

# The Future of ASEAN-RUSSIA Relations

## Renovated commitment will not traduce in priority enhancement

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## THE FUTURE OF ASEAN-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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During the 4<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-Russia Summit<sup>1</sup> held via videoconference on the 28<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, the commitment and the adoption of a new Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) aimed at further solidifying relations between the Russian Federation and the Southeast Asian Nations have been reaffirmed. (SUMMIT ASEAN - RUSSIA 2021a)

Yet, despite Vladimir Putin's assertion of relations-deepening desire, it is highly doubtful that the Southeast Asian region will become a significant Russian area of interest in the Asia-Pacific in the short-medium term.

The Russian Federation's interest in Southeast Asia concretely started to manifest itself with the 1<sup>st</sup> ASEAN-Russia Summit in the 2000s<sup>2</sup>, concomitantly to the Color Revolutions and the emergence of anti-Western rhetoric among the Russian elite. The ensuing 2008 Georgian War, 2010 Arab Spring, 2011-2012 domestic democratic protests during the Parliamentary and Presidential elections, and 2013 Ukraine Crisis and the Crimean Peninsula incorporation with the subsequent Western financial and economic sanctions imposition further fortified the already existing sentiment. As a result, 2014 marked a turning point in the Russian foreign policy agenda, with an evident strategic partnership reorientation towards Asia. The 2016 Commemorative ASEAN-Russia Summit held in Sochi provided confirmation of the pivot-shifting, advocating what would have been accomplished in Singapore in 2018: the transition from an ASEAN-Russia

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<sup>1</sup> During the 4<sup>th</sup> ASEAN-Russia Summit, the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of ASEAN-Russia Relations was commemorated through, a partnership that has been reconfirmed on the basis of guiding principles enshrined in the ASEAN Charter, the UN Charter the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia (TAC), the EAS Declaration on the Principles for Mutually Beneficial Relations (Bali Principles) and universally recognised principles of international law. (ASEAN-Russia Summit 2021)

<sup>2</sup> ASEAN-Russia dialogue partnership emerged in the 1970s but formally launched in 1991 when Russian representatives paid a visit to the Malaysian Government during an ASEAN Ministerial Meeting. The first ASEAN-Russia Summit took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December 2005. For an in-depth analysis, see "ИСТОРИЯ ДИАЛОГОВОГО ПАРТНЁРСТВА РОССИИ И АСЕАН" СУММИТ РОССИЯ – АСЕАН. Available from: [http://russia-asean20.ru/russia\\_asean/20160309/7163.html](http://russia-asean20.ru/russia_asean/20160309/7163.html)

“Dialogue Partnership” towards a “Strategic Partnership for Mutual Benefit.” (SUMMIT ASEAN - RUSSIA 2021b)

An increment of political, security and economic cooperation has hence been observed. The Russian Federation, indeed, retains positive political relations of mutual cooperation with ASEAN Nations - specifically Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar - in regional security, peace, and stability maintenance, with particular attention to crime, drug trafficking, and transnational terrorist non-state-actors opposition.

Economic collaboration plays a crucial role as well. With the expressed regional need for ties diversification and Chinese dependency overcoming, the Russian Federation has discovered fertile ground for strategic manoeuvring in order to advance national objectives. The numerous signed economic, commercial, and investment agreements in energy – oil and gas, nuclear energy, and renewable energy sources coordination –, transportation, and defence sectors, in fact, provide the Russian Federation with new markets and economic and financial resources opportunities functional to the consolidation and modernisation of the domestic economic system, the sustenance of the geopolitical ambitions beyond national borders, and the offsetting of the consequently-imposed-sanctions frozen Western capitals, demonstrating the West's failed attempts to marginalise and isolate the Russian Federation from the broader international arena.

Closer examination reveals the defence sector and the supply of military equipment to be the most flourishing sectors developed between the Russian Federation and the ASEAN Nations in the last two decades. The bilateral military relations strengthening pick reached with Myanmar after the February 2021 coup d'état and the recent agreement on the supply of the UAV Orlan-10E Surveillance Drones for tactical reconnaissance (Bisht 2021): official Russia's entering in the international UAV market are evidence of the defence industry cruciality.

Such prominence is primarily derived from the consistent Russian advantage in the armament field thanks to its pragmatic no-strings-attached policy on the export of advanced military equipment and the non-imposition of political conditionalities – including democratic reforms and human rights protection - in signing economic and trade agreements. (Al Saud 2018) As a result, the Russian Federation has emerged as a valuable alternative to the United States and even China with its growing economic influence expansion, permitting ASEAN Nations to increase their internal military capability to advance geopolitical objectives and simultaneously their external balancing, enabling a power counterbalancing behaviour. However, whilst military cooperation is gaining momentum, and the Russian Federation can be considered one of the leading arms suppliers in the Southeast Asian market, second only to China, the country, unlike other major regional powers including China, India, and Japan, is not sufficiently engaged in the region to play a central role: the Russian Federation is not a real player, security guarantor or balancer of major regional forces.

Such peripheral role finds confutation, not in the country's inability of acting but in its will, inasmuch as the Southeast Asian region does not currently represent a top priority in the Russian foreign policy agenda.

Firstly, the current international contingencies tied with the breakout of the Covid-19 pandemic crisis in March 2020 has forced the international community to enforce mobility restrictions and containment measures in order to prevent and limit the spread of the virus, resulting in domestic economic damage, partially affecting State's agency beyond national borders. National resources have been, thereby, concentrated on domestic policies and on those foreign policies considered essential for self-preservation and power position maintenance.

Secondly, as for the latter, from a geographical perspective, Southeast Asia does not constitute an area of Russian national security interest compared to other geographic regions with immediate locational proximity, such as the Middle Eastern or Central Asian quadrant. The United States' recent withdrawal from Afghanistan in September 2021 and the Taliban's resultant power takeover have produced new security issues for Russia, necessitating a prompt response. Afghanistan's vicinity to the Central Asian buffer States directly bordering the Russian Federation, the new Islamic Emirate's possible exploitation of the main national revenue source - opiate production and trafficking - to alleviate Afghanistan's current economic crisis, as well as the proliferation of international terrorism and the exploitation of the country's territory as a launching pad by extremist groups such as ISIS-K to expand their footprint internationally, became current Russian primary concerns. Even more importantly because the Central Asian republics' vulnerability and the near-total lack of customs barriers at their borders with Russian territory could facilitate potential terror attacks on the latter's territory; a scenario that the Russian Federation is attempting to avert, given the past experiences of the two Chechen Wars and the radicalisation difficulties in the North Caucasus. The key position of the Russian Federation as a security guarantor and power broker in the Central Asian region, as well as its influence in the broader Eurasia, are also at stake.

Finally, even though the Southeast Asian region were a Russian policy agenda priority, the Russian Federation would not jeopardise its partnership with China to expand the country's influence in the area.

Indeed, when the Russo pivot began to move to the Far East after the 2014 Western sanctions, the Russian Federation focused more precisely on the Northeast Asian region. Although the Russo-Chinese relations were initially more of a friendship connection, over time, they have evolved into a semi-alliance, with the two countries being independent when necessary but never competing. China quickly established itself as a valuable partner for Moscow, providing capital, technology, and a thriving market for the manufacture of raw materials and food products, as well as the export of energy resources. Much more critically, their ideological parallels, building positive relationships with a variety of regional powers to achieve national interests and supporting the Westphalian state model further strengthened the reciprocal connection. (Caselli 2020)

China is highly critical for the Russian Federation, from a commercial and strategic point of view. In commercial terms, China is one of the Russian Federation's main oil customers, oil accounting for approximately 68% of total Russian exports. In strategic terms, given the possibility of future action coordination between the two powers for peace and stability maintenance in Afghanistan and Central Asia, security cooperation becomes relevant. In addition, China and the Russian Federation support the multipolar transition and the indirect limiting of the United States' unipolar ambition considered dangerous for the belligerent potential it can produce due to its non-congruence to multi-pole tendencies of the contemporary international system.

Concisely, the Russian Federation will try to not antagonise China in Southeast Asia, nor will deprioritise its partnership so as to advance national geopolitical ambitions in the area at the expense of the latter. Confirmation is the deployment of mainly a bilateral strategy outside the ASEAN umbrella when dealing with regional Nations and the neutral stance over the South China Sea dispute. Vladimir Putin, indeed, prefers to maintain a pragmatic stance in relation to regional tensions, retaining a neutral arbiter role in an attempt to respect the territorial integrity, sovereignty, and non-interference by external actors in a State's internal affairs.

ASEAN-Russia relations are, thereby, to a certain extent, dependent on Sino-Russian interactions. And because of the above-mentioned "limitations", whose Southeast Asian Nations are fully aware of, priority enhancement and relations deepening are of little benefit for the parties: the reason for ASEAN-Russia relations not having reached their full potential yet and most probably will not even in the immediate future.

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