Chinese, he called for a joint system of comprehensive security, which would cover other areas along with the military sphere, such as energy, banking, transmission of information. "Thus, Russia and China can offer a new concept of global stability through a new security concept."<sup>28</sup>

Yet Maslov, just days later, doubted that China would agree, telling a Russian newspaper, "Despite the worsening political relationship, over the past two months Chinese exports to the US climbed 21%. So, the sides are boosting trade rather than decreasing it. So, exacerbating tensions while both economies require better relations would be simply unreasonable." He further predicted that Biden would seek constructive dialogue, including trade talks with China. Clearly, he was attentive to Chinese feedback at odds with his appeal. On the subject of North Korea, Russians complained that the Chinese were too accommodating to the U.S., finding the Sino-Russian gap comparable to the ROK-U.S. gap on the issue. This was indicative of a confrontational way of thinking about Russo-U.S. relations beyond what they perceived to be China's posture. Russians are growing nervous about rising asymmetry in the strategic triangle, doubting China's resolve. In essence, they visualize a national identity gap with little room for pragmatic compromise with the United States, but they are wary of China's long-term outlook and priority for the economy.

### **Russian Relations with Others in the Indo-Pacific**

In the 1990s, the Gore-Chernomyrdin commission focused on cooperation in the Russian Far East as talk was building for the U.S. to welcome Russia into APEC with a common agenda for Asia-Pacific development. Given that Moscow and Washington are distant from the dynamic centers of Asia's rise, the idea arose that they would find common ground. Yet Russians grew wary of joining the region as an economic supplicant and decided on rebuffing the West and its civilizational threat to embrace China's worldview and cultivate North Korea as a partner. By the beginning of the 2000s there was no further prospect of a joint Russo-U.S. regional agenda. That left Russia with the challenge of finding merit in U.S. allies as compatible identity targets.

Japan and South Korea kept alive their hopes of drawing Russia into a shared community much longer than the U.S., although they rose and fell over time. Russian rejection of Japan as early as late 1992, and of South Korea by 1997, did not mean that they were not sustained to a degree in aspirations for multipolarity. Abe Shinzo and Park Geun-hye in the mid-2010s were especially keen on encouraging Putin to accept a version of that. Yet Russian reasoning about these allies of the U.S. and about China, was at odds with their initiatives, and by the late 2010s only India was still spoken of as a multipolar partner. That last hope, however, faded with worsening Sino-Indian relations and India's partial turn to the United States. Russian claims to have partners for a Greater Eurasian identity receded, as one-by-one the candidates mentioned disappeared from the narrative, although widening the scope to Iran offered a glimmer of hope in 2021.

Some in Tokyo, Seoul, and Delhi encouraged Moscow to think of their countries as partners in building a regional community. Abe's wooing of Putin opened the door to talk of parallels in history—each messianic before defeat and each striving for autonomous influence, keeping its civilization separate. Similar today in population and facing China's regional dominance from different angles, they could find a symbiosis, while still leaning to their respective key partners. Moscow had no interest, seeing this as a path for a middle power, not a great power, and as a sellout to the U.S.-led order, to which Japan clung. South Korean leaders, one after another, made a pitch to Putin that the two sides could lock arms in reshaping Northeast Asia through a joint appeal to North Korea, awaiting a huge payoff from steps toward reunification forging a north-south corridor. Yet Putin again saw a U.S. ally defying China and subordinating Russia. In the case of India, its growing advocacy of an Indo-Pacific agenda could not be welcomed, given Russia's continental focus, the central U.S. role for India, and China's antipathy to the notion. As each proposal for regionalism was rejected, Russia was left wedded to China and at an impasse.

Russia's close ties to China and growing support for North Korea were not matched by rhetoric of civilizational affinity. The most that was ventured was silence about national identity gaps. If indirect criticisms were raised, at times, about policy choices in Beijing and Pyongyang, there was no longer reference to how domestic factors in either of these countries were responsible. That kind of criticism was reserved for the United States, as the sole target of identity enmity.

Abe tried to downplay the longstanding source of identity friction, the Northern Territories, to forge a personal bond with Putin and find common cause on economic and security regional objectives. This failed, and he never could find in history a source of bonding, especially as the Russian side glorified the victory in WWII, including over Japan, which struck at Abe's desire to "normalize" views of Japanese pre-1945 history, such as pride in the Russo-Japanese War. The national identity gap between Moscow and Tokyo could not be managed by silence on recent Russian human rights abuses and relative quiet on Ukraine matters from 2014. There never was a basis for building trust, given Putin's intensified appeal to identity elements at odds with Abe.

South Korean leaders for thirty years sought to swing Moscow away from North Korea through identity appeals as well as economic incentives. Conservatives did this seeking demonization of the North, while progressives appealed to joint efforts to entice the North. Calling initiatives "Eurasian" or "Northern" and welcoming Russia into "Northeast Asia," from which Moscow thought others were excluding it, were approaches taken. Yet Moscow

found much greater mileage for its own national identity in seeking leverage and trust from Pyongyang. Further, spillover from antipathy to the U.S. left decreasing room to share an identity with U.S. allies.

North Korea matters for Russian identity as a past ally and an enemy of the U.S. Winning its support reassures Russia that it has regained a foothold in East Asia, can operate not only with China but independently of China, and can oblige South Korea and the U.S. to take it seriously in the region. Russian wariness of Seoul and wooing of Pyongyang is detailed over two decades in a January 2021 book rooted in national identity assumptions but feigning realist arguments.<sup>30</sup>

Biden was presented with no hint of Russian cooperation on any of his regional priorities: the boosting of alliances and multilateralism rooted in them, the formation of a Quad Plus in the Indo-Pacific, the denuclearization and containment of North Korean aggression, and the goal of restraining China's "wolf warrior" behavior. The U.S. and Russia advocated different notions of regionalism, sought to pull India in different directions, and were at loggerheads in addressing the growing power of China. If vestiges of interest in wooing Putin survived in Japan under Suga and South Korea under Moon, they drew no sympathy in the Biden administration and barely any reciprocity from Putin. Meanwhile, the starker differences in Russian and U.S. positions on security, human rights, Europe, and the Middle East, boded poorly for Indo-Pacific cooperation.

## Conclusion

In the 1990s, Russians awakened to the humiliation of falling from the status of a superpower treated as one of two great centers of world geopolitics and civilization to a pitiful periphery of European civilization, whose past achievements were not only unappreciated but also dismissed as black marks to be treated as a source of shame. Reconstructing an identity of pride became an urgent pursuit. The quest for the "Russia idea" devolved into an obsession with declaring the rebirth of a civilization with a history, religion, and great power identity capable of standing on equal footing with the United States (brought down from its perch) and China (raised on a large pedestal to balance the U.S. and to open space for a third, leading civilization). Not only was this a clash of civilizations, it was a manifesto that they are fundamentally different, with no common ground for shared values or a global community. While talk lingered of cooperation in dealing with North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the differences on that were pronounced from the start of the Six-Party Talks in 2003. No common agenda in the region materialized in the 2000s-2010s.

Biden's exceptionally experienced team of experts on the Indo-Pacific is striving for a grand strategy, which is bound to be opposed to Putin's strategy in multiple respects. North Korea is likely to be an early subject of clashing thinking, in which some shared realist interests will be overwhelmed by national identity as well as balance of power reasoning. On Sino-U.S. tensions, Russia will side fully with China, allowing the wide identity gap with the U.S. to overwhelm any thinking about vying for leverage in a strategic triangle. As the U.S. strengthens the Quad, strives for a Quad Plus, and pursues alliance trilateralism on Russia's southeastern border, attacks on this as "Cold War" mentality are unavoidable. Given the impending setbacks to Russian claims to regional identity, there is little prospect of clinging to them in a more polarized environment.

The crux of Russian narratives on the Indo-Pacific is that the U.S. is desperate to maintain its fading hegemony and, thus, goes all out to contain Russia as well as China, but Russia can be on the offensive because other states share its concerns, China is not a hegemonic threat, and a form of regionalism is advancing in which Russia plays a prominent role in multipolarity. Step-by-step these pretenses have been peeled away, and the Biden agenda could be their downfall. Putin may be left without any way to differentiate Eurasianism from Sinocentrism, with no pretext of working with South Korea as well as North Korea for Northeast Asian regionalism, and with the loss of India as the anchor in its thinking about multipolarity and plural civilizational centers. In these ways, the Biden administration's expected Indo-Pacific strategy and identity is certain to be taken as a threat to Putin's "Turn to the East" and Greater Eurasianism. If India, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, or another state in Biden's sights struggles to hold onto an image of Russia as a target of opportunity able to play some sort of balancing role against China, they are likely to lose hope. Yet India still holds out hope and has a deciding voice as the key to Quad success.

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