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ASEANFocus



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How to be Strategic?

One of Singapore's most prominent public intellectuals assesses the Sochi Summit and maps the future of ASEAN-Russia relations

BY BILAHARI KAUSIKAN

The most important thing about the Sochi Summit was perhaps that it was held at all.

The meeting was the message.

ASEAN's agreement, after some initial reluctance, to hold the Summit in Russia can be presumed to be recognition, however inchoate, that Russia is a geopolitical reality that cannot be ignored. A corollary presumption is that irrespective of the attitudes of its Western dialogue partners towards Moscow, ASEAN will pursue its own interests with Russia.

But what are those interests?

ASEAN was reluctant to describe its relationship with Russia as "strategic" even though this is an adjective that ASEAN has used promiscuously or at least attached to other dialogue relationships without much concern for consistency of meaning.

This is perhaps understandable since the relationship with Russia is the least developed of ASEAN's dialogue relationships.

But the Sochi Declaration only said that ASEAN and Russia would "Further strengthen the Dialogue Partnership ... with a view to working towards a strategic partnership." The doubly qualified condition for strategic partnership does not suggest that either side regards this goal as a matter of great urgency.

Nor is there a realistic plan to move the relationship in this direction. The Sochi Declaration and the Comprehensive Plan of Action (CPA) are laundry lists of aspirations, when they

do not merely record existing projects. Both documents were primarily intended to give a semblance of substance to an event whose significance was mainly symbolic.

The Russians wanted a Summit largely for reasons of *amour propre*; ASEAN's other dialogue partners have had summits, so why not Russia? ASEAN agreed largely because there was no reason not to agree; other dialogue partners have had summits, so why not Russia?

What ASEAN and Russia seem to have most in common at this stage of their relationship, is a penchant for privileging form over substance.

REALISING THE ASEAN-RUSSIA ASPIRATIONS

I would be pleasantly surprised if more than a few of the aspirations expressed in the Declaration and the CPA were to be substantially realised. I would be a little shocked if the report of the ASEAN-Russia Eminent Persons Group (AREPG) were taken as a serious guide to the future of the relationship.

Many of the areas these documents identified for future cooperation seem better suited for bilateral follow-up by individual member states than ASEAN-wide projects. But there is no harm in attaching the term 'ASEAN' to them even if this is not strictly accurate. I do not mean to suggest that there will be no movement forward in ASEAN-Russia relations.

Some ASEAN members, Singapore among them, are interested in developing links with the Eurasian Economic Union in which Russia is the largest and most developed economy.



Russia wants to expand economic and other ties with ASEAN. It is interested in, among other things, promoting arms and energy exports to Southeast Asia, attracting investments to the Russian Far East, cooperating in scientific research and anti-terrorism linkages. Some ASEAN members see it in their interests to respond positively in some areas, Singapore again among them.

The essential obstacle to moving ASEAN-Russia relations towards a strategic partnership is thus not the lack of scope or intention. What both sides must confront is the more fundamental and complex challenge of conceptualising how each fits into each other's visions of their roles in the region.

Neither side has ever seriously tried to do so and the Sochi Summit contributed nothing in this respect.

The lack of such a conceptual framework is what most starkly distinguishes ASEAN-Russia relations from ASEAN's other dialogue relationships. The US, China, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, the ROK and India all have defined ideas of their roles in East Asia. ASEAN has its own ideas of how these countries ought to fit into its own notion of regional order.

These ideas may well vary in scope and sophistication and the ideas of ASEAN and these countries are not always aligned. But these complications are beside the point: the point being that they exist as frameworks within which specific projects are instrumentalities and hence gives focus and strategic significance to these dialogue relationships.

Without such a broader conceptual framework, no matter how many items ASEAN – as individual states or collectively –

ticks off on the Sochi laundry lists, these projects will remain discrete and *ad hoc* and will not cohere into anything which has a strategic meaning that is larger than the sum of its parts; the number of such parts in any case is unlikely to be very large.

In this respect the ASEAN-Russia relationship resembles ASEAN's relationships with the EU and Canada. Neither Brussels nor Ottawa has a coherent or consistent concept of their role in East Asia. Consequently these are the least strategically significant of ASEAN's dialogue relationships.

ASEAN brought Russia into the East Asia Summit and other ASEAN-led forums almost casually, as if its size, geography and status as a nuclear weapon state and Permanent Member of the UN Security Council needed no further elaboration or deeper justification.

But these are generic factors which in themselves prescribe nothing very useful in the way of any specific concept of an East Asian role for Russia. Having admitted Russia, ASEAN has been content to let the situation drift. There is no consensus within ASEAN on what Russia's role should be, no interest in reaching a consensus on a role for Russia, or even awareness that a consensus on this matter is required.

On its part, Moscow still most naturally looks westward and defines and validates itself in relation to Europe and the US, not Asia. Its approach towards Asia has usually been tactical. Since the time of Peter the Great, Moscow has turned eastwards usually only after Western rebuffs or to gain Western approbation. Post-Soviet Russia's Asia policy fits into this historical pattern.

“Russia wants to expand economic and other ties with ASEAN. It is interested in, among other things, promoting arms and energy exports to Southeast Asia, attracting investments to the Russian Far East, cooperating in scientific research and anti-terrorism linkages.”



The souring of Russia’s relations with the West over Ukraine was the proximate cause of the latest phase of Russia’s turn to the east. But it was taken, I believe, reflexively under pressure and without a holistic assessment of overall Russian interests. It therefore risks locking Russia into a subordinate relationship with China and an essentially passive regional role.

Some signs of this are already discernible. China recently appropriated Russia’s position on the South China Sea. Russia’s stance on this issue is in fact more nuanced than China made it out to be, but Moscow had to bite its tongue and did not clarify its position. But fortunately the situation is not yet irreversible.

Let me conclude by declaring my interest. I was Ambassador to Russia and must plead guilty to having been a member of the AREPG. I take no joy in the current state of ASEAN-Russia relations that the Sochi Summit has done little to improve beyond atmospherics that are already dissipating. I believe that ASEAN-Russia relations do have strategic potential and that it would be a great pity if that potential went unrealised.

THREE CONDITIONS

To realise the potential, three conditions must be fulfilled.

First, ASEAN must reach consensus on what strategic role we want Russia to play in our region. This need not be difficult. ASEAN’s basic and enduring purpose is to help its members preserve some modicum of autonomy in the midst of great power competition. Russia as an active and autonomous participant in regional diplomacy will widen our scope for manoeuvre, particularly when, as I think will occur sooner or later, the US and China reach a new *modus vivendi* over Southeast Asia.

Second, to play an autonomous role, Russia must more clearly and clinically distinguish its interests on its western border

from its interests on its eastern border. Moscow has legitimate grievances in the west where the US and Europe made a fundamental strategic error in the immediate post-Soviet period by treating Russia as a defeated country. The West broke promises, explicit or implied, about the expansion of its security system in Europe as if Russian interests could forever be ignored. The crisis in Ukraine was the denouement of this mistake.

But the Western security system in East Asia is no longer directed against Russia unless Moscow makes it so by its positions on the maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas. Moscow should not let anger with the West drive its policy in East Asia.

Third, the West and in particular the US, must encourage Moscow to make this differentiation in its interests by itself differentiating its approach to Russia in Europe from its approach to Russia in East Asia. The current blanket system of sanctions against Russia only promotes Moscow’s dependence on China by depriving it of alternatives.

At the recently concluded Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Defence Secretary Ashton Carter hinted at US willingness to see Russia playing a security role in East Asia. It is not entirely clear what the US meant. But it is in Moscow’s interest to put US intentions to the test. This could be by a new articulation of Russia’s position on the South China Sea and clear support for UNCLOS when the Arbitral Tribunal reaches a decision on the legal issues that the Philippines brought before it.

Will these conditions be met? Only one is within ASEAN’s control. The most important decisions are clearly going to be made in Moscow. ■

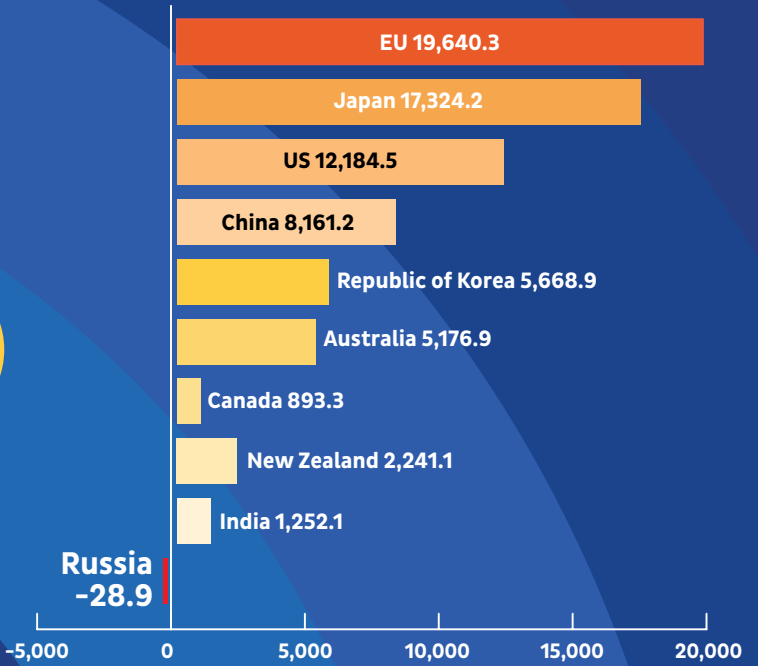
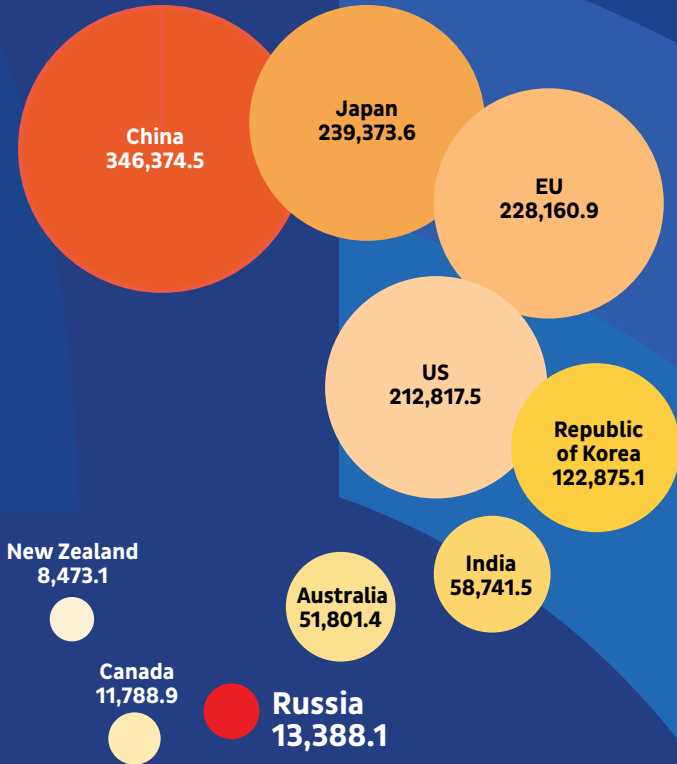
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ASEAN and Russia in Numbers

Source: ASEAN Secretariat; CEIC

ASEAN TRADE WITH DIALOGUE PARTNERS, 2015 (in US\$ million)

FOREIGN DIRECT INVESTMENT NET INFLOWS IN ASEAN FROM DIALOGUE PARTNERS, 2015 (preliminary, in US\$ million)



TOURIST ARRIVALS IN ASEAN BY ASEAN DIALOGUE PARTNERS, 2014 (in thousands)

