



MODERNIZATION OF RUSSIA, EAST ASIA GEOPOLITICS AND THE ASEAN FACTOR



Victor SUMSKY

D.Sc. (Hist.), Director
of the ASEAN Centre
of the Moscow State
Institute (University)
of International
Relations (MGIMO-U),
and chief research
fellow at the Institute
of World Economy
and International
Relations, RAS

The Russia-ASEAN summit, the second of its kind, caused mixed feelings both in Moscow and in the capitals of the Ten. Indubitably, our relations are not stagnating. Yet it is equally obvious that both the Russian Federation and the countries of the Association currently profit more by working with other partners. In areas where relations are more productive the number of people immediately interested in their development is also increasing. The numbers of analysts following progress in cooperation and outlining new frontiers for it are growing; they explain why we need certain partners and why the latter need us. Opinions clash, discussions spill over the limits of expert fields becoming fare for ordinary readers, TV viewers and Internet users. Both in this country and in some ASEAN states one such topic for discussion, for instance, is relations with China, ASEAN's next door neighbor in the north, Russia's closest neighbor in the south.

Some people may hasten to recall that neither Russia nor ASEAN countries are up to competing with China in terms of global economy and ability to fascinate the world with its achievements. It is for this reason that both we and the people of ASEAN look up to it more often than we do with regard to each other. All that may be so, but doesn't even this very fact hold a hint at our



commonality of interest? After all, both Russia and ASEAN members live side by side with a country that is now assuming the role of the 21st century's most influential power. Isn't this reason enough for us to "compare notes," collate our impressions, and think of what can be done jointly, especially in the areas of production and technology, to cut a dignified figure against the stature of the regional and world leader?

As Russia adopted the modernization agenda, the debate was revived as to which external partnerships might best help us implement that policy. Again we hear that the West, and the West alone, commands the mysteries of high-tech and will share those secrets with us if we but play on its side in the game of geopolitics. We've been through all that in the 1990s, and past experiences, just as the present crisis (we know only too well where it came from) leaves no room for illusions. The more so that it is no longer possible to ignore the alternative of proactive cooperation with East Asia, which is currently achieving obvious success in modernization. The position of this country's top leadership is a perfectly unequivocal testimony to that. In July this year at the conference on socio-economic issues that President Dmitry Medvedev chaired in Khabarovsk the problems of Russia's modernization, development of its Far Eastern areas and consolidation of partnership relations with neighboring Asian countries were considered as a single cluster.

But our "eternal Westernizers" remain undaunted. They will respond to the above arguments by reminding us that virtually all East Asian countries and territories where rapid modernization occurred in the second half of the 20th century were at the very least members of political, and often also of military, alliances with the United States. Those alliances were open (as in the case of Japan, Taiwan and South Korea) or informal (as in the case of Indonesia and China), but they invariably involved trade and economic preferences without which the Asian "miracles" could hardly have happened. This point can be accepted, but with three reservations. First, all of that happened in Cold War conditions, which are certain never to return. Second, even then it was vital to do everything in moderation: not one of the ASEAN founder states had so close a relationship with the U.S. as did the Philippines. But it was precisely in the Philippines that modernization was, and still is, far from smooth. Third, no one is saying that relations with the West should be scrapped. All that is being suggested is (merely!) following the example of the West in what it has always been good at – in being realistic in estimates and actions. And this attitude requires taking stock of all available opportunities and options of cooperation with the outer world.



More than that, it requires a certain kind of circumspection precisely in the East Asian sector, where we had better lose no more time in making our presence felt.

“We’re now in the center of things,” I heard the other day at a conference in one of ASEAN capitals. The reference was to the fact that the global hub of

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economic life was shifting to East Asia, and the words were uttered in tones of extreme satisfaction. I had to put aside the prepared text of my report and remind my audience that being “in the center” had its seamy sides, too. The greater

the profit from doing business in that zone, the more diverse forces converge on it, and the more difficult it is for them to agree. The hub is an area of fierce struggle for global hegemony. The extreme forms of that struggle are world wars. In the 20th century contradictions worsening in the hub area engendered a whole two such wars. Interdependence of economies (and in the hub such interdependence is greater than anywhere else) failed to prevent that deplorable outcome.

At this point one feels like making a pause to hear out a remark from oneself, for a change. Could it be that threats to the world were ripening not in areas of stagnation and poverty, but in the dynamic countries with steadily improving living standards?

Obviously, an alarmist mood is not desirable, but there is definitely food for thought there, especially if one views modernization not in a rectilinear technocratic way, but as a controversial process in which new achievements always entail new problems. That was, incidentally, the way Samuel Huntington viewed it. While pointing out that it took a minimum of political controllability to “kick-start” modernization programs, and the end goal of such programs was stability characteristic of developed modern society, he emphasized that modernization per se was a most destabilizing thing. And the danger of destabilization was the more real, the higher the rate of transformations.¹

These ideas formulated nearly half a century ago have lost none of their explanatory force, if seen, say, in light of the last few years’ events in Thailand, a country going through a crisis not because of chronic backwardness, but as the result of accelerated development.



Painful in themselves, such crises are even more dangerous when occurring in areas still suffering from the Cold War legacy (Korea, the Taiwan Straights) where tensions in relations between neighboring countries, protracted territorial disputes, or the so-called new threats to security, like cross-border crime, are plentiful. The region under examination is one such area.

But perhaps the most disquieting thing is that we observe, against the same background in East Asia, the start of rivalry over regional and global domination between the United States and China. The picture is made even more complicated by old resentments along the China-India, and also China-Japan lines, and by simultaneous attempts by the chief rivals to win over both ASEAN as a whole and its individual members.

Are the leaders of East Asia aware of that? Do their advisers ponder all this, do they discuss these matters among themselves? They are and they do. Otherwise the search for a “new regional architecture” of cooperation and security would not have acquired the paramount importance in that part of the world that it now has. The readiness of the East Asia Summit participants to admit Russia to their circle is a sign that Russia is expected to make a more significant contribution to the search.

What shape might that contribution take? Nothing could be better than defense of one’s own national interests, for as regards East Asia, they virtually coincide with the region’s collective interest. The objective of our Far Eastern territories developing in conjunction with the neighboring political and economic areas, basically formulated in Khabarovsk, will have its rationale if East Asia preserves economic dynamism. And it can only do so if escalation of the current regional contradictions, let alone their degenerating into a conflict phase, is avoided. Peace in East Asia is something the overwhelming majority of participants in regional developments need, and all of them, ourselves included, will have to fight for it. A laissez-faire attitude and connivance with forces provoking conflicts may prove even more lethal to Russia than to anyone else. After all, passivity is a synonym of lack of preparedness for trials, and if one imagines such a contingency, Russia with

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its vast open spaces and resources will be drawn, even against its will, into a confrontation we need like a hole in the head.

Assuming that this argumentation is not altogether groundless, we will see that ASEAN is as good as a natural ally to us. Like Russia, the Association and its members are mere losers in the context of growing contradictions between the U.S. and China.

Like Russia, ASEAN should abstain from unequivocally opting either for Washington or Beijing. The very fact of a choice like that would encourage polarization of forces in the region, it would mean confrontation between the side making such a choice and a clearly more powerful enemy, and would be fraught with involvement in a conflict where it would suffer unacceptable damage.

The situation requires that ASEAN, as well as Russia, should play a forestalling game. The Association's role of moderator in a series of multilateral dialogues that link East Asian countries among themselves and with partners in other regions in fact provides an opportunity for it, and moreover, is perfectly acceptable to Russia.

It would appear that neither we nor our ASEAN friends have yet realized in full measure our strategic need for each other. Let us hope that the process of its realization will give us extra incentives for economic exchanges, while the latter in turn will consolidate the basis for political partnership. ■

NOTES:

1. See, S.P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies*. New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1968, pp. 1-92.