

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF THE INDO-PACIFIC IN RUSSIA'S “TURN TO THE EAST”

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Abstract

Rejecting the constructs “Indo-Pacific” and the “Quad,” Russians use their own label, “Greater Eurasia” to characterize the architecture gaining ascendancy in Asia. They insist that this is consistent with China’s “Belt and Road Initiative.”

Yet, its clear purpose is to reject a China-centered region, showcasing the role of India and ASEAN in multipolar regionalism. Recent tensions between China and India and India’s embrace of the “Indo-Pacific” label complicate the Russian narrative.

The Ukraine war has driven Russia closer to China, but hesitancy in India and some Southeast Asian states to criticize it leaves room for Russian rhetoric about “Greater Eurasia” to persist.

Keywords: ASEAN, Eurasia, Indo-Pacific, Quad, Russia

Introduction

Russia has many reasons to reject the concepts of the “Indo-Pacific” and the “Quad.” Geographically, these concepts conflict with favoured constructs, whether “Asia-Pacific,” “Greater Eurasia,” or “Arcto-Pacific.” Strategically, Indo-Pacific means the reassertion of US leadership in Asia, contrary to Russian insistence that US leadership is waning and a new regional order is taking shape. Ideologically, this concept asserts values anathema to the narrative Vladimir Putin has articulated in his “Turn to the East” and elsewhere. Diplomatically, Russian opposition aligns it with China, whose coattails Russia is riding to reassert its influence. The main problem for Russia, however, is that in emphasising close ties to India, it sees in the concept “Indo-Pacific” a stark contradiction with claims it has been making. Daringly breaking with China’s hostility to this concept, one recent Russian article proposed approving an Indian version of the “Indo-Pacific,” while standing firm against the US version as well as the Quad (Kupriyanov, 2021).

Moscow views the southern tier of Asia through the prism of Soviet superpower pretensions. It had a special partnership with India. It cultivated close ties to Vietnam. Economic ties were not at the forefront, but arms sales were critical. Having gained a foothold in the 1960s-70s, Moscow sought to renew its influence after its withdrawal in the 1990s, taking satisfaction that it gained entry to the newly-expanded East Asia Summit (EAS) along with the United States in 2011. In light of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which Russia has viewed with a wary eye, Putin has tried to balance close camaraderie with Xi Jinping with autonomous efforts to reassert its presence.

Below, I separately discuss recent Russian thinking about regional architecture, ASEAN and its members, and India.⁶⁵ First, I trace the evolution of its views since Putin declared the "Turn to the East" in 2012, taking special note of a shift in 2020-2021 linked to both China and the US. The Ukraine war accelerates the shift toward China, but closer Indo-US ties complicate the situation

Tracking Russian Thinking about Asia's Southern Tier over a Decade

Russia is preoccupied with two countries—the United States and China—both of which over the past decade have reconceptualized regional architecture in Asia with keen attention to the role of Southeast Asia and South Asia. To a considerable degree, Russia has responded to the moves they have made—Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia," Donald Trump's security-focused "Free and Open Indo-Pacific," (FOIP), Joe Biden's multilateral FOIP plus the Quad; and Xi Jinping's BRI as well as Xi's increasingly aggressive, unilateral moves against India, Australia, and others.

Growing advocacy of the concept of the "Indo-Pacific" within Asia and by the United States over the past decade has raised the alarm in Russia. It defines the region in a manner deemed maximally unwelcome by a continental power hugging the Arctic Ocean but far from the Indian Ocean. In response, coupled with responses to warnings it has become China's "junior partner," Moscow has insisted that the concept is a US scheme for polarizing Asia and containing China, while simultaneously trumpeting the alternative of "Greater Eurasia," a geographical construct that serves to confirm Russia's status as a great power stakeholder in the eastern half of Asia. On the surface, Moscow is in conflict only with the US moves, but it also finds itself struggling with China's.

By turning to the East, Moscow has sought to demonstrate it does not need the West. In stage one of its turn—2012-13—the focus was on Northeast Asia but not excluding ties with Europe. In stage two—2014-16—in response to the sanctions from the West and Xi Jinping's initiatives for Asian regionalism, Putin proposed a mix of closer ties with China, multipolarity with several leading Asian states, and Greater Eurasia as a bridge between Xi's BRI and his own Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). Both India and ASEAN figured greatly in Russia's plans for multipolarity and Greater Eurasia. Stage three—2017-19--saw more accommodation of Xi and resistance to Donald Trump's call for FOIP. The fact that India entered the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), albeit with Pakistan at China's insistence, and forms an important part of BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) encouraged Putin to think more seriously about Asia's southern tier. Stage four—

⁶⁵ This article draws heavily on the bi-monthly "Country Report: Russia" in *The Asian Forum*, which since 2013 has summarized articles, explaining in the words of Russian writers how Russians think about both ASEAN and India.

2020-21--however, posed a dilemma due to at least five factors: 1) Sino-Indian relations were tense after their border skirmish in the Himalayas; 2) Indo-US relations were drawing closer with the Quad; 3) hopes for ASEAN to accept Russia as a great power balancer to the US and China were fading; 4) the BRICS and SCO were weakened and multipolarity was being exposed as an illusion; and 5) Sino-Russian divisions over the architecture of Asia were deepening as Xi Jinping's accelerating Sinocentrism came into conflict with Putin's insistence on Eurasianism (Rozman, 2021a). Yet, focusing on Ukraine in his foreign policy, Putin had greater need to stick closely with China, concealing any signs of tension over Asian strategies. This was even truer in early 2022 in the shadow of Russia's war in Ukraine.

Prioritizing opposition to US policies—even more under Joe Biden than Trump--, Putin hesitated to change course in 2020-21. Indeed, he encouraged talk of a bilateral alliance with China unlike in earlier periods. Yet the divide over India cast a deep shadow over the relationship. If he did not flag the issue, Russian writers did and warned that an asymmetrical alliance with China was a threat to Russia, including to its aspirations for multipolarity (Rozman, 2021b). One of the key questions before Russia was how to reinvigorate autonomous ties in Asia's southern tier in this new environment. Events in 2022 increased dependence on China, shifting the focus in Russia.

Russian Thinking about Regional Architecture

Moscow has largely viewed the southern tier of Asia through seven constructs: Greater Eurasia, BRICS, an expanded SCO, BRI, multipolarity with ASEAN serving as a pole, the FOIP, the Quad, and a New Cold War vs. the US. An eighth construct Sinocentrism goes unmentioned but looms large in the background. In Greater Eurasia, the BRICS, the SCO, and multipolarity with ASEAN, Russia claims to have the right organizational mix to balance the BRI while not openly opposing it. Early to recognize the arrival of the New Cold War, it accepted BRI as a means to an end, but the FOIP and the Quad have shaken Russian optimism, not so much due to the US moves, but owing to Sinocentrism that has driven India away from Russia toward the US and also has complicated Russia's ties in Southeast Asia, e.g., in retreating from Vietnam energy exploration.

One construct stands above all of the others in the mindset visible in Russian publications about the "Turn to the East." That is Greater Eurasia. It serves as an umbrella conception, bolstered by the BRICS, the SCO, and ASEAN summits with Russia reaffirming multipolarity. Russians could never shake doubts that instead of coordination of the BRI and Greater Eurasia, China was just paying lip service to Russia's idea while unilaterally pursuing its own in a quest for Sinocentrism.

In May 2014, when Putin went to Beijing to put meat behind his promise to turn to Asia after Russia had invaded Crimea and faced sanctions in the West, the focus was on "docking" his EEU with Xi Jinping's recently announced Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). It expanded the focus of Sino-Russian cooperation from the border area linking the Russian Far East and Northeast China, where it had largely been in the 1990s and 2000s, to Central Asia. (Until then, the SCO had delineated a division of labor there with little genuine cooperation.) Yet Xi's decision to encompass the SREB within the BRI widened the focus again, leading Putin to counter with his Greater Eurasia vision. Russia's gaze was turning to the south as the pathway to multipolarity.

This new vision was prompted because the EEU was on too small a scale with little chance to expand, and it was predominantly economic in nature. After defense of Russia's priority position

in Central Asia, joining with China's SREB to keep watch over it, a broader Russian initiative was needed in the face of the BRI. First mentioned in December 2015, Putin formalized Greater Eurasia at the 2016 Petersburg Economic Forum. At the May 2017 BRI forum he elaborated on it and won China's acquiescence (Tsvetov, 2017). It remained unclear how Xi and Putin, trumpeting ever-closer relations, would reconcile their dueling frameworks.

Moscow struggled to lend substance to its notion of a Greater Eurasian Partnership. Beijing gave lip service to the idea as it put real resources behind its own BRI. As in discourse on multipolarity, two entities in the south of Asia caught Moscow's attention: India and ASEAN. India had figured earlier in Russian great power narratives. In the late 1990s Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister Evgeny Primakov had proposed a troika of Russia, China, and India.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi in March 2016 joined Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in supporting linking the SCO to ASEAN, endorsing Putin's grandiose plan for a single Eurasian space, but no ASEAN state joined the SCO and Russian calls for an FTA between the EEU and these countries meant little given the fear of FTAs prevailing in Moscow. If Greater Eurasia seemed to be an empty vessel, Russia only redoubled its claims of comparability to the BRI in Asia's architecture.

With little interest in Japan or South Korea as partners offering balance and multilateralism to Russia, the idea of Greater Eurasia does not openly distance Russia from China. Yet, it is premised on two increasingly dubious pretenses: 1) India's continued "strategic autonomy" and prospect of reconciliation with China rather than antagonism to it; and 2) ASEAN's large and growing role as a geopolitical force interested in Russia as a great power balancer. These pretenses were sustained against growing doubts in the third stage of the "Turn to the East." Yet a backlash in Russia against Moscow's tilt toward China at India's expense and even against harsh rejection of the "Indo-Pacific" concept could be observed in 2020-21. Some argued there are many different notions of the Indo-Pacific, including Japanese and Indian ones which are at odds with the US one, seeking to resuscitate multipolarity amid new bipolarity.

If there are various versions of the Indo-Pacific, e.g., Indian and Indonesian ones recognizing the central role of ASEAN, and the US one aimed at containing China (using the Quad), why is Russia critical of the Indo-Pacific, and not recognising these different interpretations? In contrast to the mainstream hostility to the Indo-Pacific idea, some Russians of late have said it is necessary to distinguish other views of it besides the US position, striving to reduce Moscow's isolation on a concept that is here to stay (Denisov et al., 2021). That is also an indication of searching for a way back to multipolarity and Eurasianism, not Sinocentrism. Yet such queries also acknowledge that Russia's Pacific Fleet is small, it has no bases in the Indian Ocean or ability to project force there, and Russia's own project—Greater Eurasia—is purely continental and of little interest to India or the Southeast Asian states.

By 2020-21, the FOIP was seen as a new mega-region, impacting Russia after it had "coopted" the BRI with the Greater Eurasia initiative (Tsvetov, 2016). The Quad followed, buttressed by new regional partners including Vietnam, while weakening ASEAN centrality in security. This was seen as a fresh blow to the multilateralism Russia seeks, marginalizing it in maritime Asia. India's role and a weaker ASEAN as well as China's negative reaction all boded badly, pulling countries to the south, not the north (Tsvetov, 2016). The backlash against this reflects a desperate effort to limit growing signs of an alliance with China.

Russian pushback to tilting fully to China could be seen in a late 2021 article challenging the standard interpretation of the Indo-Pacific region (Kupriyanov, 2021a). It claims to refute the myth that this is just an American invention aimed at isolating Russia and China or is

somehow in opposition to the Russian concept of Greater Eurasia. At the same time, the article mentions that to approve the concept would defy the Chinese interpretation of it and not be in the interest of Sino-Russian relations. Considering that India supports the concept, the article warns that by rejecting the notion Russia is damaging its ties to that country. Thus, the author seeks to rehabilitate the concept regardless of the Chinese reaction. In comparison to the US late acceptance of the concept for the goal of containment, Japanese gave more emphasis to economics, and India stressed expanding its influence to the East, focusing on soft power without treating conflict with China as existential. Coverage suggests that India could agree with China on delineating spheres of influence. Somehow, by agreeing to the Indo-Pacific as one region in Greater Eurasia along with the Arctic-Pacific, which China also finds problematic, Russia is bridging the gap.

The article is remarkable for its avoidance of any mention of things that China did that could have aroused others. Except for India, for which the language is neutral, it is always others who oppose China for ulterior motives or territorial disputes that China has not exacerbated. Yet, the message is to join with India and to keep hoping for Indo-Chinese rapprochement. In Russian works there is an equivalence to the Indo-Pacific region and the Quad, which the author disputes. If the Soviets were not bashful about accepting the term Asia-Pacific, although it was introduced by Japan, a US ally, and became an instrument for the US to justify its presence in Asia, the same applies to the Indo-Pacific, the usage of which can improve relations with India and ASEAN without hurting close ties to China. This is an appeal to China to change course on India without openly acknowledging any fault by China or India's real grievances (Kupriyanov, 2021a).

Russian Thinking about ASEAN and Its Member States

On the one hand, Putin's seriousness about ASEAN repeatedly was found wanting. After Russia's entry into the EAS, Putin did not attend subsequent summits. In 2015 he also missed the APEC summit, casting doubt on whether his "Turn to the East" is to Asia or just to China (Korostikov, 2015). On the other, Russia praises ASEAN as the center of the Asia-Pacific region and key to the formation of regional and global architecture. Moreover, it was argued that "Current trends in the regional power balance will still provide Moscow with a unique chance to restore its influence as a power which is neither threatening nor being threatened by its neighboring states," which is consistent with Russia's interest in reducing the US military presence (Kozyrev, 2016). In October 2021, the ASEAN-Russia summit was the latest to trumpet the importance of ASEAN for Greater Eurasia. following meetings in 2016 and 2018. ASEAN has an essential place in this.

One article praised the utility and effectiveness of ASEAN as a regional organization, claiming it had become the nucleus of broader international cooperation involving nearly all of the leading states in the world. This laudatory commentary treated ASEAN as a godsend for peace, stability, and security with significant further potential (Samoylenko, 2017). Hope was placed on partnerships with the EEU and SCO, despite a lack of detail about how they would lead to broad Eurasianism, which places no demands on values given the merits of the "ASEAN Way" and adheres to the principle of "sovereign equality." There are other challenges.

For one, economic ties with Southeast Asia are limited. One article acknowledged that only 1.9 percent of Russia's exports go to the ASEAN states, falling in value to just \$5.5 billion in 2016. Where there is significant local interest - in Russia's high-tech achievements (as claimed by the article) - awareness in ASEAN is low. Concern was raised about insufficient information in the region about business in Russia, difficulty in finding a niche for companies in a highly competitive region, and local producers squeezing out Russia goods, such as fertilizer. Russia

fares better in terms of arms exports. To counter that, the author calls for free trade zones, such as the one the EEU created with Vietnam. While the article is upbeat about more dialogue, the overall tone is pessimistic with scant evidence of real progress in ties to ASEAN states amid some dire warnings (Sinitsyn, 2018).

The proposal to establish an FTA made at the Russia-ASEAN summit of May 2016 invited a negative response. This has led to a realization that there is little benefit for ASEAN as they prioritize talks with more important economic partners. Take for instance RCEP which is a trade agreement without Russia aimed at harmonizing rather than changing the existing “rules of the game” in trade (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 4, 2020).

Simpler operations to draw ASEAN into the Greater Eurasian Partnership are also not going well, leaving Russia with only bilateral channels. Even so, this is an area that is fraught with challenges, much of it Russia’s own doing. In 2020 Moscow and Jakarta celebrated the 70th anniversary of diplomatic relations. After three decades of tension, relations were reset with a 2003 declaration, but they did not deepen much despite arms sales. Exaggerated claims by the Russian side on security cooperation were belied by silence on China’s actions in the South China Sea. Even so, Lavrov argued that after relations were established Jakarta found Moscow to be a reliable friend in establishing its state, developing its economy, and strengthening its international position. Relations, he added, are poised for broader cooperation as well as a high level of mutual trust for military cooperation (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, February 4, 2020). Yet the claim that the two closely cooperate on security challenges ignores how Russia deals with China’s infringement into Indonesian waters. Lavrov cited as a priority tightening relations with ASEAN and pointed to Indonesian interest in integration into the Eurasian space, but he offered nothing of substance.

On the 70th anniversary of bilateral relations with Vietnam, Lavrov recalled standing together in the difficult battle of the Vietnamese people for freedom and independence and in the following peaceful construction. Special mention was made of traditional close ties in defense as well as economic ties, symbolized by the fact that Vietnam became the first state with which the EEU in 2015 signed a free trade agreement, leading to Russia’s trade volume climbing to \$6.1 billion in 2018. Although energy ties are heralded, no mention was made of the challenge of exploring for oil and gas in the South China Sea. A rise in Russian tourism to Vietnam is noted, reaching in 2018 about 600,000 visitors. Reference was made to their close positions on both global and regional problems, again with no specifics about glaring differences over relations with China and the US (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, January 29, 2020). Vietnam buys extensive Russian military technology, leading to Russian ambivalence toward South China Sea problems, and China accepts Russia’s ties there as the lesser of two evils compared to US-Vietnam military cooperation (Strel’tsov, 2017). Yet in July 2020, Beijing pressured Rosneft to abandon its drilling in the Vietnamese continental shelf.

Russia is in danger of losing its authority over Southeast Asian states, e.g., Vietnam, Thailand, the Philippines, and Indonesia, which prefer multi-national involvement, if it is seen as “pro-China,” and its economic projects favor China’s interests. One new wrinkle in Russia’s approach arose with an opportunity to play a spoiler role after the military coup in Myanmar in 2021. It boosted ties with an eye to arms sales and an expansion of its influence in the region. This was not, however, a strategy to improve ties to ASEAN. Reminiscent of its embrace of North Korea in the mid-2010s, Russia was acting opportunistically, not strategically.

The pursuit of the Greater Eurasian Partnership conveys an image of proactive and visionary leadership in an era of integrating megaprojects and reaffirms the “Turn to the East.” Greater Eurasia lowers Russian emphasis on China, upgrading the role of ASEAN, which sees itself as steering great power interactions. One Russian author argued that Trump’s lack of interest in Southeast Asia would compel states in the region to pursue balanced relations with other states. Japan, the EU, India, and Russia are mentioned. She found it fully possible that, despite weak economic ties with Russia a shared desire to maintain a polycentric structure of international relations would draw them closer (Koldunova, 2017). Insisting that BRI and Russia’s initiative are not competitive, Russians bemoan a lack of Russian elite interest and diplomatic resources for Southeast Asia, China offers credits, investment, infrastructure, and trade. The US offers regional security and defense from the Chinese influence. Russia offers neither is the upshot of warnings on Russia’s problems.

This has been further hampered by continued talk of a Sino-Russian alliance in response to military exercises in the South China Sea and of Russia demonstrating solidarity with China on territorial issues, seen in Putin’s refusal to recognize the international tribunal’s ruling. One author argued for Russia’s adherence to neutrality as a court ruling could also be sought by Japan in its dispute with Russia. Distance and lack of experience in this region complicates full inclusion of ASEAN in the Great Eurasian Partnership. Two years after publicizing this theme, Russia had yet to even clarify it, the article concluded (Strel’tsov, 2017).

It is often clearer what Russia is against than what it is prepared to do. Antipathy to the United States and acquiescence to China fail to persuade countries inclined to hedge between the two. Rhetoric that ASEAN uses Russia to boost its salience and to check US dominance exaggerates Russia’s role. When ASEAN states agreed to Russia joining the EAS, they sought it along with the US to balance against China’s growing role, economically and politically. Instead, it has focused on balancing the US. To argue that Russia and ASEAN agree on “sovereign democracy” makes little sense if Russia cannot criticize China’s infringements on sovereignty and democracy.

Russian Thinking about India

India in the 2010s served as a bulwark for Russian aspirations in Asia. It was seen as a force for Eurasianism, the critical piece in the BRICS, a vital addition to the SCO, a barrier to Sinocentrism and the BRI, and an obstacle due to its strategic autonomy to US ambitions to contain China. Yet Moscow had little to offer except arms to keep India in line, let alone to convince it to join in Russian designs for a regional architecture. Moscow had too little leverage on Beijing to get Delhi to expect any benefits from this troika. Moreover, it could scarcely convince the Indians that Washington was a threat to their interests. The problem for Moscow is that it pretends to have an independent foreign policy in Asia but is so bound to China it cannot act accordingly.

Although Modi attended the Eastern Economic Forum (EEF) in Vladivostok on one occasion and visited Russia in December 2015, the results apart from joint military production were paltry.

The idea of a “troika” of Russia, China, and India served a few Russian aspirations: to construct a continental architecture, while others had a maritime orientation; to gain the pivot when the two others struggled to improve their relationship; and to prevent a Sinocentric regional order from emerging. Claims to have special closeness to India served to allay concern about getting caught in an asymmetrical dyad with China and averting India’s

warming ties to the US and its allies. Yet ties lost even a semblance of closeness, dwarfed by booming Sino-Russian relations. India became more strategic in its thinking or pragmatic in expanding ties of economic advantage. This was quietly acknowledged in the far fewer references to India in Russian commentaries about turning to Asia in the late 2010s. Hovering near \$10 billion per year and not changing in structure, trade left Russia marginalized. Its large share of India's arms purchases was falling amid criticism of delivery and quality problems, as India showed concern about rising Russian arm sales to Pakistan.

The expanded SCO gave Russians hope. One writer argued, the influence of the SCO will spread into South Asia with the entry of India and Pakistan, its role as a counterweight international institution will grow, and its scale of almost half of the world's population and four nuclear powers will, statistically, be prominent. This is the pathway to a multipolar world and a united Eurasian alternative to Western Europe (Kortunov, 2019). Such optimism was reinforced by claims that Indians are resisting Western intrigues to use India to contain China. In 2016-17 there were still hints that the troika of Russia, China, and India, in one setting or another, would prevail, stressing Russia's importance for regional architecture for the future and for rules of the game. When Sino-Indian differences were noted, as in Indian opposition to BRI, Russians kept insisting that reconciliation could be achieved.

By the end of 2017 idealism about the Greater Eurasian region was waning, and concerns about Russo-Indian relations in the context of the triangle with China were intensifying. While efforts were made to shore up Greater Eurasia and this triangle, warnings intensified, notably in 2020. One expert warned that BRI is both a political and an ideological project. The key ally is Pakistan, to which arms are going in large quantities and through which important transportation corridors pass. Soon Gwadar will be designated a Chinese military base. Pakistan has unpayable debts, and China will not forgive any. It is proceeding similarly with Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives (Lukin, 2018). India's boycott of China's BRI forum was well covered, echoing reservations about China's plans. Another article blamed Chinese hawks for pushing BRI in a manner that is alienating countries (Lukin, 2019).

Given sharp disagreements between India and China, Russia could not always succeed in the role of middleman, it was said. Despite insistence that the triad is a major part of forming a polycentric architecture and that they agree on values such as multilateralism, equality, and the superiority of international law, there was strategic avoidance of all sensitive issues. Asked about the existing differences, one Indian official observed that China refuses regular meetings of defense ministers from the three parties. He added that India strives to give the battle against terrorism primary attention, as it stated in BRICS, and it wants support for freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, which is opposed by China. India is dissatisfied too with the development of Sino-Pakistan relations, including China's decision to invest in a project in Pakistan-controlled Kashmir, leading India to boycott the BRI summit. An article notes the near-war in the summer of 2017 over China's road construction opposed by Bhutan. Mentioned too are Indian complaints against Russia over Pakistan with experts in recent months speaking of the formation of a Moscow-Beijing-Islamabad triangle aimed against the intended triangle of Washington, Delhi, and Islamabad, citing Russian arms sales to Pakistan. Yet, the article defensively claims that this is geopolitical talk from the past, not from the polycentric world we have entered, and Russia's deepening ties to Pakistan are not against India's interests nor is the special linkage with China directed against anyone's interests (Strokhan, 2017).

In 2018 and 2019 Moscow grasped for new hope with India. The Xi-Modi summit in April 2018 was huge for Russia. It was anxious for the contradictions in that relationship, which had

deepened economically, politically, and militarily by 2017, to be reduced. In the spring of 2017, India had boycotted the BRI summit over its inclusion of a transport route through Pakistan-controlled Kashmir and its effort to draw India's neighbors into China's planned corridors. The Maldives political crisis, in which China was active, was another blow to India, as was the rental of a Sri Lankan port to China, which could turn into a Chinese naval base along with one in the Maldives. China's active role in Bangladesh and Myanmar as well as participation in talks over Afghanistan raised fears of a blockade of India by its main geopolitical opponent. Finally, in the fall standoff in Bhutan, where armed conflict was narrowly averted, tensions came to a head. India and China were on the verge of war. India fears that if China constructs the road it has begun in Bhutan, it would control a strategic area and put at risk the corridor between two parts of India; cited are 1988 and 1998 agreements between China and Bhutan, pointing to construction violating them. Pointing to growing impatience in India with the China-Pakistan economic corridor, an article observes that despite both countries being part of the SCO and BRICS, Russia cannot play any kind of mediating role, and Sino-Indian economic ties do not act as a defense against greater conflict (Narkevskii, 2018).

Modi's visit to Wuhan marked the beginning of a dialogue, leading, it was assumed, to sustained talks and a planned Xi visit to India in 2019. Instead of an India-US alliance, which some had forecast, Trump had lost interest in India, pressuring it to join in sanctions against Russia, obliging Modi to turn to China, which, one author insists, would have occurred anyways for objective economic and geopolitical reasons. Already 15 percent of Indian start-ups are financed by China as trade reaches \$90 billion. Modi's economic goals depend on China, while in the trade war with the US, China can find insurance in India. In geopolitics India is losing and can best respond by cutting a deal with China on demarcating spheres of influence—instead of fighting over the BRI—in accord with India's strategic autonomy at a time of Sino-US discord. This would give Russia room to maneuver before India draws too close to the US, concludes an upbeat Russian article (Kupriyanov, 2018). It calls on Russia to treat India as a reliable partner on a par with China and the United States and for India to work out a demarcation of spheres of influence that guarantees China's economic interests in return for India's economic and security ones, as India preserves strategic autonomy. Having shifted toward the US, it is now shifting toward China, was the hope conveyed to readers.

The Indian elite has turned away from Russia due to pro-American propaganda and reactions to Russia's moves toward China and Pakistan (arms sales and military exercises). Somehow, Russia needs to demonstrate to India that it is independent of China and will not become its junior partner, e.g., through ties to Vietnam (the most appealing triangle where military ties remain close), Indonesia, and Japan (where India could bring the other two closer). There is a need to consult with China on these formats, which will recognize the benefits to it in more space for maneuvering at the expense of the US. For Russia, India represents an independent pole along with China and the United States, justifying pursuit of it as if China would be supportive (Kupriyanov, 2018).

Civilizational arguments were invoked to affirm both Russo-Indian and Sino-India closeness. One source posited overlap on most questions as alternatives to Atlantic civilization, and places in the "non-Western" world demonstrating the end of the Western stage in the development of the system of international relations. Both India and China are at the stage of long-term economic and cultural-civilizational rise, becoming drivers of Eurasian and global growth, harboring resentments over the trauma in national identity of loss of status in world politics. They are revisionist players, ready to rewrite the West's rules of the game. Each is obsessive about national sovereignty. Given positive historical ties between the two, their new ties will mean

consolidation of the heartland and renewal of Eurasia (Kortunov, 2019). This new heartland will become an “axis of history.”

The US opposes the consolidation of Eurasia, pressing for the maximum contradictions between China and India, it is said. The Russo-Indian-Chinese (RIC) triangle has been reactivated. This is geographically more compact than the BRICS. Russia seeks to refocus on the triangle, the article suggests. The three can meet at the G20, BRICS, the SCO, etc., but more is needed for consolidation, the piece warned (Strokhan', 2017). It added that some Russians see Moscow gaining as the pivot in the triangle with no shift southward in the Eurasian center, marginalizing it. Yet, both Beijing and Delhi react with suspicion to play on their contradictions, and the situation may arise when Moscow is forced to take sides, causing big losses. It is up to China, the stronger country, to allay suspicions was the wary conclusion drawn.

More desperate assessments appeared too. Suggesting that the SCO can serve as a platform for new Sino-Indian dialogue and that normalization of Indo-Chinese relations would breathe new life into Russia's turn to the East, an article noted that India is gradually leaning toward the United States. Washington is taking advantage of Sino-Indian tensions, and Russia cannot offer India economic cooperation—new technology, new markets—on the desired scale. US arms sales are rising. Political, economic, and cultural ties with India are attenuating in comparison to India's ties to Russia's rivals. Yet, India does not join anti-Russian sanctions or yield to Western pressure. If an exclusive orientation by Moscow to Beijing happens as Indo-Chinese contradictions are escalating, trust in Moscow could be badly hurt, while Western states would be eager to take Russia's place (Gabuev, 2017). After the border clash in July 2020, Russia helplessly hosted an SCO summit unable to address the cavernous gap that now existed between India and China, silently avoiding taking either's side (Kommersant, 2020).

With the term Eurasia coming into wide usage, as the crux of discussions about a new world order, the fact that Russia is its birthplace is noticed. If China and India are recognized as the epicenter of modernization after five centuries when the West temporarily had that role, it is Eurasia that is rising to be the center of the world. Russia is added as the third country in the mix for its influence on Eurasia and its central place in the BRI, which connects Eurasia. Russia's key task in Eurasia is to achieve maximum closeness between India and China, since it has no strategic competition with either of these two giants, many have assumed. They are harking back to the troika framework.

Another writer notes that both Russia and India need to be careful in their choice. They are swing powers, striving for multipolarity, which can block unipolar or bipolar mechanisms. If Russia allied with China or India with the US, the dynamics would shift. They could guarantee the loss of either hegemon if they worked together. Optimal for both is to maintain their strategic autonomy. India should avoid siding with the US to avoid escalation of border conflicts, maximize its development, and gain access to technology and arms. To refute Indian press coverage that Russia is a Chinese vassal and supports Pakistan and Russian coverage that India is becoming a US junior partner and Russia is losing out, they need to forge a kind of alliance to overcome all of the shortcomings (Kupriyanov, et. al 2019b).

In 2015 Russia saw Modi's emergence as good for triangularity with China and Russia. If the US was trying to arouse Indian fear of China, it would not succeed or India would end up isolated (Ivashentsov, 2015). The author of that piece wrote again in 2020, calling India the key state, which is not “leaving to the West.” It prefers to avoid firm declarations on serious international issues and to keep maximum freedom to maneuver on the global arena, while affirming its key role in the Indian Ocean and part of the Pacific Ocean. India shows

understanding of Russia's international behavior, from the Soviet introduction of troops into Afghanistan to the return of Crimea. It has not imposed sanctions against Russia. Its two main problems with Pakistan and China cannot be resolved without Russia's participation. Modi attended the 2019 Eastern Economic Forum aiming to widen economic participation in the Russian Far East, and he has interest in a North-South corridor through Iran to Russia and Western Europe and in control of terrorism in Central Asia. Such claims were characteristic of the heady days when close China ties and multipolarity were both expected (Ivashentsov, 2020)

What the above citations demonstrate is Russian desperation to preserve Greater Eurasia through India accommodating China, RIC becoming the troika long sought, and the signs of India drifting to the US camp being reversed. Wishful thinking substituted for informed analysis. From mid-2020, it was impossible to sustain such illusions. The focus shifted from Indian accommodation to Russian trepidation over being dragged into what should be called Sinocentrism, without any sign of hope that Russia could change China's behavior. Helplessness revealed Russia's one-sided dependency. A surge of writings indicated the deep anxiety aroused over losing India as well as multipolarity.

More forthright blame of late has been placed on China for spoiling relations with countries in the region, including India. One article says the US and India are uniting in anger against China, and they are forging stronger military ties, which could change the balance of power in the region. It hints at blaming China for alienating India. Citing the crisis in the Himalayas that helped to change Indian thinking, it suggests that US diplomats believe it will draw India into regional partnerships with the United States, Japan, and Australia. India is looking more favorably on participation in the anti-Chinese coalition. This strikes a huge blow against Russian geopolitical aspirations, it finds (Trush, 2020).

India is not showing its former restraint about rapprochement with the United States. In 2020, India is expected to purchase \$20 billion worth of weapons. Previously negative on the presence of foreign militaries near its borders. India blessed the US defensive agreement with the Maldives (Skozyrev, 2020). There is more than a wisp of disappointment that China is driving states toward the US rather than rallying states in Asia behind the Sino-Russian agenda of prioritizing opposition to the US presence.

Russia risks losing India by leaning always to China in this triangle. Even a former ambassador to Moscow known for being sympathetic is asking why Russians keep ignoring the threat that India is facing. A passage in a speech by Lavrov aroused anger. He charged that the West is trying to drag India into anti-Chinese games with the Quad and to sharply weaken Russia's ties to India, including in military-technological cooperation. There was also mention of India being a separate pole under pressure from the West but not yielding. Yet the Indian press jumped on Lavrov's remarks and the postponement of a planned Russia-India summit. The leader of Congress attacked the government for disrupting traditional ties with Russia. The foreign ministry responded the postponement had been due to the pandemic, and the opposition's remarks could lead to irresponsible rumors that could truly damage relations with Russia. Lavrov's remarks were not timely given the fact that a half year had passed since Sino-Indian border fighting with military tensions still persisting (Kupriyanov, 2021a).

India sees Russia as gradually turning into a junior partner of China, just standing by no matter how tensions worsen. On the sensitive question of the Indo-Pacific region, Russia keeps telling India to drop the idea when many countries are drawn to it. This is not an American plot but an idea widely popular in Indian expert circles. Leaning to China, Russia is seen as no longer a major actor in the Indian Ocean. Nostalgia for Russo-Indian friendship will disappear if nothing changes. If Russia unquestioningly supports all of China's actions in South Asia and the Indian

Ocean, India will join the American camp. If it is an autonomous, powerful player in the region cooperating with India, that would be good for China too, which does not want to see India become an American bastion, concludes a Russian article, suggesting a backlash to the momentum of late to ally with China (Kupriyanov et al, 2019a).

On December 6, 2021 Putin met Modi in New Delhi, striving to breathe new life into bilateral relations. Defense topped the agenda, extending a military technology agreement. In defiance of forces pulling the two countries apart, they reaffirmed their special relationship. The subtext, however, was Modi's desire to keep Russia from drawing even closer to China and Putin's aim to keep alive the notion that Russia is not fully in China's camp. Upbeat messages reflected the mood in Moscow to keep alive a vision of Greater Eurasia beyond Sino-Russian relations as it was intensifying conflict over Ukraine and facing even greater dependency on China.

The Ukraine war from February 2022 and Quad summit of May 2022 tested India's place in the Indo-US-Russian triangle. Russia took comfort from India's refusal to condemn its attack and to join in sanctions. The US was frustrated but responded patiently. The upshot of the summit was further strengthening of the Quad to the disappointment of Russia but no sign that India would take a stance against Russia. Moscow found some comfort in that.

Conclusion

Russia counted on ASEAN and India for its Greater Eurasia Partnership from 2015, pleased that the BRICS and an expanded SCO reinforced this agenda. Yet apart from renewed hope for the RIC triad in 2018, expectations have soured. In 2020-21 a combination of the FOIP and Quad led by the US and India's outrage over China's aggressive behavior throttled Russian plans. Some Russians even warned that Moscow is becoming marginalized in ASEAN and sidelined by India over its excessive tilt to China. Greater Eurasia increasingly appears to be an empty shell. Yet, the Ukraine war saw Russians double down on China ties and content themselves with India's restrained response.

Moscow had to backtrack on energy exploration in the South China Sea and to remain silent in triangular settings over Sino-Indian fighting in the Himalayas. By prioritizing its relationship with China, it has lost ground in Asia's southern tier, watching a resurgent US host Quad summits. Obsessing about overturning the US-led world order, Moscow has deferred to China's assertion of a Sinocentric Asian order, which is undercutting plans for Greater Eurasia and multipolarity.

A backlash in Russia could be detected to an alliance with China, which could enable Sinocentrism and marginalize Russia in Southeast and South Asia. Rethinking the idea of the "Indo-Pacific" as less US containment of China leading to bipolarity than a quest by India and others for regional balance with room for Russia if it avoids alliance with China was under debate. In 2022, however, there was no room for questioning bipolarity. It was Russia, more than China, driving the world in that direction.

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