

RUSSIA'S TURN TO THE EAST: ANALYSING THE DRIVERS OF MOSCOW'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION SINCE 1991

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Abstract

Since the end of the Cold War and the consequent dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia has made the recovery of a relevant status in the international system one of the main objectives of its foreign policy. To achieve this aim, it is of great interest for Moscow to play an important role in the world's fastest growing region in recent decades: the Asia-Pacific region. Although the Kremlin's involvement has been more visible in other areas such as the post-Soviet space or Europe, a gradual process of reorientation of Russian foreign policy towards its Eastern neighbourhood has begun since the beginning of the 21st century. Hence, this article presents the results of a mixed method research design related to the main internal and systemic factors that have turned Asia-Pacific region into a priority area for the Russian Federation since its independence in 1991.

Keywords

Russian Federation, Foreign Policy, Asia-Pacific, International Relations.

Resumo

Desde o fim da Guerra Fria e a consequente dissolução da União Soviética em 1991, a Rússia fez da recuperação de um estatuto relevante no sistema internacional um dos principais objetivos da sua política externa. Para alcançar esse objetivo, é de grande interesse para Moscovo desempenhar um papel importante na região com o crescimento mais rápido nas últimas décadas: a região Ásia-Pacífico. Embora o envolvimento do Kremlin tenha sido mais visível noutras áreas, como o espaço pós-soviético ou a Europa, desde o início do século XXI iniciou-se um processo gradual de reorientação da Política Externa Russa em direção à sua vizinhança oriental. Assim, este artigo apresenta os resultados de uma investigação com um desenho metodológico misto, relacionada com os principais fatores internos e sistémicos que transformaram a região Ásia-Pacífico numa área prioritária para a Federação Russa desde a sua independência em 1991.

Palavras-chave

Federação Russa, Política Externa, Ásia-Pacífico, Relações Internacionais.

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Introduction

Since its emergence as an independent state in 1991, the Russian Federation has maintained a constant interest in the Asia-Pacific region. This interest has sometimes gone unnoticed due to the priority given to its so-called "Near Abroad" (*bližneye zarubežye* Ближнее Зарубежье)², and, to a lesser extent, to other areas. Although the Kremlin's efforts in the Asia-Pacific have evolved over time and intensified in recent years, Moscow's interest in the area is often seen as a reaction to the deterioration in Russian-Western relations following the country's decision to invade Ukraine. However, the reality is that Russian engagement in Southeast Asia dates back several decades and is the result of various factors influencing the foreign policy decision-making process.

In the first place, Russia's interest in its Asian neighbourhood is rooted in the expansionist periods of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. While the primary external threats perceived by Russia have historically come from the West, its interactions with Pacific powers have been a consistent feature of its diplomatic history, even under pro-Western leaders such as Peter the Great. Furthermore, the Russian territories that border the Asia-Pacific region —known collectively as the Russian Far East— are part of the Tsarist and Communist legacy³.

On the other hand, due to the ongoing consolidation of the so-called "vertical of power" or "power vertical" (*vertikal vlasti* Вертикаль власти)⁴, the President of Russia plays a dominant role in the foreign policy decision-making process, as stated in the Russian Constitution adopted in 1993 (Chapter 4: Art. 80-93) and the amendments of 2020.

¹ ACP – The African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States / AIIB – Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank / APEC – Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation / APR – Asia-Pacific Region / ASEAN – Association of Southeast Asian Nations / BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa / CIS – Commonwealth of Independent States / EAS – East Asia Summit / EEF – Eastern Economic Forum / EDM – Eastern Military District / EFTA – European Free Trade Association / EU – European Union / G20 – Group of 20 / NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization / OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development / OECD-EC – Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development-European Commission / OSK – Operational-Strategic Command (Obyedinennoye Strategicheskoye Komandovanie Ob'yedinnennoye strategicheskoye komandovanie) / QUAD – Quadrilateral Security Dialogue / SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organization / SIPRI – Stockholm International Peace Research Institute / U.S.A / U.S – United States of America / UN Comtrade – United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database / USD – US dollar.

² "Near Abroad" is a concept used by the Russian Federation to refer to the countries of the former Soviet Union, with the purpose of asserting its perceived "right" to expand influence in this part of the world - see William Safire, "On Language: Near Abroad", *New York Times*, May 22, 1994, <https://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/22/magazine/on-language-the-near-abroad.html>

³ For an overview of Russia's historical engagement in East Asia, see: Chris Miller, *We Shall Be Masters: Russian Pivots to East Asia from Peter the Great to Putin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

⁴ For further explanation of the concept, see: Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005), 7.



Nevertheless, it is important to note that Moscow's international strategies are also shaped by the existence of differing schools of thought, namely the Westernizers, the Eurasianists, the Nationalists or the Slavophiles (Kotz and Weir 2007, 285-86).

All these aspects should therefore be considered when analysing the evolution of Russian Foreign Policy towards the Asia-Pacific region. This background information is essential for understanding why the Kremlin initially displayed indifference towards the area during the first half of the 1990s under the pro-Western Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev, before Yevgeny Primakov relaunched Russia-Asia relations. Similarly, throughout the 21st century, Vladimir Putin has made strengthening ties with Southeast Asian countries a foreign policy priority. This was part of an effort to re-establish *derzhavnost* (Державность)⁵. This term refers to regaining the great power status and influence lost after the Soviet Union's collapse.

At the same time, this evolution has been shaped by a range of factors, whose relative importance has shifted due to changes in the international system and in response to specific events. The fact that researchers have often analysed these factors in isolation has limited previous evaluations of Russian strategy in the Asia-Pacific region. Considering the current state of research, this article seeks to analyse Russian foreign policy towards the region to explain why enhancing its presence there has become a key priority within Moscow's current multi-vector foreign policy.

Accordingly, this article is structured in three main sections. It begins by tracing the evolution of the Russian Federation's approach to the Asia-Pacific region since 1991. The second section explores Russia's economic interests in the region, focusing on trade, foreign direct investment, and the development of the Russian Far East. The final section addresses Russia's security concerns in the area, from ongoing territorial disputes with regional nations, such as Japan, to contemporary regional tensions. Each section is supported by contextual background information reflecting how global dynamics have influenced the development of these policies. The conclusion will examine the interaction between domestic and systemic factors that have shaped Russian foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region. These systemic factors emerge from the international system itself.

2. Methodology

To analyse Russian foreign policy towards the Asia-Pacific region and highlighting the main elements that have shaped its evolution, a mixed-methods approach has been adopted. Mixed methods research is an approach in the social sciences. It involves collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. By combining the strengths of both, the researcher can draw more robust conclusions and gain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem (Creswell 2015, 2). Given the nature of the phenomenon

⁵ The concept "*derzhavnost*", which refers to Russia's sense of 'Greatpowerness', is considered the major component of the predominant geopolitical worldview in the country despite the existing debate. For a balanced discussion of the meaning of the concept, see: Bobo Lo, "Recasting the ideological debate", in *Russian Foreign Policy Making in the Post-Soviet Era – Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, ed. by Bobo Lo (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave 2002), 52-56.



analysed in this article, this approach offers deeper insights than either form of data alone.

Qualitative data were gathered through an extensive literature and documentary review. On the one hand, the literature review was based on books written, as well as academic articles published by institutions specializing in Russian foreign policy and Asia-Pacific studies. On the other hand, the documentary review analysed official sources such as legislation or government documents (e.g., Foreign Policy Concepts, Energy Strategies or National Security Strategies of the Russian Federation), speeches relevant to the study (e.g., speeches of Presidents or Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation), and official reports from relevant organizations.

To determine whether relationships between variables exist, quantitative data (e.g., investment and trade data) were compiled and analysed. These data were obtained from national datasets (e.g., data from the Bank of Russia and the Russian Federal State Statistics Service, also known as Rosstat), regional datasets from the Asia-Pacific region (e.g., data from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization) and international datasets (e.g., data from the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute or the United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database also known as UN Comtrade).

To integrate these two strands, this research employed a sequential explanatory design. The analysis was conducted in two main phases. The process began with the qualitative analysis of documentary sources and academic literature. This initial phase was crucial for building a theoretical framework and identifying key historical turning points, strategic concepts, and the dominant narratives within Russian foreign policy discourse over time.

The insights gained from this qualitative review then guided the quantitative data collection phase. For instance, the qualitative identification of the post-2014 "Russia's Turn to the East" as a critical juncture prompted a targeted collection of trade and investment statistics from that specific period to measure the economic dimension of this strategic shift. This sequential process ensured that the quantitative data was not collected in a vacuum but was instead used to explore and verify the patterns identified in the initial qualitative stage.

Finally, the two types of data were synthesized through triangulation to cross-validate the findings. Quantitative data, such as the increase in arms sales to Asian nations or the growth in trade with APEC, were used to substantiate and provide empirical weight to the qualitative arguments derived from official policy documents and academic literature. This approach ensures that the article's conclusions are not only supported by policy discourse but are also reflected in measurable trends, thereby enhancing the overall validity of the analysis.

To clearly present the findings of this mixed methods research and the various forms of data used, the results of the information analysed are also presented in charts (e.g., bar charts, line charts or pie charts), tables, and illustrative quotations where appropriate.



3. The Evolution of the Asia-Pacific Region's Importance to the Russian Federation

The volatility of the international environment, along with the wide variety of policies implemented by the different governments that have led the country since 1991, has influenced not only the evolution of Russian foreign policy, but also Moscow's attitude towards the Asia-Pacific region. For an efficient identification of the most relevant changes in the Kremlin's behaviour towards Southeast Asia, an examination of the Foreign Policy Concepts of the Russian Federation approved to date is required. These official documents outline Russia's regional and thematic priorities, providing brief explanations of the key milestones that justified the formulation and intended implementation of each strategy.

Since the 'vertical of power' and the multidimensionality of Russian foreign policy discourse also play a crucial role, this section includes this section includes relevant background information beyond what is stated in the official documents. This context is essential for understanding the development of Russia's foreign policy decision-making during the administrations of Boris Yeltsin (1991-1999), Vladimir Putin (2000-2008), Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012), and Putin's current government since his re-election in 2012.

3.1 Russian Foreign Policy in the 1990s: Boris Yeltsin's Government (1991-1999)

Following its emergence as an independent state in 1991, the Russian Federation entered a period of crisis as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the consequent loss of its status as a global superpower. In such a fragile and transitional context, Moscow's main priority was to stabilise the country's situation in order to avoid economic collapse and maintain its privileged position over the former Soviet republics (Amirov 1999, 275).

To address this situation, the Kremlin adopted the so-called "Kozyrev Doctrine", named after its Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrey Kozyrev. This new policy aimed at achieving full integration with the West, with the goal of restoring the desired social and economic stability. For this purpose, the strategy implied the recognition of a unipolar order of the international system under the hegemony of the United States, since obtaining international support was an essential condition for the survival of the country (Kozyrev 2005, 196-97).

Consequently, Russian interest in the Asia-Pacific region was limited during those years. As stated in the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation approved during this period in 1993 —where only three Asian countries were considered important (China, India, and Japan)— Russia merely perceived the region as a partner in its transformation, which was required across all levels:

Acquiring a firm position in the Asia-Pacific Region, which has been rapidly transforming itself into a center of world politics and economy, comparable to the Atlantic region, would promote Russia's domestic reforms, enhance Russia's influence over the general



political and economic developments in the world, and help fulfill its unique Euro-Asian potential (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 1993).

The pro-Western orientation of this foreign policy provoked fierce opposition from Nationalist and Eurasianist sectors, ultimately leading to Kozyrev's dismissal in 1996. Unlike his predecessor, the new Minister, Yevgeny Primakov, would radically shift Russian foreign policy with the introduction of the so-called "Primakov Doctrine". This new strategy advocated for a more active foreign policy across multiple geographic areas. Its goal was to counterbalance American hegemony. Primakov perceived this hegemony as a threat to Russia's security, believing Washington intended to prevent Moscow from playing a significant role in the emerging multipolar order (Primakov 1996, 3-13).

Hence, there are two key elements of this doctrine that remain embedded in contemporary Russian Foreign Policy: multivectoralism and multipolarity. On the one hand, multivectorialism provides Moscow a strategical diversification of partnerships with the post-Soviet space as the main regional priority. On the other hand, aware of its limitations in directly confronting the United States, Russia advocates the creation of a multipolar world in which it can reassert itself as a major global actor. This explains Russia's interest in forging strategic alliances with emerging powers in the international system such as China or India. This is what Primakov referred to as the creation of a "Strategic Triangle" to counterbalance Western powers, which would provide Russia with the necessary partners to regain influence (Leichtova 2016, 23) (Mankoff 2009, 201). As an example of this, the signing of the Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New World Order in 1997 can be highlighted⁶.

At the same time, Russian participation in regional integration processes in Asia-Pacific started during Primakov's presence in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. In 1991, Russia established formal relations with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), becoming a dialogue partner five years later. Regarded by the Kremlin as a useful mechanism for balancing power dynamics in the international system, ASEAN has increasingly been used by Moscow to revitalise its engagement with regional countries (Trenin 2014, 122).

Also in 1996, Russia co-founded the Shanghai Five alongside China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The Shanghai Five was later renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) following its membership expansion in 2001. Although regional security cooperation has remained the institution's primary strength since its inception, its agenda has expanded to include other areas —such as the energy sector— demonstrating the SCO's crucial role in Moscow's progress towards its goal of becoming a key regional player (Alonso Marcos and Nurimbetov 2021, 1-13).

To achieve fuller integration in such a developed region, Russia also joined its principal financial institution by becoming a member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1998. Beyond trade and investment openness, Russia's participation in APEC reflects both its economic needs and its desire to position itself as a fully integrated actor within the global economy (Dueñas Pulido 2003, 28-29).

⁶. For more information about the Joint Declaration, see the full document: "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order", United Nations Digital Library, April 23, 1997, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/234074?ln=es>



3.2 Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century: Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev

Although both Vladimir Putin and Dmitry Medvedev encouraged cooperation with the West in combating shared threats during their presidencies, they consistently showed reluctance to build a partnership based on shared values and institutions with Western countries (Stent 2005, 272) (Trenin 2006, 87-96). As a result, the legacy of Primakov's multivector foreign policy —and the accompanying interest in the Asia-Pacific region— was preserved and even strengthened following Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000.

During the early years of his presidency, Putin pursued a pragmatic foreign policy focused primarily on economic growth and national security, given the backdrop of domestic instability and the growing threat of terrorism. In this context, securing cooperation with as many international partners as possible was essential (Donaldson, Noguee, and Nadkarni 2014, 369-70) (Tsygankov 2016, 138-39). Regarding the eastern vector, the Foreign Policy Concept adopted in 2000 stated that Russian foreign policy was "aimed at building up the positive dynamism of relations with the states of South East Asia". Achieving this objective required active Russian participation in the main regional integration institutions mentioned above, as well as the strengthening of bilateral ties with countries such as China, India, Japan, and South Korea (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2000).

However, Russian Foreign Policy became increasingly assertive during the second half of the decade, especially as a consequence of Western support to the "Colour Revolutions"⁷ that took place in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005 (Donaldson, Noguee and Nadkarni 2014, 283-84) (Tsygankov 2016, 177-78). As Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich Conference demonstrates, Moscow began openly accusing the United States of unilateralism and reclaiming its role as a global power in the emerging international order. At the same time, China's rise led to a further intensification of Russian efforts towards the Asia-Pacific region, which steadily gained importance in both political and economic terms (Molchanov 2015, 52-53) (Sergunin 2016, 157).

In 2008, Dmitry Medvedev assumed the presidency and approved a new Foreign Policy Concept. In this updated document, alongside the continued emphasis on strengthening bilateral ties with key regional states such as China, Japan, and India, additional Southeast Asian countries —including Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore— were identified as strategic partners. As it was established:

In the context of the Russian Federation's multi-vector foreign policy, the Asia-Pacific Region has important and ever-increasing significance, which is due to Russia's belonging to this dynamically developing region of the world, its interest in tapping its potential for the realization of programs aimed at economic development of Siberia and the Far East, the need for strengthening regional cooperation in the field of countering terrorism,

7. The concept "Colour Revolutions" is used to refer to the protests occurred in some former Soviet Union states to topple its authoritarian regimes during the 2000s like Georgia in 2003 with the Rose Revolution, Ukraine in 2004 with the Orange Revolution, and Kyrgyzstan in 2005 with the Tulip Revolution – For a further explanation, see Lincoln A. Mitchell, *The Color Revolutions*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).



ensuring security and maintaining a dialogue between civilizations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2008)

During the 2008-2012 term, Medvedev faced an international context marked by growing rivalry between Moscow and Washington which was fuelled by Russian invasion of Georgia, the Kremlin rejection of Kosovo's Declaration of Independence, and NATO's proposal to eventually admit Kyiv and Tbilisi into the alliance (Donaldson, Nogee and Nadkarni 2014, 395-96). Several factors led Russia to increasingly view the Asia-Pacific as the new centre of global power. These included the severity of the global financial crisis, known as "The Great Recession," and the relative strength of Southeast Asian economies. This stood in contrast to the signs of weakness shown by Western economies (Østevik and Kuhrt 2018, 78). This situation was reflected in the Foreign Policy Concept approved by Putin in 2013, one year after his return to office:

The ability of the West to dominate world economy and politics continues to diminish. The global power and development potential is now more dispersed and is shifting to the East, primarily to the Asia-Pacific region. The emergence of new global economic and political actors with Western countries trying to preserve their traditional positions enhances global competition, which is manifested in growing instability in international relations (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013)

This shift formed an integral part of Russia's renewed global strategy, which aimed to position the country as a Eurasian power through closer cooperation with Asia:

Strengthening Russia's presence in the Asia-Pacific region (APR) is becoming increasingly important since Russia is an integral part of this fastest-developing geopolitical zone, toward which the center of world economy and politics is gradually shifting. Russia is interested in participating actively in APR integration processes, using the possibilities offered by the APR to implement programs meant to boost Siberian and Far Eastern economy, creating a transparent and equitable security architecture in the APR and cooperation on a collective basis (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2013)

Examples of this shift include Russia's initiative to establish financial institutions such as the BRICS New Development Bank in 2014, the national creation of the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF), and the country's accession to the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 (Korolev 2016, 59). As a result of the new strategy adopted in this context, Moscow sought to reassert its *derzhavnost* —the notion of great power status— and reclaim what the Kremlin perceives as "its deserved place in the world", regardless of potential consequences. In line with this ambition, the Russian Federation annexed Crimea in 2014 and intervened militarily in the Syrian Civil War in 2015, citing the need to counterbalance what it viewed as the dominance imposed by the United States and its Western allies in global affairs (Tsygankov 2018, 241-43) (Forsberg 2018, 329). This assertiveness was complemented by a narrative aimed at Southeast Asian nations, framing Russia's pivot not merely as a pragmatic choice but as the embrace of a Eurasian identity that offered an alternative to the Western-led global order (Tsvetov 2016, 55-56).

As stated in the Foreign Policy Concept of 2016, the "new world" was defined as a world where a multipolar international structure was emerging and where "global power was



shifting towards the Asia-Pacific region eroding the global economic and political dominance of the traditional western powers” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016). In this context, Russia opted to maintain its strategy and intensify its engagement with the Asian region:

Russia views strengthening its positions in the Asia-Pacific Region and stepping up relations with its States as a foreign policy area of strategic importance, which is attributable to Russia belonging to this vibrant geopolitical region. Russia is interested in participating proactively in the integration processes in Asia-Pacific, using the possibilities it offers to implement socioeconomic development programmes in Russia’s Siberia and Far East, and creating an inclusive, open, transparent and equitable collective security and cooperation architecture in Asia-Pacific (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2016)

As an illustration of the implementation of this policy, it is noteworthy that President Putin attended the 13th East Asia Summit, held in Singapore in 2018. This marked the first time a President of the Russian Federation personally participated in the plenary session of the regional forum since Russia’s accession in 2005⁸.

Currently, Russia’s decision to launch a full-scale invasion of Ukraine despite foreseeable consequences makes clearer that the Kremlin’s implementation of the mentioned strategy has continued so far. In fact, expanding its presence in the Asia-Pacific region and strengthening ties with regional states is not only of paramount importance to Russia, but it can now be also considered a strategic necessity. Following the adoption of the new Foreign Policy Concept in March 2023, it is likely that Moscow will continue to intensify its efforts in the region as part of a broader attempt to pivot away from Europe and contribute to shaping a new world order:

A comprehensive deepening of ties and enhancement of coordination with friendly sovereign global centres of power and development, which are located on the Eurasian continent and committed to approaches which coincide in principle with the Russian approaches to a future world order and solutions for key problems of the world politics, is particularly important for achieving strategic goals and major objectives of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation 2023)

4. Russian Economic Interests in the Asia-Pacific Region

As previously mentioned, the firm economic growth experienced by Southeast Asian states in recent years is one of the most significant events that have influenced international relations in the 21st century. Therefore, Moscow has several interests at stake in such an attractive economic market. Considering the available data, it can be observed that both Russian exports to Asia-Pacific countries and imports from such nations have progressively increased, contrasting with the declining trade trend observed

⁸ About Putin’s attendance to the East Asia Summit, see “East Asia Summit: Vladimir Putin attended the plenary session of the 13th East Asia Summit (EAS)”, President of Russia, November 15, 2018, <http://en.kremlin.ru/catalog/countries/SG/events/59128>



with Western partners. In addition, data reveal that China, Japan, and Korea are Russia's most important trading partners in the region (see Table 4.1).

Table 1. Share of the Russian Federation's Exports and Imports by Main Partners in the Asia-Pacific Region and the West (%)

	Russian exports				Russian imports			
	2000	2010	2015	2020	2000	2010	2015	2020
China	5,1	5,1	5,3	14,6	2,8	17,0	19,1	23,7
Korea	0,9	2,6	3,9	3,7	1,1	3,2	2,5	3,1
Japan	2,7	3,2	4,2	2,7	1,7	4,5	3,7	3,1
Germany	9,0	6,3	7,4	5,5	11,5	11,7	11,2	10,1
Italy	7,0	6,9	6,5	3,0	3,6	4,4	4,5	4,4
The Netherlands	4,2	13,6	11,9	7,4	2,2	1,9	1,7	1,6
APEC	15,1	16,9	22,8	27,9	16,1	34,1	37,9	42,4
Eurozone	35,8	53,5	52,0	33,7	32,9	41,7	41,3	34,0

Sources:

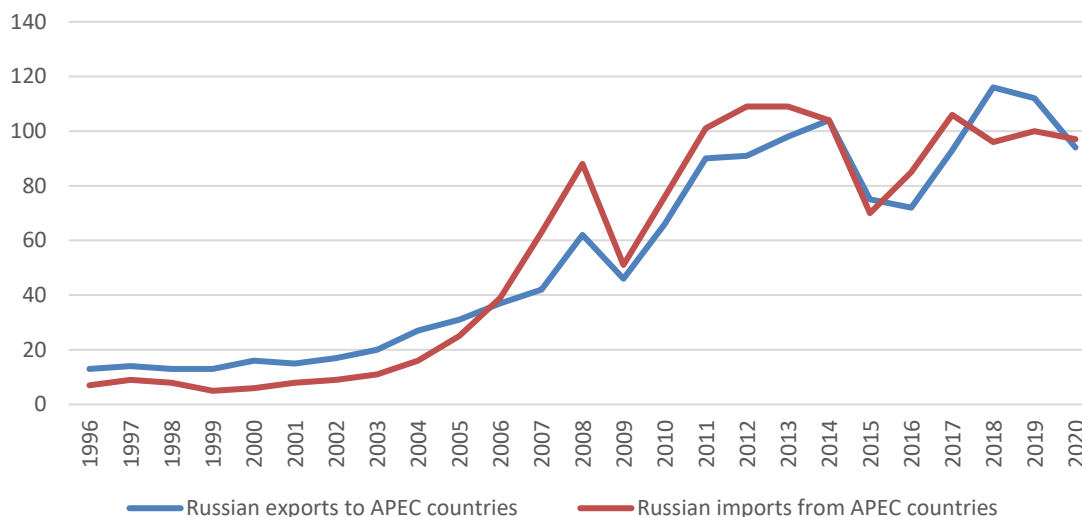
Data from Russian Federal State Statistics Service, *Rossiiskii Statisticheskii Ezhegodnik 2017* [Russian Statistical Yearbook], (Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service - Rosstat, 2017), 223-224, <https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/torg17.pdf>

Data from Russian Federal State Statistics Service, *Rossiiskii Statisticheskii Ezhegodnik 2022* [Russian Statistical Yearbook], (Moscow: Federal State Statistics Service - Rosstat, 2022), 587, https://rosstat.gov.ru/storage/mediabank/Ejegovnik_2022.pdf

At the multilateral level, Russian trade with APEC experienced significant growth in the early 2010s, largely as a consequence of the aforementioned "Great Recession" (see Chart 4.1). In contrast, trade between Russia and ASEAN peaked in 2014, coinciding with the deterioration of Moscow's relations with Western countries after the annexation of Crimea and the military intervention in territories of Eastern Ukraine (see Chart 4.2). However, despite this growth, experts note that Russia's overall economic footprint in the region remains modest, limiting its ability to build influence through trade and investment when compared to established economic powers like China, Japan, or the United States (Rangsimaporn 2012, 326).



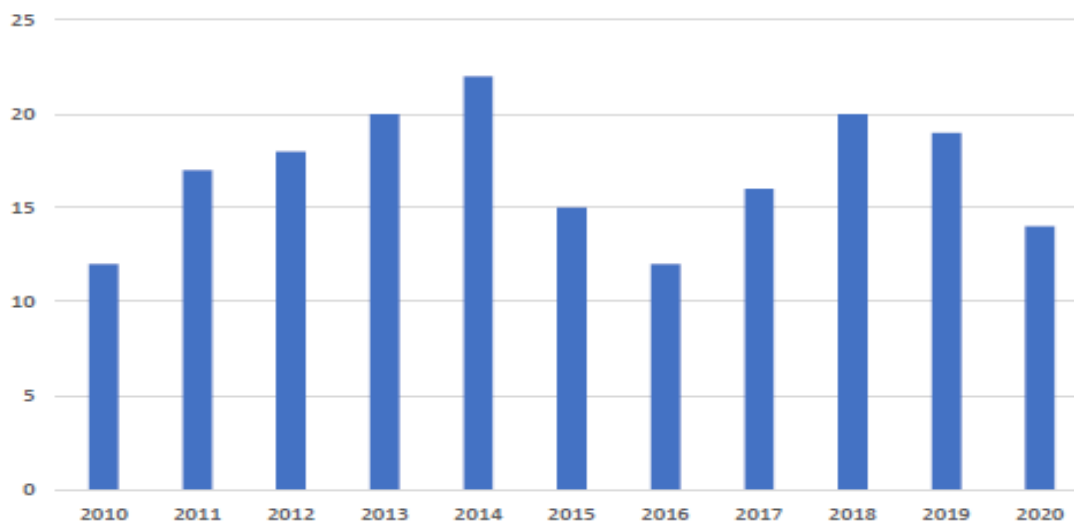
Chart 1. Evolution of Russian trade with APEC (in USD millions)



Sources: Data from Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, "StatsAPEC: Bilateral Linkages Database".

Accessed October 15, 2023, http://statistics.apec.org/index.php/bilateral_linkage/bld_result/37

Chart 2. Evolution of Russian trade with ASEAN (2010-2020) (in USD millions)



Sources: Data from United Nations Commodity Trade Statistics Database, "Free access to detailed global trade data". Accessed October 15, 2023, <https://comtradeplus.un.org/>

On the other hand, Moscow has a keen interest in promoting its arms sales in a region where military modernization efforts currently predominate. Considering the data provided by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Russia has been by far Southeast Asia's largest arms supplier over the past 20 years, with several states in the region heavily reliant on Russian weaponry (see Table 4.2). At the same



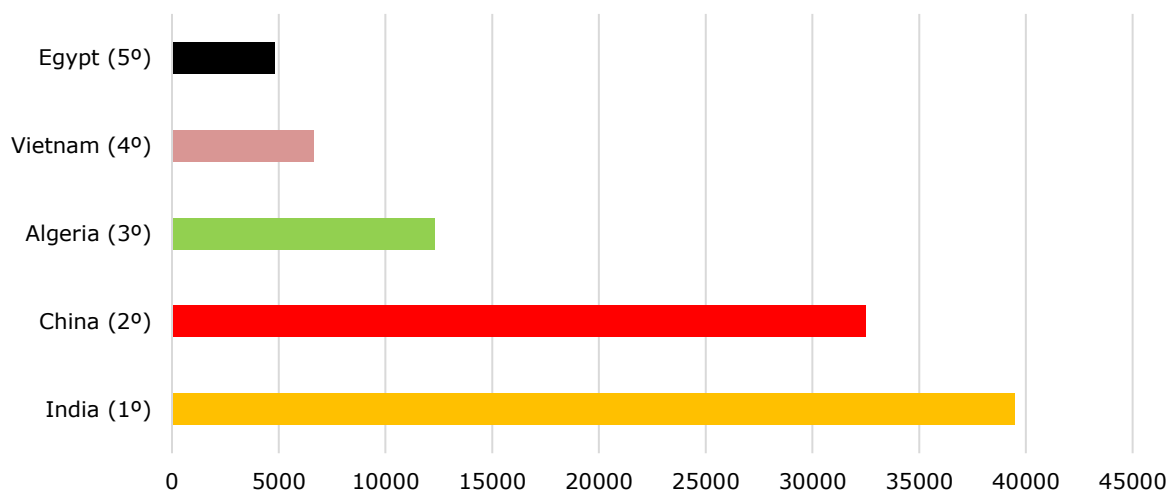
time, alongside Egypt and Algeria, three Asian countries rank among the top foreign customers of Russian weapons: India, China, and Vietnam (see Chart 4.3).

Table 2. Arms Imports from Russia by Southeast Asian Countries (2000-2022) (in USD millions)

	Total arm imports in millions (2000–2022)	Arm imports from Russia (2000–2022)	% imports from Russia
North Korea	93	93	100%
Vietnam	8168	6607	81%
China	40827	32487	80%
India	61304	39479	64%
Laos	269	130	48%
Myanmar	4529	1962	43%
Malaysia	4401	1274	29%
Indonesia	7906	1147	15%

Sources: Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database". Accessed October 15, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55163/SAFC1241>

Chart 3. Main Destinations of Russian Arms Exports in the 21st Century (2000-2022) (in USD millions)



Sources: Data from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database". Accessed October 15, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.55163/SAFC1241>

Nevertheless, the main opportunity for Russia to project itself as a major player in the region lies in the energy field. As one of the largest energy suppliers in the world, Moscow

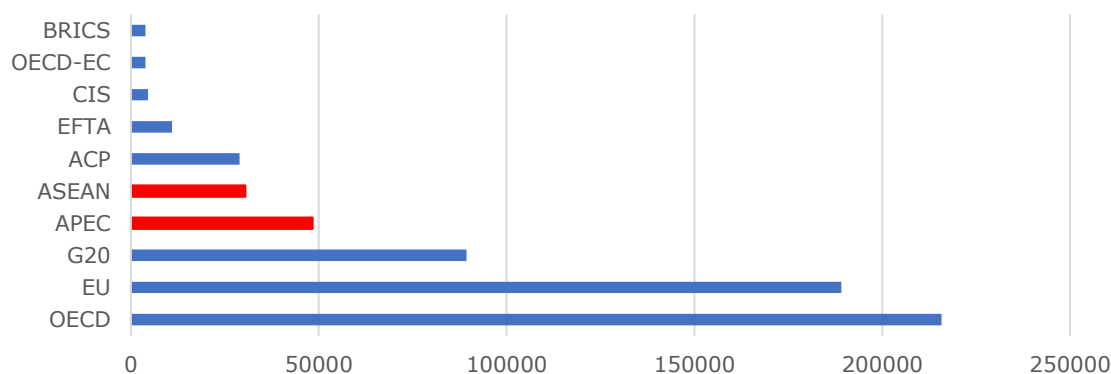


finds in the Asia-Pacific region a key market, especially following the measures adopted by the European Union (EU) to reduce its reliance on Russian oil and gas. In 2009, the *Energy Strategy of Russia for the period up to 2030* set the objective of increasing oil and gas exports to Southeast Asia to 25% and 20%, respectively (Ministry of Energy of the Russian Federation 2010). Currently, the goal set by the existing *Energy Strategy of the Russian Federation for the period up to 2035*, approved in 2020, has raised that target to 50% for both resources (Government of the Russian Federation 2020).

To achieve these aims, Russia has launched several projects such as the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean oil pipeline—which exports crude oil to the Asian Pacific markets of China, Japan, and Korea—, the Sakhalin I and II projects—to export oil and liquefied gas to a wide range of countries— and the Power of Siberia pipeline—which allows Russia to deliver gas to China—. Regarding the latter, although negotiations between Moscow and Beijing had taken place for years, it was not until 2014 that both parties signed the agreement for the construction of the pipeline. Moscow's willingness to meet Beijing's terms was largely due to the deterioration of its relations with the West, combined with other factors such as the shale gas revolution, the EU's Third Energy Package, and the emergence of liquefied natural gas producers (Ruiz González 2014, 16).

To develop these projects, major structural reforms are required in eastern parts of the Russian Federation. In 2013, Putin declared the modernization of the Russian Far East—a region bordering the Asia-Pacific whose underdevelopment poses a severe threat to Moscow—a national priority. Due to the urgency of the matter, attracting investment from Southeast Asian states is viewed as the fastest solution (Mankoff 2009, 67-71). For this reason, the Kremlin's main efforts have focused on promoting cooperation between the Russian Far East and the Asia-Pacific region, as it is shown by the continuous launch of "Development of the Far East and Baikal Region" plans and funding mechanisms, the creation of the Ministry for the Development of the Far East, and the annual celebration of the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok—a Russian city that hosted the APEC summit in 2012— (Korolev 2016, 53-63).

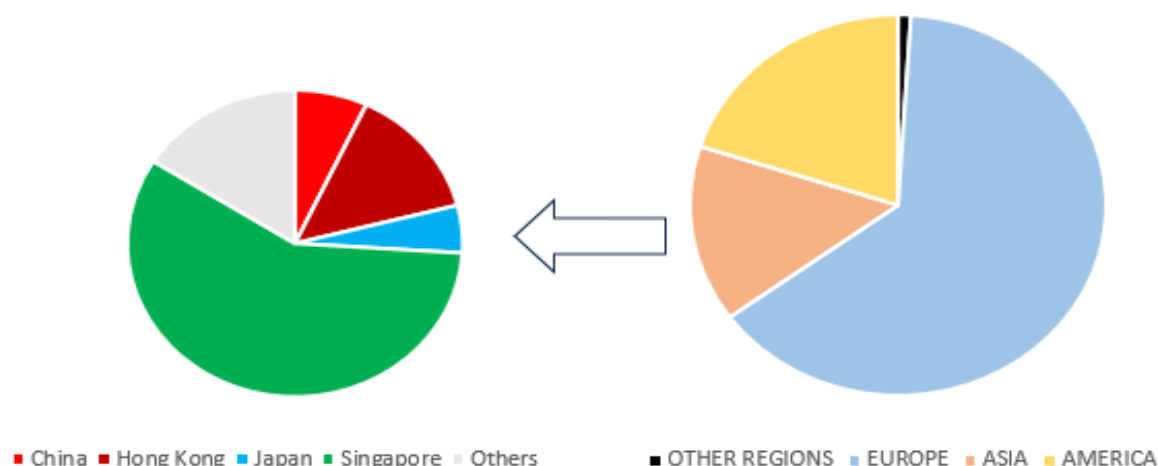
Chart 4. Foreign Direct Investment Flows into the Russian Federation by Regional and Global Institutions (2011-2021) (in USD millions)



Sources: Data from Bank of Russia, "Statistics: Flows by Geographical and Economic Areas", 2023. Accessed October 15, 2023, <https://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/>



Chart 5. Foreign Direct Investment Flows into the Russian Federation from Asia, by Country (2011-2021) (in USD millions)



Sources: Data from Bank of Russia, "Statistics: Flows by Geographical and Economic Areas", 2023. Accessed October 15, 2023, <https://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/>

5. Russian Security Concerns in the Asia-Pacific Region

In its early years as an independent state, the Russian Federation identified in the Asia-Pacific region some elements of relevance in terms of security: territorial disputes with Japan, the persistent presence of the United States in the area, the rise of China, the nuclearization of South Asia, India's intransigence on nuclear non-proliferation and arms control issues, and the importance of the region in the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking (Baranovsky 1999, 25-31) (Azizian 2007, 25-26). Many of these concerns remain relevant today.

Disputes over the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands—known in Japan as the Northern Territories—continue despite ongoing peace talks and dialogue mechanisms between Moscow and Tokyo. For the Kremlin, these territories have gained strategic significance due to shifting power dynamics in the Asia-Pacific region. Beyond Russia's distrust of one of the United States key regional allies, these enclaves secure Russian access to the Sea of Okhotsk and the Kamchatka Peninsula, where several military bases are located (Hamzah, Esmail and Abbas 2020, 294-99). The large-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine has further complicated prospects for any agreement.

As reflected in nearly every Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation to date, one of the permanent security concerns for the Kremlin in the region is the Korean issue. Beyond the importance of avoiding a conventional conflict and instability in the region, the situation provides Moscow with an opportunity to position itself as a constructive player in regional security-building and enhance its international standing (Lo 2019, 11-12). However, Russia's role as mediator is constrained by its lack of impartiality, owing to historical ties with Pyongyang dating back to the Soviet era, recently strengthened relations amid shared international isolation, and the Seoul-Washington alliance.



Another significant Russian security concern is Washington's presence in the region, particularly following the prioritization of the Indo-Pacific strategy in U.S. foreign policy as a response to China's rise as both a regional and global power. A clear illustration of this is Russia's rejection of the Indo-Pacific concept, described by Moscow as a Western containment strategy against China in an attempt to divide the Asia-Pacific region into opposing blocs reminiscent of those during the Cold War (Melvin 2021, 3-4). As pointed out by current Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in 2020 at the Raisina Dialogue:

A new concept was coined: Indo-Pacific strategies. Not Asia-Pacific but Indo-Pacific strategies. Initiated and promoted first of all by the United States, Australia, Japan, Republic of Korea. When we asked the initiators about the difference between Indo-Pacific strategies, and Asia-Pacific Regional Cooperation, they said, "Well, Indo-Pacific is more open, more democratic." If you look at it closely, I wouldn't go into the details, it is not at all the case. It's an attempt, I think, to reconfigure the existing structures in Asia-Pacific region. And to move from ASEAN-centred consensus seeking forms of interaction, to something which would be divisive" (Lavrov, 2020)

Consequently, the Indo-Pacific concept and the resulting Quad security format would not only divert Asia's future away from Eurasia—where Moscow plays a central role—but would also lead to a regional order centred around Washington and its allies, thereby weakening Russia's ambitions to pivot to a region where its influence would likely be marginal (Melvin 2021, 11-12).

Apart from safeguarding its interests and countering U.S. power, Russia's negative perception of the Indo-Pacific concept is also a result of its growing dependence on China. Indeed, Moscow's partnership with Beijing is crucial for its foreign policy as it enhances Russia's status on the global stage, making its Asia-Pacific policy almost an extension of its relationship with its neighbour. Consequently, Russia follows China's lead on key issues where Beijing's interests are at stake, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, the South China Sea dispute, and tensions surrounding Taiwan (Lo 2019, 6-7).

However, Sino-Russian relations have experienced alternating periods of harmony and conflict, including the Sino-Soviet split during the second half of the last century, which has left a legacy of mistrust between the two countries due to the wide common border and their geostrategic ambitions. In this respect, there are several Russian concerns like Chinese demographic pressure on the Russian Far East or the growing rivalry between both states in areas like the Arctic and Central Asia (Pardo de Santayana 2020, 159). Despite these challenges, both sides decided to set aside their differences to achieve their common goal of counterbalancing U.S. influence in the international arena. Thus, the strategic partnership between China and Russia would be better described as a momentary axis of convenience rather than a formal alliance.

For all these reasons, in 2010 the Ministry of Defence of the Russian Federation established the Joint Strategic Command *OSK East* —also known as the Eastern Military District (EMD)— by merging the Siberian Military District and the Far Eastern Military District with the Pacific Fleet. Following this decision, the number of large-scale military drills conducted by Moscow in the region has increased significantly (Weitz 2019, 917-19). To maintain strategic deterrence in the area, this permanent military presence is tasked with guarding the disputed Kuril Islands and securing the land borders critical to



the Kremlin's desired control over the Russian Far East (Rumer, Sokolsky and Vladicic 2020, 15-19).

Conclusion

In conclusion, a confluence of several factors has turned the Asia-Pacific region into a key vector within the multi-vector foreign policy of the Russian Federation. The Kremlin views the region as a strategic enclave as it offers a wide array of political, economic, and security-related advantages that have grown in significance as a result of various international developments.

At the political level, the Asia-Pacific region is extremely important for Russia in achieving its ultimate foreign policy objective: regaining a prominent role in the international system at the expense of the West in general, and the United States in particular. For this purpose, aware of its inability to confront US hegemony directly, Moscow considers the establishment of a multipolar world order essential to restoring Russian *derzhavnost*. The rise of Southeast Asian countries and the resulting reconfiguration of the international order present a clear opportunity for this objective to be pursued.

Furthermore, Russia's strategy in the region could be summed up by its rejection of the Indo-Pacific concept due to its perception as a Western containment strategy against China. Beijing is Moscow's main partner. However, historical mistrust between the two neighbours remains. Consequently, the Kremlin views the Asia-Pacific region as an opportunity to retain strategic flexibility. This flexibility is essential for Russia to promote itself as a major player, even as cooperation with China continues to be the foundation of its regional policy.

To achieve diversification, Russia faces several disadvantages such as its limited historical presence in the region in comparison with China or the United States. This is also aggravated by the hostility of the latter two countries towards Moscow's presence in the region and their capacity to influence local countries. Therefore, Russian participation in the Asia-Pacific multilateral framework could strengthen its position not only in a region that is widely accepted as the centre of geopolitical shift, but also on the international stage. While APEC and ASEAN may be more helpful for Moscow to develop ties with Asia-Pacific nations due to the importance of the economic factor, the SCO is also essential to promote its interests. Hence, a multilateral approach in Russian Foreign Policy towards the region is expected to continue.

At the economic level, beyond the importance of the region as a source of investment for the needed development of the Russian Far East, the Asia-Pacific region represents a major market at a time when it is essential for Moscow to diversify its customer base. Regarding arms trade, although the war in Ukraine has undermined Russia's reputation as a reliable supplier, Russia still retains opportunities to maintain key clients like Vietnam—a country where Western states are reluctant to sell arms and where China is not perceived as an acceptable supplier. It may also find opportunities with India, whose preference for strategic partnerships over formal alliances also offers Moscow a chance to achieve the diversification and try to counterbalance Beijing's influence. On the other hand, regarding energy trade, the significance of the Asia-Pacific has grown substantially



for Russia considering its increasing international isolation and the pressing need to find alternatives to Western markets. The region offers a viable solution to offset the decline in energy exports to Europe, particularly in oil and natural gas.

Regarding security and defence, aside from the importance of maintaining stability in one of its immediate neighbourhoods, the Asia-Pacific region is of particular interest to Russia due to territorial disputes with Japan over the Sakhalin and Kuril Islands, as well as the threat posed to Russian national security by the deteriorating situation in the Russian Far East. These concerns are further heightened by two major geopolitical dynamics: the rise of China and the persistent military presence of the United States in the region. Other minor but significant security concerns of the Russian Federation in the Asia-Pacific region that have persisted during these decades are the Korean issue and the South Asia's nuclear challenges, both of which have consistently influenced the formulation of Russia's defence policy in the region over the past decades.

To conclude, although Russia's interest in the region is the result of a gradual process, it is evident that this interest has intensified because of some developments at the international level. While at the economic level the importance of the region increased in the 2010s due to the effects of "The Great Recession" and the deterioration of Russian-Western relations as a result of the invasion of Ukraine in 2014, at the security level it has gained significant importance since the adoption of Indo-Pacific strategies and the fact that many powerful international actors like China and the U.S.A are increasing their presence in the region.

In a prospective analysis, considering Moscow's isolation because of the large-scale invasion of Ukraine started in 2022 and the enduring strategic weight of the Asia-Pacific, a region from which no global power can afford to be absent, it is foreseeable that Russian efforts towards the region will be increased in the short and medium term. The Kremlin's pivot to the East may thus be expected to continue, as part of a broader attempt to redefine Russia's role within an evolving international order.

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