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Russia's Turn to Asia: More or Less Room for Manoeuvre?

As the Ukrainian crisis unfolded and the West declared sanctions against Russia, the country's political elite returned to the rhetoric typical to its foreign policy tradition about Asia as a counterbalance to Europe and the U.S. Contrary to the previous stages, this time recognition of Russia's objective strategic and economic needs allowed for a genuine breakthrough in the relationships with the region that had increasingly become central to international politics and economics. However, Russia had first to deal with the long-standing problems of its "Eastern vector", the primary of which continued to be the dependence of its "Asian politics" on China. This article attempts to evaluate the correspondence between the goals proclaimed by Moscow's foreign policy makers in Asia and the actual results achieved throughout the research period of 2014 to 2016 inclusive, with particular focus on its fundamental objective to thus gain more room for manoeuvre on the global and regional levels of international politics.

Introduction

The double-headed eagle in the coat of arms of the Russian Federation (Russia) that looks in two opposite directions has often been associated with the world's largest country's specific historical, cultural and geo-strategic identity, defining it as a unique actor between the East and the West, Asia and Europe. Yet Russia has always been more involved with the latter space, while the rhetoric and practices of its interaction with its eastern neighbours were usually based on the motives derived from the western direction. This trend continued to characterize the so-called "multi-vectoral" foreign policy of post-Soviet Russia in both the late Boris Yeltsin's and Vladimir Putin's tenures. The "Asia card" was used in order to affect the U.S. and, particularly, (Western) Europe on security policy, energy, investment, and other issues.

Indeed, it could be observed that discursive application of the so-called "Eastern vector" in the rhetoric of Russia's leaders largely coincided with

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the trends of deterioration of its relationships with the West. The country's "turn to Asia" was particularly emphasized following the 2008 military conflict with Georgia; after Putin's controversial return to the presidential office in 2012; and, certainly, during the later stages of the Ukrainian conflict, which had itself developed from the initial Euromaidan protests in November 2013 to the "Revolution of Dignity" and, finally, transformed into one of the most serious international crises since the Cold War. Economic sanctions declared by the West after Russia's annexation of Crimea and initiation of military conflict in Donbas have provided Moscow with an exclusive incentive to perform a genuine breakthrough in its eastern vector, thus showing that it had solid alternatives to the European Union and the U.S. In other words, the Kremlin attempted if not to implement the principle of "strategic autonomy", then at least to create its illusion, based on the room for manoeuvre in foreign and security policies on the global (systemic) level of international politics befitting proper great powers.

However, the prospects of Russia's "turn to Asia" were intimately related with not only its attitude or the opposition of the Western transatlantic community, but also with the chronic problems of planning and implementation revealed by its earlier "eastern vector" foreign policies. Despite the significant debate about the country's actual belonging to Asia as well as continuing socio-economic crisis of its own eastern domains, the primary problem that has been developing throughout the last several decades is Russia's increasing bilateral power asymmetry and economic dependence on the People's Republic of China (China). Certainly, foreign policy priority to this country was determined by the objective factor of being Russia's largest neighbour, and persisted ever since the establishment of bilateral relations at the end of the 17th century. After the Cold War this challenge has become even more precarious, as China's rapidly expanding power increasingly diminished the role of the former superpower in Asia and even on a global scale, and ultimately could even create preconditions for revanchism based on the willingness of some Chinese to get back the territories that, according to them, had been lawlessly taken by the tsar in the 19th century.

According to one of the most renowned researchers of the Sino-Russian relationship, this same peculiarity has determined the main principles of Moscow's post-Soviet "eastern vector", namely its strategic diversity, the "congress of Asia", and multilateral engagement. The first principle aimed at closer relations with the key additional actors of the continent; the second pursued a vision of Russia's participation in a new forum dealing with regional secu-

rity issues based on the model of the Congress of Vienna (1815–1914); and the third sought its entrenchment in Asia through the membership and active participation in local international organizations.¹ Notably, all three principles were connected by the crucial goal of increasing Russian foreign and security policy's room for manoeuvre on the regional (sub-systemic) level, with particular emphasis on “strategic autonomy” from China.

Thus, the objective of this article is to evaluate the results of Russia's “turn to Asia” throughout the research period of 2014 to 2016 inclusive, with particular focus on the changes in its freedom to pursue truly independent foreign and security policies on global and regional levels of analysis. The research is based on the data publicly available in academic literature, think tank publications, and mass media. It is performed in three principal stages, consecutively dealing with (1) exclusively bilateral Russo–Chinese relations and Moscow's implementation of “strategic autonomy” through (2) Asia's secondary countries, and (3) the means of influence penetration (economic, military/security, and institutional). In other words, the paper successively evaluates Russia's dependence on China, its interaction with other significant countries in the continent's three subregions (Northeast, Southeast, and South Asia), and the actual methods of influence dissemination usually located on the sidelines of transnational relationships. The analysis is based on Russia's traditional conception of its eastern foreign policy vectors, meaning that five post-Soviet Central Asian republics (defined as within its sphere of influence) and Western Asia (the Middle East without Africa) are placed outside of the area examined.

1. Russo–Chinese Strategic Partnership

Notwithstanding both partners' continuous rhetoric about the absolutely equal and balanced nature of their bilateral relationship, even before the research period of this paper one could envisage unmistakable examples of Russia's growing dependence on China, especially in the sphere of economics. Indeed, even the constantly growing exports of Russian natural resources and substantial deliveries of weaponry to the Asian giant had not prevented the emergence of trade imbalance in 2007,² which has only increased since that time. China has rapidly emerged as Russia's largest trade partner, although

¹ Lo B., *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*. London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2008, p. 120–127.

² Лукин А. В., «Российско–китайские отношения: не ослаблять усилий.» *Международная жизнь*, 11, 2009, p. 4.

Russia never climbed from the bottom of China's top-10 list. Nevertheless, dynamic development of bilateral interaction is undoubtedly facilitated by the fact that both countries have a similar attitude towards many crucial problems of global politics. Although this trait has been yet again emphasized in Russia's latest edition of its Foreign Policy Concept (2016), China remains consistent in affirming that both partners are indeed close, but not to the point of being genuine military allies. It seems that Beijing is perfectly aware that it is precisely the People's Republic that dominates in this strategic partnership, and that this trend would only strengthen with time. Yet, in the meantime, characteristic mistrust of each other is being sidelined by other, more pressing, motives.

Russia was hard hit by the global financial and economic crisis, the repercussions of which, besides other things, had induced it to finally settle the most serious bilateral energy issue when Moscow agreed to build a spur to China from its Eastern Siberia–Pacific Ocean oil pipeline. Notably, it was agreed upon in exchange of \$25 billion worth of credit to the Rosneft and Transneft state-owned corporations, which had been previously denied by the crisis-affected Western and Japanese financial institutions.³ As the Russo-Western relations began to deteriorate at the end of 2011, Moscow's negotiations with Beijing suddenly intensified, and several new agreements had been reached in 2013: Rosneft accepted to supply an additional 16 million metric tons of oil per year to the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) over the next 25 years, while the China Development Bank would make loans totalling some \$2 billion to the Russian energy company; Gazprom, the world's largest supplier of natural gas, pledged to provide this same Chinese company with 38 billion cubic meters of gas per year for a period of 30 years; and finally, Russia's largest private natural gas company, Novatek, sold CNPC a 20 per cent equity stake in its liquefied natural gas (LNG) development project in the Yamal peninsula.⁴ These agreements were especially important considering that before that Moscow had been relatively consistent in pursuing the policy of "anyone but the Chinese" in energy exploration and development.⁵

However, the real breakthrough in Sino-Russian economic relations came in May 2014, that is during this article's research period and also coinciding with the apogee of the Ukrainian crisis. It was Putin's visit to Shanghai

³ Lo B., *Russia and the New World Disorder*. London & Washington, D.C.: Chatham House & Brookings Institution Press, 2015, p. 144-145.

⁴ Hyodo S., Akimoto S., Yamazoe H., "Russia: Japan and Russia Hold First-ever "Two-Plus-Two" Meeting of Foreign and Defense Ministers." In *East Asian Strategic Review 2014*. Tokyo: The Japan Times, 2014, p. 224-225.

⁵ Lo, (3 footnote) p. 147.

back then which led to the so-called “deal of the century”, settling \$400 billion worth of deliveries of Russian natural gas to China. Significantly, such a dramatic characterization of the agreement should be objectively associated with not only the striking scope of it, but also with the fact that hard negotiations on this issue had proceeded almost since the beginning of the millennium. Thus, China is indeed becoming a purchaser of Russian natural gas, which had almost wholly been exported to Europe before 2014. The same meeting in May saw a pompous declaration of a new stage of comprehensive partnership and strategic cooperation between the two countries. According to Russian scholars, the Ukrainian crisis forced Russia to remove three key barriers to cooperation with China, namely suspicions on Beijing’s actions in post-Soviet Central Asia; unofficial ban on selling the most advanced weaponry to China; and unwillingness to allow Chinese investments in its principal resource extraction and infrastructure projects.⁶ In the latter case, by the end of 2015, CNPC agreed to support the Yamal LNG development project with an additional €700 million, while China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec) acquired a 10% stake in Russia’s largest equivalent company, Sibur, and several agreements were signed with local metallurgy and energy giants, Norilsk Nickel and En+ Group.⁷

It would be especially hard to overestimate the importance of the decision to terminate the unofficial ban on selling the most advanced weaponry to China. In 2015 Russia declared the end of negotiations to deliver the latest model of the S-400 Triumph air defence missile complex and twenty-four Su-35 fighter jets.⁸ Notably, both purchases would allow Beijing to seriously upgrade the capabilities of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) with all resulting consequences for East Asia’s security. China would become the first country to get these advanced defence systems. To sum up, in the case of continuing Western sanctions, Beijing would almost certainly turn into Moscow’s largest trade partner, and the main source of its foreign investments.⁹ It is getting too hard for Russia to resist Chinese capital inflows into regions and sectors traditionally defined as strategic, such as energy, extraction of minerals, and the defence industry. Tellingly, the country’s Far East has already been increasingly used as

⁶ Gabuev A., “Friends with Benefits? Russian–Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis.” Moscow: Carnegie Moscow Center, 2016, p. 4.

⁷ Lukin A., “Russia’s Pivot to Asia: Myth or Reality?” *Strategic Analysis*, 40 (6), 2016, p. 583.

⁸ Yamazoe H., Akimoto S., Hyodo S., “Russia: Focus of Strategic Engagement Shifts from Ukraine to Syria.” In *East Asian Strategic Review 2016*. Tokyo: The Japan Times, p. 225.

⁹ Blank S. J., Kim Y., “Does Russo–Chinese Partnership Threaten America’s Interests in Asia?” *Orbis*, Winter 2016, p. 114.

an example of how to secure crucial natural resources without direct conquest of territory.¹⁰ All of these insights allow one to conclude that throughout the research period exclusively bilateral Moscow's dependence on Beijing has indeed expanded.

2. Room for Manoeuvre through Asia's Secondary States

Despite Russia's recent aggressive turn in its foreign policies in the western (European) and, somewhat later, southwestern (the Middle Eastern) directions, there has been a fair share of proper premises for larger room for manoeuvre on the global scale thanks to Asian actors. This can be clearly seen from the voting patterns of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 68/262 that defended Ukraine's territorial integrity. Although Washington's traditional allies in Northeast Asia (Japan and South Korea) as well as important, generally pro-American, Southeast Asian states (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, the Philippines, and Singapore) supported this document, the rest of the continent, except for the dwarf states of Bhutan and the Maldives, abstained, while two countries (Laos and East Timor) were not present during the vote, and one (North Korea) rejected it. The resolution was counterattacked by Moscow's allegations that the states supportive of it had faced U.S. pressure, thus not only questioning the vote's results, but also leaving an opportunity for a future dialogue with the actors that endorsed it. In Asia, by far the most significant was certainly Tokyo.

Russia's goal of "strategic autonomy" in its eastern foreign policy direction has been traditionally associated with technologically and economically advanced Northeast Asian actors, especially Japan. However, since Dmitry Medvedev had become the Kremlin's first (nominal) master to visit the disputed Southern Kurils (Northern Territories) in autumn 2010, the bilateral relationship between Moscow and Tokyo suffered the most serious decline since the end of the Cold War. Yet after Putin's and Shinzo Abe's return to their respective posts as heads of state, a new stage of amelioration began. In April 2013 the latter politician became Japan's first prime minister to visit Russia in 10 years. The bilateral summit meeting led to the decision to establish a regular dialogue between their defence and foreign ministers ("two plus two"). The

¹⁰Norris W. J., *Chinese Economic Statecraft: Commercial Actors, Grand Strategy, and State Control*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2016, p. 64.

breakthrough in personal diplomacy was especially apparent, judging from the fact that throughout these several years Abe met more times with Putin than with the U.S. president Barack Obama, and was the only truly influential leader of the liberal democratic part of the world to visit the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games.

However, the deepening Ukrainian crisis and, ultimately, the annexation of Crimea forced Japan to reluctantly adhere to sanctions against Russia. Although Japan had been unsuccessfully testing the opinion of its G7 partners about Moscow's possible participation in the May 2016 summit meeting of the forum held there, and Abe even visited the Kremlin just before the start of it, the damage to bilateral relations had already been made. Nonetheless, Russia should also be blamed for this decline. Judging from authoritative reviews of the Japanese National Institute for Defense Studies, Tokyo has come to a general understanding that Putin's and Medvedev's divergent actions related to the territorial dispute is none other than a negotiation tactics creating an effect of "carrots and sticks". Contrary to the image of the president willing to solve this fundamental issue, throughout these last several years Russia has proceeded with further militarization of the disputed islands and consistently breached Japan's airspace with its military aircrafts.¹¹

Nevertheless, Tokyo's diligent preparation for a bilateral summit meeting in mid-December 2016 has shown that Abe indeed attempted to exploit the recent opportunity to reach a breakthrough as the sole political leader of G7 to allegedly preserve good relations with Putin. Yet Japan's expectations on both key issues of territorial dispute and peace treaty have not materialized. To the contrary, Putin's behaviour just before and during the meeting, from the viewpoint of the highly contextual Japanese culture, could be qualified as unequivocally humiliating. Indeed, just before the first visit of Russia's head of state to Japan in many years, additional weaponry had been deployed in the disputed islands, and Putin himself simply denied the sheer existence of a territorial dispute to Japanese journalists visiting his residence in Moscow. Later he refused to accept a dog as Abe's deeply symbolic gift, and finally, following his notorious tactical tradition, the Russian president left the Japanese premier waiting for him for two hours without any prior notification or particular official reason in Abe's own native town, and all of this happening while being struck by rain in front of many TV cameras. Despite this humiliating experience, the Japanese supported collective economic agreements worth some \$2.5 billion, but such an amount was much smaller than the one the Russians were

¹¹ Yamazoe, Akimoto, Hyodo, (8 footnote) p. 225–243.

hoping for.¹² Hence, it can be reasonably assessed that a genuine breakthrough in a bilateral relationship failed to materialize by the end of 2016.

In the case of the Korean peninsula, Moscow attempted to deepen economic cooperation with the South, and profit from Kim Jong-un's alleged disagreements with Beijing in the North. In order to acquire new levers of influence, Russia wrote off almost fully \$10 billion of Pyongyang's debt in 2014 in exchange for its support for a potential gas pipeline and a railway leading to the South.¹³ In this case the Kremlin's breakthrough had been associated with preparations for the youngest Kim's first visit abroad as a head of state, commemorating the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War organized by Moscow. Yet preoccupied by consolidation of his power at home, the North Korean leader did not show up at the Red Square. Moreover, after Pyongyang's declaration of the "hydrogen bomb" test in the beginning of 2016, the Kremlin had to once again reassess its approach and reacted to this outburst with unusual harshness. As regional tensions deteriorated further, bilateral cooperation came to a new standstill. Finally, the Northern provocations, leadership changes in the South, and the Ukrainian crisis have stalled Moscow's rapprochement with Seoul, which had earlier led to a bilateral visa-free travel regime.¹⁴ Although South Korea became the only formal U.S. ally that refused to apply sanctions against Russia, basing their decision on the country's significance in the relationships with Pyongyang,¹⁵ the local political crisis that struck the country in autumn 2016 has further slowed down its foreign policies. All of these conditions have obviously prevented the resurgence of the Six-Party talks on the North Korean nuclear weapons programme, long held as a prototype of the "congress of Asia" by Russia, as well as implementation of its planned transport and energy infrastructure projects on the peninsula.

If in Northeast Asia Russia failed to decrease its deeply entrenched dependence on China, then in South Asia, to the contrary, unusual indications recently emerged of questioning the traditional friendship with the primary local power, India. The objective of larger diversity of its Asian foreign policy vector led Moscow as far as aborting the arms embargo to its strategic partner's

¹² Topaloff L. K., "How Putin Outplayed Abe in Japan." *The Diplomat*, December 23, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/12/how-putin-outplayed-abe-in-japan/> (viewed on December 26, 2016).

¹³ Tsygankov A. P., *Russia's Foreign Policy: Change and Continuity in National Identity*. 4th edition. Lanham & London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 249.

¹⁴ Ramani S., "Russia, Japan, and North Korea's Nuclear Test." *The Diplomat*, January 25, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/russia-japan-and-north-koreas-nuclear-test/> (viewed on September 16, 2016).

¹⁵ Charap S. et al., *The US and Russia in the Asia-Pacific*. International Institute for Strategic Studies & Primakov Institute of World Economy and International Relations, 2016, p. 12.

principal competitor, Pakistan, in 2014. Since then the Russians have agreed to sell Islamabad four Mi-35M attack helicopters, approved its admission into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization along with India, and even conducted their first bilateral military exercises in Pakistan's mountainous areas in September and October 2016, precisely when New Delhi and Islamabad were quarrelling in Kashmir and the Indian soldiers were conducting their exercises in Russia. By the end of the research period, the Kremlin had softened its traditionally hostile rhetoric towards the Afghani Taliban and in December 2016 even hosted a trilateral meeting with representatives of Beijing and Kabul, dedicated to the topic of Afghanistan's future. The meeting has caused astonishment in New Delhi due to its exclusion from discussion on such an important and sensitive question.¹⁶

In the sphere of economics Moscow pledged to build a \$2 billion natural gas pipeline connecting Pakistan's largest cities of Karachi and Lahore that would potentially deliver this resource to around a third of the country's population.¹⁷ Russia also decided to support the so-called China–Pakistan Economic Corridor, widely seen as the flagship project of Beijing's Belt and Road (or the One Belt, One Road) Initiative, which, besides other things, undermines Moscow's traditional logistical advantages in Eurasia, and is being qualified by New Delhi as the crucial component of India's strategic encirclement by the Chinese. Quite naturally all these trends have caused a fair share of concern in India, which had already been shocked by the end of its traditional preferential position in the sales of Russian advanced weaponry. Moscow attempted to counterbalance these policies in October 2016, when several new deals were struck, ranging from deliveries of S-400 Triumph air defence systems to construction of new nuclear reactors in India. However Indians, in contrast to several decades before, today have other alternatives for cooperation in many sectors, which became apparent from the agreement with France that was reached in the end of September 2016 to supply them with Dassault Rafale fighter jets. Thus, Russia has to spare no efforts if it really wants to prevail in a competition for the access to today's largest market for weaponry in the world.

Finally, throughout the research period Moscow intensified its foreign policy in Southeast Asia, especially in Vietnam, which is traditionally seen as its gate to the region. Both countries signed an agreement to facilitate the

¹⁶ Pant H. V., "A Russian Volte Face on South Asia." *The Diplomat*, January 23, 2017,

<http://thediplomat.com/2017/01/a-russian-volte-face-on-south-asia/> (viewed on January 24, 2017).

¹⁷ Frolovskiy D., "What's behind Russia's Rapprochement with Pakistan?" *The Diplomat*, May 14, 2016,

<http://thediplomat.com/2016/05/whats-behind-russias-rapprochement-with-pakistan/> (viewed on September 16, 2016).

access of Russia's naval and air forces to the Cam Ranh Base in August 2014. Furthermore, the Vietnamese continue to acquire about 90% of their weaponry from their strategic partner, in particular, crucial naval equipment.¹⁸ Both countries witnessed a free trade agreement between Hanoi and the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union coming into force on the 5th of October 2016.¹⁹ However, Vietnam quickly denied the rumours that had surfaced in the Russian mass media about the establishment of their full-fledged naval base in Cam Ranh. Similar to the case of India, Moscow's traditional advantages in arms deliveries here are being increasingly challenged by Washington, which terminated its arms embargo on Hanoi completely at the end of spring 2016. Lastly, despite its emphatic neutrality in a complex web of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, Moscow prioritizes Beijing's interests, which naturally limits its influence in Vietnam and many other states of the region. Indeed, Russia hesitates to invest in offshore hydrocarbon exploration projects under Hanoi's *de facto* territorial control and in September 2016 even conducted joint exercises with the PLA Navy in the South China Sea, thus sending symbolic negative signals to other disputants.²⁰ Hence, the priority reserved for Beijing is evident in this specific case as well.

3. Room for Manoeuvre through Influence Penetration

Russia probably possesses the world's largest natural riches, thus having much to offer to the resource hungry markets of the most dynamic continent on the planet in return for their capital and technologies. However, in the latter case the Asian countries arguably have not yet acquired the capacities of hydrocarbon extraction in extreme conditions, which are imperative to the Russians. The hosting of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum in Vladivostok in 2012, then projected as the symbol of the country's "return" to the continent, is widely seen as a missed opportunity. Instead of offering a constructive vision of regional development, Moscow seemed to be more pre-occupied with the search for funds for its domestic infrastructural projects. As the deterioration of the initially imposing architectural objects built for the fo-

¹⁸ Kuhrt N., "Russia and Asia-Pacific: Diversification or Sinocentrism?" In David Cadier and Margot Light (eds.), *Russia's Foreign Policy: Ideas, Domestic Politics and External Relations*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, p. 185.

¹⁹ Putz C., "Eurasian Economic Union's First External FTA to Come Into Force." *The Diplomat*, September 21, 2016, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/09/eurasian-economic-unions-first-external-fta-to-come-into-force/> (viewed on 25 September 2016).

²⁰ Blank, Kim, (9 footnote) p. 124.

rum became apparent only several years later, Russia's chronic problems in this sphere had yet again been highlighted. Also telling is the fact that Putin did not find time to visit the APEC and the East Asia Summit (EAS) meetings in 2015. He also failed to show up during the first Far Eastern Economic Forum held that same year in Vladivostok. Instead, for the sake of public relations he spent that time with the friendly American actor Steven Seagal.²¹ Russia's leader did not repeat the same mistake the following year, but economic benefits of the second forum remain uncertain despite loud declarations.

To sum up, Moscow's economic penetration into Asia, especially its eastern part, continues to be dependent on largely unsuccessfully pursued modernization of its Siberian and Far Eastern domains, as well as diversification of its energy deliveries towards the east. However, the crucial goal of decreasing reliance on China failed to materialize throughout the research period in both of these cases. Moreover, Beijing's own simultaneously developed infrastructural projects of the Belt and Road Initiative undermine both visions of Russia as the transit centre between Asia and Europe. Indeed, the Northern Shipping Route and the Russian "Iron Silk Road" through the Trans-Siberian Railway seem neither commercially attractive nor unilaterally viable in comparison with the Chinese alternative rapidly developed in Central Asia.

Yet Russia's attempts to project its influence do not confine themselves to the north-eastern part of the continent in question. For example, in 2014 Moscow applied for observer status in the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), but as of the beginning of 2017 this request has not been satisfied. Moreover, in May 2016 Russia hosted the first summit with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Sochi, marking the 20th anniversary of their bilateral dialogue.²² Nevertheless, Moscow's penetration into this distant region is mainly characterized by deliveries of weaponry and interaction in the energy sector. Indeed, throughout the last several years Russia distinguished itself by deals for delivery of submarines (Vietnam and Indonesia), surface ships (Vietnam), fighter jets (Vietnam and Indonesia), attack helicopters (Indonesia), and tanks (Thailand). Notably, in the latter case Moscow profited from the post-coup military junta's worsened relationships with its traditional security partner – Washington.²³ Similarly intriguing is the Phi-

²¹ Stent A., "Russia, China, and the West after Crimea." *2015–16 Paper Series No. 8*. Washington, D.C.: Transatlantic Academy, 2016, p. 12–13.

²² Trenin D., "Russia's Asia Strategy: Bolstering the Eagle's Eastern Wing." *Russie.Nei.Visions*, No. 94, 2016, p. 17.

²³ Dave B., "Russia's Asia Pivot: Engaging the Russian Far East, China and Southeast Asia." *RSIS Working Paper No. 297*, 2016, p. 14.

Philippines' new administration's verbal reverence to Russia, which allows one to contemplate the possibility that Manila could indeed follow Hanoi's example of interacting with Moscow in the security sphere, up to the point which would lie within limits of Beijing's open discontent and Washington's traditional role there. The hostility of the new administration in the White House towards the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) in principle could provide the Kremlin with a stronger incentive to develop its economic integration with East Asia, but in this case, as in many others, its capabilities simply can not match China's, which has already started developing its own alternatives.

Conclusions

The relatively short research period of this article, 2014 through the end of 2016, was characterized by many events that allow us to reach several conclusions about the results of Russia's "turn to Asia". First, its "eastern vector" foreign policies have indeed been more proactive, and in many cases corresponded to the temporal range of the analysis. This activity was sufficient to create an impression at the global level, that Moscow's "turn to Asia" proceeded successfully. However, a closer look at its particular bilateral relationships and means of influence penetration reveals that Russia has failed to gain more room for manoeuvre on a strictly regional (sub-systemic) level of Asia. In fact, its bilateral dependence on China has only increased throughout these three years. Meanwhile, its deeper interaction with new (Pakistan) or long forgotten (Vietnam) Asian partners could not, in principle, substitute for the relationships with politically, economically, and militarily more powerful actors, India and Japan in particular. In all of these cases Russia is forced to carefully balance between the entrenched axes of hostility (China–Japan, China–Vietnam, China–India, India–Pakistan) in any pair eventually choosing a more powerful (former) actor. Finally, the search for room for manoeuvre through its own economic, military, and security, as well as institutional influence, has also failed to produce concrete results, beyond symbolism and rhetoric. It also, quite often, was damaged by China's not necessarily malign actions.

However, this kind of "turn" proved to be sufficient for Russia to largely preserve wider room for manoeuvre in its foreign and security policies on the global (systemic) scale, especially in its "New Cold War" with the West. In other words, Moscow's "eastern vector" to Asia, or to China to be more precise, has indeed untied its hands in the short term, which, according to the country's political elite, should prove to be enough to implement its strategic

vision in Ukraine and Syria. Yet in the middle and, particularly, the long term period, this “turn” could prove to be extremely costly, especially considering that the country’s projects of modernization of its Asian landmass continue to flounder, neighbouring China’s influence is ever increasing east of the Urals, while the opportunity to interact with the U.S. in the Asia-Pacific, where quite many interests are actually shared by the two countries, seemed to be sacrificed on the altar of quasi-existential confrontation in the western and southern “vectors”, at least until Donald Trump’s election to the American presidency. Beijing, in the meantime, could enjoy a new period of relative “strategic respite” from Washington’s extraordinary attention, implement its long-cherished plans in Moscow’s domains, and carefully study the dynamics of a serious international crisis, that had emerged without any Chinese participation, but which would allow the People’s Republic to prepare for similar scenarios in the future. The Kremlin is left with expectations that in these scenarios Russia would not play the sacrificial role, and that the U.S. elections would indeed prove the validity of its short-term strategy.

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